**Day 6--Gideon’s Spring, Beth She’an**

**Jericho and the Place of Baptism**

Pastor Emeritus Joe Fuiten, November 28, 2018

 If we were to follow the water from Gideon’s Spring it would eventually take us by all the places we want to visit today. When the water leaves Ein Harod, Gideon’s Spring, it flows past Beth She’an into the Jordan River. The Jordan passes Jericho and provides the place of baptism just before the water flows into the Dead Sea.

 Gideon was one of the Judges in Israel before the time of the Kings. It was a terrible time of oppression as the Scripture indicates in Judges 6: “*Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites. 2 Because the power of Midian was so oppressive, the Israelites prepared shelters for themselves in mountain clefts, caves and strongholds. 3 Whenever the Israelites planted their crops, the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples invaded the country. 4 They camped on the land and ruined the crops all the way to Gaza and did not spare a living thing for Israel, neither sheep nor cattle nor donkeys. 5 They came up with their livestock and their tents like swarms of locusts. It was impossible to count the men and their camels; they invaded the land to ravage it. 6 Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the LORD for help.*

 Think what it must have been like in those days. You are living in the bread basket of Israel. You had Mt. Carmel to the west and Mt. Gilboa to the east. The rich agricultural land of the Jezreel Valley was as fertile in 1200 BC as it is today. You work hard all year long and a bountiful harvest is coming your way. However, every year your efforts disappear at harvest time. You might even get so far as to bring in the harvest but you get it stolen from you right at the last minute. You could barely provide for your family at a subsistence level.

 This was the fourth of seven cycles of sin and judgment recorded in Judges. They all read about the same. Israel did evil and fell victim to one form of oppression or another.

An important idea of the Bible is that when we do wrong there are consequences that follow. This is certainly what hell is all about. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees felt the ire of the Lord in Matthew 23:33 when he said, "*You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell*?” At another time Jesus said, in Luke 12:4-6 “*But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him*.”

 Let’s consider how God responded to Israel’s cry for help in the time of Gideon: “*When the Israelites cried to the LORD because of Midian, 8 he sent them a prophet, who said, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. 9 I snatched you from the power of Egypt and from the hand of all your oppressors. I drove them from before you and gave you their land. 10 I said to you, 'I am the LORD your God; do not worship the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live.' But you have not listened to me."*

 God reminded Israel what he had done for them in the past. In the same way, God reminds us that he has blessed this nation. We have been blessed with prosperity and security. But like Israel, we have not listened to God.

*11 The angel of the LORD came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. 12 When the angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon , he said,* ***"The LORD is with you, mighty warrior."*** *13 "But sir," Gideon replied, "if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, 'Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?' But now the LORD has abandoned us and put us into the hand of Midian." 14 The LORD turned to him and said, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?"*

Gideon gathered a force of 32,000 men but God shrank Gideon’s it to three hundred by sending home the fearful and then anyone who drank incorrectly from the spring. It was just a way to shrink the number so God got the credit instead of the size of Gideon’s army. Judges 7:1-2 “*Early in the morning, Jerub-Baal (that is, Gideon) and all his men camped at the spring of Harod. The camp of Midian was north of them in the valley near the hill of Moreh. 2 The Lord said to Gideon, "You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands.*”

Gideon followed God’s plan and God delivered an enormous army of over 120,000 soldiers into his hand and gave Israel peace for the next 40 years. The Midianites and the eastern people always came up the Jordan River Valley traversed across Jezreel then all the way down the coast to Gaza. In our travels we will stop at the eastern entrance to the Jezreel Valley which is Beth She’an, a city which has stood guard there for seven or eight thousand years. Protecting the critical intersection of the Jordan River Valley and Jezreel is why the city has been so durable. One can visit the city today and see both the mound that was the city upon which the bodies of Saul and Jonathan were hung as well as Roman remains from the leading city of the ten cities of the Decapolis. It is one of the most spectacular ruins in Israel.

