

“NAZARETH, BETHSAIDA, CAPERNAUM”

This past week I received an email announcement that some private foundation was paying for ministers to visit the Holy Land. They would pay all the expenses – air fare, hotels, transportation, etc. The ministers only had to pay their travel expenses to a church camp where they were meeting and would have several days orientation. Their stated reason for doing this is so that the ministers will understand the New Testament Scriptures better once they have seen Israel.

I’m sure a few of you have been to the Holy Land. Most of us have not visited the Holy Land and never will visit it. For us these sermons are intended to give a clearer picture of the places where Jesus lived and ministered. Last Sunday we visited Bethlehem in the sermon. The most striking thing geographically about Bethlehem is that it sits on a mountain ridge higher than Jerusalem, about seven miles away. Bethlehem is almost as high as Mt. Magazine, the highest in Arkansas.

Nazareth, Bethsaida, and Capernaum were in Galilee. Try to imagine the Mediterranean Sea in the west and the Sea of Galilee in the east. Galilee was that area of land between those two Seas. The Sea of Galilee flowed into the Jordan River. The Jordan River eventually empties into the Dead Sea. Halfway down the Jordan River is Jericho. Between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River to Jericho was Samaria, then began Judea. Because of animosity between the Jews and Samaritans, Jews traveling from Galilee to Judea usually crossed the Jordan River where it begins, traveled on the east side of the Jordan and then crossed back to the west bank at Jericho into Judea.

1.) Nazareth

Nazareth was situated midway in Galilee, about halfway between the Mediterranean Sea and the Sea of Galilee. It sat alongside a road that connected the two Seas. It was also near a caravan route from Egypt to Damascus and on to the Silk Road. One writer said it might have been like a truck stop town and that is why Nathaniel remarked to Philip, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Joseph and Mary were living in Nazareth when the angel came to the Virgin and told her she would give birth to the Christ of God. Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine built a Church of the Annunciation here. It was destroyed in 1263 in the aftermath of the Crusades. In 1620 the Franciscans rebuilt it as the Basilica of the Annunciation.

After Joseph and Mary returned from Egypt they came back to Nazareth, and Jesus grew up here and lived here thirty years. He was living here when He went to John the Baptist in Judea to be baptized. After His baptism, Jesus was in the Wilderness of Judea fasting, praying, and being tempted by Satan. After His temptations were over, He returned to Nazareth. While He was preaching in synagogues and healing in other towns in Galilee, Nazareth was His home.

Then one Sabbath He read from Isaiah 61 in the synagogue in Nazareth. When He finished He said, "This day this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." He went on to tell them that He could not do many works of healing among them because they did not believe in Him. They were so angry that they drove Him out to a cliff and wanted to hurl Him off of it. After that Capernaum became His home. However, He was always known as Jesus of Nazareth.

2.) Bethsaida

I really should head this part "Bethsaidas" because there were two towns named "Bethsaida". North of the Sea of Galilee is Lake Gennesaret. It flows into the Sea of Galilee through a short stretch of the Jordan River. At one point the Jordan River is so shallow that people could easily walk across it. Where the Lake flows into the Jordan River was a good place for fishing. Bethsaida means "the place of fish." There were two towns on the south shore of the Lake, one on the east side and the other on the west side both named Bethsaida.

Bethsaida in Galilee was on the western shore of Lake Gennesareth, a short distance north of Capernaum which was on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Bethsaida in Galilee was the birthplace of the apostles Philip, Andrew and Peter. It was often visited by our Lord.

Then He came to Bethsaida; and they brought a blind man to Him, and begged Him to touch him. (Mark 8:22 NKJV)

"Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. (Matthew 11:21 NKJV)

The other Bethsaida was on the eastern side of Lake Gennesareth. It sat on a hill overlooking the Lake. There was plain of lush grass stretching for three miles to the Sea of Galilee. It was on this hill that Jesus sat and taught the people who sat on the plain below. It was here that He fed the 5,000 with a few loaves of bread and fish. When Jesus told the disciples to return home while He sent the crowds away, they went from one Bethsaida to the other Bethsaida in Galilee.

(Mark 6:45) Immediately He made His disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while He sent the multitude away. (NKJV)

3.) Capernaum

The name "Capernaum" means "Nahum's town". However, it is not mentioned in the Old Testament. It was the chief city in Galilee. Like Nazareth it was on the caravan route from Egypt to Damascus, Syria. It was also on the highway from Damascus to Acco and Tyre. It was the most prosperous and densely populated area in Palestine.

There was a detachment of Roman soldiers stationed here; it was a custom's post, and the residence of a officer of the king.

There was a beautiful synagogue built by a Roman centurion:

(Luke 7:2-5) And a certain centurion's servant, who was dear to him, was sick and ready to die. So when he heard about Jesus, he sent elders of the Jews to Him, pleading with Him to come and heal his servant. And when they came to Jesus, they begged Him earnestly, saying that the one for whom He should do this was deserving, "for he loves our nation, and has built us a synagogue." (NKJV)

This was the home of Peter and Andrew and probably James and John. It became Jesus' home for the last three years of His ministry. In addition to the healing of the centurion's servant, Jesus performed many other miracles here including healing the nobleman's son, healing Simon Peter's mother-in-law, healing a paralytic, casting out an unclean spirit, and raising Jairus' daughter from the dead.

Jesus frequently taught in the synagogue here.

(John 6:54-59) "Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me. This is the bread which came down from heaven--not as your fathers ate the manna, and are dead. He who eats this bread will live forever." These things He said in the synagogue as He taught in Capernaum. (NKJV)

This is one of Jesus' most difficult teachings. It is an indication of the spiritual maturity of the people in Capernaum that He said it here.

