

As the Dust Settled

By Bill Welzien

You can call me the "*Lowdown Double-Crossing Pastor*." I deserve it. In fact, I earned the title. It didn't come easy; I worked harder than I ever have before. So this title is a true badge. Let me explain ...

On Monday, September 1, 2015, I caught a plane, just after noon, from Key West to Atlanta. At 9 p.m. that evening, I was winging my way to Paris. Arriving at 6 a.m. Paris time, I hunkered down at the Charles De Gaulle Airport for the next 9 hours. My next plane took me to Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv, Israel. What was the goal of flying to the Middle East? My mission was to attempt something that had never been done before. I intended to swim a double-cross of the widest area of the Sea of Galilee, the lake of Genneserat, The Sea or Lake of Tiberias (see John 6:1; Luke 5:1), or, as the Israelis refer to it, the Kinneret. Anyone familiar with the Bible knows that this is the body of water that the Lord Jesus calmed during a terrible storm and even walked upon to aid His disciples. (Matthew 8:23-27; 14:22-33).

I had accomplished a historic first in early September of 2009. I was accompanied by my then-13-year-old son, Billy, and dear friends John and Judy Pex. Guided by Galilean fisherman Amnon, I swam the full length of the sea from north to south in 10 hours and 25 minutes. That distance - as the crow flies - is about 13 miles. Anyone who swims open water knows that no one can swim a straight line. Even the best open water swimmer will zig and zag to some degree.

Now, at 65 years old, I returned to try another first: to swim the width - across and back! This time I traveled alone. As we grow older, the window of opportunity closes for such tests of endurance. A double cross at the widest part of the lake is about 8 miles, so my total "as the crow flies" is 16 miles. In real life, maybe 17. It could be longer, but surely not shorter!

Before I left the United States, I was given a tip about a man named Lior from the Wake Up Ski School on the eastern shore of Galilee in En Gev. The word was that he accompanied swimmers such as me. We exchanged several emails. I would call him after I landed and we would choose a window of three days, September 7-9, for the swim. The plan was for him to select the best weather day. We also decided that it would be more ideal for me to begin at night. Typically at this time of year, the wind kicks up mid-afternoon. When I did my lengthwise swim 6 years

prior, I started at 7 a.m. and by 2 to 3 p.m., the water became very choppy, and at that point I was tiring. I was willing to swim through the night if it meant avoiding the wind. Originally, we discussed a midnight start and a start and finish on the eastern shore. As I spoke with Lior from Tel Aviv, we decided to begin on Tuesday, September 8 at 1 a.m. Still, that was flexible, depending on the winds and weather.

The first few days were spent in Eilat. I stayed with the Pexes and used some of my pastoral gifts with them at their Shelter Hostel and with the congregation there in Eilat. On Saturday afternoon I was riding with Ted Walker as he drove me to his home in Tiberias on the western shore of Galilee. I met Ted and Linda on my last trip. The Walkers oversaw the work at a guesthouse in Migdal called Beit Bracha. This couple, though Americans, speak Hebrew and assisted me in communication. My captain on this adventure was a young man called Offri and his assistant, Iddo, who was also in his mid-twenties.

As the day approached, we determined that we would start on Monday night, September 7, at about 10 p.m. I thought the earlier the better. I figured since I was swimming at night, the sky would be as dark at 10 p.m. as it would be at 4:00, so starting earlier made sense as I would finish earlier and avoid the heat of the sun the next morning. All my calculations told me I would be finished in 13 hours. Thirteen hours would exceed all my previous swim times. My longest swim time ever was in Tampa Bay where I swam about 20 miles in 11:25. I wondered if I could make it that long, but I was willing to try. I felt I had trained well.

Back on June 6, I swam my 65th career swim around Key West. This day I swam, with 85 other solo swimmers, the 12.5 mile distance around this beautiful Island which is where I have made my home for the past 29 years. My wife, Sessie, and I arrived in 1986 with our three young children (the Lord blessed us eventually with a total of nine: 7 daughters and 2 sons). I would serve as the evangelist/director of an openair easel evangelism ministry at the nightly Sunset Celebration at Mallory Square. I still continue to minister there each Monday, Wednesday and Friday. I have also pastored Keys Presbyterian Church (OPC) since 1989.

I began to organize the Annual Swim Around Key West in 2003 after the founder, Anna Fugina, left the Island. The rest of my training swims were on my own. I swam my 66th swim on June 16 and then, in July (a blue moon month of two full moons), I swam #67 on July 2 (the first full moon) and #68 on the new moon on July 16. The blue moon was on July 31, when I completed #69. Swimming 12.5 miles in the salt water was good training to build a base, but I felt I needed to do a swim of 13 hours. In the Keys, this is impossible due to the tidal currents. So, my solution was

to swim again on August 1: #70. My reasoning was that swimming back-to-back swims around Key West would give me an indicator as to how my shoulders would endure for the length of time that would be demanded of them. I should point out that each of these Island swims took between 6.5 and 7 hours. The back-to-back swim went well. I was sore, but okay. I did my last long training swim, #71, on August 13.

