

On the Hillside by the Lake 1

This study is based on Matthew 4:23–25 and
Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing, chapter 1
—see also *Blessings*, chapter 1.

A morning to remember

As the dawn broke that morning, the disciples began to stir. Looking about, it was clear that Jesus had not slept in His spot on the ground near them. Where was He?

It wasn't unusual for Jesus to be missing when the disciples woke up. He often spent the night in prayer rather than sleeping. In the quiet of the dark hours, He communed with His Father, preparing for the coming day and planning how to fulfill His mission to save humankind.

On this night, Jesus had been praying for His disciples. Knowing that His time on earth was short, He longed to see them prepared to carry on His work and take His gospel of love to the world. But with their limited education and long years of listening to the misguided Pharisees and leaders, they had much to learn.

Jesus approached them in the early morning light and gathered them into a circle. This time, as He spoke words of instruction and encouragement, He placed His hands on each of their heads and blessed them, asking His Father to enlighten their minds with understanding so that they could light the world with love. He dedicated each one to the work of sharing His gospel beginning on that day and lasting through every day for the rest of their lives.

From their secluded spot, Jesus led the group down to the lakeshore, where the waves lapped gently against the sand. Already a large crowd of people had gathered. They came from all the local towns in Galilee, from Jerusalem, where Jesus has recently visited, and from Decapolis, the heathen region on the other side of the lake. People had traveled from the far south and even from the great Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon on the shores of the Mediterranean. There was no room on the shore for such a crowd, so Jesus led them back up the hillside to where there was a mostly level spot where all could sit.

The people hadn't gathered that morning to hear a sermon. Many had come hoping to be healed of their illnesses or injuries. But mostly they had gathered because they hoped that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. They hoped to hear Him proclaim Himself their King and declare them free from the hated Romans.

Even the disciples felt that something exciting was going to happen. Jesus' actions that morning made them think that this might be the day He would announce His plans to become King. Everyone imagined the day when Israel would be the most powerful nation on earth and all would bow before them.

The Pharisees imagined ruling over the Romans and claiming their great riches. The

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peasants and fishermen wanted nothing more than to hear that their days of hard work would soon be over. They pictured living in mansions, wearing the luxurious robes of the Romans instead of their soiled cloaks as their no-longer-hungry children played happily.

There they sat, thousands of people, each with their own dream of what the future would bring. As Jesus opened His mouth to speak, they turned with eager expectation.

But Jesus had something else in mind.

Reflect on the story

“More than fourteen centuries before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the children of Israel gathered in the fair vale of Shechem, and from the mountains on either side the voices of the priests were heard proclaiming the blessings and the curses—‘a blessing, if ye obey the commandments of the Lord your God: . . . and a curse, if ye will not obey.’ Deuteronomy 11:27, 28. And thus the mountain from which the words of benediction were spoken came to be known as the mount of blessing. But it was not upon Gerizim that the words were spoken which have come as a benediction to a sinning and sorrowing world. Israel fell short of the high ideal which had been set before her. Another than Joshua must guide His people to the true rest of faith. No longer is Gerizim known as the mount of the Beatitudes, but that unnamed mountain beside the Lake of Gennesaret, where Jesus spoke the words of blessing to His disciples and the multitude.

“Let us in imagination go back to that scene, and, as we sit with the disciples on the mountainside, enter into the thoughts and feelings that filled their hearts. Understanding what the words of Jesus meant to those who heard them, we may discern in them a new vividness and beauty, and may also gather for ourselves their deeper lessons.

“When the Saviour began His ministry, the popular conception of the Messiah and His work was such as wholly unfitted the people to receive Him. The spirit of true devotion had been lost in tradition and ceremonialism, and the prophecies were interpreted at the dictate of proud, world-loving hearts. The Jews looked for the coming One, not as a Saviour from sin, but as a great prince who should bring all nations under the supremacy of the Lion of the tribe of Judah. In vain had John the Baptist, with the heart-searching power of the ancient prophets, called them to repentance. In vain had he, beside the Jordan, pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world. God was seeking to direct their minds to Isaiah’s prophecy of the suffering Saviour, but they would not hear.

