

## "Self-Centeredness"

### The Dead Sea

This lesson might also be called "the Lesson of Dead Ends" because of the areas we will look at – the Negev desert, the Dead Sea, Qumran, Masada all came to rather abrupt endings!

The Dead Sea was not always dead! This very unusual body of water today is quite different than it was when Abraham and his nephew, Lot, inhabited this valley many years ago (Genesis 13). The Dead Sea is 1300 feet below sea level, so the incoming water from the Jordan River has no outlet except for evaporation. And this leaves a tremendous salt and mineral content. The water itself is very oily, and you cannot get it in your mouth or eyes, but you can float in it very easy - in fact that is about all a person can do in the Dead, or otherwise known, as the Salt Sea. It is about 48 miles in length (N to S) and 11 miles at the widest point.

The beginning of the 'end' of this area was probably when God destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18-19). It is thought that the location of these two cities was actually in an area which is now covered by water at the southern part of the sea. No one has been able to identify the exact location of either of these cities, but since the destruction of the cities, this whole area has become very desolate. Our guide, who grew up in this area, said that he would have never thought that anything could grow anywhere near this nonproductive body of water. But just in recent years, Israel has been able to irrigate some of the land toward the northern end of the lake and begin growing certain types of trees, such as dates.

To the northwest is the excavated site of the historic Qumran community, and the nearby area of rocky cliffs and caves where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found.

A shepherd found the first ones, and The locals did not realize just what they had found for a while! Our guide said that his uncle had a batch of them in his house for some time before they found someone who could be responsible with them. (about 15 miles from Bethlehem)

Qumran was the community of Essenes, who from about 200 BC until about 68 A.D. lived in a monastic lifestyle here in the desert.

**Photos**

Going south, down the west side of the Dead Sea, is the area of En Gedi, where David hid from King Saul in the numerous caves (I Sam 24:1-2),

**Beginning with the last verse of chapter 23 first mentions En Gedi:**

**1 Samuel 23:29-24:2 (NIV)**

*29 And David went up from there and lived in the strongholds of En Gedi.*

*24 After Saul returned from pursuing the Philistines, he was told, "David is in the Desert of En Gedi." 2 So Saul took three thousand able young men from all Israel and set out to look for David and his men near the Crags of the Wild Goats.*

KJV,NASB: Engedi & Rocks of the Wild Goats

CEB: En-gedi

A very rugged and desolate area – in these hills, travel probably only by foot and the goats!

and continuing south, the flat topped 1400 foot Masada rises high above the surrounding desert plains.

The Masada, Hebrew for "fortress", is an interesting place! Israeli soldiers still come up here for training and lessons on dedication, perseverance and to learn to not give up. The Masada symbolizes the determination of the Jewish people to be free in its own land.

This is a 1400 foot high mesa in the Judean Desert, which overlooks the Dead Sea. The remoteness and climate have contributed to the very well preserved condition of the structures on this plateau.

Herod the Great built two palaces for himself on the mountain and fortified Masada between 37 and 31 BC as a place where he could escape to in case of trouble, but it became the final resting place for the Zealot Jews, who had taken the mesa over from a small Roman garrison stationed there.

## Mark 3:16-19 (NIV)

<sup>16</sup>These are the twelve he appointed: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter), <sup>17</sup>James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means "sons of thunder"), <sup>18</sup>Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot <sup>19</sup>and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

Josephus tells us about the Siege of Masada by the Roman soldiers towards the end of the Jewish–Roman War ending in the mass suicide of, reportedly, 960 people – the Sicarii rebels, a more extreme group of the Zealots, and their families hiding there. This took place about 73-74 AD.

Masada is now one of Israel's most popular tourist attractions.

The flat top is about 900 x 1800 feet where there were buildings constructed (rock & bricks) for housing, food supplies, arms, a synagogue, etc, and cisterns that would fill with rain water whenever the infrequent rains would come, & even a large Roman bath house.

During the Roman siege, they built a siege ramp (military with Jewish prisoner laborers) up the back side (western) as a means to get a larger group of Roman soldiers, up to 15,000 soldiers, up to the top. The only access had been some narrow trails which were very well guarded. Overall, it took the Romans about 3 months to get this done.

I'm not sure why the Romans went to all the effort, because the Zealot Jews would have had a limited food and water supply, especially for that size of group, and the Romans could have just waited them out. But I think it was just the challenge of the defiant group, and Roman leaders wanted to confront them face to face – which did not happen anyway! I think there were two women and 3 children who survived.

This plateau was last occupied by a small Byzantine monastery (about the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century). The ancient ruins were later explored by some Americans in the mid 1800's, but major excavations were not done until the 1960's by an Israeli archeologist. So, it is a rather recent tourist site, and became a recognized "World Heritage Site" in 2001.

The east side of the sea is in Jordan, as is all of the land east of the Jordan River, and a mountain range rises from the Eastern shore. Mount Nebo is to the northeast, from which Moses was allowed to view the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 32:49). The area where the Israelites first crossed the Jordan River, near the city of Jericho, is only about 8 miles north of where the Jordan empties into the Dead Sea.

