

# THE SEA IS HIS DELIGHT

The rabbis of ancient times said, “The Lord has created seven seas, but the Sea of Galilee is his delight.” Anyone who has seen the beauty of the blue water against the green and brown background of the mountains around the Sea of Galilee would understand that statement. This freshwater lake is the largest in Israel and among the world’s most beautiful. The Bible does not tell us specifically why God chose this place as the location for Jesus’ ministry, but certainly he (and his Son), having created it, appreciated its beauty. Since Jesus spent most of His short time of ministry near or on the Sea of Galilee, we will be able to enhance our understanding of his message and ministry by learning as much as we can about it.

## THE SEA

This sea has many names, but most New Testament readers recognize “the Sea of Galilee” as its most common designation. It is also called the Sea of Kinnereth (Numbers 34:11; Joshua 12:3), the Lake of Gennesaret (Luke 5:1), the Sea of Tiberias (John 6:1, 21:1), and sometimes simply “the lake” (John 6:16). Set in the hills of northern Israel, the sea is nearly 700 feet below sea level. It is nearly eight miles wide at its widest point, and more than 12 miles long from north to south. Its depth is more than 200 feet in some places.

Surprising to many first-time visitors is the fact that from any point on the rocky shore, all other locations along the shoreline are visible. Around the sea, the hills of Galilee reach nearly 1,400 feet above sea level, and the mountains of the Golan Heights (the Decapolis in Jesus’ time) reach more than 2,500 feet above sea level.

Much of the sea’s beauty comes from its being nestled among the hills, which are green in the spring, brown during the dry season, and always in contrast with the deep blue of the sea. The slopes of the Golan Heights on the east and Mount Arbel on the west drop sharply down to the sea.

The sea’s location below the mountains to the east makes it subject to sudden and violent storms as the wind comes over these mountains and drops suddenly onto the sea. This happens especially when an east wind brings cool air over the warmer blanket of air that covers the sea itself. The cold air, which is heavier, drops as the warm air rises. This sudden change can produce surprisingly furious storms in a short time, as it did in Jesus’ day (Matthew 8:24).

There are several hot mineral springs surrounding the lake. The largest of these is in the capital city of Tiberias, where Herod Antipas included it in his hot baths. Ten of Jesus’ 33 recorded miracles—including a majority of his healing miracles—happened near the lake. The number of sick people mentioned in the vicinity of the Sea of Galilee (see Matthew 14:35—36) may be due in part to the hot mineral springs and public baths in the area. When these springs and baths did not provide cures, people sought the Rabbi from Capernaum, who had a reputation of being able to heal.

The Sea of Galilee contains fresh water. It is fed primarily by the Jordan River in the north and several wadis on the east that carry rainfall and melted snow from the Golan Heights.

As it is today, the Sea of Galilee was teeming with fish in Jesus’ time. This made for a prosperous commercial fishing industry in the many small villages and larger towns along its shore. Among these was Bethsaida, which means “house of fishermen.” Jesus’ choice of this location for his ministry, along with his selection of several fishermen as his disciples, made it natural that he would illustrate much of his teaching with fishing imagery (Matthew 4:19).

The climate of Galilee is quite tropical, and the soil is fertile. The most productive area is around the sea. In Jesus' time, wheat, barley, figs, grapes, and olives were produced in large quantities. The fertile fields often gave Jesus opportunities to illustrate His teaching (Matthew 12:1, 13:1—43; John 12:24). Jesus' messages about wealth and earthly treasures were also easily understood by the inhabitants of the prosperous communities around the lake (Matthew 6:19—21, 16:26; Luke 12:16—21).

## THE PEOPLE AROUND THE SEA

Galilee was heavily populated in the first century, especially around the sea. The remains of the area indicate that several villages and towns had populations of more than 5,000 people. Perhaps that is one of the reasons Jesus chose this location. Although the people living around the sea mixed to some degree, they tended to congregate in groups. This fact helps us understand the relationship between Jesus' actions and teachings and the area he was in. The following identifications of groups of people are those of the author and are based on a variety of sources.

