



THE BLESSED LIFE

A 90-DAY DEVOTIONAL
THROUGH THE TEACHINGS
AND MIRACLES OF JESUS

KELLY MINTER

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*To my parents and all the wonderful believers
at Reston Bible Church who taught me the
ways of the Blessed Life by teaching me Jesus.*



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INTRODUCTION

THIS DEVOTIONAL IS FOR ANYONE who wants to take a fresh look at the person of Jesus. To listen anew to what He says and behold once again His healing touch and unspeakable power. Our world has a lot to say about Jesus, but what if we sat down on an ancient Galilean hillside together and listened to Him speak for Himself? What if we then followed Him down the mountain and watched Him reach out to outsiders and outcasts, wanderers and worriers with astounding care and compassion?

I imagine it would change our lives.

I want to warmly welcome you to this ninety-day journey through the teachings and miracles of Jesus. Day by day and verse by verse, we'll stroll through Jesus's Sermon on the Mount and ten of His most notable miracles. We will gain the most practical insights into our relationships, our possessions, our purpose, and the way God intends for us to live most freely and abundantly. I'll do my best to shed light on the cultural context, occasionally highlight the original language, and make logical connections where they're not always obvious. Mostly, I will try to get at the heart of what Jesus is saying and doing so we can find clarity for our paths and healing for our souls. So we can be His actual disciples in a world desperate for earnest Christ-followers.

I also want to note that whether you are a seasoned believer, new to the Christian faith, or simply exploring Jesus, I am expectant this book will meet you where you're at. And if you have ever found Jesus's teachings to be confusing, heavy, or out of touch, my prayer is that a fresh listen and look will be healing and rejuvenating for your soul. Also, if you've known Jesus's commands but have lost sight of His love, I can't

wait to follow Him with you straight to the sick, marginalized, religious and non-religious alike. The matchless power and love He brought to bear upon those He encountered is still at work in our lives today.

I must admit that up until the past several years, the Sermon felt like an unrelated string of nearly impossible teachings I couldn't always make sense of. If I could oversimplify my problem, it was this: I had looked to Jesus as my Savior (His death and resurrection) and to the New Testament epistles for how to live the Christian life. This meant I'd not spent much time studying what Jesus said about being salt and light in our broken world, what it means for our actions and our hearts to align, how to live generously, unhindered by worry and anxiety, which acts of goodness to show and which ones to keep private, how to pray, how to prioritize, how to build a life on solid ground. In other words, how to live *The Blessed Life*. And I certainly had not made the connection between all that Jesus taught and His immediate plunge into a sea of hurting people—like you and me—who desperately needed His healing touch, His compassion, and most of all, His *Godness*.

It was the Gospel writer Matthew who first paired Jesus's famous teaching (Matt. 5–7) with ten handpicked miracles (Matthew 8–9), and it made sense to follow his lead in this devotional. I imagine he did this so we might know that Jesus is not only a fountain of wisdom but also an ocean of love—what He taught He lived, and He wants the same for us.

So if I could distill my hope for you over the next 90 days it is this: that every day you'll learn more about how to live the life Jesus says is *blessed* and be overwhelmed by His immeasurable power and tenderness. My heart is eager for you, new and dear friend. What a well of wisdom and compassion Jesus is for those who will come to Him. What purpose there is for your life, what hope, what joy, what reconciliation and renewal await. If only you will simply follow Him.

PART 1 THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS

Part 1 of this devotional covers Jesus's most extensive collection of teachings found in Matthew chapters 5–7, best known to us as The Sermon on the Mount. I encourage you to prepare your heart for what Jesus has to say to you over the next sixty days. Perhaps keep a journal close by, noting what stands out and what you can implement in your everyday life. Jesus's words were meant to be imparted and lived.

