The Capernaum Residency

The Bible reports the lives of:

- Real People
- Who Lived In Real Places
- In Real Time

Around His age of 30, Jesus left Nazareth and made His home relatively near it in Capernaum. In Hebrew that word meant “Nahum’s Village” and it was a fishing enclave located on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee.

In Jesus’ day, it was believed that Capernaum had a population of about 1500. When I host our Israel pilgrims in Israel, we always make this town a “must” on our itinerary. There it lies, nestled against the waters Jesus knew so well.

Archaeological excavations have uncovered two ancient synagogues (see the picture on page 2) built one over the other. The ruins of Peter’s home are still there. That site was later made into a church by the Byzantines. The Byzantine Empire evolved after the decline of Western Rome around 500 AD. A few years ago, a Roman Catholic church was built over it, which has certainly preserved those ruins for some time to come.

Some travelers to Israel get upset over the many churches, primarily Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox, built over the holy sites. I do not mind it as I understand those churches have preserved the holy sites beautifully. Time and weather might well have eradicated so many of those places held dear by Christians had they not been protected by the churches built over them.

Capernaum was inhabited continuously from the 2nd century before Christ to the 11th century AD when it was abandoned sometime before the Crusaders. In 749, an earthquake devastated Capernaum but it was shortly after re-established as a functioning village.

All four Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John cited Capernaum. Matthew himself worked there as a tax collector for Rome before Jesus called him to follow Him. The hometown of Peter, Andrew, James and John was Bethsaida, located on the far north
The ruins of the 3rd century synagogue in Capernaum, built upon the footprint of the original synagogue that Jesus knew so well. This structure is very near the shore of the Sea of Galilee and the ruins of Peter's home.

end of the Sea of Galilee (very close to Capernaum). In Matthew, Capernaum is referred to in a charming way as “his own city:” Matthew 9:1 And he (Jesus) entered into a ship, and passed over, and came into his own city. One can put together the timetable of Jesus’ move to Capernaum from the small mountainous hamlet of Nazareth, choosing the town as the center of His public ministry: Matthew 4:12-17 Now when Jesus had heard that John was cast into prison, he departed into Galilee; [13] And leaving Nazareth, he came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is upon the sea coast, in the borders of Zabulon and Nephthalim: [14] That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias (Isaiah) the prophet, saying, [15] The land of Zabulon, and the land of Nephthalim, by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles; [16] The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up. [17] From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Jesus became angry at the residents of Capernaum (along with the nearby towns of Bethsaida and Chorazin) for their unbelief, saying to them, Matthew 11:23 And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the
mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.

As Jesus prophesied, Jerusalem would fall before long (which it did to the Romans in 70 AD). Galilee had already been crushed by the forces of General Vespasian (who became Emperor of Rome and built the famed Roman Coliseum. It is interesting to me that no historical sources have been found indicating that Capernaum was involved in any of these bloody revolts against the Romans. Nor were they involved to any degree sixty years later with the revolt led by Bar Kokhba’s forces (132-135), as we learn from the contemporary historian Josephus; thus this village was spared destruction. Josephus referred to Capernaum as a fertile spring. We know he spent at least one night there following an injury.

A good number of Jesus’ healing miracles occurred in this region. Mark recorded one of the most unusual ones:

Mark 2:1-12

And again he entered into Capernaum, after some days; and it was noised that he was in the house. [2] And straightway many were gathered together, insomuch that there was no room to receive them, no, not so much as about the door: and he preached the word unto them. [3] And they come unto him, bringing one sick of the palsy, which was borne of four. [4] And when they could not come nigh unto him for the press, they uncovered the roof where he was: and when they had broken it up, they let down the bed wherein the sick of the palsy lay. [5] When Jesus saw their faith, he said unto the sick of the palsy, Son, thy sins be forgiven thee. [6] But there were certain of the scribes sitting there, and reasoning in their hearts, [7] Why doth this man thus speak blasphemies? who can forgive sins but God only? [8] And immediately when Jesus perceived in his spirit that they so reasoned within themselves, he said unto them, Why reason ye these things in your hearts? [9] Whether is it easier to say to the sick of the palsy, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and take up thy bed, and walk? [10] But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (he saith to the sick of the palsy,) [11] I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy bed, and go thy way into thine house. [12] And immediately he arose, took up the bed, and went forth before them all; insomuch that they were all amazed, and glorified God, saying, We never saw it on this fashion.

Much of the construction, both of houses and public buildings, prior to Jesus’ time was made of basalt, black rock spewed out by earthquakes. The early synagogue in Capernaum that Jesus knew was constructed of basalt. In nearby Chorazin, almost all of
Ruins of a basalt home in Galilee, similar to the one described in Mark 2. Note the arches. In its original construction, there would have been three of four of such arches in a typical home. Over the top of the arches, stretching from one to the other, were slabs of basalt, weighing about 100 pounds each, which comprised the ceiling. The men who brought the paralyzed man to Jesus removed those heavy stones! What an effort to bring a man to the Master!

the remains are basalt. It was not some “light” branches on the roof. It was basalt. (On the following page are the ruins of the actual synagogue in Chorazin just a couple miles from Capernaum that we believe Jesus actually visited.)

