

ANDY COOK



FINALLY FINDING
ASTER

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of my parents,
Hal and Hulda Cook.*

The story of Scott Ricketts, the girl he falls in love with and the trip they take to Israel is a fictional one.

However, all the historical and archaeological information Scott and Aimee Jackson discover on their tour is true. As evidenced by the great photography in this book, that information is *non-fiction*. The land itself and the discoveries of recent years offer rock-solid proof of the Bible's faithful record of history. A book like this, I like to say, is a "novel" way to discover what the land can teach us about the Bible!

In addition, the life-changing spiritual truth that Scott finds inside these pages is also real. When Jesus was alive, people were profoundly changed when they met him. People are *still* being changed by Jesus! In this sense, Scott's story is my story. I also pray that it's your story.

But if you're going to walk this way, do your best to stay on the path. Danger lurks in Wadi Qelt!

– Andy Cook



1

As the sun reached its peak, what had been a hot, early-summer day in the Judean Wilderness turned into an unqualified scorcher.

Along with 54 other tourists, Scott Ricketts and Aimee Jackson didn't seem to notice the triple-digit heat as they hiked single-file along the ancient Jericho-Jerusalem road. They were simply too excited to be walking on a path where Jesus had once walked.

Scott and Aimee were both university students, but from different states. They'd met only a week before, but had fallen in love on a biblical study tour of Israel. Now they were on yet another challenging hike, following Dr. Samuel Anderson and his Israeli tour guide, Yoram Black, into the northern edge of the Judean Wilderness.

"Can you believe this view?" Aimee kept asking. All around them, hikers were trying to keep their eyes on a narrow path, carry on conversations and take pictures at the same time. As they climbed ever higher, however, most of the talking gave way to labored breathing.

"Keep drinking," Scott reminded those around him again, even as he took another long pull of water. He was already into his second liter.

Scott was tall, broad shouldered and an obvious athlete. Aimee was



a head shorter and also in excellent shape. Both of them wore lightweight T-shirts and hiking shorts. Their hiking boots looked well-worn after a week of similar hikes in the northern half of Israel.

The canyon – known as Wadi Qelt to the people of nearby Jericho – was marked by dramatic cliffs and a very deep ravine. The path clung to the northern side of the wadi, about halfway up the canyon. Though the road was narrow, no one seemed to be troubled by the precarious-looking hike. The line of hikers simply kept moving forward, taking in one dramatic view after another with each twisting turn.

In an hour, Scott and Aimee rounded another corner and spotted their companions taking seats on stone rows carved right into the canyon wall.

“Check that out!” Aimee said. “Someone’s made an amphitheater here! I’ll bet they have sunrise services here ... look at the crosses on the hills!”

Some of the hikers had climbed to the highest seats and appeared to be perched on the edge of the canyon. Others had immediately taken the lower seats, glad to have a break from the strenuous walk.

“Come on up, everyone!” Samuel said as he greeted the last hikers. “Make sure you keep drinking your water. You may not think you’re sweating, because your clothes are drying so quickly. But believe me, you’re losing water. Keep drinking while we take a break here.”

Samuel Anderson had been leading tours of Israel for more than 35 years. A former seminary professor from Tennessee, he’d especially enjoyed taking students and other travelers on hiking trips. Experiences like the walk on the Jericho Road, he’d told his travelers earlier that day, were something few visitors to Israel would ever know.

Samuel started teaching quickly, aware that the sun was directly overhead and draining the energy from his group.

“Welcome to the most famous road in the Bible,” Samuel said. “So much happened here! If you can remember a name from all the stories in the Bible, there’s an excellent chance he or she walked this road. That certainly includes Saul, David and Solomon. Saul was from the tribe of Benjamin, and this is Benjamite territory. David must have known this path as a shepherd, and we know this was the route he took as he escaped from Absalom, the son who rebelled against him.

“All the kings of Judah walked this way. The last king of Judah ran for his life down this path, but the Babylonians caught him in Jericho. All of the prophets surely knew every bend in this road. Mary and Joseph walked this way on their way to Christmas.”

Samuel paused and took a drink from his water bottle.

“It’s another 17 miles or so to Jerusalem,” he said, looking to his left and pointing up the hill. “Once you get past this first stretch, things calm down a bit. The rest of the way up isn’t as difficult or as dramatic as what we’ve just covered, though it’s still a steady climb. The Bible always speaks of going ‘up to Jerusalem.’ You’ll probably never read that phrase the same way again!”