The thirty-first chapter of First Samuel ends with the death of Saul along with three sons including Jonathan. “*Now the Philistines fought against Israel; the Israelites fled before them, and many fell slain on Mount Gilboa. 2 The Philistines pressed hard after Saul and his sons, and they killed his sons Jonathan, Abinadab and Malki-Shua. 3 The fighting grew fierce around Saul, and when the archers overtook him, they wounded him critically. 4 Saul said to his armor-bearer, "Draw your sword and run me through, or these uncircumcised fellows will come and run me through and abuse me." But his armor-bearer was terrified and would not do it; so Saul took his own sword and fell on it. 5 When the armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he too fell on his sword and died with him. 6 So Saul and his three sons and his armor-bearer and all his men died together that same day. 7 When the Israelites along the valley and those across the Jordan saw that the Israelite army had fled and that Saul and his sons had died, they abandoned their towns and fled. And the Philistines came and occupied them. 8 The next day, when the Philistines came to strip the dead, they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. 9 They cut off his head and stripped off his armor, and they sent messengers throughout the land of the Philistines to proclaim the news in the temple of their idols and among their people. 10 They put his armor in the temple of the Ashtoreths and fastened his body to the wall of Beth She’an.”*

 The journey of Saul and Jonathan’s bones did not end under the tamarisk tree. 2 Sam 21:10-14 tells the story of how and why the bones were moved yet again. “*Rizpah daughter of Aiah took sackcloth and spread it out for herself on a rock. From the beginning of the harvest till the rain poured down from the heavens on the bodies, she did not let the birds of the air touch them by day or the wild animals by night. 11 When David was told what Aiah's daughter Rizpah, Saul's concubine, had done, 12 he went and took the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan from the citizens of Jabesh Gilead. (They had taken them secretly from the public square at Beth She’an, where the Philistines had hung them after they struck Saul down on Gilboa.) 13 David brought the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan from there, and the bones of those who had been killed and exposed were gathered up. They buried the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan in the tomb of Saul's father Kish, at Zela in Benjamin, and did everything the king commanded. After that, God answered prayer in behalf of the land.”*

I find the story of Saul’s bones quite interesting and a positive honoring of a man who had fallen into dishonor. Saul’s life ended badly, quite literally the victim of self-inflicted wounds. Yet it was not always so for Saul. He was in fact used by God to expand Israel and defeat many enemies. (When I think of how God used Saul I think of how he is using President Trump.) King Saul in one of his early acts had come to the rescue of the people of Jabesh Gilead. It was something they never forgot. 1 Sam 11:1-11 has that story. “*Nahash the Ammonite went up and besieged Jabesh Gilead. And all the men of Jabesh said to him, "Make a treaty with us, and we will be subject to you." 2 But Nahash the Ammonite replied, "I will make a treaty with you only on the condition that I gouge out the right eye of every one of you and so bring disgrace on all Israel." 3 The elders of Jabesh said to him, "Give us seven days so we can send messengers throughout Israel; if no one comes to rescue us, we will surrender to you." 4 When the messengers came to Gibeah of Saul and reported these terms to the people, they all wept aloud. 5 Just then Saul was returning from the fields, behind his oxen, and he asked, "What is wrong with the people? Why are they weeping?" Then they repeated to him what the men of Jabesh had said. 6 When Saul heard their words, the Spirit of God came upon him in power, and he burned with anger. 7 He took a pair of oxen, cut them into pieces, and sent the pieces by messengers throughout Israel, proclaiming, "This is what will be done to the oxen of anyone who does not follow Saul and Samuel." Then the terror of the Lord fell on the people, and they turned out as one man. 8 When Saul mustered them at Bezek, the men of Israel numbered three hundred thousand and the men of Judah thirty thousand. 9 They told the messengers who had come, "Say to the men of Jabesh Gilead, 'By the time the sun is hot tomorrow, you will be delivered.'" When the messengers went and reported this to the men of Jabesh, they were elated. 10 They said to the Ammonites, "Tomorrow we will surrender to you, and you can do to us whatever seems good to you." 11 The next day Saul separated his men into three divisions; during the last watch of the night they broke into the camp of the Ammonites and slaughtered them until the heat of the day. Those who survived were scattered, so that no two of them were left together.*

