Who Is Jesus

Part Six / Wednesday, January 16, 2019

Jesus Begins His Earthly Ministry

THE ESSENES, THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS ... AND ... JOHN THE BAPTIST

Each year in Israel, we load our two gleaming Mercedes Benz touring busses and drive east out of Jerusalem toward Jericho (16 miles) and then turn south to the Dead Sea. Rounding a severe bend in the road, we cross the site of the community of the ancient Essenes. Behind the area, the mountain ridge is dotted with many caves (note the picture on page 2), some large, some small. It was here the Dead Sea Scrolls were found initially in 1946. (More about them down the page.)

Most scholars believe the scrolls were written by a group of Jews called The Essenes. They thrived during the Second Temple Period (Herod’s structure) from around the 2nd century before Christ to 70 AD, when Israel was destroyed by Rome.

The Jewish historian Josephus records that Essenes existed in large numbers, but were fewer in number than the Pharisees and Sadduccees, the other two major sects at the time. The Essenes lived in various cities but congregated in communal life dedicated to voluntary poverty, daily immersion in water, and celibacy. Zadok the priest is believed to have been their founder. (Zakok was a Levite priest during the time of King David - around 1,000 B.C. Zakok was a descendant of Aaron. 1 Chron. 27:17 Of the Levites, Hashabiah the son of Kemuel: of the Aaronites, Zadok:)

The Essenes have gained fame in modern times as a result of the discovery of an extensive group of religious documents known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. These scrolls preserve multiple copies of parts of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) untouched from possibly as early as 300 B.C. (They are now in the Israeli Museum in Jerusalem)

The Roman writer Pliny the Elder (died in 79 AD) in his Natural History related that the Essenes had little or no money. He placed the Essenes somewhere above Ein Gedi (where David hid from King Saul), next to the dead Sea.

Josephus relates that the Essenes immersed in water every morning (a religious act, not hygienic), ate together after prayer, devoted themselves to charity and benevolence, and were students of history.

Why do I bring them up here? It is my personal opinion that John the Baptist might well
Ruins of the Essene community on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea. The “x” marks the spot of the Essene buildings. Did John the Baptist live here for a time?? Note all the caves, some well into the mountains. It was here that the Dead Sea Scrolls were found.

have been an Essene. We know from Scripture that he set up his preaching and baptizing ministry at Bethabara, where the Jordan River pours into the northern edge of the Dead Sea, not all that far from the Essene village. If John had been an Essene, he would have been very familiar with the daily immersion in water practiced by the group. Here is how Matthew wrote the story:

Matthew 3:1-15

In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, [2] And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. [3] For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias (Isaiah)*, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. [4] And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey. [5] Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan, [6] And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins.

[7] But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath
This is the area on the Jordan River, near the Dead Sea, where Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. Note the dirty water. On our tours of Israel, we baptize folks upstream where the water is clean and the Israeli Department of Tourism has made a safe and lovely spot for the baptisms. (Note the picture on page 4)

to come? [8] Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: [9] And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. [10] And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. [11] I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire: [12] Whose fan is in his hand, and he will throughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

[13] Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him. [14] But John forbad him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? [15] And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. Then he suffered him.

* Isaiah 40:3

The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
This is the water baptismal site we use in Israel. It is located at the north end of the Jordan River where it leaves the Sea of Galilee on its meandering way to the Dead Sea (past Bethabara where our Lord was baptized). The ramps in the foreground are ideal for people to come in and out of the water (which is usually pretty cold).

**WATER BAPTISM IS VERY IMPORTANT!**

Will water baptism “save” a person? No. Perhaps this is an excuse some give for not following Jesus into the water. But regardless of the fact that many have allowed this cherished truth from Scripture and from Jesus own earthly life to erode, it is still vital for spiritual health. Let’s examine the reasons.

1. **IT IS AN ACT OF OBEDIENCE.**

When Jesus commissioned His disciples to evangelize the world, He made water baptism of supreme importance: Matthew 28:19-20

> Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:

[20] Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen. If for no other reason, we baptize believers because Jesus told us to! Jesus never allowed water baptism to be an option. It was an imperative. Note verse 20: “... I have commanded you.”
2. IT IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO WITNESS

Romans 6:1-4  What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? [2] God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? [3] Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? [4] Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

Our baptism in water is a witness to the saving work of Christ - His death, burial and resurrection. When we observe a new believer enter the water, go under the water, and come up from the water, we are seeing what Jesus did to save us.