### THE NORTHWESTERN SIDE OF THE SEA: LAND OF THE RELIGIOUS JEWS

Certainly not all the people who lived on this fertile side of the sea were religious or even Jewish. But it is clear that most of the inhabitants were very religious—a fact supported by the many synagogues discovered in the towns. It was here that Jesus conducted his ministry. In fact, the Bible indicates that most of his miracles were performed in three towns of this area: Capernaum, Chorazin, and Bethsaida. These three cities are sometimes called the “gospel triangle” because they form a triangle, with the points about three miles apart.

The international trade route sometimes called the Via Maris (the Way of the Sea), ran through this area near the city of Capernaum. Matthew records that Jesus chose that town as his home to fulfill the prophecy that the Messiah would live in Galilee by “the way to the sea” (Matthew 4:12—17). God's people, Israel, had always lived in the land that connected the great empires of the ancient world. The whole world knew of them because the trade routes passed through their country. As the nations of the world passed by, Israel could obey God's command to be his witnesses (Isaiah 43:10—12). Jesus, bringing the next chapter of God's message to the world, made his home a few yards from the great trade route. Galilee was not a backwoods region; it was on the crossroads of the world. Jesus' message was heard by many people from around the world.

#### **Here are the main towns of the area:**

**Capernaum**—Located on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, this major town was home to fishermen, farmers, a Roman garrison, and a customs house (where tax collectors worked). Capernaum had a large synagogue, the remains of which are beneath the ruins of a later synagogue. Many of the New Testament stories about Jesus took place here. Jesus' disciple Matthew, a tax collector, came from this town (Matthew 8:5—17, 9:1—34, 17:24—27, 18; Mark 1:21—34, 2:1—12; Luke 7:1—10; John 6:16—71).

**Korazin**—Korazin was a village located three miles north of Capernaum. Although this was one of the towns where most of Jesus' miracles took place, the Bible records no specific visit of Jesus to this town. It was large and prosperous and had a synagogue. Its economic pursuits included the processing of olives.

**Bethsaida**—Peter, Andrew, and Philip were successful fishermen from Bethsaida (John 1:44, 12:21). This town was located on the northern end of the sea near where the Jordan River enters. Jesus fed the five thousand (Luke 9:10—17) and healed a blind man (Mark 8:22—26) here. The ruins of this village are being uncovered for the first time, revealing a prosperous town constructed of basalt, a black rock common to the area.

**Magdala**--Magdala was a small village on the northwestern shore of the sea. Its name means "tower." As her name suggests, Mary Magdalene came from here (Mark 16:1; Luke 8:2). It stands at a junction of the Way of the Sea, where one branch turns west toward the Jezreel (the route Jesus took to Nazareth) and the other continues south. Apparently, Magdala was also called Tarichaeae (a Greek word meaning "the place where fish are salted"). It was famous for the fish caught locally salted, dried, and sent throughout the Roman world. This town was also a Zealot base during the First Jewish Revolt.

**Gennesaret**--A small plain on the northwestern corner of the Sea of Galilee, Gennesaret was the garden spot of the region. Its rich soil and abundance of water produced grapes, figs, olives, wheat, vegetables, and melons. The rabbis called this area "the Garden of God." Gennesaret may have also been the name of a village near the sea at the foot of the Old Testament city of Kinnereth (Joshua 19:35). A large harbor from this town has recently been found under the water in the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 14:22—35; Mark 6:45—56).

## THE NORTHERN CORNER OF THE SEA: LAND OF GAMLA AND THE ZEALOTS

The Zealots were part of a movement (the term was later applied to a specific group) totally devoted to serving God. They believed it was not possible to both serve the pagan Romans and be faithful to the law of God. They resisted Rome and anyone who sided with the Roman rulers—often with violence. The movement was started by a man named Judah from Gamla who revolted over taxes (Acts 5:37). Although one of Jesus' disciples was a Zealot (Matthew 10:4), there is no specific record that Jesus was ever in this area, although Matthew's Gospel records that he went "through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues" (Matthew 9:35). He probably did visit the synagogue at Gamla, the remains of which attract visitors today.

