

Broomfield



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The Cities in which we Dwell, Part 1

The Seven Churches of Revelation

A study of Revelation 2-3 is very beneficial. In it are seven letters written to the seven churches flourishing in Asia Minor. These seven congregations not only had certain characteristics which set them apart from each other but through the inspiration of the Spirit of God, they have counterparts today. This is why I believe that the seven churches of Revelation are types of churches which have and will continue to exist throughout church history.

The letters to the churches of Revelation 2-3 do not simply the record of Christ's words to seven congregations in Asia Minor; rather they record of Christ's communication to every church in every age.

This study has challenged, inspired, and convicted me as I consider not only the modern church scene, but also my own life as a temple of the living God. That is why I consider it important to begin this new study on the cities and towns which dotted the countryside in Christ's day. While I think it will be beneficial to be better acquainted with the civic landscape of Israel at the time of Christ, nevertheless it is my belief that just like with the seven churches of Revelation many of the cities of Christ's day have their counterparts today.

And yet the modern cities of which I am speaking are NOT literal cities in which we reside — like Denver, Los Angeles, New York, or other cities of this world, RATHER, they are the cities which we have crafted by our philosophies, beliefs, and practices. They are the cities in which we daily live.

The City of Nazareth

Matthew 2:19-23, "But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeareth in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, Saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel: for they are dead which sought the young child's life. And he arose, and took the young child and his mother, and came into the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus did reign in Judaea in the room of his father Herod, he was afraid to go thither: notwithstanding, being warned of God in a dream, he turned aside into the parts of Galilee: And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene."

If your life was personified by an Israeli city of the first century, in what city would you live?

Consider with me Nazareth. Perhaps there are residents of this city here this morning.

Nazareth is a city 55 miles north of Jerusalem. It is located in a mile and a half wide basin on top of a mountain in the region of Galilee. Geographically it is situated as a ready witness to Mt. Carmel, Mt. Tabor, and Mt. Gilboa. And yet, unlike many mountain-top cities, for example Jerusalem,

Nazareth played no real significance in the Old Testament. It was not along any trade-route. It was small and somewhat backwards. In fact, it is not specifically mentioned in the Old Testament, Apocrypha, Talmud, or even by Josephus.

It was located in rugged country. In order to approach the city from the north or south required the navigation of steep, winding trails. This is what made this city the perfect hide-out for someone who didn't want to attract a lot of attention.

Biblical Significance

When it comes to “significance” there isn't a whole lot that can be said. Because of its geographical location, Nazareth was virtually unknown to the people of the Old Covenant. However that is not to say that this place has had no significance when it came to Redemption.

Nazareth was the place where God's messenger delivered the word to Mary that she would be the mother of Christ.¹ Accordingly, recall our text, it was where Immanuel was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary. And it is the city in which Joseph and Mary chose to live after fleeing from Egypt.²

As such, Nazareth was Jesus' home: it is where Christ grew, “in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men” (Luke 2:52b). It was here that Jesus learned the trade of a carpenter until the age of 30. And it is the place that our Lord spent 88% of His life, or a total of 29 years!

Its Message

As we approach the question of the message of Nazareth, we are brought to four passages which set the tenor of this city. Now, while most of these passages detail history that occurred outside the city walls, nevertheless Nazareth was situated in such a place that its inhabitants were ready witnesses to the events that happened.

In Judges 4 we read of an account that occurred on Mount Tabor which was just across the valley and so would easily have been seen by the people of Nazareth. At this time in redemptive history, God's people were suffering severely under the yoke of the Canaanites. Speaking of Gabon, king of the Canaanites, we read that he had “nine hundred chariots of iron; and twenty years he mightily oppressed the children of Israel” (Judges 4:3).

Judges 4:4-10, “And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, she judged Israel at that time. And she dwelt under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in mount Ephraim: and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment. And she sent and called Barak the son of

¹ Compare Luke 2:4

² Compare Matthew 2:22-23

Abinoam out of Kedeshnaphtali, and said unto him, Hath not the LORD God of Israel commanded, saying, Go and draw toward mount Tabor, and take with thee ten thousand men of the children of Naphtali and of the children of Zebulun? And I will draw unto thee to the river Kishon Sisera, the captain of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his multitude; and I will deliver him into thine hand. And Barak said unto her, If thou wilt go with me, then I will go: but if thou wilt not go with me, then I will not go. And she said, I will surely go with thee: notwithstanding the journey that thou takest shall not be for thine honour; for the LORD shall sell Sisera into the hand of a woman. And Deborah arose, and went with Barak to Kedesh. "And Barak called Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; and he went up with ten thousand men at his feet: and Deborah went up with him."

