

Location Matters

Coincidence or Providence?



"Bethabara beyond the Jordan"

*"These things were done in Bethabara beyond the Jordan,
where John was baptizing" (John 1:28)*

David Padfield

Location Matters

© 2019 by David Padfield
All rights reserved

www.padfield.com

Published by the Zion Church Of Christ, Zion, Illinois, USA

Scripture taken from the New King James Version.
Copyright ©1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Location Matters (Lesson One)

Introduction

- I. It has been claimed that British real estate tycoon Lord Harold Samuel coined the expression: “There are three things that matter in property: location, location, location.”
 - A. Today, that phrase is still the mantra of real estate agents: location, location, location.
 - B. You’ve probably heard the phrase and may wonder what inspires agents to say the word three times.
 - C. In a nutshell, “location, location, location” means that houses can experience significant increases or decreases in value due to nothing other than their location.
 - D. What is a brand new 8,000-square-foot mansion worth today?
 - E. If that mansion is located in Lake Forest, Illinois, it will sell for a lot more than if that house was located in Detroit—location matters!
- II. When studying the Bible, you should always remember the location of Bible events.
 - A. The Bible does not contain any *filler material*—every word in Scripture is there for a reason (even though you might not be aware of that reason yet).
 - B. Do you realize that the four gospels only mention 27 towns and villages by name?
 - C. As you study the gospels and find a city mentioned by name, you should always stop and ask yourself, “What happened here before?”
 - D. For example, even the most casual Bible students know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea (Luke 2:4–6; Matt 2:1–6).
 1. As Luke explained, Bethlehem was the ancestral home of David, Israel’s most beloved king (Luke 2:4).
 2. Thus, it is fitting that the one who would sit on “David’s throne” would be tied to that great king by ancestry and a shared hometown (Mic 5:2).
- III. In our lesson today, we want to notice a few New Testament events and see how their location greatly affects our understanding of the story.
 - A. We will start with the remote location...

Discussion

I. Where John The Baptist Was Teaching And Baptizing

- A. John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, was teaching and baptizing people in the area known as “Bethabara beyond the Jordan” (John 1:19–28).
 1. Great crowds from all over Judea went to hear John (Matt 3:5–6; Mark 1:4–5).
 2. It appears that Jesus went to this area to be baptized by John (John 1:29–34).
- B. Where is “Bethabara beyond the Jordan” (John 1:28)?
 1. Early pilgrims claimed that Sapsaphas, north of the Dead Sea and east of the Jordan River, was the site where Jesus was baptized and that a church building there was dedicated to John the Baptist.
 2. The sixth-century mosaic Madaba map shows a place called Beth-abara, labeled “Ainon (spring) where now is Sapsaphas.”
 - a) The Madaba map is the earliest known map of Palestine, dating to approximately AD 560–565.

- b) It is designed into the floor mosaic of a Byzantine Church in Madaba, Jordan.
- 3. Ancient Sapsaphas has been identified as Wadi el-Kharrar, a small riverbed slightly over 1 mile long, 5 miles north of the Dead Sea.
- 4. Excavations in the area have revealed three ancient church buildings, three caves, and three baptismal pools from the Roman and Byzantine periods.
- 5. Approximately 330 yards from the Jordan River, there are indeed the ruins of an ancient church building, identified by the excavators as the Church of Saint John the Baptist, which was mentioned by the early pilgrims.
- 6. It stands at the traditional site of Jesus' baptism.
- 7. Today, on the east bank of the Jordan River, in the nation of Jordan, there is a baptismal site officially known as "Bethany Beyond the Jordan" (Al-Maghtas).
- 8. On the opposite side of the Jordan River, on the Israeli side, is Qaser El-Yahud, and for centuries, it was the most important baptism site for pilgrims.
- C. Why did John the Baptist choose this remote location to teach and baptize?
 - 1. A hill in this vicinity is recognized as the point from which Elijah, the great Old Testament prophet, had been taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire.
 - a) After passing through Gilgal, Bethel, and Jericho, Elijah and his successor, Elisha, came to the Jordan River (2 Kgs 2:8-15).
 - b) Elijah's cloak was a symbol of his authority as a prophet.
 - c) Elisha asked to be Elijah's successor (that is why he asked for a double share of Elijah's spirit).
 - d) Elijah transferred the prophetic mantle to Elisha just before Elijah ascended to heaven.
 - e) The hill where this event transpired is known to archaeologists today as *Tell Mar Elias* (Elijah's Hill).
- D. The closing words of the Old Testament speak of the return of the prophet Elijah (Mal 4:5).
 - 1. God was not going to send Elijah back from the grave literally, but He was going to send someone *like* Elijah (Matt 17:10-13; 11:10-14).
 - 2. John the Baptist came forth "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17).
 - 3. John's appearance, being "clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist," would have evoked images of the prophet Elijah (2 Kgs 1:8; Matt 3:4).
 - 4. So when John the Baptist, a man dressed like Elijah, came preaching in the "spirit and power of Elijah," where Elijah had been taken up into heaven, Jews from all over Judea went out to hear him!
 - 5. Location, location, location!
- E. Now, let us look at...

