Text: Genesis 17:8
Title: "The Bible Lands … Our Spiritual Roots"

INTRODUCTION

I want you to see your faith connected to the activity of God in history. Sometimes we read our Bibles and forget that we're not just reading a story … we're reading history, or better His-story. Every time I travel to Israel, that story, His-story, comes more alive to me than ever. And this morning I want to encourage you that the faith to which you cling is rooted in God's real activity in history. You've not put your trust, not in fairy tales or myths, but in a God who actually revealed Himself in the person of Jesus Christ, in a very real part of the world.

It all starts with a promise that God made to our faith-father, Abraham when God told him…

Genesis 17:8 (NIV) - "The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God."

PHOTO – CLIFFS OF ARBEL

It was such an exhilarating experience for the 40 of us on the trip to cover a major part of the land that God promised Abraham's descendents … the land in which so much of the Bible actually occurred.

Let me take you to a very significant place just north of Jerusalem … to the site of the ancient city of Gibeon.

2 Chronicles 1:3 (NIV) - "Solomon and the whole assembly went to the high place at Gibeon, for God's Tent of Meeting was there, which Moses the Lord's servant had made in the desert."

PHOTO – ANCIENT GIBEON

This photo is taken from the highest hill in the area (in fact there's a shrine on top of this hill commemorating the death of Samuel … the Muslims have built a mosque atop this hill. The high place would have been where this photo was taken. Remember that here the Lord came to Solomon after he had worshipped by offering sacrifices, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you." Solomon's answer:

"Give me wisdom and knowledge, that I may lead this people, for who is able to govern this great people of yours?" 2 Chronicles 1:10 (NIV)

PHOTO – ANCIENT GIBEON

It was very special to me to stand on this site where Solomon prayed this prayer. II Chron.1:10 is a prayer that I pray regularly as I think about my own responsibilities as a pastor and a spiritual leader.

But in time, the place of worship would ultimately come to a very significant mountain, Mount Moriah, where, incidentally, Abraham was tested when God told him to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. Of course, God intervened when he saw the genuine nature of Abraham's faith, and provided the ram to offer instead. This foreshadowed what would happen on this mountain hundreds of years later when…

2 Chronicles 3:1 (NIV) - "Then Solomon began to build the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the Lord had appeared to his father David. It was on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite, the place provided by David."

PHOTO – SECOND TEMPLE MODEL

So Solomon built the magnificent temple. This is actually a model of the second temple, built by Herod the Great. It gives you an idea of the towering beauty that could be seen from every direction.

Remember at the dedication of the temple that Solomon prayed, "Lord, when your people experience warfare or famine or plague or drought, and they repent and come to this place to pray, may your eyes be open and your ear attentive to the prayers offered in this place." And God answered…

Chronicles 7:14-15 (NIV) - "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land. [15] Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place.

PHOTO – WESTERN WALL OF THE TEMPLE MOUNT

But the Bible tells us that God's people were unfaithful and disobedient. And after generations of patience, God allowed His people to be taken into captivity. And then the Bible says…

Ezra 5:12 (NIV) - "But because our fathers angered the God of heaven, he handed them over to Nebuchadnezzar the Chaldean, king of Babylon, who destroyed this temple and deported the people to Babylon."

PHOTO – DOME OF THE ROCK

Through the years Jerusalem was a battlefield, taken first by one nation, then by another. For a great majority of the past 2000 years the city of Jerusalem, and particularly the Temple Mount has been under the control of Muslims. In 691 the Dome of the Rock was completed and is now the third most holy place for Muslims in the world.

So were God's plans for His people destroyed with the temple? No, God was still on His throne in heaven, and working according to His plans. Because God had promised Abraham that not only would his descendents possess this land, but also out of them would come a blessing for the whole world … Jesus Christ.

So we fast forward to the first century when we're told…

Matthew 2:1-3 (NIV) - "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him."

PHOTO – HERODIAN, PALACE/FORTRESS OF HEROD THE GREAT

Now King Herod, in many ways, was the Sadaam Hussein of the first century. He was a palace builder. And one of his palace/fortresses was built on a towering hill just south of Jerusalem … called Herodian. Ironically, from Herodian one can look out over the Shepherds' Fields and the little town of Bethlehem where the Savior was born.

Remember that the news of this newborn King of the Jews disturbed Herod, and set him on a brutal rampage.

Matthew 2:16 (NIV) - "When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi."

PHOTO – SECOND PHOTO OF HERODIAN

Of course, Herod the Great wasn't successful in killing the Christ. But shortly after this, Herod the Great himself died, and he was buried at this palace. You may recall just a few weeks ago that archaeologists finally discovered the grave of Herod the Great. In fact, the supervisor of the dig was present the day we visited and we were able to get his first hand description of the amazing discovery.

But I couldn't help but think, here was the grave of the one who wanted to be "King by Might" overlooking the little town of Bethlehem, the birthplace of the one who would be "King by Right."

Now fast-forward 30 years to the day that something very important happened down on the Jordan River.

John 1:28-29 (NIV) - "This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing. The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'"

PHOTO – JORDAN RIVER AT BETHANY-BEYOND-THE-JORDAN"

The actual baptismal site of Jesus has only been opened to tourist for that last 4-5 years. We were able to walk down and put our hand into the waters of the Jordan River where Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist.