The rest of this chapter details the battle, the victory that God's people enjoyed, the flight of Sisera the Canaanite General, the Israeli pursuit, and the death of this evil soldier when Jael took a tent peg and hammer, and then drove the peg through Sisera's temple while he slept.

The epilogue is recorded in Judges 4:23-24.

Judges 4:23-24, "So God subdued on that day Jabin the king of Canaan before the children of Israel. And the hand of the children of Israel prospered, and prevailed against Jabin the king of Canaan, until they had destroyed Jabin king of Canaan."

The inhabitants of Nazareth would have beheld this incredible act of God wherein He subdued Israel's enemies. They would have witnessed the approaching army of 10,000 Israeli soldiers. They would have seen the battle, the route, and the ensuing victory celebration.

1 Samuel 31

We advance the clock about 300 years and we are on Mount Gilboa a mountain which was in eye-range of the inhabitants of Nazareth, though a little further south east. Here we see Saul and Jonathan engaged in a battle against the Philistines.

1 Samuel 31:1-6, "Now the Philistines fought against Israel: and the men of Israel fled from before the Philistines, and fell down slain in mount Gilboa. And the Philistines followed hard upon Saul and upon his sons; and the Philistines slew Jonathan, and Abinadab, and Malchishua, Saul's sons. And the battle went sore against Saul, and the archers hit him; and he was sore wounded of the archers. Then said Saul unto his armourbearer, Draw thy sword, and thrust me through therewith; lest these uncircumcised come and thrust me through, and abuse me. But his armourbearer would not; for he was sore afraid. Therefore Saul took a sword, and fell upon it. And when his armourbearer saw that Saul was dead, he fell likewise upon his sword, and died with him. So Saul died, and his three sons, and his armourbearer, and all his men, that same day together."

What a shocking turn of events. The first King of Israel and the heir to the throne could be seen fighting against overwhelming odds. But then the battle turned against them such that Jonathan along with his brothers were killed. And Saul was struck down; he tried to commit suicide and was eventually killed by an Amalekite.³

Now again, the inhabitants of Nazareth would have been privy to this climatic "change of the guard"

³ Compare 2 Samuel 1:9-10

wherein the regency of Saul came to an end.

1 Kings 18

Notice a third passage, 1 Kings 18 recorded during the ministry of Elijah. Here we come to the end of a three and one-half year drought which Elijah prayed for. Incidentally the King of Israel at the time, Ahab, blamed Elijah for the drought. Accordingly when Elijah came to meet the King, Ahab declared, “Art thou he that troubleth Israel?” (1 Kings 18:17).

Elijah responded, “And he answered, I have not troubled Israel; but thou, and thy father’s house, in that ye have forsaken the commandments of the LORD, and thou hast followed Baalim. Now therefore send, and gather to me all Israel unto mount Carmel, and the prophets of Baal four hundred and fifty, and the prophets of the groves four hundred, which eat at Jezebel’s table” (1 Kings 18:18-19).

1 Kings 18:20-24, “So Ahab sent unto all the children of Israel, and gathered the prophets together unto mount Carmel. And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word. Then said Elijah unto the people, I, even I only, remain a prophet of the LORD; but Baal’s prophets are four hundred and fifty men. Let them therefore give us two bullocks; and let them choose one bullock for themselves, and cut it in pieces, and lay it on wood, and put no fire under: and I will dress the other bullock, and lay it on wood, and put no fire under: And call ye on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the LORD: and the God that answereth by fire, let him be God. And all the people answered and said, It is well spoken.”

What made this such a “good idea” was the fact that Baal was the god of lightening, and thus fire. As such, Elijah was taking on this so-called god at his strength. Well you know the rest of the story. The prophets of Baal spent all day praying, weeping, longing, cajoling, and begging for Baal to consume their offering; and yet it was all in vain. In fact, they even began cutting themselves to show their devotion in the attempt to get Baal to respond.

Now in and through it all Elijah sat there and egged them on. “What’s the matter? Is Baal deaf? Maybe he’s preoccupied? Maybe he’s asleep! No! I’ve got it; he’s gone to the bathroom!”