So I invite you to find a comfortable spot on that Galilean hillside where we will simply listen to what Jesus has to say and then seek to obey Him. When we stand back up at the end of His hope-filled message, my prayer is that we'll follow Him down the mountain with more understanding, purpose, and love than we had when we first sat down.

MATTHEW'S PURPOSEFUL PEN

"Now Jesus began to go all over Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people."

Matthew 4:23

"Jesus continued going around to all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness."

Matthew 9:35

IF SOMEONE ASKED YOU TO describe Jesus's ministry on earth in a single sentence, what words would you use to describe it? We begin our ninety-day journey together with a single sentence from the book of Matthew answering this question. I suppose it's actually two sentences, but it's the same one stated twice: Jesus *taught* in the synagogues, *preached* the good news of the kingdom, and *healed* many people in the towns and villages in and around Galilee. Matthew wants us to know lots of things about Jesus's ministry, but he really wants us to know *these* three things. How do we know this? Because verses 4:23 and 9:35 serve as repetitive bookends that each *declare* what Jesus did on either side of Matthew *showing* us what He did (scholars call this literary device an *inclusion*).

This doubly stated sentence is the heartbeat of our devotional. It's the summary of the primary elements of Jesus's mission, but we will

soon find that Matthew never intended for us to settle for a summary. He wants us to immerse ourselves in the details. To sit on the verdant hillside listening to Jesus's wisdom, to be bowled over by the astonishing good news of His kingdom, to follow Him through a sea of hurting people for whom He had come to touch and heal. Matthew wants us to *experience* Jesus.

Are you languishing? Is your hope waning? Perhaps your mind is unsettled, or your body is fighting disease, or you're emotionally spent because of deep loss or ongoing pain. Or you might simply need some direction, a bit of guidance. Or maybe you're just desperate for an encounter with Him.

No matter why you're here, you're in the right place, for we can't linger in the presence of Jesus and not be changed. Not be renewed.

So let us step into first-century Galilee, a region in the northern countryside of Judea. Let's brush up against the Jewish people who were plodding along under Roman occupation, mostly as struggling farmers, fishermen, or subsistence laborers.¹ A population that by modern standards lived in poverty, some of whom were considered outcasts and expendables.² Let's nestle beside them in the grassy field and listen to Jesus because He first announces His kingdom to precisely *this* group.

This, all by itself, is cause for us to lean in.

The Son of God. The incarnate One. The "late in time" Messiah for whom Israel had long been waiting had finally come! It would stand to strategic reason, even basic common sense, that Jesus would leak the breaking news of His kingdom in the Jerusalem courts of the religious elite. Or perhaps He might seek an audience with the wealthy minority or the Roman emperors. His best bet by a mile would be to approach any number of these powerful waterheads of the fastest moving streams where big news travels fast.

But Jesus is no politician. His kingdom is not of this world.

How unconventional for Jesus to deliver His otherworldly ethic—the truths about how we're to live and who we can now be as new people—on the side of a hill to a noninfluential gathering of the downtrodden. When we'd expect Him to go where the power is, He goes to where the need is. Here we discover that the good news of Jesus Christ will not go from the top down but from the bottom up, or perhaps I should say bottom *out*, to the ends of the earth.

What hope-filled days we have ahead, and what a gift Matthew has given us! A curated collection of Jesus's words and deeds; a peek into the struggles of His primary followers; a detailed record of what He deemed most important about how we're to live the precious lives we've been given; a collection of specific people He cleansed, touched, healed, challenged, called, and poured compassion on. In all these ways and more, Matthew has clearly not left us haphazard memories from his morning journal; rather his pen is purposeful and passionate.

What is your need? What are your longings? Carry them into the presence of Jesus and hear what He has to say. He has much to tell and show us over the next ninety days.

And if you feel undeserving, or unspectacular, or ordinary . . .

If you identify as burdened . . .

The anxious.

The bottom dweller.

The non-pious believer . . .

Do not despair. He has come for you.