## THE WESTERN SIDE OF THE SEA: LAND OF TIBERIAS AND THE HERODIANS

Easily visible from Jesus' hometown of Capernaum was Tiberias, the regional capital built by Herod Antipas. It was shunned by religious Jews (we have no record that Jesus ever visited it) because **it** was supposedly built over a cemetery; which made it ritually impure. The city was named after the emperor Tiberius and was built on a hill overlooking the sea. The hot mineral springs in the area were used as a health spa by Herod and the people of the city. Little is known of its inhabitants, who are assumed to be the "Herodians" who opposed Jesus' ministry (Matthew 22:15—22; Mark 3:6, 12:13—17). Apparently, they were an aristocratic group who supported the Herod dynasty and the Romans who kept it in power. The Herodians plotted Jesus' execution, probably because any of the many "messianic" movements of the time threatened those who were used by Rome to keep the peace. It is ironic that Jesus' ministry took place so close to those who bitterly opposed him.

## THE HEIGHTS OF THE EASTERN SIDE OF THE SEA: THE DECAPOLIS

The name *Decapolis* means "10 cities." Though the number of cities changed from time to time, the Decapolis was a group of independent city-states, thoroughly pagan and Hellenistic in makeup. Veterans of Alexander the Great's army founded several of them in the fourth century **B.C.** When Pompey and his Roman legions took control of the area in 63 **B.C.**, he kept the Decapolis independent from the Jewish territory to the west. Several of these city-states are mentioned in the Bible, including Gerasa (Mark 5:1; Luke 8:26), Beth Shean (then called Scythopolis—1 Samuel 31:10), and Gadara (Matthew 8:28). These towns had typically Hellenistic designs, with theaters where lewd plays were performed, temples where sacrifices were offered to pagan gods, and coliseums where nude athletic games and gladiatorial contests took place. Each city controlled the areas surround it, spreading Hellenistic philosophy and religion.

In full view of the religious Jews of Jesus' town of Capernaum, the steep cliffs of the Eastern Shore must

have seemed evil and menacing. The farmers of Galilee could see the sophisticated Gentile world barely eight miles away. Its culture must have been alluring to many of the faithful followers of the Torah. Some scholars believe the “far country” of Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son could refer to the Decapolis. It was barely a day’s walk from Galilee. Certainly, the riotous lifestyle and the pigs were there. The Talmud and one of the church fathers tell us that many people in New Testament times believed that the inhabitants of this area were those whom Joshua had driven from the Promised Land—the seven pagan nations (Joshua 3:10; Acts 13:19)—making this the land of the “expelled ones,” the worshipers of Baal.

In this context, Jesus’ ministry here is remarkable. His disciples probably hesitated when He suggested they row to the Decapolis (“the other side” — Mark 4:35). Once they arrived there, **it** was probably no surprise that they were greeted by a man possessed by a legion of demons—there was a Roman legion stationed nearby (Mark 5:1—20). Uncharacteristically, Jesus, having healed the man, sent him to share the Good News with the people of his town (possibly Susita, which was close by). Apparently, the man’s message was blessed before the next time Jesus visited (Mark 7:31—37).

## THE SEA AND THE ABYSS

The Sea of Galilee is beautiful. Its calm, peaceful setting, though, does not present a complete picture of the people’s perspective in Jesus’ day. Many of the biblical images related to the sea reflect a very different cultural understanding.

The Jews were not seafarers; they were desert nomads. Their father, Abraham, was a shepherd in the Negev. At one point, the Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years before settling in the Promised Land. They rarely controlled the seacoast. Even David spent his childhood caring for sheep in the wilderness pasture around Bethlehem and wandered in the wilderness of Judea for some time before becoming king. The Israelites were not at home on the sea.

The sea in general has a negative connotation throughout the Bible. This may be due in part to the desert background of the Israelites. To them, the sea probably appeared alien and threatening, a reminder of cultural stories depicting the sea as a monstrous beast and as the place Baal went to do battle with Yam, the sea god. Whatever the reasons, the Bible uses sea imagery in a less-than-positive way. For example, in Genesis 1:2, the beginning of the world is described as watery chaos, a primeval sea, from which God brought order. The earth, God’s masterly creation, rested *on* the sea (Psalm 24:1—2), and his great power controlled it (Psalm 104:5—9).

