

Friends,

My son Billy and I flew out of Key West via Atlanta to Tel Aviv on August 31st as planned. All went well with our travels. In fact, we landed about an hour earlier than expected. We got our rental car and drove to Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee. My good friends John and Judy Pex were there at the Beit Bracha Guesthouse to greet us at our arrival at about 9:00PM. We were pretty tired because it was now Tuesday, September 1. There is a 7 hour time difference Israel and Florida. We managed to sleep pretty well that night. The next afternoon we went to find a boat that would escort me the distance of the Sea of Galilee. We checked a few options and settled with a fisherman named Amnon.



The plan was to meet him at 5:30AM at the dock and ride in his boat to the northern shore of the lake. We were there on time but both Billy and I had not one wink of sleep the night before. I don't attribute my sleepless to jitters as much as to jet lag. Certainly Billy wasn't nervous about my swim. I listened to him toss and turn the full night. I just tried to lay still and get some rest, hoping for the sleep that never came. At 5:00AM John knocked on our door and we were on our way 15 minutes later. I knew what I needed for the challenge from all my swims around Key West. I had two sport bottles and several liters of water and my Hammer Perpetuum in a plastic bag with the scoop. I had plenty of gel shots and some Cliff bars in snack Baggies. I had

all I needed in a sport bag. I didn't feel tired and trusted that will power and adrenaline in addition to all the prayers of God's people would carry me through. I explained to John and Judy everything in my bag and what to expect as to my needs and we slowly putted to the start location. As we neared the start the sun was just coming over the eastern mountains. It was a very hazy morning and the Sea was very calm, like glass. We started just to the east of the Jordan River, the river that feeds into Lake Kinneret (Galilee). Judy lathered me up with my zinc oxide, for protection from the sun.



In addition to my zinc I only wore a Speedo swimsuit and goggles. I got out in about a foot of water on the soft delta sands. I was just after 7:00AM that I took my first stroke. The first of many. The water was sweet. I was used to salt. The water was warm, about 83 degrees and very still, calm, tranquil. I didn't notice being heavier but I did notice after about an hour's time that the area opposite my Achilles tendon, where my leg meets my foot was becoming very sore. I am sure it was because I had to kick more than in the salt. I kept taking inventory wondering if my lack of sleep was going to play a part. I figured I better just settle into the task at hand. I stopped to drink my Perpetuum on an average of once an hour. Every other feeding I had a gel pack. I never ate any

Cliff bars.

At the start I didn't know how we would work the logistics with the escort boat (the fishing boat), but that worked out fine. Captain Amnon would speed up ahead and I would swim swim to the boat. When I was hungry I would shout out "Drink!" and the boat would wait for me and I would get my sustenance. John mixed my drinks and Billy would hand me my bottles and gel packs. Amnon gave us some string to tie on the bottles in case we lost one with an over toss. I treaded water in taking my food never touching the boat as I drank.



I could see Tiberias on my right and at first I thought I was making very good time but then it never seemed to arrive. Maybe it was an optical illusion but I seemed to be swimming in place. Later Amnon told me that there was a current that ran across the area and that I was swimming against it. He also told me that since it was a full moon, it was even stronger. That is so odd to my thinking as this is a fresh water lake and I had never imagined such a thing. If any one can add some light to this I would love to hear more.

I was amazed to be swimming in this particular body of water. Up north I most likely swam over the area that Jesus came walking to His apostles as they struggled against a storm in the middle of the night. I tried to imagine Him in a boat with his disciples and absorbed looking at the mountains on both sides of me. I was an unreal feeling, beyond my wildest dream. Amnon told us of several individual who swam the width but he sad he had never known anyone to attempt the length.

John decided we needed to get some news coverage on the swim. He called his son, Joshua who just passed his bar exam and works for a law firm that caters to human rights cases. Joshua told his dad that if I had a cause I would fair better. He suggested I swim for civil marriages. Since I have always believed in civility between spouses, I thought that was a good cause. Actually, civil marriage (state recognized marriage for non Jewish religious marriages) in Israel is not of any legal standing. For example two Christians cannot marry in Israel. They must leave the country to legally marry.



