

Bethel



# PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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## The Cities in Which We Dwell, Part Three

I want to begin with a thought-association exercise.

What is the first thought that comes to your mind when you think of the following 6 cities?

- New York?
- Berlin?
- Paris?
- Amsterdam?
- Rome?
- Jerusalem?

While we might not all think the same at the mentioning of these cities, the truth is that each of these cities evokes a definitive thought or impression in most people's minds. For example,

- New York might arouse the feeling of excitement: “Start spreading the news, I'm leaving today. I want to be a part of it - New York, New York . . .”
- Berlin might have made you think of Hitler or the World Wars.
- With Paris you might have thought about the Eiffel Tower or snobs.
- The mentioning of Amsterdam probably makes you think of moral depravity.
- With Rome... I think of the Caesars and the city in which Paul died.
- And with Jerusalem... You probably either thought of something pertaining to the Jews, or the Temple, or Christ who died there.

From this it should be obvious that on account of history or a profound event it is possible to entertain a message just by the mentioning of a city.

Our current study arises from this fact. If you and I lived in the first century AD, while we might not have a specific thought when it came to every city of Palestine, there were definite connotations which accompanied many of the cities/places of Israel. For example, we've seen that Nazareth would have aroused the feeling of contempt on account of its aloofness. Nazarenes didn't care about God, His Kingdom, or its impact on the world. The Wilderness would have conjured up the idea of suffering, turmoil, and difficulty.

Now, we are going to turn our attention to another city, the City of Capernaum. Notice the text.

John 2:12, “After this he went down to Capernaum, he, and his mother, and his brethren, and his disciples: and they continued there not many days.”

Here we read of Jesus, His disciples, and His family traveling to Capernaum following the miracle at Cana.

## Physical Characteristics

Well, what was in Capernaum that brought Christ and His disciples there?

To answer this, let's begin by considering its physical characteristics. The name of Capernaum is derived from a word which means, “Village of Nahum.” Its Greek name, Heptapagon, means, “Seven springs” which was an apt name for the city.

Capernaum was located on the northwest shores of the Sea of Galilee. Agriculturally speaking it was lush on account of its copious spring which watered Gennesaret. The Jewish historian Josephus, who at one time was governor of Galilee, wrote this about this area:

“It is throughout rich in soil and pasture, producing every variety of tree, and inviting by its productivity even those who have the least inclination for agriculture. It is everywhere tilled and everywhere productive”<sup>1</sup>

Dr. John MacArthur wrote this speaking of Galilee:

“The region is some 60 miles long, north to south, and about 30 miles wide. The area around the lake [which is where Capernaum was located] was heavily populated (estimated by some to have had as many as two million people in Jesus' day) and had long been the breadbasket of central Palestine. The soil was extremely fertile, and the lake furnished great quantities of edible fish.”<sup>2</sup>

At the time of Christ, Capernaum was also near a political border such that a customs-post was located in the city.<sup>3</sup> It was also the outpost of a military detachment.<sup>4</sup> And yet the importance of Capernaum is seen when it is understood that the *via maris* passed right by this city.

The *via maris* means “the way of the sea.” It was a trade route in Palestine through which passed ALL north/south trade. And so for example think of Corinth, which was another key trade city in the ancient world, in its hey-day at the time of Paul, all east/west trade between Asia and Rome traveled through this city. This is what made Corinth a microcosm of the ancient world housing both the best and the worst of Roman culture.

Well Capernaum was somewhat like this, yet on a smaller scale. All north/south trade from Africa into Asia and Europe and east/west trade from Asia into the Mediterranean passed by Capernaum on the *via maris*. This made the city another micro-cosmic center boasting of a high Gentile population.