Now, faced with the actual swim, the question loomed, "Could I make it?" My massage therapist, Stephen, felt sure, and my chiropractor, Doc Ryan, was confident. With their encouragement, I left the country, and now the day had come. By God's grace, I put together a team, Pastor Jan Barendse from Holland, young South African, Jonathan Biggs (21) and Yonatan Pex, an Israeli. These men committed to cross one way. On the return trip I had several young ladies with me; Debora Van Vuuren from Holland (18), Claire Splawn (21) and Hannah Abke (21), both from the United States. Only Jonathan would be the constant. It is remarkable how many people committed to pray for me!

I heard from Offri, my captain from Kibbutz En Gev, twice on September 7. We spoke at 4 p.m. and again at 7 p.m. I asked if we could start earlier. We left the western shore, just north of Tiberias, just after 8 p.m. It took about 30 minutes to arrive at En Gev by the southern route. The boat was a 23-foot Malibu speed boat, and it was fast! Jan, Jonathan, Yonatan and I loaded our supplies into the boat. I had my FINA approved Nike Hydra HD3 jammer suit on. In my duffle bag, I had two gallon baggies filled with Hammer Nutrition Perpetuem and serving scoops and Clif Bars. Perpetuem has been my staple for endurance swims for years. It is a powder that contains complex carbohydrates, electrolytes and a bit of protein. Jonathan's job was to mix the powder with water and keep my three sports bottles filled. The bottle in use was attached to a piece of cord by a slipknot. Every 45 minutes I would be handed or tossed the bottle. I would suck down what I needed and toss the bottle back. The cord was to insure we didn't lose the bottle by an over or under toss. The Clif bars were broken into bite-sized pieces and placed in a baggie. If I needed a piece, they would hand it to me or, if I was close enough, they would put the piece in my mouth. I would chew it quickly and wash it down with a good drink. I was not allowed to touch the boat for any reason. I must tread water to feed. My motto is: Enjoy every moment you're in the water, but don't stay in the water longer than you must! Also in the duffle bag I had my goggles - the ones I ended up wearing the full time - and an extra set, just in case. As a Keys swimmer, I am always coated with a thick layer of Desitin Maximum Strength Zinc Oxide. This is an excellent full sun block that stains your suit, and is

a bear to remove. This night I applied nothing to my body. All I wore was my suit, goggles and my Garmin GPS watch. As we were settling into the boat, I noticed the flag on the dock was blowing straight from the western wind. There was a slight chop to the water. I asked Offri if he thought it would be wise to cross over to the western shore to have the wind at our back. He agreed this was a good idea, so we were off. We had looked at the map and concluded that the widest points across were Hawaii Beach, near Magdala, and Labnun Beach, near Kursi. According to the map, it was 8.1 miles each way, as the crow flies! Remember crows are not known for swimming!!

That ride across from En Gev was the fastest that boat would travel for a good long time. It took only about 10 minutes to reach our starting point. I got out of the boat in the dark and walked to the shore. As I look now at my Garmin watch, it tells me that I entered the water at 9:30 p.m. and took my first stroke at 9:33.22. I had never done any swimming, to speak of, at night. In salt water, this would be dangerous with so many predators in the water. Galilee is sweet water. There is nothing scary in the water: no sharks, barracudas jelly fish or micro-organisms to sting or cause an itch. It was akin to being in ink.

Offri had purchased an extension-pole. On the end was a round buoy and luminescent glow sticks, one above the buoy and one underneath the buoy. They extended out of the right side of the boat. I found it ingenious and was easy to follow. I didn't have to pick my head up constantly, but could see it as I turned to, and even underwater. He drove slowly, so as to stay beside me. My first mile was a surprising 34-minute mile. Sadly, that didn't last! The water was 86 degrees, which is hot for some, but not this Key West boy. My last swims around the Island were in 89-91 degree hot water. The water felt good to me, comfortable. I would glance over my right shoulder and marvel at Tiberias. The lights looked to me like a crown, with glowing amber and shining diamonds. I could also look forward, and though they were far away, I could see the lights on the eastern shore. The water was like ink and the sky dark. I never saw a star, and there was no moon of any phase. The boat had spotlights on me and I had a luminescent glow stick resting on my posterior, that was affixed by a string around my waist. I never found annoying.