Samuel had to stop and wipe his brow. The sweat was getting in his eyes.

“I’m reminded that the last hike Jesus ever made was from Jericho all the way up to Jerusalem, and today I’m thinking it might be the last hike I’m going to make, too!”

Some laughter spread through the group, but most of travelers were still staring in awe at their dramatic surroundings.

Scott had been trying to pull up his weather app on his cell phone, but he had no service. He had no doubt that it was well over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. There was no breeze. As he looked up both ends of the canyon, he saw no trees or other opportunities for shade.

“This is brutal,” he whispered to Aimee. “Keep drinking your water.”

“This is incredible!” she whispered back, taking another long drink. “I never imagined it looking like this!”

“So here’s the deal,” Samuel continued. “Jesus knew that every person he met would have known this road. So he made it the setting for one of his most famous parables.”

John Jameson stood immediately and began quoting a passage of scripture. Before the trip began, Samuel had assigned each traveler a few Bible verses and asked them to memorize the passages. Some read the passages, but many were able to simply start quoting their passages when the opportunity presented itself.

“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers,” John said in a dramatic voice. “This is from Luke 10, verse 30 and following.

“They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.”

Samuel held up his hand, signaling John to stop. “Hey, John, take a look at this road. How in the world are you going to ‘pass by on the other side?’”

The entire group broke into laughter. The path wasn’t wide enough in most places for two people to walk comfortably side by side.

“This is how the land gives us fresh insight into the Bible’s most familiar passages,” Samuel continued. “You laughed at the idea. I think the people hearing this story from Jesus laughed at the idea, too, even as he told the story. If you want to pass by a man who’s sprawled out and left for dead on this road, you would probably have to step over him! And that’s simply not the way of hospitality in this part of the world. It’s not the



way of anyone who's ever really understood the love of God for all of us. This is just ... wrong!"

Samuel was so animated as he acted out the scene, the group laughed again. At the same time, Samuel nodded at John, who continued the story.

"But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came to where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. "Look after him," he said, "and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have."

"And Jesus asked the man, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?""

A silence fell over the group. John sat back down, the rim of his blue T-shirt soaked to a much darker color. Three hikers near him patted him on the back. John just took another big drink of water.

After a few seconds had passed, Samuel said, "Great job, John! What an amazing place to quote that scripture! I wonder how many times the people who heard Jesus tell it retold it while taking a break on this road. Can't you see that happening?"

Samuel was smiling, clearly in his element. He had a way of unwrapping familiar Bible passages that made them seem brand new.

"As you know, this story was crafted to ask the people hearing it that very important question. Who is my neighbor? Who am I obligated to help?"

"Jesus was such an incredible story teller. The man who'd asked Jesus who his neighbor was apparently had a deep prejudice against Samaritans. That's not really a difficult conclusion. We know a *lot* of people around Jesus hated the Samaritans. Their hatred

came from a complex combination of religious, social and racial prejudice. It was like a long-running feud that was never going to end.

"So when one of his Jewish listeners wants to know who he's obligated to help, Jesus makes a Samaritan the hero of the story. It must have been repulsive to the man who'd asked the question!"

Suddenly, Samuel got very animated again.

"Look what Jesus does! The man asking Jesus a religious question obviously has a problem with Samaritans as a whole. Again, it's a prejudice-thing. But Jesus isn't going to let the guy get away with saying he loves God with all of his heart, soul and mind while at the same time hating a people group just because of their skin color or their economic standing or whatever. These two things just can't go together.

"So when the Samaritan makes his surprise entrance into this parable, Jesus doesn't just make the Samaritan the hero of the story. He paints a picture that would be very difficult for a man prejudiced against Samaritans to deal with."

Samuel reached over to Rusty Smith, the traveler nearest him, and began acting out the story.

"The hero in this story cleans off the poor guy's wounds, putting his Samaritan hands all over his body. He's practically bathing the man!"

Rusty looked a little uncomfortable as Samuel ran his hands back and forth on his back. This caused another burst of laughter to run through the group.

"He puts Samaritan bandages and Samaritan ointment on the man's very non-Samaritan wounds. Then the Samaritan picks the poor guy up with his Samaritan arms and puts the man on his Samaritan donkey and takes him all the way to an inn, promising to drop by again to do it all again! Who knows? It's probably one of those low-rent, dirty,

Samaritan Inns!”