Now again it wasn't as “modern” or as “pivotal” as was Corinth to the ancient world. Yet, if you wanted

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<sup>1</sup> Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, 3.3.2

<sup>2</sup> Dr. John MacArthur, *Commentary on Matthew 1-7*, pages 105-106

<sup>3</sup> Compare Mark 2:14

<sup>4</sup> Compare Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10

to reach the world with a philosophy or teaching, Capernaum was the place to go if you lived in Palestine. O. Palmer Robertson noted this:

“For thousands of years travelers from Africa to Europe, from Asia to Africa passed along the *via maris*, the 'way of the sea.' Right by the locale of Capernaum they passed, and they continued to pass by throughout the days of Jesus... [So] Capernaum... [was] a point of passage for countless peoples traveling between continents”<sup>5</sup>

One ancient writer put it this way:

“...Judea was on the way to nowhere, whereas Galilee [on account of the *via maris*] was on the way to everywhere.”<sup>6</sup>

## **Biblical/Redemptive Significance**

Capernaum is not mentioned in the Old Testament, and the “Nahum” after whom it was named is probably not the prophet Nahum. Nahum means “compassion” and so it could have been that Capernaum was named on account of its compassionate people at the time. It is believed by most that Capernaum was founded sometime after the Jews returned from captivity which means its history begins following the close of the Old Testament, which is why we don't read about this city in the Old Testament.

By the time of the New Testament era however, Capernaum was large enough that it was called a “city.”<sup>7</sup> It had its own synagogue, in which Jesus frequently taught.<sup>8</sup> It housed a permanent office of taxation.<sup>9</sup> It was a place of itinerant tax collectors who operated in the city, one of which was Matthew.<sup>10</sup>

Because Capernaum had become Jesus “own city” — I'll address this in a moment — Christ performed many miracles here including the healing of the centurion's paralyzed servant,<sup>11</sup> a paralytic carried by four friends who went through a roof in order to get to Christ,<sup>12</sup> Peter's mother-in-law,<sup>13</sup> and the nobleman's son.<sup>14</sup>

## **The Calling of His Disciples**

As Christ walked by the Sea of Galilee near Capernaum, He called the fishermen Simon, Andrew, James, and John to be his disciples.<sup>15</sup> It was also here that Jesus called Matthew who was a tax collector living in this city.<sup>16</sup> Immediately following the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus delivered the controversial sermon on the Bread of Life near this city.<sup>17</sup> (This was the sermon in which He graphically called upon

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<sup>5</sup> O Palmer Robertson, *Understanding the Land of the Bible*, pages 11, 36

<sup>6</sup> Quoted by MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7*, pages 106-107

<sup>7</sup> Compare Matthew 9:1, and Mark 1:33

<sup>8</sup> Compare Mark 1:21; Luke 4:31-38; and John 6:59

<sup>9</sup> Compare Matthew 9:9; Mark 2:14; and Luke 5:27

<sup>10</sup> Compare Matthew 17:24

<sup>11</sup> Compare Matthew 8:5-13

<sup>12</sup> Compare Mark 2:1-12

<sup>13</sup> Compare Matthew 8:14-15; Mark 1:29-31

<sup>14</sup> Compare John 4:46-54

<sup>15</sup> Compare Mark 1:16-21, 29

<sup>16</sup> Compare Matthew 9:1-9; Mark 2:13-14

<sup>17</sup> Compare John 6:32

His disciples to gnaw on his flesh and blood!)

In fact, archeological excavations in the last century un-earthed two significant finds in Capernaum:

1. A Jewish synagogue with unusually large steps- no doubt the synagogue at which Christ taught.
2. A shrine with the words, "Amen," "Lord," and "Jesus" inscribed in Greek on the walls. This is believed to be the house of Peter which, following the Apostolic age, had been converted into a church.

## The Message

Well all of this brings us to the message of Capernaum.<sup>18</sup> This account took place following Christ's rejection on the part of Nazareth at the advent of His first year of ministry.<sup>19</sup>

Matthew 4:12-13, "Now when Jesus had heard that John was cast into prison, he departed into Galilee; And leaving Nazareth, he came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is upon the sea coast, in the borders of Zabulon and Nephthalim."

After being run out of town and hearing of the capture of John the Baptist Christ moved to Capernaum and amazingly settled down there. In fact notice what we read in Matthew:

Matthew 9:1, "And he entered into a ship, and passed over, and came into his own city."

This was Capernaum. It alone is said to have been Jesus' city. And so truly, Capernaum would become a very important place for Christ.

