Lessons from the Jordan River

"Ye shall pass over Jordan to go in to possess the land which the LORD your God giveth you, and ye shall possess it, and dwell therein. And ye shall observe to do all the statutes and judgments which I set before you this day."
—Deuteronomy 11:31,32

MORE THAN THREE THOU-sand years have passed since the Israelites fulfilled the instructions of our opening text and crossed the Jordan River, entering for the first time the land promised to their forefathers. The Jordan River has played an important role in the history of God's chosen people, Israel, and by searching the Scriptures we are able to see significant meaning to many events concerning it. Although Israel as a nation today does not yet see God's hand in their affairs, or the symbolisms contained in a consideration of the Jordan River, students of the Bible see these things through the enlightening power of God's Holy Spirit. This is particularly true as the time approaches for the establishment on earth of God's kingdom through Christ.

Many of the outstanding events in ancient Israel, that had typical meaning, were associated with the Jordan River. God instructed Israel to go up the east side of the Dead Sea and cross the river Jordan to enter Canaan. It would have been much simpler if they had gone up the west side of the Dead Sea and not have to cross the Jordan at all. However, it was required because our Heavenly Father was giving us a valuable lesson in connection with our consecrated walk in newness of life. We also remember how the Jordan River entered into many of the experiences of Elijah and Elisha, most of which are recorded in II Kings. David likewise had many experiences at the Jordan River which have typical significance, and it is also significant that Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River.

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE JORDAN RIVER

These characteristics become more understandable when we note that the Jordan River runs north and south, and nearly in the middle of Israel's entire length. This illustrates certain features of God's plan of the ages, and it was through Joshua that God divided the land between the tribes of Israel. The river has its beginning on the northern border of Palestine on the sides of Mount Hermon, and one hundred and fifty miles south the river terminates in the Dead Sea, also called the Salt Sea. Between these two points, the Sea of Galilee is an outstanding landmark through which the Jordan flows.

There are also certain physical characteristics of the water itself. As the small river leaves the slopes

of Mt. Hermon, it is sweet and pure and continues to be so as far as the Sea of Galilee. Immediately upon leaving Galilee it begins to pick up marl and salt from along the banks and the river bed, and by the time it reaches the Dead or Salt Sea it is polluted to such an extent that no life exists in it. It is estimated that each year 850,000 tons of salt are added to the salt content of the Dead Sea by the waters of the Jordan River. In addition, we see the rapid descent of the river from high up in the mountains of northern Palestine, along its one-hundred-fifty mile length, as it plunges to a depth of 1,300 feet below sea level at the Dead Sea. This accounts for the name Jordan being given to it, which means 'the descender.'

A PICTURE OF GOD'S PLAN

The head waters of the Jordan River are at Mt. Hermon, representing God's throne, of which the Psalmist David spoke, "As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the LORD commanded the blessing, even life for evermore." (Ps. 133:3) At the time our first parents were created, the pure water of life descended from the throne of God to Adam and Eve, and instructions were given to Adam that he should multiply and fill the earth with a perfect race of human creatures. This was dependent upon the pure water of life as it would flow out and encompass the entire earth.

However, because sin entered in through the disobedience of our first parents, these pure waters became polluted, and that which should have been a blessing for man became a curse upon all. Since

the original fall, as each generation passes, man has degenerated from the original perfection of Adam. The human family is becoming more polluted with sin and error in the depths of human depravity and hopelessness represented by the Dead Sea. The whole human family then may be represented by the Dead Sea—the condition of Adamic death.

The Dead Sea's waters are so polluted, and the salty marshes that surround its shoreline have such a stench, that for centuries there have been no inhabitants around its shores. This, however, has not always been the case. The scriptural evidence is that God placed a special curse upon that area at the time that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. In due time, this special curse will be lifted when Christ's kingdom is established, signifying that once again these areas will be inhabited with a thriving population. Prior to this curse being placed upon the region, the scriptural record states, "Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered every where, before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, even as the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, as thou comest unto Zoar."—Gen. 13:10

WATER OF LIFE

Mankind has not been left hopelessly lost in the Dead Sea of Adamic death. At the due time in God's arrangement, he sent forth his Son, and brought hope to a dead world. Most of Jesus' life and ministry was spent in the vicinity of the Sea of Galilee performing many miracles and doing much preaching there. The Sea of Galilee was sweet and clean

water, abundant in fish and animal life, and is a fitting picture of the hope for life held out to all men through the ministry and sacrificial death of the Lord Jesus. The Jordan River, especially from Galilee to the Dead Sea, represents the human family still on the downward course toward destruction and death. The pure water of life has been polluted with sin and error and has been turned into a curse upon mankind, and no one is able to avoid its consequences.