As I swam my first miles, I did an intensive mental check of my muscles, ligaments and tendons. I looked for cramps and any potential problems. I felt some warmth around my teres minor before I left the States. I had my massage therapist work on me the day before I flew off. He worked it hard and assured me it was not injured. I was concerned as I swam, wondering if this would give me trouble. It is funny that pains seem to move from place to place. As long as they kept moving

about, I didn't mind. I just didn't want pain to take up permanent residence. I found myself praying as I swam. I just wanted to relax. In fresh water, swimming is more challenging because of the loss of buoyancy from the salt. My feet sink, and my swimming posture is one of me dragging my feet. The solution is to press your face and chest down, and your feet will rise to the surface. You must maintain a horizontal position. I had to remind myself of that fact constantly. Those in the boat were very enthusiastic for the first couple miles. No one can be expected to keep that level up for hours. Periodically Yonatan would get in the water and swim next to me. It was good to have the men there. Every 45 minutes, Jonathan was ready to feed me. About midway the first half, I think, I had the doldrums and prayed my way out. I prayed for groups of people, my family, my Session of the church, my congregation, my Presbytery, the board of my evangelism ministry, my friends in Israel and other friends elsewhere. I would recall Bible passages and pray over them, especially those that promised God's strength. I remembered that this was the time I had planned for, prayed about, dreamed about, and trained for. Here I was now, actually doing it. How I desired to be successful! Each stroke I made took me a stroke closer to my goal. Every stroke didn't seem like much, but they were cumulative.

I would look for the vibration of my GPS watch each hour. Sometimes I would wonder why it didn't buzz. The miles seemed to take longer than I thought. Of course I couldn't read the watch until I reached a mile. When it vibrated, the light also came on and I could see the time for that mile. This is a nice tool because not only do you know you have another mile to your credit, but you can see if you are slowing and adjust your speed. After mile 6, my Garmin failed to give me my splits. I didn't understand why until later. I soldiered on and I was very joyous to begin to see the lights on the beach at Labnun. The closer I got to the beach, the harder I swam. That was such a welcome sight. The boat got near enough to the shore for my team to exit and walk to the shore; no need for them to swim. The rules call for me to go ashore and to plant both feet on the dry ground. At that point, I have to be back in the water within 10 minutes to start my swim back to point A. I stumbled over the smooth but sizable rocks at Labnun beach. Kent Spalwn, the Director of the Beit Bracha Guesthouse, drove Team B over from Migdal. Jonathan brought me a full bottle of Perpetuem and a full Clif bar. As I ate, Pastor Jan prayed. With the exception of Jonathan, Team A disappeared with Kent. Jonathan and the girls got aboard, joining Offri and Iddo. I walked back into the dark waters. My Garmin tells me I swam a 6:32.17 time for the first lap. I was only 8 minutes on the beach.

I was half finished! Praise God, but could I get back to my start? Only time would tell. I began stroking my way westward. My Garmin tells me I took my first stroke at 4:14.15 a.m. Over the next few hours, something began to take place that I am told hasn't been witnessed in 70 years. About one hour into the return, I began to notice a film on the water. At first I didn't pay much attention to it. I had bigger fish to fry! I wanted to stay positive and move forward. I noticed that I was slowing down. I knew the sun would rise, and I was convinced that dawn would be a big boost. My original forecast was to complete the course in 13 hours, but based on my first half time, I questioned that, and set my sites on 14 hours.

About 5:30 a.m. I began to notice some light in the eastern sky, but it was muted. It was like a very dirty, yellowish color. As the sun rose, it was fully hidden behind what appeared to me to be a dome. I could see the boat clearly, but as I looked around I couldn't see land. It was as though we were in a bubble! Hanna said it was like being in a dream: very quiet, very peaceful and yet very eerie, even surrealistic. I realized the reason my Garmin ceased to give me my splits was because of this atmospheric phenomenon. While we were on the lake, we were unaware of what was happening around us. We came to know that this was what is known as a *Chamsin* in Arabic, or a *Sharav* in Hebrew. During this weather condition, temperatures rise significantly and hot winds from the surrounding deserts carry dry air, sand and dust. They usually happen in the spring or autumn and are followed by a good rain. What made this one so unique was that it was the hottest, sandiest and longest lasting one in the past 70 years! The whole country of Israel is still covered by it, and it is two days after my swim that I am writing this account!