II. Where Jesus Began His Ministry

- A. After being rejected in His hometown of Nazareth, Jesus moved His base of ministry to Capernaum (Luke 4:31-32).
 - 1. His move to Capernaum fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy (Matt 4:13-16; cf. Isa 9:1-2).
 - 2. A "great light" would arise out of *Zebulun* (the tribal territory in which Nazareth was located) and *Naphtali* (the tribal territory in which Capernaum was located).
 - 3. It is easy to overlook the significance of Jesus teaching in these two towns.

- B. Isaiah 9:1–7 is one of the best-known passages in the Old Testament, though many people are only familiar with the last two verses (Isa 9:6–7).
1. Isaiah attempted to convince his listeners that God can be trusted and that His promises for a glorious future for His people will be fulfilled.
 2. The power of this passage is heightened when one realizes that it serves to conclude the section that began with wicked king Ahaz (Isa 7:1).
 3. Because of his defiant disobedience to the will of God, Ahaz’s reign experienced the devastation and destruction of the Assyrian army.
 4. It was a time of great darkness.
 5. In contrast to Ahaz’s godless behavior, there is another royal figure who will be divine and whose reign will bring peace, light, and justice.
 6. The lands of Zebulun and Naphtali are in the northernmost region of Israel, and they undoubtedly suffered the brunt of the Assyrian invasion.
 7. Since the Assyrian campaign that reduced it to a province under an Assyrian governor in 732 BC (2 Kgs 15:29), this region had long experienced turmoil and forced infiltration of Gentile influence.
 8. Even they will experience the blessings of the coming royal Savior.
 9. Jesus began His ministry in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali to fulfill prophecy and bring light to those who were in darkness.
 10. Yes, location matters!
- C. Now, let us go to the story that took place in...

III. The Village Of Nain

- A. In the Old Testament, 353 towns and villages in Israel are mentioned by name.
1. In addition, some stories mention, for example, that “Elijah went to another village.”
 2. I would suggest that if a place is mentioned by name, knowing its name can add insight to the story.
 3. For example, in Luke 7:36–37, Jesus is a guest at Simon the Pharisee’s home.
 4. Luke does not tell us the name of the village.
 5. Earlier in this chapter, Luke tells us that Jesus had already passed through the cities of Capernaum (Luke 7:1) and Nain (Luke 7:10).
 6. However, it was not important where Simon’s house was located.
- B. At the tiny village of Nain, Jesus raised a young man from the dead (Luke 7:11–15).
1. This is the only mention of Nain in the Bible, and it is one of the few times Luke gives the name of the city or village where Christ was.
 2. As Jesus approached the city, He met the funeral procession of a widow’s son, who was apparently a well-known person, since the procession consisted of a large crowd from the city.
 3. According to Jewish burial customs, a body was anointed with spices, wrapped in cloth, and laid on a plank or in a coffin.
 4. The funeral procession, accompanied by mourners, proceeded outside the city gate to the family burial site.