This marked the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus. After he was tempted for 40 days in the rugged Judean Wilderness we're told that Jesus began his teaching ministry.

Matthew 5:1-2 (NIV) - "Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them…"

PHOTO – FIELD ON THE NORTHERN SHORE OF THE SEA OF GALILEE NEAR WHERE JESUS TAUGHT

How grateful we are for the teachings of Jesus that guide us as disciples in our everyday life.

Of course, Jesus not only taught, but He also performed powerful miracles like the one recorded in John 5.

John 5:2 (NIV) - "Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades."

PHOTO – POOL OF BETHESDA

Archaeologists have unearthed the remains of the pool and the Byzantine church that was built over the pool to commemorate the miracle that Jesus performed there.

But Jesus didn't just come to teach and perform miracles. He came to die. And that fateful weekend began as we're told in Matthew's Gospel.

Matthew 26:36 (NIV) - "Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.'"

PHOTO – GETHSEMANE

Gethsemane means "olive press," and on the grounds of this grove of olive trees they found an olive press. It is very likely that Jesus and His disciples prayed beneath the olive trees there. The trees in the picture were likely shoots that grew up from the original trees that were in the Garden when Jesus prayed there.

We were privileged to go into a private garden area to pray on the very grounds where Jesus prayed, and then later was arrested. The hideous trial and cruel treatment of Jesus resulted in Jesus' sentence by Pontius Pilate to be crucified.

Mark 15:22,24 (NIV) - "They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull) … And they crucified him."

PHOTO – GOLGOTHA OUTSIDE GORDON'S GARDEN TOMB

Some scholars speculate that the crucifixion of Jesus happened at this site. They point to the fact that nearby there were found tombs.

“So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb.” Mark 15:46 (NIV)

PHOTO – GARDEN TOMB

Other scholars say that the crucifixion and burial of Jesus took place at the site marked by the ancient Church of the Holy Sepulcher. But as we sat together in a quiet pavilion near the Garden Tomb, one person in our group said this: “Some think it was this tomb. Some think it is that tomb. All I know is that both of them are empty.” Amen!

Well, after His resurrection, Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father. And later the Holy Spirit fell upon the Jewish believers in Jerusalem.

Acts 2:1-4 (NIV) - When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. [2] Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. [3] They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. [4] All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

NO PHOTO

Peter stepped forward and preached a powerful message to the thousands who heard the commotion and came to see what had happened. And we’re told …

Acts 2:41 (NIV) - “Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.”

PHOTO – RITUAL BATHS

If you’ve ever been to the Middle East you know that there’s not much water there. It doesn’t rain a drop for about 6 months of the year. Where would there be enough water to baptize 3000 people? Archeaologists have discovered several ritual baths located at the main entrance to the temple on the Northern Wall. These could easily have been the pools where the first baptismal service of the early church took place.

And so the church was on mission to fulfill the commission of Jesus to make disciples of all nations.

Now move with us over to the Mediterranean Sea to the ancient port city of Caesarea by the Sea. Here Herod the Great built another great palace, and made it his seat of power. But the city of Caesarea is important in church history.

Acts 21:8 (NIV) - “Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven.”

PHOTO – THEATER AT CAESAREA BY THE SEA

We sat in this great theater and talked about how Caesarea was the home of Philip the Evangelist who preached in Samaria, and then led the Ethiopian official to Christ. Paul came through this very city during his missionary journeys.

We also know that Caesarea was the home of a important Roman official by the name of Cornelius.

"At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment." Acts 10:1 (NIV)

PHOTO – MORE RUINS OF CAESAREA

Peter came to the home of Cornelius and proclaimed the gospel to his household. And they were saved and baptized, and the Bible says the Holy Spirit fell upon Gentiles there for the first time … the so-called Gentile Pentecost.

But then Paul would return to Caesarea under protective custody. He would have the opportunity to speak before three very powerful leaders: Felix, Festus, and Herod Agrippa.

Acts 24:1 (NIV) - "Five days later the high priest Ananias went down to Caesarea with some of the elders and a lawyer named Tertullus, and they brought their charges against Paul before the governor."

PHOTO – HEROD'S PALACE IN CAESAREA

Here in what is called "the hall of hearing," Paul stood before King Agrippa and made this bold statement.

Acts 26:19 (NIV) - "So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven."

PHOTO – "THE HALL OF HEARING" IN HERODS PALACE AT CAESAREA

And the mission and the baton have been passed to each succeeding generation of the church to make sure that every person has the opportunity to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ.

And all of this is crucial because of what will happen one fateful day when we're told …

Revelation 16:16 (NIV) - "Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon."

PHOTO – JEZREEL VALLEY (VALLEY OF ARMAGEDDON)

The Bible says that the Lord Jesus Christ will lead the great fight against the Anti-Christ and his forces. He is on a white horse. His eyes are a blazing fire. He has a name written on him that no one knows. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood. And the armies of heaven follow him. On his

robe is written, “King of Kings and Lord of Lords.” Without a shot being fired the beast is captured, and he is thrown, along with his minions, into the pits of hell.

On the opposite side of the valley from Megiddo is the ancient city of Nazareth. We must wonder if the little boy who grew up in Nazareth, who worked in His father’s carpenter business, some days looked down into this valley. Did He know at that point that He would one day lead the final and decisive battle of history in his valley?