In the Bible, the flooding waters of the sea could become a tool of God’s judgment (Genesis 6, 7; Exodus 14)—either for the whole earth or for those who opposed God’s people. But always the sea remained a dangerous place (Psalm 30:1, 69:1—3). Jonah was thrown into the depths because he turned his back on God (Jonah 2:3—6), but when he remembered God, he was rescued (Jonah 2:6—7). Only God could control the sea and the evil it symbolized (Psalm 65:5—7, 77:19, 89:9, 93:3-4; Exodus 14—15; Isaiah 51:10).

The sea was the home of that terrible dragon, Leviathan, which came to symbolize the pagan nations opposing Israel (Isaiah 27:1, 51:9—10). Daniel’s description of the great beasts of the sea and the terror they spread is based on the image of the sea as the home of evil, the chaos that only God can control (Daniel 7:2—7). The evil nations that oppose God are like the roaring of the sea (Isaiah 17:12). In the New Testament, the sea symbolizes chaos, evil, and evil beings. The depths of the sea are seen as the home of demons—a place called the Abyss, the home of evil spirits, according to Jewish tradition. The demons begged Jesus not to send them into the Abyss (Luke 8:31), but he did anyway: The herd of pigs ran into the sea.

John referred to the Abyss often in his Revelation (9:1,11, 11:7, 17:8). It is clearly the abode of the one who is the epitome of evil—Satan (Revelation 20:1—3). Someday the devil himself will rise from the sea (Revelation 13: 1—11). Jesus’ condemnation of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum compares their fate to that of Sodom and Gomorrah. Capernaum will go down to the “depths.” It is likely that the biblical use of the sea as the home of the chaotic evil that God alone controlled, along with Capernaum’s location at the edge of the Sea of Galilee, meant that the people understood this as a reference to hell itself. To them, Jesus’ miracles on the sea meant more than simply that he had power over the forces of nature.

## JESUS’ AUTHORITY OVER THE SEA

Jesus acted to demonstrate his authority over the sea and its destructive power. He walked on the stormy water (Mark 6:47—50; Matthew 14:22—33; John 6:16—20). He calmed the storms on the sea (Mark 4:35—41; Matthew 8:23—27; Luke 8:22—25). He even empowered His disciple to walk on the water (Matthew 14:28—32). Peter’s cry of “Lord, save me!” as his lack of faith caused him to sink into the deep takes on intense meaning in light of the symbolism of the sea (Matthew 14:30). The reaction of the disciples was profound. They were amazed (Matthew 14:33; Mark 6:51) and terrified (Mark 4:41) at Jesus’ power. They recognized that his power was more than just authority over the elements of nature. Some Old Testament heroes had controlled nature; for example, at Elijah’s word, it did not rain for years (1 Kings 17:1). This is a feat James suggests might be possible for all righteous people (James 5:15—18). But only God can control the Abyss. The stilling of the storm produced not only awe at the power of God within Jesus, but also the realization that he was God. “Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God’” (Matthew 14:33).

## CONCLUSION

The Sea of Galilee is one of the most significant locations in the world. Here God sent His Son to continue the work of salvation with the message that the kingdom of God was at hand. The sea and its fishermen provided images He used to explain His kingdom and His followers’ role in it. And the sea and what it represented gave Him opportunities to demonstrate that He was truly God.

## NOTES

1. The term *Abyss* is a Greek word meaning “depths.” In the Old Testament the Hebrew word is translated “depth” or “deep” (Genesis 1:2, 7:11; Proverbs 8:28, Job 7:12 [where the monster lives]; Psalm 42:7. Clearly, it is (symbolically) the abode of the demonic beings who oppose God. But he can control the deep and its forces.
2. The disciples thought Jesus was a ghost (Mark 6:49), consistent with the view that the sea harbored demonic forces.
3. Jesus calmed the storm and immediately met a demon-possessed man (Mark 4:35—5:2), again consistent with the cultural view that storms were somehow caused by evil powers. He defeated them in the storm, then they confronted him in a dangerous man.