Water baptism symbolizes that as Christ died, was buried and rose again, so the believer has died and been buried to self and now has new life in Christ Jesus. Baptism demonstrates that he or she is a new creature in our Lord. The Greek word *baptizo* was commonly used in the first century to describe dipping cloth into dye. The cloth came out of the dye vat looking different than when it went in. Being a new believer in Christ means that our lives, by faith in Him, have changed. Baptism symbolizes that change in the follower of Jesus.

The scriptures tell us the stories of converts obeying Jesus in water baptism. When Paul presented Christ to the unsaved in Philippi, the Philippian jailer and his family were baptized (Acts 16). In Acts 10, Cornelius the Roman centurion was baptized. In Acts 18, the Corinthians new believers were obedient to water baptism.

On a number of occasions, I have noticed persons being baptized who have invited unsaved friends to come to observe. The guests naturally will ask questions such as - why are they being taken under the water? Or - what is the significance of all this? And so the very act of water baptism can serve as a powerful witness to the saving work of Christ and the salvation experience of the one being baptized.

3. Water Baptism Is An Open Door To The Church Body

The book of Acts relates how seriously the early Church members took water baptism. Acts 2:41-42  Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. [42] And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.

I usually take our Israel tour groups to the south end of the great Temple where "the stairs
There are many of these mikvah baths in Israel. This is one I found near the Temple steps where Peter preached.

of Solomon” remain. It was here, we believe, that Peter preached the classic sermon you will find in Acts chapter 2. Think of it - 3,000 saved and many of them baptized in water.

I used to wonder how the apostles could baptize that many people in that particular place. When I first visited the site in 1971, it was still all covered by dirt. But excavations began and what has been uncovered is remarkable. We now know that those stairs were used by worshipers going in and out of the Temple. (The steps are different sizes, which require the worshiper to keep his or her head down lest they trip and fall. That was to assist the worshiper entering the Temple to do so in a worshipful position - head down.)

Reaching the steps we now see a number of old mikvah baths. (See the illustration above) Here the worshiper would enter the water and be fully submerged. This enabled the person to be ceremonially clean upon entering the Temple. There are a number of these baths near the steps where Peter preached in Acts 2.

So the early church took seriously this matter of church membership. People who had repented and were saved were baptized in water. The first church was made up of those who had been saved and baptized. To the local church (which includes First Assembly
of God) Jesus committed two ordinances: water baptism and communion (the Lord’s Supper). As long as the Christian believers have gone to “church,” water baptism has been an integral part of the worship and witness of God’s people. Baptism is a time of celebration for both the believer being baptized and the church entire.

We have water baptism at least one Wednesday evening per month. As Pastor, I encourage everyone to follow the Lord’s directive to be baptized. Call the church office to get information on the next baptismal service. (239) 936-6277

THE HOLY TRINITY OF GOD SALUTED OUR LORD’S BAPTISM IN WATER

Matthew 3:16-17

And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: [17] And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

Why would Jesus submit to water baptism? His cousin, John the Baptist, preached a gospel of repentance. Did Jesus need to repent? No, He was the perfect and sinless Son of God. This was the ideal moment for Jesus to begin His ministry. Men were conscious of their sin and conscious of their need for God has never before. This was His opportunity, and in His baptism He identified Himself with the people he came to save, in the hour of their new consciousness of their sin, and of their search for God.

The belief in the Trinity, God, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit has long been upheld by Bible-believing Christians. In the very beginning of everything, God summoned the Trinity in the creation of Adam: Genesis 1:26 And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. When speaking of the Trinity we mean there are three eternal distinctions in one divine Being. We do not have three gods.

When emerging from the Jordan River at His baptism, a voice overhead was heard to exclaim (vs. 17), “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” God was quoting from His own Book, the Scriptures: Psalm 2:7 I will declare the decree: the Lord hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee. And Isaiah 42:1 Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles.