Following the deliverance of the man in Capernaum (in the house with the now-torn-up roof), Jesus interacted with the tax man in that area – a fellow named Levi, the son of Alphaeus, better known to us as MATTHEW:

Mark 2:13-17 And he went forth again by the sea side; and all the multitude resorted unto him, and he taught them. [14] And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the receipt of custom, and said unto him, Follow me. And he arose and followed him. [15] And it came to pass, that, as Jesus sat at meat in his house, many publicans and sinners sat also together with Jesus and his disciples: for there were many, and they followed him. [16] And when the scribes and Pharisees saw him eat with publicans and sinners, they said unto his disciples, How is it that he
eateth and drinketh with publicans and sinners? [17] When Jesus heard it, he saith unto them, They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

MATTHEW

It required a lot of money to run the Roman Empire. There were the famous roads to fund, law and order, the armies, government and - you name it. The funding was done through taxation. Officially designated publicans, tax collectors, were free to approach a person and tax him for just about whatever he wanted to. As a result, the “tax men” were hated by and large and, at least in old Israel, were Jewish men - like Matthew.

It was very hard for John Q. Citizen to tolerate some officious guy who could open your boxes, your bundles, your mail, and on-the-spot tax it for whatever he cared to. The publican - tax collector - was hated. If the tax man happened to be a Jew in the land of Jesus, he was considered a crook, a renegade, a traitor to his own people.

Each time I go through the main gate at Capernaum, I am well aware that somewhere in that near area sat Matthew, doing Rome’s business against his own people. This road was known as “the great trunk road from Damascus, Syria, and the far east to the Mediterranean Sea. It a sort of biblical I-75! Matthew had a great spot to relieve people of their money! Even if the tax man was somewhat honest, he was held in contempt! Then...one day...Jesus passed by - and all was changed! “Follow me!” He challenged. “And he (Matthew) arose and followed Him.” What a line!

Jesus of Nazareth knew Matthew quite well. Perhaps only too well. Jesus had by this time migrated from Nazareth to Capernaum. He doubtless had been in Matthew’s tollbooth to pay His taxes. But Jesus called “the outcast” to a better occupation, to better wealth than silver and gold, to serve a better King than Caesar. Without hesitation, Matthew left all and followed Christ. — Alexander Whyte

There was a feast soon after - at Matthew’s home. It irritated Pharisees. (They are so easily upset!) Here they came....complaining. Their nit-picking never changed our Lord. He was still the Champion of Compassion.

The Holy Spirit used this former collector of revenue to give us the Gospel of Matthew. That book is often referred to as “The King and His Kingdom.” It is a great account because Matthew was an eye witness! He was there!

Matthew is believed to have stayed in or around Jerusalem for a decade or two after our
Lord’s ascension. And there is a tradition that claims he became a missionary to northern Africa and died as a martyr somewhere around Ethiopia.

MATTHEW WAS NOT THE FIRST DISCIPLE CALLED BY JESUS

Mark 1:16-20

Now as he walked by the sea of Galilee, he saw Simon (Peter) and Andrew his brother casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers. [17] And Jesus said unto them, Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men. [18] And straightway they forsook their nets, and followed him. [19] And when he had gone a little farther thence, he saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who also were in the ship mending their nets. [20] And straightway he called them: and they left their father Zebedee in the ship with the hired servants, and went after him.

No one is any smarter than the staff he or she builds up around them. Upon news of John the Baptist’s martyrdom, Jesus immediately began selecting men around Him. The first four men were all from Galilee and the area right around Capernaum.

1. Peter (Simon)
2. Andrew, Peter’s brother
3. James
4. John (his brother and probably the youngest of the first twelve disciples)

As far as we know, John was the only one of the 12 who died a natural death; the others were martyred plus Judas’ death which was a suicide.

For the most part, Jesus’ disciples were fishermen. It is recorded that in the days when Jesus was there, 300 fishing boats on the Sea of Galilee were not unusual. Very few people had enough money to eat beef or mutton; they ate a lot of fish. The name of James’ and John’s town, BETHSAIDA, meant “house of fish.” (Bethlehem meant “house of bread.” Note the first three letters: “Bet” which means “house.”) In Galilee, fish were preserved for export to Jerusalem and even to Rome. The salt fish industry was big in Galilee.

Jesus’ men were simple people - folk! Abraham Lincoln is believed to have said, “*God must love the common people – He made so many of them!*” Jesus took twelve “average Joe’s” and changed the world. In the Old Testament, the prophet Amos testified, Amos 7:14-15 Then answered Amos, and said to Amaziah, I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son; but I was an herdman, and a gatherer of sycomore fruit: [15] And the Lord took me as I followed the flock, and the Lord said unto me, Go, prophesy unto my people Israel. What a marvelous reality that God can use any person who is WILLING TO BE USED!
To me, this is one of the most beautiful sites in all Israel. From one of my favorite restaurants in Tiberias (right off the water of the Sea of Galilee) is this platter containing a delectable tilapia. I recommend that you always order it with the head on. “It’s better that way! Honest!” The Sea of Galilee is teeming with these fabulous mouthfuls!