And yet, why was that? Why did Jesus come to Capernaum? Why after hearing about John, do we read that Christ settled in this city? Why did this become "His own city"?

Clearly it wasn't out of fear of the Jews or the suggestion that Capernaum was the only place that would take Him. No! As we have seen, Capernaum was a key city in the ancient world, it was on the way to everywhere!

So why did He come here?

Notice He came here to preach.

Matthew 4:14-16, "That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet, saying, The land of Zabulon, and the land of Nephthalim, by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles; The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up."

Long ago before the advent of the New Testament, God spoke through Isaiah the prophet in which He said that Christ would seek this key spot out for the purpose of proclaiming the gospel to the nations! And preach He did!

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<sup>18</sup> Compare Matthew 4:12-17

<sup>19</sup> Compare Luke 4:16-31

Matthew 4:17, “From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

So why did Christ make Capernaum His very own city?

Christ made Capernaum His own city for the sake of the gospel. Truly, Capernaum was on the way to everywhere. It housed large Gentile communities. As such it was a perfect spot for a message which was intended not simply for the Jews, but the entire world! O. Palmer Robertson wrote this:

“By inaugurating his public ministry in Galilee of the Gentiles along the major international trade route, Jesus was making a statement. This land would serve as a springboard to all nations. The kingdom of God encompassed a realm that extended well beyond the borders of ancient Israel. As Paul so pointedly indicates, Abraham's promise from a new covenant perspective meant that he would be heir of the cosmos (Romans 4:13). All nations, lands, and peoples would experience the blessing of this benevolent rule.”<sup>20</sup>

Another commentator wrote this:

“The fact that Jesus began His ministry in Samaria and Galilee, rather than in Jerusalem and Judea, emphasizes the fact that His gospel of salvation was for the whole world. It was the fulfillment of Old Testament truth, which God had chosen to reveal through the Jews (cf. Romans 3:1-2).”<sup>21</sup>

What is the message of Capernaum? What does this city represent?

From the perspective of Matthew 4 it has a twofold message. First, it proclaims the glorious news that no matter whom you are or what you have done, the gospel is for you! O. Palmer Robertson wrote this:

“After his resurrection, he delivered his Great Commission to his disciples in the region of Galilee of the Gentiles (Matthew 28:16-20). From that point until today, his Gospel has spread among all the nations of the world. In this sense, Galilee continues to have significance as a symbolic representation of the ongoing purposes of the Lord to minister his saving grace to all peoples of the world.”<sup>22</sup>

And yet it also represents on the part of the child of God a utilizing of the opportunities that God gives us in order to proclaim and enjoy Christ! See, Jesus could have chosen to base His ministry in almost any city in Palestine. And yet He chose Capernaum, a city upon which all the trade routes of Palestine converged. It was a city which was known for a high Gentile population. It was a city which would place the Gospel in a position to reach the world.

And so heed the message of Capernaum. Regardless of your pedigree, salvation can come to you for the promise of the Gospel is for all men!

Secondly, if you are a servant of the Gospel, then we must strive to utilize the institutions and opportunities of this life to proclaim and enjoy Christ.

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<sup>20</sup> Robertson, *Understanding the Land of the Bible*, page 11

<sup>21</sup> MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7*, page 107

<sup>22</sup> Robertson, *Understanding the Land of the Bible*, page 36

Accordingly, I want to exhort us along these two lines!

## **A Message of Salvation**

First the message of Capernaum is the message of salvation! As far back as Genesis, God declared His will to bless the nations through Christ.<sup>23</sup> In other words, it was never God's intention to confine the saving message of grace to an ethnicity or a culture. And thus when God came in the flesh, He stood on the crossroad of the ancient world and proclaimed to both Jew and Gentile this glorious message: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 5:17).

Today that is still God's message to this world! Repent means to turn. And truly we must turn not only from our sin, but from all self-reliance and independency. We must turn from the thinking that God is pleased by what I have done by way of devotion and religious service. We must turn from the belief that while we have sinned, nevertheless our good works have compensated for them. We must see that the "wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). And that accordingly if upon your death you stand before God guilty of just one sin, you will suffer eternity in hell. To the devoutly religious of his day Paul warned with these words:

Romans 2:5, "But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God."