5. This dead man was the *only son* of his mother, and she was a *widow*, which made for a pitiful situation.
 6. The woman was now all alone in the world.
 7. Without a male protector and provider, she must have been in difficulties.
 8. There were few openings for a woman to earn her living in the first century.
 9. To add to the hardship and the sense of loneliness and sorrow, there was the knowledge that the family line had ended.
 10. Touched by the widow's desolate state, Jesus miraculously restored the young man to life, to the astonishment and gratitude of the whole city.
- C. Nain was located in what is now the Muslim settlement of Nein, a small village six miles southeast of Nazareth, on the northwest slopes of the hill of Moreh.
1. It is intriguing that on the south side of the same hill lies the Old Testament town of Shunem, where Elisha had restored a child to life (2 Kgs 4:8, 18–37).
 2. In like manner, at Nain, the people declared, “A great prophet has risen up among us” (Luke 7:16–17).
 3. The people considered Jesus a prophet because a few centuries before, another prophet of God had healed a child from just over the hill.
 4. Again, location matters.

Invitation

- I. We could have used many other examples to illustrate our point today.
- II. I hope and pray that in your future Bible studies, you will always consider the entire context of the stories you are reading—not just the literary and linguistic context but also the historical, cultural, visual, and geographic contexts.
- III. Let me give you one more location that really matters.
 - A. All “spiritual blessings” are located “in Christ” (Eph 1:3).
 - B. Only two passages in the New Testament tell you how to get “into Christ” (Rom 6:3–4; Gal 3:26–27).
 - C. Are you “in Christ”?

Location Matters (Lesson Two)

Introduction

- I. Last Sunday morning, we noticed how the location of specific Bible stories shapes our understanding of those stories.
 - A. We noticed how John the Baptist chose to teach and preach in the same area where Elijah the prophet had ascended into heaven at “Bethabara beyond the Jordan” (John 1:28).
 - B. Then we noted that Jesus began His ministry “in the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali” (Matt 4:13) to fulfill Old Testament prophecy (Isa 9:1–2).
 - C. Finally, we visited the tiny village of Nain, where Jesus brought a young man back to life (Luke 7:11–15), and saw how this event took place on the opposite side of the hill of Moreh from where the Old Testament prophet Elisha had brought a child back to life at Shunem (2 Kgs 4:8, 18–37).
- II. When studying the Bible, you should always keep the *location* of Bible events in mind.
 - A. The Bible does not contain any *filler material*—every word in Scripture is there for a reason (even though you might not be aware of that reason yet).
 - B. As you study the gospels and find a city mentioned by name, you should always stop and ask yourself, “What happened here before?”
 - C. In our lesson today, we want to notice three New Testament events and see how their location greatly affects our understanding of the story.
 - D. We will start with the location where Peter declared...

Discussion

I. The Deity Of Christ

- A. Jesus chose the region of Caesarea Philippi to ask His disciples a serious question concerning His identity (Matt 16:13–20).
 1. Interestingly, Jesus chose “the region of Caesarea Philippi” (Matt 16:13) to ask this vital question.
 2. During the days of our Lord’s earthly ministry, Caesarea Philippi was a famous Greco-Roman city filled with pagans and other Gentiles.
- B. There is no location in the Middle East with more religious associations than the area around Caesarea Philippi.
 1. In the Old Testament age, the Canaanite god Baal was worshiped in this area (cf. Josh 11:17; Judg 3:3; 1 Chr 5:23).
 - a) The area was scattered with the remains of ancient Baal worship.
 - b) At least fourteen temples of Baal have been identified in the area.
 2. A cave at Caesarea Philippi is said to be the birthplace of the Greek god Pan, the god of nature, fields, forests, mountains, flocks, and shepherds.
 - a) The original name for Caesarea Philippi was *Panias*.
 - b) In the Hellenistic period, a sanctuary was built to Pan.
 - c) The cult of Pan originated in Arcadia, a pastoral region in Greece.
 - d) During Alexander the Great’s reign, Greek travelers found the landscape to be like their homeland, and they established this area of worship for Pan.