JESUS, THE MASTER TEACHER, BEGINS DOING SO IN THE SYNAGOGUE

Mark 1:21-22

And they went into Capernaum; and straightway on the sabbath day he entered into the synagogue, and taught. [22] And they were astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as one that had authority, and not as the scribes.

These two verses pack a wallop! # 1: “....straightway on the sabbath day....” To the religion-practicing Jew, Sabbath begins on Friday sundown and extends to Saturday sundown. And it is observed! In Israel, just about everything Jewish closes on Shabbat (Sabbath). Even in our hotels, several of the elevators are called “Shabbat elevators,” which means you don’t punch any buttons to your floor. That would be considered “working.” Instead, you enter an elevator which takes you to the top floor! Well, if your room is on the third floor and the hotel has twenty-five floors, you are in for a long-lasting ride; for upon reaching the top floor, the elevator then begins an automatic descent, one floor at a time! I always tell our touring group, “Be sure to get on the right elevator!”
So...what did Jesus teach?  The Word!  He always taught the Word of God!  Often in 
the Gospels, we are informed that “Jesus opened the Scriptures.”  Remember in 2 
Timothy, chapter 4, the last words Paul would ever write just prior to his beheading, he 
cautioned young Pastor Timothy to.... “preach the Word.”  There is precious little Word 
being taught today, even in some of our Assemblies of God churches.  To that end, our 
General Superintendent, Doug Clay, has instituted a major emphasis we call “Biblical 
literacy.”  This program now going into effect across our constituency has two main 
ingredients:
 ✓ Read the Scriptures
 ✓ Know what those Scriptures mean

This initiative could represent a major change in our 13,000 U.S. Assemblies of God.

Then note how Jesus taught:  WITH AUTHORITY!  That does not mean Jesus yelled 
and pounded a pulpit.  Rather it means that His teaching was powerful, went straight to 
the heart and mind, brought about change in the listener.

About 50 years ago, there was a subtle, but (I think) deadly transition in pulpits across 
America.  Preachers would stand before their congregations and say, “Today I want to 
SHARE some Scriptures....”  And to this day, that makes me wince.  Why?  You 
SHARE a sandwich!  You PROCLAIM the Word of God!

One of my great mentors was Leonard Ravenhill.  I have all his books.  Darlene and I 
often sat in his home for days at a time just to hear him talk about Jesus.  His books 
included the classic, Why Revival Tarries, Meat for Men, Tried and Transfigured and 
others that were so life-changing.  He preached in our church in Sandusky at least 15 
times.  He rarely lifted his voice, he made no grand gestures, and I have heard him 
preach for 2 to 3 hours at one setting.  And....the listener (including me) felt I could 
hardly breathe!  He preached with such authority.  Sadly, both he and his wife are now 
in Glory (sad for us, not for them).

In my first few years of pastoring this church, Ravenhill’s phone calls, his letters, his 
encouragements, and sometimes his rebukes! helped me tremendously.  The following 
are several paragraphs from his book, Tried and Transfigured (ch. 21):

Having walked the “valley of the shadow of death” on at least two occasions, I think that 
for me death has lost its terror.  But there are two things that I am afraid of: one, my 
lack of faith; the other, the Judgment Seat of Christ.  I am not afraid that I will get an 
unjust “deal” there (“Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?”) but I am afraid that 
millions who have professed Christ’s name will discover in that awful day that it is a 
serious business to bury talents.  The Apostle John speaks of not being ashamed at
One of Pastor Betzer's greatest friends and mentors, the late Leonard Ravenhill

Christ's appearing (I John 2:28). A marvelous biography of Ravenhill was published some years after his death in 1994. Note this about his passing: Before Ravenhill died, he was unconscious for around two months. During that time he was on an oxygen mask and kept alive through fluids. Worship music was played through his earphones 24/7. At times this "unconscious" man would lift up his hands to worship.

Oh - one thing more: in the several decades I knew and loved him, I never heard Ravenhill "share" the scriptures; but, oh how he PROCLAIMED them - and with authority. Now magnify that over and over again....and that would give us some smidgeon of an idea of how Jesus must have taught - with authority.

THE REST OF HIS DISCIPLES

We have already turned the spotlight on several of these men. Here's the whole list:

- Peter
- James
- John
- Andrew
- Bartholomew (Nathaniel)
Now, surrounded by the twelve, eleven who would follow Him and one who would betray Him, Jesus began His three-year earthly ministry. Mark 1:27-28 And they were all amazed, insomuch that they questioned among themselves, saying, What thing is this? what new doctrine is this? for with authority commandeth he even the unclean spirits, and they do obey him. [28] And immediately his fame spread abroad throughout all the region round about Galilee.

Jesus’ ministry would also take Him north into the nation we now call Lebanon and all the way south into Judea. And the world would never be the same again.

Next week: Signs and Wonders At Jesus’ Bidding