Toward the end of the day when it was evident that the 450 prophets of Baal had failed, Elijah set up an altar using twelve stones to represent the twelve tribes of Israel. He then dug a pit around the altar to hold water. He killed an animal and arranged the sacrifice on the altar. Then he poured twelve large pots of water on the wood and the sacrifice, and then filled the trough around the altar with water.

And then he prayed a simple prayer. “God, demonstrate that you are God and that I am your prophet. Exalt you name.”

At this moment, fire came down and consumed the altar!

Once again, the inhabitants of Nazareth would have beheld this most incredible chapter in the history of redemption: the forceful demonstration that Yahweh alone is God! The people of Nazareth are so near to Mount Carmel they could have heard the voices of the prophets and Elijah. That is how close they were to this event!

Now, while Nazareth was an unknown city in the Old Covenant, nevertheless its inhabitants witnessed

some of the most profound redemptive turn-of-events.

Luke 4

And yet, all of this is nothing compared to the events outlined in Luke 4. These events occurred during Christ's first year of ministry. He has just been tested in the wilderness and has chosen to retreat back to His home town. It is the Sabbath and Christ entered the synagogue and was invited to give the sermon.

Luke 4:16-21. "And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read. And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord. And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him. And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears."

Talk about a double-take! Jesus reads a most significant Messianic passage and in essence says, "I'm the fulfillment!"

Not surprisingly, there was a mixed reaction.

Luke 4:22, "And all bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth. And they said, Is not this Joseph's son?"

Addressing His detractors, Christ here issues forth a rebuke on account of their unbelief.

Luke 4:23-27, "And he said unto them, Ye will surely say unto me this proverb, Physician, heal thyself: whatsoever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in thy country. And he said, Verily I say unto you, No prophet is accepted in his own country. But I tell you of a truth, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elias, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when great famine was throughout all the land; But unto none of them was Elias sent, save unto Sarepta, a city of Sidon, unto a woman that was a widow. And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Eliseus the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, saving Naaman the Syrian."

Once again, the key here is knowing that Naaman was a Gentile! By these quotations, Christ was implying that on account of Nazareth's rejection of Him, He would bring the gospel to the Gentiles!

Well this would be like throwing gas on a fire.

Luke 4:28-30, "And all they in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, And rose up, and thrust him out of the city, and led him unto the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, that they might cast him down headlong. But he passing through the midst of them went his way."

Of all the blessed things that Nazareth had beheld as a city, this was the most profound! They had just spent twenty-nine years with the Living God. And when the Lord chose to manifest His saving plan, at

first they mildly rejected Him; which lead to a rebuke and judgment And then upon hearing the rebuke, they responded with severe disbelief, anger, and wrath with the ultimate goal of murdering Him!⁴

Unmoved, Indifferent

So what's the point? What is the message of Nazareth?

Throughout its history, Nazareth beheld some of the most profound events in Redemptive History. They beheld the fire of God during the days of Elijah. They witnessed the powerful deliverance of God during the days of Barak. They had gazed upon the downfall of a sinning king. And they had the very Son of God dwell among them for twenty-nine years!

And yet, far from responding to any one of these redemptive events or people with humility, godliness, or introspection which lead to a piety in their walks with God, it is clear that they remained unmoved and indifferent.

The Old Testament never explicitly mentions, good or ill, Nazareth. As a hideaway for many, the inhabitants of Nazareth were content to live and let live. They minded their own business, and remained neutral in the affairs of life. Indeed, the typical Nazarene didn't want to be bothered by outsiders. They wanted to be left alone.

Thus when we think of Nazareth, we think of uncaring and selfish people. It was a city which had eyes, but did not see and had ears which refused to listen.

In fact Nathaniel's words are recorded for us after he was told of Christ, he said, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). It is clear from this passage and others that the thought of Nazareth in the first century A.D. aroused feelings of hatred and disdain on the part of most Jews. One commentator put it this way: "The term Nazarene had long been a term of derision, used to describe any person who was rough and rude."⁵

Now, Nathaniel's testimony about Nazareth is true. Recall that Christ said that Nathaniel was "An Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!" (John 1:47). This statement tells us that Nathaniel was not one who was given to slander or malign his neighbor. When Nathaniel was told of the Lord and that He was from Nazareth, he rightly questioned the credentials of our Lord. The New Bible Dictionary put it this way:

"...Nazareth lay close enough to several main trade-routes for easy contact with the outside world, while at the same time her position as a frontier-town... produced a certain aloofness. It was this independence of outlook... which led to the scorn in which Nazareth was held by strict Jews (John 1:46)."⁶

And thus as we think about Nazareth at the time of Christ, we think of a city with a long history of seeing, and yet not believing. It was a place of moral neutrality. It was a place of indifference to the things of the Lord. And that is a city in which many today continue to dwell.