We were just passing the center of Tiberias and a speed boat came whizzing out with a camera man and a big camera in it. The boat circled me several times and then stopped to speak to Amnon and the crew in his boat. I paid little attention to all of that and just kept on swimming. Later that night some footage appeared on the channel 10 national news just before 9:00PM. I didn't see it but was told that my name was mentioned and the cause.

I checked my watch periodically. I did so not only to check the time but also to keep track of my need for food. I needed to stay fueled, to feed my muscles.

I initially thought this swim would take 8 hours at top end. Boy was I surprised when 8 hours came and went and I was still swimming. I felt my muscles aching, especially in my lower back on the left side, in the kidney area. At about the 5 hours mark I hit the doldrums. Judy had jumped in and began to swim next to me. That had an exhilarating effect on me. I tried to match her pace. Then I began to push my head and chest below the surface. It made me feel like I was swimming down hill. It seemed to take pressure off my shoulders and lower back. It seemed as though I had gotten a second wind. It was a joy to have passed Tiberias. At about 4:00PM the wind began to pick up. It came out of the west and things got choppy. I wondered how far to the end. The haze never totally went away and judging distance in the water is very hard. I asked my support crew how far unto the finish. I was told about an hour. An hour later I asked the same question. This time they didn't even want to offer a guess. I had to reconcile myself that every stroke I was one closer. I couldn't give up now. My body was aching. I prayed fervently and continued to stroke.



As we approached the Jordan in the south of the Galilee Amnon directed me to the shore. It was very difficult because I swam directly into the wind. I would be happy to see the bottom. I swam until the water was too shallow and my fingers dragged on the bottom. The bottom was somewhat rocky and when I tried to stand I lost my balance. I looked at my watch. I had been swimming for 10 hours, 25 minutes, 34 seconds. I couldn't believe it. John came to help steady me until I got my "land legs" back. Praise God, I had completed the swim!

When I finally got on shore I asked where our captain had gone. John and Judy told me he went to look for cigarettes. When he returned he informed me that I had swum 23 kilometers. By God's grace I had made it. Thanks to all who prayed and to John and Judy and my son Billy for their encouragement during this great day of my life! I am sore but no damage for the wear.

The staff and guests at Beit Bracha gave me a hero's welcome when we returned. They held dinner for us and though I had no appetite I ate anyway knowing that my body need the nourishment. I was light headed, somewhat dizzy and dead tired. I had found the remedy for jet lag. I went to bed at 9:15 and slept until just before 8:00AM. I slept deep.

I am writing this from the home of John and Judy Pex in Eilat. Eilat is located at the southernmost point of Israel. Billy and I left Beit Bracha in Tiberias at Friday noon. We drove up to Capernaum and saw the ruins and then up to Bethsaida. We then drove around the Sea of Galilee, through the Golan Heights and south. From the southern point of the Sea of Galilee we continued south passed Jericho passed the Dead Sea and here to Eilat. John oversees the congregation of Jewish believers in Jesus Christ here in Eilat. I gave one of my easel messages on Friday evening and this morning I gave the message in the morning Shabbat service. We had a wonderful time of worship with believers from around the world who now lived in Eilat. The service was variously translated in Russian, Spanish, English, Hebrew and Arabic.

In the late afternoon we went swimming in the Gulf of Aqaba (near the Egyptian border). Honestly, it was like swimming in an aquarium. The deep blue crystal clear water, the coral heads and the exotic fish were breathtaking. It was also good to stretch the swimming muscles and try to get rid of some the lactic acid. The swim is over and now it is time for a little vacation. Billy and I hope to be back home, in Key West, Fl. on Wednesday, September 16th. Blessings!!

In the Loving Arms of My Great Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ,

Bill "Ciastko" Welzien