- e) There are five niches hewn out of the rock to the right of the cave—at one time, they probably held statues.
 - f) Three niches bear Greek inscriptions mentioning Pan, Echo, and Galerius (one of Pan’s priests).
3. The cave at Caesarea Philippi is also the most eastern source of the Jordan River—this alone would make the area full of emotion for the Jews.
 - a) Earthquakes over the years have changed the formation of the cave.
 - b) The water now emerges at the foot of the cave rather than from within it.
 4. In the first century AD, Caesarea Philippi also had a great temple of white marble built to the godhead of Caesar—it had been built by Herod the Great.
 - a) In 2 BC, Herod the Great’s son Philip named it *Caesarea* in honor of Augustus, and, to differentiate it from Caesarea Maritima, it became known as Caesarea Philippi.
 - b) An earthquake destroyed the town in AD 363.
 - c) Since 1967, considerable excavations have been conducted here.
 - d) The shrine of Pan has been cleared, along with the Herodian palace.
- C. Here, at the crossroads of Judaism and paganism, Jesus asked the most important question ever posed to His disciples (Matt 16:13).
1. Did Jesus choose this location by accident?
 2. I don’t think so!
 3. “Here indeed is a dramatic picture. Here is a homeless, penniless Galilean carpenter, with twelve very ordinary men around him. At the moment, the orthodox are actually plotting and planning to destroy him as a dangerous heretic. He stands in an area littered with the temples of the Syrian gods; in a place where the ancient Greek gods looked down; in a place where the history of Israel crowded in upon people’s minds; where the white-marble splendor of the home of Caesar-worship dominated the landscape and drew the eye. And there—of all places—this amazing carpenter stands and asks his disciples who they believe him to be, and expects the answer: ‘The Son of God.’ It is as if Jesus deliberately set himself against the background of the world’s religions in all their history and their splendor, and demanded to be compared with them and to have the verdict given in his favor.” (William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2*. The New Daily Study Bible. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001)
 4. Location matters!
 5. Let us move into the Book of Acts and see what happens to...

II. Paul And Barnabas At Lystra

- A. The Holy Spirit sent Barnabas and Paul out on their first missionary journey around AD 46 or 47 (Acts 13:1-3).
 1. This journey took them to Antioch of Pisidia, located in the central part of modern-day Turkey (Acts 13:14).
 2. Once the Jewish inhabitants of the city rejected the gospel, Paul and Barnabas turned to the Gentiles (Acts 13:42-52).
 3. After leaving Antioch, they walked to Iconium (Acts 14:1).
 4. While at Iconium, “unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren” (Acts 14:2).
 5. When a violent attempt was made on their lives, they moved on to the cities of Lystra and Derbe (Acts 14:4-7).
- B. At Lystra, Paul healed a man “who had never walked” (Acts 14:8-13).
 1. However, have you ever wondered *why* the people of Lystra associated Paul and Barnabas with two of their own gods?
 2. Luke gives us the *Greek* name for the gods (Acts 14:12).
 - a) In the *Roman* world, *Zeus* is known as Jupiter, and *Hermes* is called Mercury.
 - b) The crowds at Lystra identified Barnabas with *Zeus*, the head of the Greek pantheon.
 - c) Paul, they identified with *Hermes*, the messenger of the Olympian gods, since he was the main speaker.
 3. “Approximately half a century before Paul’s first missionary journey, Ovid (c. 43 B.C.–A.D. 17) in the *Metamorphoses* (8.626–724) retold an ancient legend that may have been well known in southern Galatia and may in good part explain the wildly emotional response of the people to Paul and Barnabas. According to the legend, Zeus and Hermes once came to ‘the Phrygian hill country’ disguised as mortals seeking lodging. Though they asked at a thousand homes, none took them in. Finally, at a humble cottage of straw and reeds, an elderly couple, Philemon and Baucis, freely welcomed them with a banquet that strained their poor resources. In appreciation, the gods transformed the cottage into a temple with a golden roof and marble columns. Philemon and Baucis they appointed priest and priestess of the temple, who, instead of dying, became an oak and a linden tree. As for the inhospitable peoples the gods destroyed their houses. Just where in ‘the Phrygian hill country’ this was supposed to have taken place, Ovid does not say. But it appears that, seeing the healing of the crippled man and remembering the legend, the people of Lystra believed that Zeus and Hermes had returned and wanted to pay them homage lest they incur the gods’ wrath.” (Richard N. Longenecker, *Acts*. EBC 9. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984)
 4. If the people of Lystra had failed to honor the gods as gods on their last visit, they would certainly not repeat the error this time!
 5. Cities of the Bible world often have a story to tell!