THE PEOPLE ON THE HILLSIDE

"Then the news about him spread throughout Syria. So they brought to him all those who were afflicted, those suffering from various diseases and intense pains, the demon-possessed, the epileptics, and the paralytics. And he healed them. Large crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan."

Matthew 4:24–25

WHILE A FEW OF JESUS'S earliest disciples appear to be His primary audience, and we will get to them soon, we must not forget the others who populated the hillside that day—those craning their ears over the disciples' shoulders. Today's passage tells us just what type of people generally made up the crowds who followed Jesus. As we touched on yesterday, they were the hurting, those on the fringes of society, the diseased, paralyzed, pain stricken. The demon possessed.

We must get out of our heads images of crisp, gingham picnic blankets spread about with well-kempt middle-class families sitting in linen sundresses and ironed button-ups, snacking on baguettes and cheese while listening to Jesus give a Sunday school lesson. Those to whom Jesus first announced His kingdom were a desperate, mostly impoverished, hard-scrabble lot. We aren't given details about how controlled the setting was on the day Jesus delivered His Sermon, but I imagine it was a somewhat rambunctious scene of restless children, hungry babies fussing, and the sick moaning. Perhaps some were asking questions or dissenting.

When I imagine that day's setting, I think back to one of my first trips to the Amazon jungle with Justice & Mercy International (JMI). We were in a village partnering with an indigenous pastor to assist with a day camp and worship service for kids and families among the *riberinhos* (people of the river). It was a sweltering day where the humidity wrapped itself around me like extended relatives on Christmas, and there wasn't an air-conditioned building within a thousand miles. From our boat we unloaded guitars and a djembe for worship; crayons, construction paper, and glue for crafts; and reams of pasta for lunch.

My vision of an orderly service where information would be transmitted from one party to the other with an end result of people's lives being on-the-spot transformed by Christ was about to be tweaked (read: dashed). What instead transpired was a chaos I wasn't used to in our orderly American church services where squirming babies are slipped into special rooms with rocking chairs and the distracted feign attention. Moms pressed forward for prayer, sporadically calling out for the needs of their families. Kids poked and prodded one another. Toddlers walked up to their mother's breasts and started nursing—standing up. The men swatted away flies with one hand and wiped sweat from their brows with the other. Everyone was eager for the meal we'd prepared to serve after the service. Few seemed to be paying attention to the worship songs I'd taken the time to learn in Portuguese—the nerve.

If the goal was orderly conduct and listeners' absorbing information I deemed important, it was an utterly disastrous worship service. But when I consider that Jesus met physical and emotional needs, in addition to spiritual ones, that day proved a turning point for me. In hindsight, it was a classic case of my having no concept of what it's like to wake up in the morning and spear fish, feed mouths who may or may not be your own offspring, lumber to the closest outlet for clean water, tend your family's diseases with your own bare hands—all while praying to God your husband comes home with a hunted animal that can be carved into stew for dinner. I needed to be reminded that Jesus cares for the whole person.

The physical needs of the *riberinhos* in many ways resemble the ones of Jesus's first-century followers. As they listened to His famous Sermon on that patch of earth, they did so not as those without need but as

those deeply in touch with their need. How remarkable and tender that Jesus didn't only address their spiritual depravation without also being keenly sensitive to address physical and emotional needs too. (Matthew's intentional pairing of His teachings and healings affirms this reality.) And how important is the reminder to you and me that whatever the specific scene looked like on that hillside, we can know for sure the ordinary and the suffering believed Jesus had a place for them.

This is good news for those who have assumed they can only approach God in their Sunday best. It's good news for the ones who have tried everyone and everything else only to be disappointed. And it's good news for those who feel on the outside because if this passage tells us anything, it says, *you belong*.