⁴ Compare Luke 4:29

⁵ Dr. John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, Matthew 1-7, page 47

⁶ *The New Bible Dictionary*, Second Edition, page 819

To the citizens of Nazareth I ask you this day:

- How long will you remain heartless for the things of the Lord?
- How much longer will you doubt?
- You've heard the truth so many times; what are you waiting for?

If the truth be known, I will tell you what you are waiting for. It is not more proof or evidence. Nazareth had a long history of seeing. And they had spent twenty-nine years with the Son of God. And still they would not believe!

It wasn't a lack of proof which held them back. The words of Christ bear this out. "If the mighty works, which have been done in thee [Capernaum], had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day" (Matthew 11:23).

What the inhabitants of Nazareth want is a religion which makes no claims or demands. They want Christianity, the city of Nazareth was Jewish, but they want to be left alone, do their own thing, and be their own person.

But this is a problem! Christ won't allow you to sit on the fence. There is no neutrality when it comes to the Lord.

Revelation 3:15-16, "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth."

You must choose for yourselves whom you will serve!⁷ To choose not to choose, is to choose!

Accordingly, I call you this day to leave Nazareth; you cannot afford to tarry! Don't wait for all the answers to your questions, for that will delay you past the point of salvation. You've observed enough. Now trust Christ! Turn from your sin. Accept Christ as your Savior and Lord! And the Lord will deliver you.

And yet it is possible for the Christian to live in Nazareth as well. In the church these are the pew sitters. They are not the pillars of the church, but the caterpillars who crawl in and out of church each week. They are never caring, never giving themselves to another.

When you were first saved you lived in Macedonia where though you were poor, wretched and naked nevertheless you gave beyond your ability in the service of the saints. But somewhere along the way you moved to Nazareth with its beautiful view, independent lifestyles, and carefree Christian living. This is not a healthy place to live because to not care about Christ's people or His Kingdom soon leads to not caring about Christ Himself.

Indeed! Nazarite Christians are cold Christians who have long since lost their first love.

And yet, this is not hopeless because of the gospel of Christ. It is possible to break out of the mold because Christ has done it for you. He was a Nazarene who did not sit back longing for others to care for Him. He didn't withdraw from life. He didn't see and yet remain neutral. No! He came to serve, to die,

⁷ Compare Joshua 24:15

and to rise again on our behalf. Christ broke the mold and through Him so can you.

But how?

Begin today by understanding that Christ's sacrifice continues to wash away even your indifference! As we are in Christ, today God looks upon us and is zealous for us.

Don't just behold the Lord; taste Him! If you live in Nazareth, you have been too long the observer. Get in the word and thereby fellowship with Christ. I love the analogy of H. P. Barker:

“As I looked out into the garden one day, I saw three things. First, I saw a butterfly. The butterfly was beautiful, and it would alight on a flower and then it would flutter to another flower and then to another, and only for a second or two it would sit and it would move on. It would touch as many lovely blossoms as it could, but derived absolutely no benefit from it. Then I watched a little longer out my window and there came a botanist. And the botanist had a big notebook under his arm and a great big magnifying glass. The botanist would lean over a certain flower and he would look for a long time and then he would write notes in his notebook. He was there for hours writing notes, closed them, stuck them under his arm, tucked his magnifying glass in his pocket and walked away. The third thing I noticed was a bee, just a little bee. But the bee would light on a flower and it would sink down deep into the flower and it would extract all the nectar and pollen that it could carry. It went in empty every time and came out full.”

You begin approaching the word of God like the bee, and you will be on your way out of Nazareth.

Finally, go back to Macedonia and once again take responsibility for the welfare of people in the body of Christ. If someone should fall like Saul, bear his burden. If someone should gain the victory like Barak, rejoice with them. If someone should be used to advance God's Kingdom like Elijah, praise God with them. If Christ should make a demand of you which doesn't make sense, do not respond with anger. Rather, “entrust [your] soul ... to a faithful Creator in doing what is right” (1 Peter 4:19)

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on June 11, 2006. Greg is the Preacher at Broomfield Presbyterian Church.