With no outlet, and very little rainfall (about 4 inches per year) here in the Negev Desert, the Dead Sea is just as the song says:

“There is a sea, which day by day, receives a fuller tide, but all its store it keeps, nor gives... It’s Jordan stream, now turned to brine, lies heavy as molten lead. It’s dreadful name doth e’er proclaim, “That sea is waste and dead.”

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Then the third verse asks the question, *“Which shall it be for you and me? Shall we accept God’s gifts for self alone, or will we take to give again?”*

The Dead Sea takes in all the water that has previously flowed through the Sea of Galilee, with its abundance of fish and greenery, and the Jordan River where Jesus was baptized, as well as many others, even today. But, when this same water reaches the Dead Sea, it can no longer support any life whatsoever. All life stops, as nothing can survive in these waters - fish, plants, nor animals!

This is a great change from when Lot chose this area in which to live because the, “whole plain of the Jordan is well watered, like the garden of the Lord”! Imagine the catastrophic event that must have taken place here, but note Moses’ footnote to Lot’s description:

{10} Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, toward Zoar. (This was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) **Gen 13:10**

Just think of the reality of God’s judgment! Sin and disobedience is a very serious matter to God. How often do we want to control our own lives and activities instead of giving the control over to God? Notice Jesus’s words, as recorded by Luke:

{28} "It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. {29} But the day Lot left Sodom, fire

and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. {30} "It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed. {31} On that day no one who is on the roof of his house, with his goods inside, should go down to get them. Likewise, no one in the field should go back for anything. {32} Remember Lot's wife! {33} Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it. **Luke 17:28-33**

The people were unconcerned about judgment when it suddenly came upon them! Do you think that they were any more self-centered than we are? And in verse 32 he specifically noted Lot's wife! Note the emphasis given to helping those in need in Ezek 16:49-52, Acts 20:35, Eph 4:28 and 1 John 3:17, and the comparison to our failure to do this to the condition of the people of Sodom! (Lk 17:28)

**(Ezek 16:49-52)** "Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. {50} They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen. {51} Samaria did not commit half the sins you did. You have done more detestable things than they, and have made your sisters seem righteous by all these things you have done. {52} Bear your disgrace, for you have furnished some justification for your sisters. Because your sins were more vile than theirs, they appear more righteous than you. So then, be ashamed and bear your disgrace, for you have made your sisters appear righteous.

**(ACTS 20:35)** 35 In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

**(Eph 4:28)** He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.

**(1 John 3:16-18)** 16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. 17 If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

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**(Gen 13)** So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, with his wife and everything he had, and Lot went with him. {2} Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold. {3} From the Negev he went from place to place until he came to **Bethel**, to the place between Bethel and Ai where his tent had been earlier {4} and where he had first built an altar. There Abram called on the name of the LORD. {5} Now Lot, who was moving about with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents. {6} But the land could not support them while they stayed together, for their possessions were so great that

they were not able to stay together. {7} And quarreling arose between Abram's herdsmen and the herdsmen of Lot. The Canaanites and Perizzites were also living in the land at that time. {8} So Abram said to Lot, "Let's not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are brothers. {9} Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left." {10} Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, toward Zoar. (This was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) {11} So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east. The two men parted company: {12} Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom. {13} Now the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the LORD. {14} The LORD said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. {15} All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. {16} I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. {17} Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you." {18} So Abram moved his tents and went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he built an altar to the LORD.

**(Gen 14:1-3)** At this time Amraphel king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Kedorlaomer king of Elam and Tidal king of Goiim {2} went to war against Bera king of Sodom, Birsha king of Gomorrah, Shinab king of Admah, Shemeber king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar). {3} All these latter kings joined forces in the Valley of Siddim (the Salt Sea).

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**(Num 27:12-14 NIV)** Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go up this mountain in the Abarim range and see the land I have given the Israelites. {13} After you have seen it, you too will be gathered to your people, as your brother Aaron was, {14} for when the community rebelled at the waters in the Desert of Zin, both of you disobeyed my command to honor me as holy before their eyes." (These were the waters of Meribah Kadesh, in the Desert of Zin.)

**Note on Num 27:12:** "Abarim" was a mountain range northeast of the Dead Sea (33:47). Pisgah (21:20; 23:14) may have been the name of a ridge in that range of which Nebo (Deut. 3:27; 34:1) was the highest peak. Jebel en-Neba, 2700 feet above sea level, and Ras es-Saighah, slightly lower (both possible sites of Mount Nebo), afford superb views of Canaan. Moses' punishment is a reminder that even the greatest Christian leaders are not above the requirement of obedience to God.

**(Deu 32:48-52 NIV)** On that same day the LORD told Moses, {49} "Go up into the Abarim Range to Mount Nebo in Moab, across from Jericho, and view Canaan, the land I am giving the Israelites as their own possession. {50} There on the mountain that you have climbed you will die and be gathered to your people, just as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his people. {51} This is because both of you broke faith with me in the presence of the Israelites at the waters of Meribah Kadesh in the Desert of Zin and because you did not uphold my holiness among the Israelites. {52} Therefore, you will see the land only from a distance; you will not enter the land I am giving to the people of Israel."