

When in Israel . . .

The Jordan River Caper

Many, many people who travel to Israel are baptized, or rebaptized, in the Jordan River—the same river where Jesus was baptized by John. Most of these baptisms are performed at a narrow place in the river, just south of where the Jordan exits the Sea of Galilee. This picturesque point, complete with steps, ramps, showers, and viewing areas, was primarily financed by *Calvary Chapel* under the direction of Pastor Chuck Smith.

Thousands of Christians who visit Israel every year take advantage of this specially designed baptismal site. But occasionally, a rogue group will forgo the dunking area and just plunge into the river and swim around. And thus our story begins.

A good friend of *Compass*, who was present on one particular day at the baptismal site, recounts that a group of about ten Eastern Orthodox priests approached the water, hoisting high above them a three foot long, very ornate and expensive looking wooden cross, beautifully encrusted with jewels. They spoke only Greek and were wearing their traditional head-to-toe solid black robes, including their peculiar looking round can-shaped hats, and rope belts wound around their waists. They were there to celebrate a ritual called, “The Blessing of the Cross.”

For this ceremony, the priests don’t disrobe or change clothes, but enter the river fully clothed. On this particular day, they began passing the cross around, dunking it and letting the water drip off of it and on their heads. As they tossed it from one to another, they became more and more euphoric, focusing their celebration around their worship of this spe-

cial icon. The zeal and emotion of the moment seemed to carry them further and further into a realm of unrestrained excitement.

As they became more and more mesmerized by this activity, the cross seemed to traverse further out into the river with each consecutive toss. But every time it splashed into the Jordan, one of the priests would swim over to gather it up and send it once again into flight. But then it happened. A large, but obviously not too coordinated participant, attempted to throw the cross to the priest who was furthest away. But with a strong arm, he ended up skipping the cross more than halfway across the river, beyond the reach of his fellow priests. The excited exclamations (in Greek) came to an abrupt halt as all of them together witnessed the unbelievable.

From the opposite bank of the river, a black Labrador retriever came bounding down, and with a magnificent leap, pounced upon the revered wooden cross. Before anyone could react, the dog grabbed the cross in his mouth, turned around, swam out of the river, scaled the bank, and disappeared out of sight. The Priests were so stunned they just stared motionlessly at the place where the dog had vanished.

For many of us, just imagining a scene of this sort evokes a tremendous sense of humor. But then we thought of an even more incredible scenario:

Suppose there was a simple Jewish family, just sitting down for dinner in their small, modest home on the eastern bank of the Jordan River, praying and asking God to meet their pressing financial needs, when suddenly the family dog paws at the door with a jewel encrusted, 24 karat gold-overlaid cross in his mouth . . .