Saul would have been a local hero to those people. He had literally saved their lives even though he had fallen into dishonor by the poor choices of his life. He had just visited the witch of Endor to try to know the future by occultic means since God was not revealing things to him. Before nightfall the next day Saul was dead. “*When the people of Jabesh Gilead heard of what the Philistines had done to Saul, 12 all their valiant men journeyed through the night to Beth She’an. They took down the bodies of Saul and his sons from the wall of Beth She’an and went to Jabesh, where they burned them. 13 Then they took their bones and buried them under a tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and they fasted seven days.”*

Saul is a tragic figure. He had so much potential. Shakespeare had the orator at Caesar’s funeral say “The evil men do live after them but the good is oft’ interred with their bones.” Saul’s evil certainly lives after him but the men of Jabesh Gilead remembered the good and honored that. It strikes me as a great way to think about the people of our lives who have failed in great and small ways. If you recall my message on the altar rebuilt by Elijah on Carmel, you will recall that tradition holds the altar was originally built by Saul. Elijah built on the good work of Saul and took it to heights it had never known.

The upper city of Beth She’an is the ancient city of Saul’s demise. The lower city is the remains of various occupants including when it was the leading city of the ten cities of the Decapolis. In 634 it would have been virtually a 100% Christian city when it was taken by the Muslim Caliphate. The incoming Muslims renamed the city Baysan and lived alongside the Christians until the 8th century. The Arab style is to build shops ever closer to the street traffic shutting off sidewalks. It continued to decline until January 18, 749 when Umayyad Baysan was completely devastated by an earthquake. The city never recovered although the Crusaders and a long succession of others maintained a presence there.

Beth She’an is only four miles from Mt. Gilboa where Saul and his sons died and only about nine miles from where Saul had his occultic encounter with the Witch of Endor. Jabesh Gilead is about 10 miles east of the Jordan.

Leaving Beth She’an we travel down the Jordan River Valley through Palestinian territory and into the Palestinian town of Jericho. We can compare our experience to that of Joshua in Joshua 5:13-6:5. *“Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?" 14 "Neither," he replied, "but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come." Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, "What message does my Lord have for his servant?" 15 The commander of the Lord's army replied, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so. 6 Now Jericho was tightly shut up because of the Israelites. No one went out and no one came in. 2 Then the Lord said to Joshua, "See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men. 3 March around the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. 4 Have seven priests carry trumpets of rams' horns in front of the ark. On the seventh day, march around the city seven times, with the priests blowing the trumpets. 5 When you hear them sound a long blast on the trumpets, have all the people give a loud shout; then the wall of the city will collapse and the people will go up, every man straight in*." NIV

It seems impossible that Israel could have marched around any city seven times in one day until you see how small the city actually was. The ancient city was limited to the area which is raised above the valley floor. An eight acre city is tiny to us but ancient cities in 1400 BC were mostly quite small.[[1]](#footnote-1) Jericho was in two main layers. When the trumpets were blown, the walls tumbled outward. The fallen stones became like ramps into the two levels of the city. If you look closely, there are still places where you can see the jumble of mud bricks that were atop the stone walls of Jericho when they came tumbling down. Without the imposing walls, the city was very vulnerable and fell to Israel quickly. It was their first victory as they moved into the land that God had promised them. Ironically, this is one of the first cities that Israel gave back to the Palestinians several years ago when they were trading “land for peace.” Arafat had a home in the city as well as a “police” training academy where his troops trained.

In Jericho, a ruin dating to around 7000 B.C. has been uncovered, making this one of the earliest known villages of man. Along with Aleppo in Syria and Iconium in Turkey, this city claims to be the oldest, continuously inhabited city on earth.

Jericho is one of the places to which Elisha followed Elijah on the journey that led to Elijah’s translation into Heaven (2 Kings 2:4-5). The spring of Elisha is significant because here Elisha made the water sweet by putting in salt (2 Kings 2:18-22). A local ministry run by Tasir Abu Sada is now selling the water of Jericho all through the West Bank.

Jericho is mentioned six times in the Gospels and is associated with Zacchaeus, Bartimaeus, and the Good Samaritan. The New Testament city was located to the west of the old site. Josephus says Herod the Great died there and was buried at Herodium.