- C. The Lystrians' desire to sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas was short-lived.
 - 1. Paul and Barnabas rejected the worship of the multitudes (Acts 14:14–18).
 - 2. Hostile Jews from Antioch and Iconium turned an adoring city of potential sacrificers to the missionaries into a lynch mob.
 - 3. Only days after the people in Lystra had thought that Paul and Barnabas were gods and wanted to offer sacrifices to them, they stoned Paul and left him for dead (Acts 14:19).
 - 4. That's human nature.
 - 5. Now, let us look at an event from another of Paul's journeys when he explained the true identity of..

III. The “Unknown God” At Athens

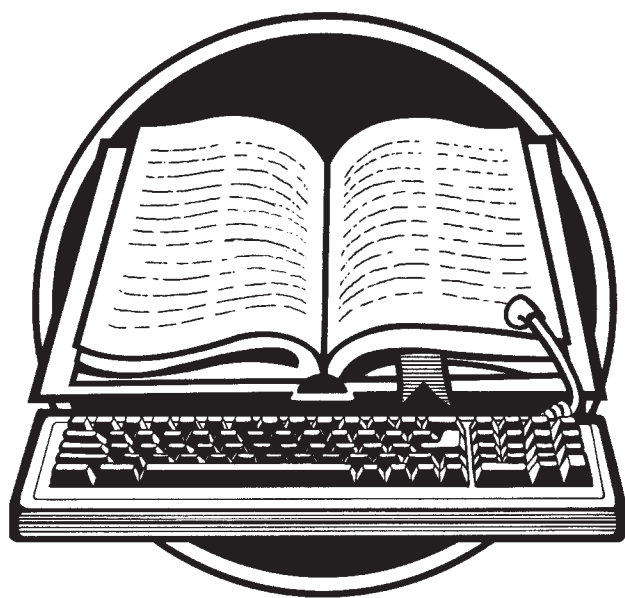
- A. While on his second missionary journey, and after being driven out of Berea, the apostle Paul sailed to Athens, Greece (Acts 17:14).
 - 1. By the first century AD, Corinth had replaced Athens as Greece's most important political and commercial center.
 - 2. However, Athens had lost no cultural significance—it was still the philosophical center of the ancient world.
 - 3. It was also the home of the world's most famous university.
 - 4. Athens was also a religious center where almost every god in existence was worshiped.
 - 5. Every public building was dedicated to a god, and statues of gods filled the city.
- B. While Paul waited for Silas and Timothy, whom he had instructed to join him as soon as possible, he must have explored the city like tourists do today (Acts 17:15).
 - 1. Wherever Paul turned, he would have seen statues, temples, and shrines.
 - 2. There was the Sanctuary of the Dioscuri, the Serapeum in the lower part of this city, the Temple of Olympian Zeus southeast of the Acropolis, the Pythium on the southern side of the Acropolis, the Sanctuary of Dionysus at the very foot of the Acropolis, and many more.
 - 3. Walking up to the Acropolis, he would have passed two statues of horsemen facing each other on opposite sides of the road.
 - 4. On his right, on the western edge of the Acropolis, was the Temple of Victory Athena, the so-called Wingless Victory.
 - 5. He would have visited the Parthenon, the most famous and beautiful of all Greek temples, a 23,000-square-foot temple.
 - 6. Inside the temple, his eyes must have fallen on the oldest and most venerated statue of the goddess Athena, which towers 39 feet high.
 - 7. This image dominated all buildings of the Acropolis.
 - 8. Also on the Acropolis is the Erechtheum (built 421–405 BC) for the worship of Athena and Poseidon, and the temple of Athena Nike (“Athena who brings victory”).