So before you sit down in the tall grass to listen to Jesus, the Teacher, may you first take in this good news. May you receive the reminder that He is not one to pass over your needs, pain, longings, loneliness. . . . He is not simply about transferring information but transferring a kingdom to you. Yes, He has truths upon which you can build your house, ethics that will shape your decision making, wisdom that will confound your instincts. But you will only revel in Him as Teacher because He has first given Himself to you as Savior.

What needs do you need Him to address today? He invites you to bring them.

WHAT IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN?



*"Now Jesus began to go all over Galilee . . .
preaching the good news of the kingdom."*

Matthew 4:23

AS ANXIOUS AS I AM to get to the Sermon on the Mount, we still have a bit of groundwork to lay. I'd hate for us to jump into scene 1 without a good handle on some key themes. (It would be like touring the White House after having snoozed through American history class; you'd appreciate the décor and savor the honor, but you'd miss the stories hidden in the paintings and architecture.) So we must begin by looking at this idea of the *kingdom of heaven*. It is a central topic of Jesus's teaching and ministry. Matthew uses the phrase fifty-five times in his Gospel alone, and it's one of the first phrases Jesus mentions in His Sermon on the Mount.³ And since the kingdom of heaven is hopelessly intertwined with human flourishing, we really do want to understand it.⁴

Trying to succinctly define the kingdom of heaven is like attempting to define wind or your favorite novel. One of my favorite seminary professors describes it as "the in-breaking of God into history to realize his redemptive purposes," and I find this helpful.⁵ He goes on to explain that Christ's kingdom "is a reign more than a realm, a power rather than a place."⁶ If I can attempt to put it into my own words, I would say it's anything having to do with Christ's being, character, or actions

made manifest in our broken world, primarily through His people, by the power of the Holy Spirit, as a result of Christ's coming to earth. I shall receive no extra points for brevity or precision.

To use the old adage, the kingdom is a concept better caught than taught. This must surely be why Jesus spoke of it in parables when trying to explain its nature. It's like a mustard seed, He said, yeast working its way through dough, a hidden treasure, a merchant seeking a priceless pearl, a fisherman's net!

For all its complexities, it's good to be reminded that one way Jesus described the kingdom is simply that it is *good news*.

In what area of your life do you yearn for the kingdom of heaven to come? Where do you want the in-breaking of His goodness, peace, and "rightness" to touch down in your life? Where are you desperate for His presence? We will have lots of time to further consider what exactly it is. Right now I want you to think about where you want it to come.

Which brings us to another important aspect of the kingdom of heaven—it is *at hand* (Matt. 4:17). It is within our grasp, close enough to touch, accessible enough to enter (Matt. 7:13, 21). We must leave behind our notions of slogging it out on earth in our own strength until we get to some way faraway place called heaven when we die (though resurrection and heaven on earth are surely coming for us one day). We have the power and the goodness and the beauty and the righteousness of God's kingdom available to us *now* because the presence of the King is among us.

What specifically does this look like, you may wonder. We will spend the next eighty-seven days exploring the answer to this question. In the meantime, it looks like having the power to love those who have wronged you, possess joy through adversity, cast off anxiety when there's lots to worry about, commune intimately with God when sin used to be a barrier. It is a brand-new way of living in the power of the Spirit, wholly counter to the empty promises of the world in which we live. In a word, it means to live the life Jesus called *blessed*.

The secret to living in this glorious kingdom, you ask. The arrival of the King.

Dearest Jesus, give us a vision of Your kingdom as we study your wise teachings and compassionate actions. Show us what it means to live the blessed life according to Your Word and how it can change our lives now.

JESUS, THE TEACHER

"When he saw the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to teach them."

Matthew 5:1-2

I HAVE A SPECIAL PLACE in my heart for teachers. They pass on to us knowledge about the world and ourselves that we otherwise wouldn't know. They help us hone skills and master tools that allow us to navigate our lives. They believe in us. Teachers have shown me where to place my fingers on the fret board of a guitar and how to strum in time. In high school, coaches drilled into me the optimal form of shooting a basketball. *Use your wrist. Don't forget to put your legs into your shot. Follow through.* My seminary professors have waltzed me through the maze of church history, Israel's monarchy, the Gospels, and took the lead through tricky books like Ezekiel.

