

EXPLORATION: BIBLE

By Chip Thompson

The village of Bethsaida connects prominently with the story of Jesus.

The name Bethsaida means, “House of Fishing.” Mark chapter 6 tells us Jesus and his disciples travelled by boat, on the Sea of Galilee, to Bethsaida. Bethsaida, therefore, was located on the shoreline of the sea. In Jesus day, it was nothing more than a small fishing village.

Bethsaida enters the New Testament story on several occasions. In Mark chapter 8, Jesus healed a blind man at Bethsaida. In Luke chapter 9 Jesus fed 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two small fish in a deserted place that “belonged to Bethsaida.” Jesus lived just two and a half miles west of Bethsaida, in Capernaum, where he taught and performed many miracles. So, the people of Bethsaida were eyewitnesses of the ministry and miracles performed by Jesus.

John 1:43-44 says, “Jesus found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow Me.’ ... Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.” Three of Jesus Christ’s twelve disciples, Peter, Peter’s brother Andrew, and Philip, were all fishermen from Bethsaida. These three men later became Apostles in the New Testament Christian church.

Despite all this, in Matthew chapter 11 and Luke 10, Jesus “rebuked the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent.” Three cities were cursed by Jesus: Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. These cities were all on the northern end of the Sea of Galilee, in close proximity to one another. Jesus said, “If the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon... and Sodom... they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.” Then Jesus said, “it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon... and Sodom in the day of judgment than for you.”

So, has this small first century fishing village been located and does the archeology match the information found in the story of Jesus?

Until recently, the location of Bethsaida was a mystery. Then in 2016 excavations began at a site known in Arabic as El-Araj. The excavations are being led by Prof. Mordechai Aviam and Prof. Steven Notley, archeologists from Kinneret College in Israel and Nyack College in New York. As they excavated, it soon became evident that they had discovered Bethsaida.



As you can see, geographically, Tel El-Araj is a perfect match for the biblical fishing village of Bethsaida. [photo: elarajexcavations.com, Fair Use Act]

What did they find in the excavations that proved beyond any shadow of a doubt that they had found Bethsaida? They found the ruins of a Crusader church (12th century A.D.) built over the ruins of a Byzantine Church (5th century A.D.). Why were these impressive structures built in this small fishing village?

Byzantine Christians were native people who lived in the Middle East. Following Constantine’s Edict of Milan, in 313 A.D., which de-criminalized the act of being a Christian, the Byzantines built Christian churches at the ‘holy places’ in Israel. They were prolific builders of churches on the sites connected with the stories of Jesus and his Apostles. So, what did the Byzantine church at Bethsaida commemorate?



A Mosaic floor inscription tells us this church was dedicated to the "chief and commander of the heavenly apostles." [photo: elarajexcavations.com, Fair Use Act]

The “chief and commander of the heavenly apostles” is a clear reference to the Apostle Peter. Saint Jerome (4th century A.D.) who lived in Bethlehem at a time that corresponds closely with

the building of the Bethsaida church, wrote, “Simon Peter the son of John, from the village of Bethsaida in the province of Galilee, brother of Andrew the apostle, (was) himself chief of the apostles...” (De Viris Illustribus, 1. Simon Peter).

In the 8th century A.D., while travelling along the shores of Galilee, Bishop Willibald wrote, “And thence they went to Bethsaida, the residence of Peter and Andrew, where there is now a church on the site of their house.” (The Chronicles by Bavarian bishop Willibald, 724 A.D.) As excavations progress at Bethsaida, the archeological team expects to find ruins of the 1st century home of Peter and Andrew beneath the apse of this church.

A final piece of evidence relates to the curse Jesus placed on the three cities: Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. In Matthew chapter 21 and Mark 11, when Jesus cursed a fig tree, it died. So, what happened to the three cities that Jesus cursed?

These are the ruins of the ‘Three Cursed Cities’...



Chorazin

Bethsaida

Capernaum

Although other 1st century cities along the sea of Galilee are still thriving communities today, these three cities have been dead for centuries. Why? Because they did not repent... they refused to acknowledge Jesus as their Messiah. The Old Testament Messianic prophecies were ALL fulfilled in Jesus. The teachings of Jesus were clear evidence of his ministry as the Messiah. And, finally, the many miracles of Jesus proved he was the one sent by God to be the Messiah. But, in spite of all the evidence that proved Jesus was their long awaited Messiah, they rejected him.

A similar curse is given to all who examine the stories of Jesus in the gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The Apostle John wrote, “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (John 3:36). The historical, archeological, and biblical evidence is clear – Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior of the world. The Question for you today is this, “Will you believe the biblical story and place your trust in Jesus alone for salvation from the curse of your sins and receive the free gift of eternal life?”