Romans 2:9, "Tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile."

And so before it is too late, you must turn from your sin, confess that you have violated God's commands, and accept the sacrifice that God has provided for sin- the death of Jesus Christ and you will be saved!

Now I hope you have a sense of urgency here for listen to the second part of Christ's message.

## **The Kingdom is at Hand**

The term the *Kingdom of Heaven* references the regency of God and the fact that while you can't see God, nevertheless His reign and rule as a King is real. In fact not only is it real, but right now it is available to you for citizenship, "it is at hand!"

Indeed there is an immigration problem today, but not what you have come to think. While thousands are trying to sneak into the United States and yet are doing so unlawfully — they don't have permission — the Kingdom of God has open borders and yet so few care, and that's the crises! And yet someday it will be too late and the borders of heaven will be forever closed to you.

Thus heed the message. In light of the Second Coming of Christ the Hebrew writer exhorts as it relates to salvation this message:

Hebrews 4:7 (NASB), "He again fixes a certain day, 'Today,' saying through David after so long a time just as has been said before, 'Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.'"

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<sup>23</sup> Compare Genesis 12, 15, 17, 21, etc.

2 Corinthians 6:2, “(For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.)”

Indeed! The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand do not wait another moment. Trust Christ today. And yet if Christ is your Savior and you are a citizen of heaven, then the call of Capernaum is to utilize the institutions and opportunities of this life to proclaim and enjoy Christ.

You know it is so easy to get absorbed with life. There are the bills, careers, worries that accompany life in a state of sin and misery, our health, and the health of our parents. If you are married you've got your spouse to worry about. And if you are a parent, there are the children and their needs to be concerned about. There are so many things with which to be consumed that it is possible to live as atheists though we love Christ.

Brothers and sisters, it ought not to be this way.

1 Corinthians 9:19-23, “For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you.”

It is very clear that in the life of the believer, the proclamation of the gospel ought to take center stage. This doesn't mean that we sell our homes and head for the mission field. Rather, it means that proclaiming and enjoying the Christ becomes the priority of our lives. Paul said that he was, “...set apart for the gospel of God” (Romans 1:1).

More loosely, this meant that Paul was a “Gospel Man. Paul's goals, life, future, happiness, and contentment were all set apart unto the gospel! And so it must be with us!

Whatever we do is to be done, “heartily, as for the Lord rather than for man” (Colossians 3:23). Our lives are to be devoted to disciplining ourselves “for the purpose of godliness” (1 Timothy 4:7). In fact in everything we do, even in the most mundane things of life like eating and drinking, all is to be done, “to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Truly we must never forget that there is far more to this life than our pleasure, plans, and priorities. God has so ordered reality that it truly does revolve around Christ.

Accordingly let us endeavor in and through all things

- At work.
- In the home.
- In public.
- Behind closed doors.
- When we are with the family.
- When we are by ourselves.

to proclaim and enjoy Christ!

If there is any message that arises from the city of Capernaum, it is this: The Gospel of Grace Proclaimed and Enjoyed. And yet there is warning that accompanies citizenship in Capernaum. Again this was Christ's city. Maybe therefore it would enjoy a privileged position at the Last Day. Far from it, it was destined for judgment.

Matthew 11:23-24, "And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say unto you, That it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee."

If the message of Capernaum is the Gospel proclaimed and enjoyed, then to fall short of either reality is to incur a stricter form of judgment. Today you have become citizens of Capernaum by virtue of this sermon. Accordingly, do not be as a man who looks at himself in a mirror and then forgets his reflection. Rather, let us turn from our sin unto Christ and purpose to proclaim and enjoy Him.

Did you know that in Christ's day the region of Capernaum housed over two million people?

Yet according to Christ's words, very few live in the city today. Indeed, it is devastating to hear the word of grace and then to turn your back upon it.

Citizens of Capernaum, let us embrace and proclaim the Savior!

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## **About the Preacher**

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on June 25, 2006. Greg is the Preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.