John the Revelator assures us that the ultimate purpose of God to restore life to his human family will in due time surely be fulfilled. "He shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations."—Rev. 22:1,2

SODOM AND GOMORRAH

In Genesis is recorded the battle of the kings, when many of the kings of surrounding nations came together against the more prosperous kings, including the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah, whose cities were located in the "vale of Siddim, which is the salt sea." (Gen. 14:3) When Abram heard that his brother's son, Lot, had been taken captive during one of these battles, he organized his men and set out in pursuit of his nephew. He finally overtook and defeated those kings, returning the captives and spoil, including Lot, back to their rightful cities in the vale of Siddim. It was

on this return trip that he paid tithes to Melchisedek.—vss. 18-20

Later, in Genesis, is recorded the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah by God. "Then the LORD rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven; And he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground." (Gen. 19:24,25) The entire area of the Jordan valley, as well as the people, were cursed by God, and the valley of the Jordan which had been known as 'the garden of the LORD' was now to become known as the 'valley of salt.'

The immediate effect of God's judgment was in the form of literal fire that rained down upon Sodom and Gomorrah destroying the people and the cities. God intended that there should be a perpetual curse against the region, and this could not be accomplished by fire only, as the cities could have been rebuilt later if fire was the only disaster to the area. God intended that there should be a perpetual desolation of the land, and this was accomplished by polluting the waters of the Jordan and the Dead Sea with great quantities of salt and marl.

THE PROPHET ZEPHANIAH

Josephus—the Jewish historian of the first century A.D.—suggested that there may have been earthquakes accompanying the fiery destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and geologists now are finding many evidences that this may have occurred. This might account for the salt springs that apparently broke out along the lower section of the Jordan. This led to the pouring of their polluted waters

into the river, resulting in millions of tons of polluted, salt-laden, poisonous water flowing daily from the river into the Dead Sea. The prophet of God spoke of this, saying, "Therefore as I live, saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, Surely Moab shall be as Sodom, and the children of Ammon as Gomorrah, even the breeding of nettles, and salt-pits, and a perpetual desolation."—Zeph. 2:9

THE PROPHET JEREMIAH

The Prophet Jeremiah also says, "Thus saith the LORD; Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the LORD. For he shall be like the heath in the desert, and shall not see when good cometh; but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, in a salt land and not inhabited. Blessed is the man that trusteth in the LORD, and whose hope the LORD is."—Jer. 17:5-7

The whole human family is represented in the curse that came upon Sodom and Gomorrah, and truly the earth, being cursed, is not able to sustain or perpetuate life, but blessed are those who trust and hope in the LORD, and in his plan. Let us rejoice in the hope through Christ that is represented by his earthly ministry by the Sea of Galilee. In due time, that curse will be lifted through the administration of Christ's future and glorious kingdom. Then the waters of the Jordan, being purified, will once again represent the pure river of life that will go out and encompass the entire earth. At that time, mankind will be washed in the symbolic waters of Galilee, through the merit of our Lord Jesus, and made free from Adamic death and condemnation.

THE CITY OF ENGEDI

There was a city on the western shore of the Dead Sea called Engedi, contemporary with Sodom and Gomorrah, yet it continued on for many generations before the curse of salt caused its desolation. It is first mentioned in Genesis 14:7 under a different name—Hazezon-tamar. Later, when David was being pursued by Saul, he took refuge in the ruins of Engedi by the Salt Sea. (I Sam. 23:28-29) Since Engedi was not destroyed by fire as was Sodom and Gomorrah, its ruins have been much better preserved. The evidence of excavations there agrees with the scriptural account that, at one time in the distant past, it was a thriving and prosperous city due to the fertility of the soil along the Dead Sea. This is shown in the Song of Solomon, where we read, "My beloved is unto me as a cluster of camphire [cypress, *Marginal Translation*] in the vineyards of Engedi." (Song of Sol. 1:14) This was before the curse of salt began to take effect in the Jordan valley.

The judgments of the LORD upon Sodom and Gomorrah are a vivid reminder and illustration of God's judgments against the human family as a result of the transgression in Eden. This destruction represents Adamic death. However, Jesus indicated that the Sodomites would be granted an opportunity to obtain eternal life in his future kingdom. "I say unto you, that it shall be more tolerable in that day for Sodom, than for that city." (Luke 10:12) The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah has also been used in the Scriptures both as a warning and as a picture of God's judgments upon certain nations and institutions before Christ's future kingdom is set up.

