

IN HIS FOOTSTEPS

The Towns and Cities of Jesus’ Day

“Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS” (John 19:19). Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but Mary and Joseph returned with Him to Nazareth as soon as it was safe. Consequently, this was the village in which Christ actually grew up. It was also the village that later rejected His ministry and teaching. All the way to the cross, the Lord was known as a “Nazarene.”

Nazareth

- Location** Nazareth is about 16 miles west of the Sea of Galilee. It sits on top of a ridge about 1300 feet above sea level. In Bible times it was relatively inaccessible which might have contributed to its small population. This region of Galilee would usually receive an adequate amount of rainfall (25 in) to raise crops and animals.
- Size** In the days of Jesus, indications are that the village was very small. Probably less than 200 people lived there.
- History** The only thing historically important about Nazareth is the fact that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus lived there. If it weren’t for that, the place would no doubt be long forgotten. It is not named in the Old Testament nor by the early Jewish historian Josephus. The village did not have a good reputation at the time of Jesus (Jn 1:46), perhaps for several reasons, a) Being a very remote place, the language spoken there was not as refined as the language of the “city dwellers.” b) It’s population was a mixed group of people made up of Jews and also varieties of heathen. c) The inhabitants were rather given to rebellions and uprisings. There was always a feeling of unrest about the village. The name “Nazarene” became synonymous with a person who was low, ignorant, and

un-cultured. The Apostle Paul in Acts 24:5 was accused of being the ringleader of this riotous group of folks from Nazareth.



Archaeologists have uncovered some ancient ruins indicating that the city was probably destroyed in 733 BC when the Assyrians invaded Galilee. There is no sign of the place being inhabited again until much later. It is supposed that the exiles from Judah who had returned after the Babylonian Captivity might have rebuilt it and people began living there again in the second century BC.

In the sixth century AD, Christian pilgrimages began to be made to the town and around 1100 Christianity had taken a fairly good hold in Nazareth. In 1160 the Roman Catholic church held a council there in which they declared Alexander III the pope. The Christians were driven out, however, when the Turks invaded Palestine in 1517 (cp. the original text of Luther’s hymn *Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Thy Word*).

In 1620 the Franciscan monks gained control of the town and they established a guard to watch over the ancient ruins. The Turks bothered the monks and other Christians there unless they paid tribute. So they did, and that arrangement continued until 1697. Finally at that time, the Franciscans were able to take over more complete responsibility for Nazareth. They erected a church there in 1730. In 1877 the church was enlarged and in 1954 it was demolished so that archaeological studies could go forward and a new church could be built.



In 1966 the Roman Catholics built a church on the supposed site where the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and announced that she would be the mother of the Christ-child. That basilica is now the largest church building in the Middle East. The population of Nazareth today is about 60,000 and a modern tourist guide says this: “Picturesque red roofs and white stone churches ramble haphazardly down the slopes of this ancient Galilee hillside, the summit of which overlooks the panorama of the entire Jezreel Valley.”

Nazareth in the Bible

There are some fairly significant Bible events that took place in and around Nazareth. Consider briefly the following lessons:

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| Luke 1:26-31 | <i>The Annunciation</i>
What does the Annunciation teach us about our God? What does it show us about Mary's faith? |
| Matthew 2:23 | <i>The Return From Egypt</i>
How was the child Jesus protected from Herod? What is significant about the fact that Mary and Joseph returned to Nazareth with Jesus? Remembering how small the village was, how might Mary and Joseph's return been an encouragement to the people? |
| Luke 4:16-31 | <i>Jesus Preaches in the Synagogue</i>
What was the reaction of the people to their "hometown" boy? Is it surprising? Is it amazing to you that people reject the <i>good news</i> of Christ? Nazareth was not a large place and many of the people who listened to Jesus that day may well have been his relatives— yet they couldn't wait to get rid of Him. What did Jesus do when He was rejected at Nazareth? What do we do when the word we present is rejected? Read John 1 for further comments on Christ's rejection at Nazareth. |

Considering all you now know about the town, why do you think God planned that His Son Jesus should grow up a Nazarene?

Conclusion

As we enter the season of Lent, the question is asked of us, "What do you think of Jesus?" Was He just a grubby Nazarene, or is He the Son of the Living God? Was He all confused at quoting the prophecies of Isaiah and applying them to Himself, or were the prophets looking forward to Him all along? Was He just another preacher, or does He preach the true way of salvation through faith in His work completed at the cross?

May we ever see Jesus of Nazareth as our Savior who came to be our substitute under divine Law and then went forward without hesitation to the mount at Calvary.

We all believe in God's own Son,
Our Lord, the Sole-begotten One;
And by the Holy Ghost the same
Of a virgin man became.

By Pontius Pilate crucified,
He suffered on the Tree and died;
To show of Satan's reign the end,
He did into hell descend.

The same Lord Christ of Nazareth
Who for all sinners tasted death
The third day after He had died
Rose with body glorified.

(*Lutheran Hymnal* 253:2-4)

Resources

<http://www.biblepicturegallery.com/Pictures/Nazareth.htm>
<http://198.62.75.1/www1/ofm/san/TSnzcent.html>
<http://www.ancientsandals.com/overviews/nazareth.htm>
<http://www.bibleplaces.com/nazareth.htm>
www.inisrael.com/tour/nazareth/index.html
The Popular and Critical Bible Encyclopedia Samuel Fallows, ed.