

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)*

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Preface

This booklet contains two sermons that were preached in Zion, Illinois. Like most of my published sermon outline books, these outlines include more information than was presented in the lessons. I like to include additional material in these outlines for the benefit of students who are not afraid to delve into the weightier matters of Biblical studies.

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 real estate agents’ mantra: 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 large 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 is going to sell for a look more than if that same house was located in Detroit—location matters!
- 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. 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 of Bible students know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea (Luke 2:4-6; Matt 2:1-6).
 1. As Luke has already 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 the location has a great deal of bearing on 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 a place called Sapsaphas, north of the Dead Sea and east of the Jordan River, was the site at which Jesus was baptized and that a church building there was dedicated to John the Baptist.
 2. A place called Beth-abara is shown on the sixth-century mosaic Medaba map, where it is labeled “Ainon (spring) where now is Sapsaphas.”
 - a) The Medaba map is the earliest known map of Palestine, dating to approximately A.D. 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 is indeed the ruins of an ancient church building, identified by the excavators as the Church of Saint John the Baptist that was mentioned by the early pilgrims—it stands at the traditional site of Jesus’ baptism.
 6. 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).
 7. 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 mantel 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 told of spoke of a 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 some *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 who dressed like Elijah, came preaching in the “spirit and power of Elijah,” in the place 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 own 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 the godless behavior of Ahaz, there is one, another royal figure, who will be of divine character and whose reign will bring peace and light and justice.
 6. The lands of Zebulun and Naphtali are in the northern-most region of Israel and no doubt they suffered the brunt of the Assyrian invasion.
 7. Ever since the Assyrian campaign that reduced it to a province under an Assyrian governor in 732 B.C. (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. There are 353 towns and villages in Israel mentioned by name in the Old Testament.
1. In addition, there are some stories that simply reference, for example, that “Elijah went to another village.”
 2. I would suggest that if a place is mentioned by name there is an insight to the story to be gained from knowing the name of the place.
 3. For example, in Luke 7:36–37 Jesus is a guest on the home of Simon the Pharisee.
 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 it 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 entire Bible—and one of the few times Luke even gives the name of the city or village where Christ was at.
 2. As Jesus approached the city, He met the funeral procession of a widow’s son, 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 desolate state of the widow, 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 thought of Jesus as 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. There are many other examples we could have used 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 the historical, cultural, visual, and geographic contexts as well.
- 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 certain 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 has a great deal of bearing on 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. It is interesting that 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 the days of Alexander the Great, Greek travelers, finding the landscape was like their homeland, established this area of worship to 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 of the niches bear inscriptions in Greek 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 A.D., 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 B.C., 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 A.D. 363.
 - c) Since 1967 there have been considerable excavations 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. Now, let us move into the book of Acts as see what happens to...

II. Paul And Barnabas At Antioch Of Pisidia

- A. The Holy Spirit sent Barnabas and Paul out on their first missionary journey around A.D. 46 or 47 (Acts 13:1-3).
 1. This journey took them to Antioch of Pisidia, which is 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 were certainly not going to 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

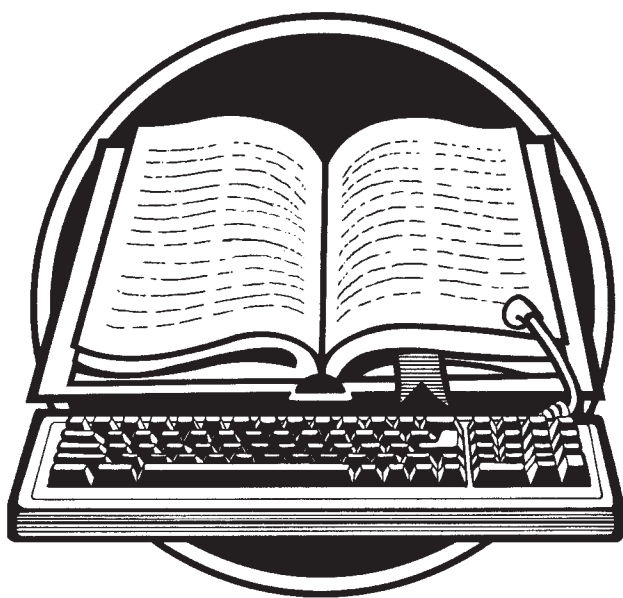
- A. While on his second missionary journey, and after being driven out of Berea, the apostle Paul sailed to the city of Athens, Greece (Acts 17:14).
 - 1. By the first century A.D., Corinth had replaced Athens as the most important political and commercial center in Greece.
 - 2. However, Athens had lost none of its 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 in the same manner in which 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 most famous and beautiful of all Greek temples, the Parthenon, 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—towering 39 feet high.
 - 7. This image dominated all buildings of the Acropolis.
 - 8. Also on the Acropolis is the Erechtheum (built 421-405 B.C.) 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, in niches and on pedestals, in temples and on street corners, were gods and demi-gods.
1. A writer named Petronius, visiting Athens in the first century was startled by the excessive number of 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. A.D.) in his *Description of Greece* (1:1:1:4) and Philostratus (late 2d cent. A.D.) in his *Life of Appolonius of Tyana* (3:6:5), refer to “altars to an unknown god.”
 4. However, the altar in Athens had a specific historical background that had its origin six centuries before Christ came into the world.
- E. Diogenes Laertius, a third-century A.D. 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 basic 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 in the matter of 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 give any god concerned in the matter of the plague an opportunity 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. A number of sheep rested, and the Athenians offered them in sacrifice upon unnamed altars built especially for the purpose.
 6. Thus the plague was lifted from the city.
 7. The Athenians were not sure which god to thank, so they erected an altar to “the unknown god.”
 8. Paul must have been horrified as he looked upon 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. The word *Areopagus* literally 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. It was on this same hill, nearly six centuries earlier, that Epimenides once grappled with the problem of the plague in Athens.
 6. Do you think Paul, a Jewish rabbi, really understood the historical background of that altar and the concept of an unknown god? Certainly, he did!
 - a) For 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 the historical, cultural, visual, and geographic contexts as well.
- II. And, as we mentioned in our previous lesson, our *spiritual location* matters as well.
 - 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”?



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