- C. An ancient proverb declared that there were more gods in Athens than men, and wherever Paul looked, there were gods and demigods in niches and pedestals, temples, and street corners.
1. A writer named Petronius, who visited Athens in the first century, was startled by the many gods in that city.
 2. He wrote that it was easier to find a god in Athens than it was to find a man!
 3. Every building in the city and everywhere Paul looked had a representation of some god or goddess.
- D. Among this forest of deities, Paul sees one altar dedicated to the “unknown god” (Acts 17:23).
1. There are many examples of similar inscriptions in the Greco-Roman world.
 2. The idea, of course, was that these altars to the “unknown gods” ensured that no deity was omitted from worship.
 3. Two ancient writers, Pausanias (2d cent. AD) in his *Description of Greece* (1:1:1:4) and Philostratus (late 2d cent. AD) in his *Life of Appolonius of Tyana* (3:6:5), refer to “altars to an unknown god.”
 4. However, the altar in Athens has a specific historical background that dates back six centuries before Christ came into the world.
- E. Diogenes Laertius, a third-century AD biographer of Greek philosophers, in his *Lives of Philosophers* (1:110), describes the events that led up to the erection of this monument in Athens.
1. The essential elements in Diogenes’ account are: Epimenides, a Cretan hero, responded to a request from Athens by a man called Nicias, asking him to advise the city of Athens regarding a plague.
 2. Arriving in Athens, Epimenides obtained a flock of black and white sheep and released them on Mars Hill, instructing men to follow the sheep and mark the places where any of them lay down.
 3. Epimenides’ apparent purpose was to allow any god concerned about the plague to reveal his willingness to help by causing sheep that pleased him to lie down to rest as a sign that he would accept those sheep if they were offered in sacrifice.
 4. Since there would have been nothing unusual about sheep lying down, Epimenides conducted his experiment early in the morning, when sheep would be at their hungriest.
 5. Several sheep rested, and the Athenians sacrificed them upon unnamed altars built especially for the purpose.
 6. Thus, the plague was lifted from the city.
 7. The Athenians were unsure which god to thank, so they erected an altar to “the unknown god.”
 8. Paul must have been horrified as he saw all this idolatry (Acts 17:16).

- F. Now, let us look at the rest of the story about Epimenides.
1. Paul was brought to the Areopagus, where the supreme court of Athens often met (Acts 17:19).
 2. *Areopagus* means “hill of Ares” (the Greek god of war).
 3. The Romans had an equivalent god of war, Mars.
 4. The hill is in the middle of the city—sixteen well-worn steps lead to the summit from a plateau between the Areopagus and the Acropolis.
 5. Nearly six centuries earlier, Epimenides grappled with the plague in Athens on this same hill.
 6. Do you think Paul, a Jewish rabbi, understood the altar’s historical background and the concept of an unknown god? Indeed, he did!
 - a) Epimenides was also a Greek poet!
 - b) Paul quoted the poetry of Epimenides in Acts 17:28, “For we are also His offspring.”
 7. When Paul left Titus to strengthen churches on Crete, he wrote instructions to guide him in his dealings with Cretans (Titus 1:12).
 - a) The words Paul quoted are from a poem ascribed to Epimenides.
 - b) Notice also that Paul called Epimenides “a prophet.”
 8. The philosophers on the Areopagus were familiar with the story of Epimenides from the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and others.
 9. They must have listened with admiration as Paul began his address with recognition of their cultural background.

Invitation

- I. In your study of the Bible, always consider the entire context of the stories you are reading—not just the literary and linguistic context but also the historical, cultural, visual, and geographic contexts.
- II. And, as we mentioned in our previous lesson, our *spiritual location* also matters.
 - A. All “spiritual blessings” are located “in Christ” (Eph 1:3).
 - B. We get “into Christ” through baptism (Rom 6:3-4; Gal 3:26-27).
 - C. Are you “in Christ”?



www.padfield.com

Sermon Outlines
Bible Class Books
Bible Class Curriculum
PowerPoint Backgrounds
Bible Land Photographs
Church Bulletin Articles

This booklet is protected by Federal Copyright Laws. Individuals and local congregations are allowed to reprint this book. No one is allowed change the contents. This book may not be placed on any other Web site, nor is it allowed to be sold.