MOSES' WARNING

After Moses smote the rock twice in anger, the Heavenly Father told him that as punishment he would not be allowed to cross over the Jordan River into Canaan. (Num. 20:10-12) Realizing this, and that he would die in the wilderness, Moses wrote this book, which was a mixture of admonitions and instructions concerning the Law, but also a book in which he seemed to pour out his heart and soul to his people Israel. He showed his earnest desire for their faithfulness to God's Law, and his complete selflessness, by the fact that he hardly mentioned his imminent death. His sole concern was for his brethren.

Moses gave a warning to Israel in which he reminded them of the importance of keeping God's Law. He told them of all the blessings they had received at the LORD's hand—the way in which God had smitten their enemies before them, how he provided for their food and drink in the wilderness, and even miraculously preserved their clothes and the shoes that they wore. Then he warned them, saying if they sinned against him, and against the Law, he might do to them as he had done to Sodom and Gomorrah. "That the whole land thereof is brimstone, and salt, and burning, that it is not sown, nor beareth, nor any grass groweth therein, like the overthrow of Sodom, and Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboim, which the LORD overthrew in his anger, and in his wrath."—Deut. 29:23

God used the desolation of Sodom and other cities to signify what would happen to Israel if they forsook the Law. This text is further scriptural evidence that the killing salt content of the lower

Jordan and the Dead Sea was indeed part of the curse which God placed upon Sodom and Gomorrah.

JEREMIAH PROPHESIES CONCERNING THE JORDAN

God used the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah as an example of how he would, in due time, destroy the great mystical city Babylon. This account is found in chapters 50 and 51 of Jeremiah. God speaks of the judgments against literal ancient Babylon, foretelling her overthrow by the Medes and Persians, but also speaks of a greater fulfillment as he foretells the overthrow of symbolic Babylon. Jeremiah's prophetic words read, "As God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah and the neighbour cities thereof, saith the LORD; so shall no man abide there, neither shall any son of man dwell therein." (Jer. 50:40) In the Revelation account, we read, "He cried mightily with a strong voice, saying, Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird." (Rev. 18:2) This indicates that God will, in due time, destroy Babylon with the symbolic fire and brimstone of Armageddon, and sprinkle it with the salt of perpetual desolation never to rise again.

Jeremiah continues to tell how this judgment against Babylon will be carried out. He says, "Behold, he shall come up like a lion from the swelling of Jordan unto the habitation of the strong: but I will make them suddenly run away from her: and who is a chosen man, that I may appoint over her? for who is like me? and who will appoint me the time? and who is that shepherd that will stand

before me?" (Jer. 50:44) The Revelator identifies the one who has been chosen to carry out the Father's will. We read, "One of the elders saith unto me, Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof."—Rev. 5:5

ISAIAH'S HOPEFUL TESTIMONY

Isaiah's prophetic words are encouraging. He says, "In that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious. And it shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord shall set his hand again the second time to recover the remnant of his people, which shall be left, from Assyria, and from Egypt, and from Pathros, and from Cush, and from Elam, and from Shinar, and from Hamath, and from the islands of the sea."—Isa. 11:10,11

Later, he wrote, "The LORD shall utterly destroy the tongue of the Egyptian sea; and with his mighty wind shall he shake his hand over the river, and shall smite it in the seven streams, and make men go over dryshod. And there shall be an highway for the remnant of his people, which shall be left, from Assyria; like as it was to Israel in the day that he came up out of the land of Egypt."—vss. 15,16

The prophet wrote of the time when the offspring of David—the root of Jesse—shall stand before the people in power and glory. At that time, he will roll back the curse represented by the waters of the Jordan, so that the people can pass over into the blessings of the kingdom. The prophet also speaks of the highway that will be prepared for the

people to walk upon. We look forward to that glori-ous time to come when the glory of the Lord will fill the earth, and the hearts and minds of all people.

A PICTURE OF SALVATION

There were four main streams that converged together on the slopes of Mt. Hermon to form the body of the Jordan River. This may signify the salvation of the church, the great company, the Ancient Worthies, and the world of mankind all taken from the human family. Each group will be glorified on their respective planes because they all drank at the brook of that pure living water. They will all have been lifted up by faith from the poisonous waters of the Dead Sea and washed in the pure waters of Galilee. Those who are now striving to be of the church class should especially have before their minds how the Lord has lifted them up from the condemned world and brought them under the cleansing influence of his precious blood.

May we continue to rejoice in the wonderful words of life and keep in mind the importance of giving diligence to make our calling and election sure. We are living at the very threshold of the kingdom and the fulfillment of all things prophesied and promised in God's Holy Word. ■