“Had the teachers and leaders in Israel yielded to His transforming grace, Jesus would have made them His ambassadors among men. In Judea first the coming of the kingdom had been proclaimed, and the call to repentance had been given. In the act of driving out the desecrators from the temple at Jerusalem, Jesus had announced Himself as the Messiah—the One who should cleanse the soul from the defilement of sin and make His people a holy temple unto the Lord. But the Jewish leaders would not humble themselves to receive the lowly Teacher from Nazareth. At His second visit to Jerusalem He was arraigned before the Sanhedrin, and fear of the people alone prevented these dignitaries from trying to take His life. Then it was that, leaving Judea, He entered upon His ministry in Galilee.

“His work there had continued some months before the Sermon on the Mount was given. The message He had proclaimed throughout the land, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand’ (Matthew 4:17), had arrested the attention of all classes, and had still further fanned the flame of their ambitious hopes.

The fame of the new Teacher had spread beyond the limits of Palestine, and, notwithstanding the attitude of the hierarchy, the feeling was widespread that this might be the hoped-for Deliverer. Great multitudes thronged the steps of Jesus, and the popular enthusiasm ran high” (*Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, 1–3; see also *Blessings*, 11–13).

Questions to consider

1. How can we learn to see a new vividness and beauty in the words of Jesus? Is it possible for us to misunderstand Jesus as badly as the people of His time did?

2. Could we be in danger of also losing the spirit of true devotion to tradition and ceremonials? What traditions and ceremonies have filled our worship today?

3. What message did Jesus exclaim in Galilee in the months leading up to the Sermon on the Mount? What did the people understand that to mean? What did it really mean?

Reflect on the story

“Now it was time for His closest disciples to join in His work, helping to care for the large crowds who followed Jesus. Some of the disciples had been with Jesus since the beginning of His ministry, and nearly all twelve had traveled and lived with Him like members of a family. But they had also been misled by the teachings of the rabbis so that, like the crowds, they expected Jesus to establish Himself soon as King of Israel. With this expectation, they couldn’t understand what Jesus was doing. Why didn’t He seek the support of the priests and rabbis? Why was He doing nothing to establish His authority as King?

“These disciples had much to learn before Jesus could leave them with the responsibility for His church on earth. But they had responded to Jesus’ love, and He saw that He could train and teach them even though they were slow to see the truth of God’s kingdom. They had been with Him long enough to begin to believe that He was on a divine mission from God. Many of the huge crowds that followed Jesus had seen much of His power. Now it was time to teach them all the principles of His kingdom.

“Alone on a hilltop near the Sea of Galilee, Jesus spent all night in prayer for His chosen disciples. At dawn, He called them together and shared important lessons with them. He prayed with them and laid His hands on their heads and blessed them, dedicating them to the gospel work. Then He led them to the edge of the lake, where even at that early morning hour, a massive crowd was already gathering.

“Besides the usual throngs of people from the towns in Galilee, a great many others had gathered as well—from Judea, Jerusalem, and half-pagan Decapolis; from far to the south and from Tyre and Sidon, the Phoenician cities on the shore of the Mediterranean. ‘They all came to hear Jesus teach and to be healed of their sicknesses’ (Luke 6:18 [NCV]).

There wasn’t enough room on the narrow lakeshore for everyone who wanted to hear Jesus, so He

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led them back to the hillside. At a level spot where there was room for everyone, Jesus sat down on the grass. His disciples and the crowd of people did the same.

“The disciples stayed close to their Master, feeling that something unusual was about to happen. Jesus’ actions earlier that morning made them think that He was going to announce His plans to become King. The people felt the excitement as well, and each person waited eagerly for Jesus’ words. As they sat on the green hillside, they were filled with thoughts of their nation’s future glory and power. Among them were scribes and Pharisees who looked forward to the day when they would rule over the hated Romans and claim the riches of the world’s great empire. The peasants and fishermen hoped to hear that their poor houses and days of hard work, worry, and hunger would soon be replaced with mansions and days of ease. They hoped to trade in the simple garment they wore as a coat by day and used as a blanket by night for the rich robes of the Romans.

“The heart of each person was filled with pride that Israel would soon be honored worldwide as God’s chosen nation and that Jerusalem would be the capitol of the world.”

But Jesus had a different mission and a different message (*Blessings*, 13–15; see also *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, 3–5).

Questions to consider

1. Why was Jesus patient with the disciples even when they didn’t understand His mission? What does that teach us about being patient with fellow church members who seem just as misled?

2. Why did Jesus lead the crowd away from the lake to the hillside? Why had so many people come that day?

3. The Pharisees longed for worldly power and honor. The peasants longed for escape from hunger and hard work. What do you long for most when you turn to Jesus?