Samuel was at his most passionate in moments like these, and he was practically yelling. The canyon echoed with the sound of his voice.

“When Jesus turns the question back to the man who’d first asked for a clarification of who he needed to love in this hate-filled world of ours, the poor guy can’t even say the word, ‘Samaritan!’ He answers the question Jesus asked him by saying, ‘The one who had mercy on him.’

“But he gets the moral, of course, and so do we,” Samuel said. “It’s impossible not to see the real neighbor in the story. It’s a man who is blind to color, blind to prejudices, blind to anything except the love of other people. That’s the kind of love we’re supposed to have for everyone. Not just our family members. Not just for the people we like or the people who look like us, or who buy the same kind of clothes as we do, or who vote for the same politicians. But for everyone!”

The group was quiet again. Scott felt as though he’d just heard the famous parable for the first time. The dramatic view, the narrow path and Samuel’s passionate explanation of scripture was once more bringing the Bible to life.

Just the day before, Scott had been baptized in the Jordan River. It wasn’t his first time to confess Jesus as Messiah, but after a season of personal doubt, the trip to Israel had convinced Scott that the Bible contains a faithful record of actual history. Despite what others had told him, he had realized the Bible wasn’t a collection of religious myths or fables. Overwhelmed by all he was learning, Scott had taken the opportunity in the Jordan River to recommit his life to Christ.

His baptism hadn’t been the only major decision of the day. On the previous evening, he’d professed his love to Aimee and she’d responded in kind. He’d gone to bed convinced he’d found the young woman who would one day be his wife.

Scott looked again at Aimee. Despite the heat, she still looked beautiful. She had short, blond hair that curled around her face. Her eyes were alive with energy and mischief. She was intelligent and sensitive. Most impressively, she was as committed a follower of Jesus as Scott had ever met among his peers. He had never dreamed of falling in love on a trip to the Holy Land, but now he couldn’t stop stealing glances of Aimee Jackson.

“OK,” Yoram said, “We’re going to start walking again. But be careful as you get up. You might be a little lightheaded for a few moments. Watch out for one another!”

Yoram Black, 35, had been guiding groups for more than a decade and had been hiking the trails of Israel since he was a boy. He wore wire-rimmed glasses and a very worn baseball cap. He was munching on an apple and helping some of the travelers climb down from their canyon-wall seats.

Scott rose slowly, testing his balance. The excessive heat and the long break made getting down the steep steps of the natural theater a little tricky. He and Aimee and three other travelers lined the steps so that all the travelers could safely move back to the path. Then they helped one another down.

By that time, most of the hikers had already made it around the next bend.

“Hey, we’ve got a minute! I’ve got to have my picture made here!” Aimee said, tugging on Scott’s arm. Her enthusiasm for each part of the trip seemed limitless. She handed Scott her phone and ran over to the ledge where Samuel had been teaching. It made for a dramatic shot. The canyon gaped below her and the path stretched into the distance. Aimee stepped even closer to the edge of the big rock, smiling broadly as she waited on Scott to snap the photo.

“Give me a second,” Scott said. He slipped off his sunglasses and tried to find the best angle for the photo. The sun was so bright, however, he had to cover his eyes with his hands.

When he looked up again, Aimee wasn't on the ledge.

In the split second that his mind registered that she wasn't there, he heard the sickening sound of a body hitting the rocks below. He heard the distinct snap of bones breaking, and a short cry from Aimee. The sound of several rocks clattering down the canyon followed.

Instantly, several other travelers screamed in horror and Scott instantly felt sick to his stomach.

He tossed the phone aside and scrambled to the edge of the cliff. He lowered himself on his belly, crawled quickly to the edge and looked into the abyss.

Aimee was sprawled on a narrow ledge about 25 feet below him. One leg was grotesquely twisted at an unnatural angle. It was obviously broken. One arm was over her head. It appeared to be broken as well. The other arm was hidden behind her. Her white T-shirt was covered with dust. A red pool of blood was growing slowly near her head.

If she moved suddenly, Scott also realized that she could fall even further into the canyon. The rounded edges of the ledge meant she could slide off easily with any movement.

But Aimee wasn't moving at all.

Scott couldn't even tell if she was breathing.

Hardback copies of Finally Finding Easter available November, 2018.

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