As I swam, my team told me that I was leaving a trail because of the dust floating on the water. The dust was particularly obvious to me as I looked up from under the water. I was committed to the task at hand and kept swimming. Now that my Garmin watch was not recording my splits, the only way I had to know far I had gone was to ask Captain Offri. Whatever navigational tools he had apparently went south, and there was no visibility. He was using the compass app from the cell phones we had and they all would eventually die. Once, he reported that I was half way to the finish. Of course, that encouraged me. Ninety minutes later, I would ask again and I was told I had about 3 miles. Truly, I was slowing but, come on, not that much! One hour later, I would ask again, and we were 2.5 miles to the shore. I was told we were 1 mile from the shore several times. It was becoming obvious to me that we were lost, and I was beginning to wonder how much longer I could keep this up. All Offri could offer me were guesses, empty promises. I felt like I was in a

game where the goal post was constantly being moved. The young people on team B sought to be an encouragement as they kept me fed, but none of them knew where we were.

As time passed, my right shoulder was getting more and more sore. I was amazed at the difference between my left and right shoulder. The left one felt fine and my right one ached. My prayers were becoming more and more intense! I asked the Lord Jesus Christ for the grace and strength that I was in desperate need of, and I knew only He could provide. I was genuinely frustrated with not knowing how long I had to continue. Maybe, one of the many promises - that we were half a mile from the shore - was true. How would I feel after swimming eight, nine, ten hours on the return to quit and then learn I was 20 minutes from the beach? At this point I was slogging it out. Forget about form. There was a point where the water was so dirty that it was like swimming in mud. The bubbles that formed on the surface from my strokes were like the bubbles you see in a mud pond. We came across a pontoon boat filled with people. I thought to myself, "There are way too many people on that boat." It seemed there were so many that everyone had to stand and there was no room to sit. They spoke to Offri in Hebrew and so I didn't know what they said. Moments later a couple came by on a jet ski. They, too, were apparently lost in the haze.

Then things dramatically changed! My dear friend Ted Walker drove to the beach and turned his car headlights on. He began shouting my name. Those on the boat heard his voice and saw the lights. Offri blew the boat's horn. Ted continued to shout. Then all of sudden the boat sped away, but not before Offri sent Iddo on a paddle board to keep an eye on me. Finally, that half-mile was really the half-mile! In fact, likely even less!

Moments later the boat sped back with Ted on board. He was a welcomed sight. Before long, Kent was swimming out to us. I asked him if his feet were on the bottom. He said no, but that the bottom was halfway between him and the shore! I couldn't believe that I could now actually see the shore. There were a handful of people gathered there. I soon reached the point where I could see the bottom, but purposely did not stop and stand. I swam until my hands dragged on the bottom, until the water was too shallow to swim any longer. I had a renewed zeal. I praised God excitedly with each final stroke. I thanked Him for His faithfulness. He let me complete the course. He stood with me. He enabled me. He showed me that I had more perseverance and fortitude than I had ever thought possible.

My Garmin recorded a time of 11:46.21 on my return. That means it took almost 5 hours longer to return to the western shore than to Labnun. What a test of endurance! My total swim time, according to my calculations, was 17:59.08. If you add the 8 minutes on shore it would be 18:07.08. All my sources indicate that this is a historic first. There is no documentation of anyone ever having done a double crossing on this body of water. The Sea of Galilee is the lowest lake on the planet. It is 686 feet below sea level. That makes it the lowest swimmable body of water on the earth. The Dead Sea is the lowest body of water on this globe, but it not swimmable. In fact, it is inadvisable to put your face in the water in the Dead Sea, as it is the saltiest body of water on this terrestrial ball. Tourists go there, to the south of Israel, to float, not swim.

So now you know why I call myself a Lowdown (You can go no lower.) Double-Crossing Pastor. In light of these extraordinary conditions, you might add the adjective "*dirty*." You can call me a lowdown, dirty, double-crossing pastor, but just don't call me *no good*!

I was dizzy upon reaching shore, but the Walkers have kept me nourished, and my right shoulder feels better with each new day!

I sincerely thank Team A, Team B and Jonathan Biggs, who stuck with me for the whole event! I thank Offri and Iddo for not panicking in the dust cloud and calling me out of the water. For Kent and Shawna of Beit Bracha in Migdal and all their volunteers. Thanks to Hermana of Magdala. Thanks to all the prayer warriors on both sides of the ocean. Thanks to my dear friends in Christ for over 40 years, John and Judy Pex. Thanks to Ted and Linda Walker, perhaps the most generous, self-effacing couple I have ever known. To my wife, Sessie, who puts up with my lunacy, and to my children who have kayaked for me more times than they would prefer. To my elder, Tim Warner, who has kept an eye on the dear sheep of Keys Presbyterian Church in my absence. The entire Board of KEM. Also to Don Nelson, Larry Batts and Katie Leigh. The list could go on and on and on! Ultimately, I thank and continue to do so, my great Triune God. May the Father be praised through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit!!

Written on September 10, 2015, at the Pro-Life Office in Tiberias, Israel

By Bill "Ciastko" Welzien