I will never get over that of all the things Jesus could have done for a hurting, dejected, oppressed crowd, He chose to *teach* them. This is not an obvious move when you take into account the makeup of the listeners and their needs (Matt. 4:24). This would have been a fine time for multiplying some loaves and fish. A healing service would have really hit the nail on the head.

But Jesus taught . . .

Of course He tended to physical and emotional needs too, but He determined that at the inauguration of His kingdom on earth, one of the most meaningful treasures He could entrust to His disciples and share with the listening crowds was truth. Wisdom. Knowledge. And not only knowledge about how the world works and how the people in the world

tend to tick, but even more compelling, how life works in His kingdom and how the people of His kingdom are now empowered to live with new and soft hearts filled with His Spirit. His big reveal on that mountainside, then, was not *how you can have entirely different circumstances in five easy steps*, but rather, *how you can be an entirely new person in the face of any circumstance*. We in the kingdom of God can walk through this world differently, namely because Jesus walks with us.

Are you fuzzy as to the purpose of your life? Are you wondering if trials and loneliness mean God has forsaken you? Have years of trying to get even with your ex-boyfriend or ex-boss or ex-best friend left you exhausted and bitter? Has anxiety wound itself around you like a sea nettle because you're not sure how college will get paid for, or if your wayward child will return, or if the disease is back? Do you pursue God to puff up your ego as people applaud your religious deeds, or have you learned the secret of your prayer closet? Have you constructed your life's house on sand that gives way the moment the winds roll onto shore, or on immovable, unshakable rock?

Jesus will address this and so much more in His Sermon on the Mount. And this is not used-car salesman speak. With economy of words and power of speech, Jesus will teach us how to live well as defined by our heavenly Father. He will pull forth from His storehouse treasures old and new (Matt. 13:52) that will thrill and amaze.

But, first, one thing. We must hold loosely what we think we know. As we learn from Jesus, it will help to take the posture of a child learning from his mother how to tie his shoe, or from a father how to bait her hook. We must assume that some of what feels innate to us will, surprisingly enough, work against us as we discover the counterintuitive culture of the kingdom of heaven. And some of what would typically seem like death will actually produce life. What we can know for sure is that if we will learn from Him, and obey accordingly, we will be *blessed*. After all, this is the first word of His beloved teaching.

Lord, prepare my heart for what's ahead. Make me ready for what you have to say and then help me live out your good and life-giving words.

IMAGINE how your life might change if you followed Jesus up that Galilean hillside, hearing His most famous Sermon for yourself as you sat in the tall grass. Imagine how the world might change if you followed Him down the mountain, reaching your arms out as He did to a harvest field desperate for His touch.

With accessible, warm, and down-to-earth writing, you don't have to imagine these things, for beloved author and Bible teacher Kelly Minter brings to life the teachings and healings of Jesus in vivid color. Sharing her own heart along the way, Kelly offers historical elements of Jesus's day and references the original language when illuminating. *The Blessed Life* is for anyone willing to take a thoughtful 90-day journey through the mind, heart, and work of Jesus, so they might know Him more deeply and reflect Him more fully.

GO UP THE MOUNTAIN TO LEARN.
GO DOWN THE MOUNTAIN AND WALK ACCORDINGLY.
YOU'LL NEVER BE THE SAME.



KELLY MINTER is a Bible teacher and author of numerous Bible studies. Along with her love of Scripture, she has great affection for the local church and is privileged to minister to the vulnerable and forgotten with Justice & Mercy International. Currently pursuing an MA in biblical and theological studies at Denver Seminary, Kelly lives in Nashville, and is an adoring aunt, flower and vegetable grower, and unfancy cook.

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