Looking west from Jericho, you see the Mount of Temptation where Jesus is said to have gone after being baptized in the Jordan River.

2 Kings 2:5-12 “*The company of the prophets at Jericho went up to Elisha and asked him, "Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master from you today?" "Yes, I know," he replied, "but do not speak of it." 6 Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; the Lord has sent me to the Jordan." And he replied, "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So the two of them walked on. 7 Fifty men of the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. 8 Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground. 9 When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?" "Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit," Elisha replied. 10 "You have asked a difficult thing," Elijah said, "yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours — otherwise not." 11 As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. 12 Elisha saw this and cried out, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them apart*. “

Mark 10:46-52 has one of the great miracles of Jesus. “*Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (that is, the Son of Timaeus), was sitting by the roadside begging. 47 When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" 48 Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" 49 Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." So they called to the blind man, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you." 50 Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. 51 "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him. The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see." 52 "Go," said Jesus, "****your faith*** *has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road*. (NIV)

Bartimaeus had an explosion of faith as verse 50 would seem to indicate. He is suddenly not acting like a blind man. Since when do blind people toss their coat aside as though it would be easy to find later? Only rarely do you see a blind person jump or run, but this one did. There was no doubt in his mind what was going to happen. Jesus acknowledged as much when he said, YOUR faith has healed you. (More particularly, it was his faith in Jesus that healed him. Jesus was the healer but the man’s faith was the catalyst that allowed it to happen.)

I think it is worth noting that this experience did not happen in a vacuum. Jericho was on one of the main routes from Galilee to Jerusalem via the Jordan River Valley. As pilgrims traveled, they naturally told the stories of what was happening around Galilee with Jesus. Each story Bartimaeus heard was a preparation for faith to take hold in his heart.

Located near Jericho and the Dead Sea on the Jordan River, Qasr Al Yahud is the traditional spot where the New Testament narrative of the baptism of Jesus took place. Marble steps from the Jordanian side descend into the Jordan River from remains of Byzantine and Crusader churches that once hosted pilgrims wanting to renew their baptism experience. We will get within a few feet of the country of Jordan.

Luke 3:21-22 has the story of the baptism of Jesus. *“When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."*

Jesus was alive in the Spirit and by the Spirit from the beginning of his human journey. He was conceived of the Holy Spirit. His early growth in wisdom, demonstrated at age twelve in the Temple, evidences the workings of the Holy Spirit. Luke notes this when he says, “*And the child grew and became strong, he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him*.”[[2]](#footnote-2) No one can reasonably argue that Jesus needed more of the Holy Spirit. The grace of God was on Him. The Holy Spirit was alive in him.

If Jesus had the Holy Spirit in him, then what was the nature of what happened to him on the banks of the Jordan River? Before we address that question, I want to justify my suggestion that the significant experience with the Holy Spirit did not occur in the Jordan River and certainly was not his baptism by John.

Jesus received the anointing of the Spirit on the shore, not in the water. Matthew makes it clear that Jesus was not in the water. *“As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him.”[[3]](#footnote-3)* We have two ideas here. First, that Jesus was baptized, and second that he went up out of the water. If we try to argue that the reference to “*out of the water*” somehow speaks of the baptism itself, then we would make the sentence redundant (Jesus was put in the water, came up out of the water, then he went up out of the water). The “washing” with water followed by the anointing with the Spirit is consistent with the Old Testament pattern for consecrating priests for ministry. There the priest was first washed, then he was anointed with oil. Cyril of Jerusalem viewed the water baptism followed by the anointing with the Holy Spirit as analogous to the Old Testament anointing of the High Priest.[[4]](#footnote-4) Cyril’s commentary on the subject in drawing upon the analogy is meaningless if the anointing was not subsequent to the water baptism.

1. <http://ldolphin.org/Jericho.shtml> argues for the early date not around 1250 as some prefer. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Luke 2:40 NIV. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Matthew 3:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cyril of Jerusalem. Catechetical Lecture XVII. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 7, (Peabody Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995. Reprint of Christian Literature Publishing company, 1894.) page 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)