Verse 16 describes The Spirit of God descending like a dove. It does not teach that the
Holy Spirit IS a dove. Scriptures say the Spirit of God descended upon Jesus (softly and gently) as a dove would do. We see so many times in paintings the Holy Spirit depicted as a dove. The Holy Spirit IS NOT A BIRD! He is the third person in the Trinity; He is God.

SATAN ATTEMPTS TO STOP JESUS BEFORE HE EVEN GETS STARTED

Crossing the Jordan River from the country of Jordan, heading west into Israel, one can clearly see the outline of Jericho some six miles straight ahead. Behind Jericho is a rugged series of hills. They are known as “the wilderness.” After Jesus was baptized in the river, He departed and walked toward that forbidding cliff dead ahead, where He was confronted by Satan.

Matthew 4:1-11

Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. [2] And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hunred. [3] And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. [4] But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. [5] Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, [6] And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. [7] Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God. [8] Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; [9] And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. [10] Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. [11] Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him.

We need to clarify something immediately. Could Jesus have been tempted? Apparently so. However, the word “tempt” and its derivative come from the Greek word peirazein. The chief meaning of this word means TO TEST. We should settle in our minds that Jesus was dealing primarily with TESTING here, even more than being TEMPTED.

Look at Genesis 22:1 And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. Does God tempt people? Not really - but He does TEST us. So that verse in Genesis 22 really means that God TESTED Abraham. Knowing the rest of that story with Abraham and
his son Isaac, that definition makes sense.

Get the picture clearly on the screen on your mind: Jesus had just been baptized and eulogized by the Godhead. Now He walks into the wilderness. Sir George Adam Smith, who traveled over it as have I so many times, described it this way: **It is an area of yellow sand, 35 x 15 miles, of crumbling limestone, and of scattered shingle. It is an area of contorted strata, where the ridges run in all directions as if they were warped and twisted. The hills are like dust heaps; the limestone is blistered and peeling; rocks are bare and jagged; often the very ground sounds hollow when a foot or a horse's hoof falls on it. It glows and glimmers with heat like some vast furnace. It runs right out to the Dead Sea, and then there comes a drop of twelve hundred feet, a drop of limestone, flint, and marl, through crags and corries and precipices down to the Dead Sea. In that wilderness Jesus would be more alone than anywhere else in that country.**

**SOME LESSONS YOU AND I CAN GAIN ABOUT OUR OWN LIVES FROM THIS STORY:**

□ In his gospel, Mark reminded us of this: Mark 1:12 **And immediately the Spirit driveth him into the wilderness.**

In our journey to Glory, it quite often happens that after a great moment there comes a reaction. And often in that “reaction,” we find ourselves in a critical moment. The great Old Testament prophet Elijah knew about this. I Kings 18 tells the gripping story of his showdown with the prophets of Baal. But the success of that story prompted wicked Queen Jezebel to fury and she promised a “hit” on the prophet. What was Elijah’s reaction? I Kings 19:3 **And when he saw that, he arose, and went for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongeth to Judah, and left his servant there.** This man of God who had faced down all comers now fled in terror for his life. Someone has observed, “It seems to be the law of life that just after our resistance power has been highest it nose-dives until it reaches the lowest.”

□ Let us remember that this testing of Jesus was not a one-time situation.

Satan was at Caesarea Philippi (not a surprise since it was the location literally of what was known as “the gates of hell”). Peter was the instrument the tempter used to sidetrack Jesus from taking the way to the Cross. What was Jesus’ response? Matthew 16:23 **But he turned, and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.**

At Gethsemane Jesus waged perhaps the major fight with Satan: Luke 22:42-44 **Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my**
And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.

Physicians say that in some people it can happen during times of great stress that the tiny capillaries just under the skin can rupture and blood ooze out on a person’s face. That condition is called hematidrosis.

The follower of Christ has to be constantly vigilant against the clever approaches of Satan. Never get the idea that you have somehow evolved above and beyond temptation.

How is it that Jesus won the test?

But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.

Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.

Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.

Again and again, our Lord stood on Scripture.

Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him.

Now, baptized in the Jordan River, and having stood successfully the test of temptation, Jesus began His 3 ½ year earthly ministry. It began when something happened to His cousin.

In our next study, we see how JESUS BEGAN HIS MINISTRY.