

3 - Blessed Are Those Who Mourn

Mourn: to feel or show sorrow or regret (to lament, weep for, sorrow over, grieve)

Living the Future Now

Notice how formulaic each of the beatitudes are (probably to make them maximally memorable). An attitude or behavior is declared blessed in the present because of some future reward.

Matthew 5:3-11

3 Blessed are the poor in spirit,	for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
4 Blessed are those who mourn,	for they shall be comforted.
5 Blessed are the gentle,	for they shall inherit the earth.
6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,	for they shall be satisfied.
7 Blessed are the merciful,	for they shall receive mercy.
8 Blessed are the pure in heart,	for they shall see God.
9 Blessed are the peacemakers,	for they shall be called sons of God.
10 Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness,	for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
11 Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad,	for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

For now, we are focusing on Matthew 5:4 (those who mourn). The background for this statement comes from Isaiah 61, which Jesus quoted in his inaugural sermon at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21). Isaiah 61 is one of the key driving texts for Jesus' ministry. He interpreted his miracles and acts of healing as signs of the Kingdom. (See also Matthew 11:3-5; cp. Isaiah 35:5-6). In other words, Jesus did not sit around waiting for the Kingdom to arrive, but he constantly found ways to live out the future in the present and bring light into a dark world (Matthew 4:13-17). He didn't just wait for God to comfort those who mourned; he actively and courageously offered them comfort then and there. Here are three examples wherein Jesus comforted those who mourn:

Example 1: Widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-17)

Widowhood in ancient Judea was much different than today. Consider this description:

Nonetheless, the loss of a husband in ancient Israel was normally a social and economic tragedy. In a generally patriarchal culture, the death of a husband usually meant a type of cultural death as well. Although the denotation of widow referred to a woman whose husband had died, because of the social context, the word quickly acquired the connotation of a person living a marginal existence in extreme poverty. The widow reacted with grief to her plight, and probably wore a distinct garb as a sign of her status (Genesis 38:14; Genesis 38:19; 2 Sam 14:2; cf. Judith 8:5-6; 10:3; 16:8). Disillusionment and bitterness could easily result (Ruth 1:20-21). Her crisis was aggravated if she had no able-bodied children to help her work the land of her dead spouse. To provide for her children, to maintain the estate, and to continue payments on debts accrued by her husband imposed severe burdens. Since she was in an extremely vulnerable economic position, she became the prime target of exploitation. The fact that she was classed with the landless stranger and Levite indicates that she was often unable to keep her husband's land.¹

When Jesus and his disciples come across this funeral procession, thick with the sounds of gut-wrenching lament and wailing, he offered the best comfort imaginable.

Example 2: Jairus' Daughter (Mark 5:22-24, 35-43)

Once again Jesus encounters someone who has lost a child—a twelve year old girl. What's different this time, however, is that she was not dead when Jairus set out to find Jesus. Even so, all appeared lost when they received the report that she had died while they were en route. Upon their arrival, acute weeping and sorrow already filled the house. It is hard even to imagine the excruciating pain of losing a child:

In most cases, parents find the grief almost unbearably devastating, and it tends to hold greater risk factors than any other loss. This loss also bears a lifelong process: one does not get 'over' the death but instead must assimilate and live with it. Intervention and comforting support can make all the difference to the survival of a parent in this type of grief but the risk factors are great and may include family breakup or suicide. Feelings of guilt, whether legitimate or not, are pervasive, and the dependent nature of the relationship disposes parents to a variety of problems as they seek to cope with this great loss.²

Once again, Jesus confronts this mourning and obliterates it by raising the child from the sleep of death. By doing this he prefigured the ultimate resurrection, when death will be no more.

¹ Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology. Edited by Walter A. Elwell

² Wikipedia

1 Corinthians 15:54-55

But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"

Example 3: Woman with Alabaster Box (Luke 7:36-50)

It is difficult to say exactly what this woman had done to get the reputation of being a sinner. She may have been a prostitute, an adulteress, the wife of someone with a dishonorable occupation, or someone in serious debt. To help imagine the scene, consider this explanation:

Reclining was the normal position for eating a special meal in the ancient Near East. Each person would lie on his side, facing the table, and with body and feet angling away from the table. Such reclining was common at a festive banquet, while family meals involved sitting. Jeremias argues that the occasion suggests a banquet, perhaps a Sabbath meal, in honor of the teacher Jesus, who may also have been viewed as a prophet. Another point that suggests this possibility is the ease with which the woman entered the meal. At special meals the door was left open, so uninvited guests could enter, sit by the walls, and hear the conversation.³

Between her intense sobbing and the poignant ointment, she was impossible to ignore. Obviously she was full of sorrow, and Jesus pronounced her forgiven of her sin as the remedy, which indicates her grief was over what she had done in the past. Jesus comforted this mourning woman and provided her with a much desired second chance.

4 - Blessed Are Those Who Mourn

Mourning for Others

We all go through several kinds of mourning. Like the woman with the alabaster box, when we become acutely aware of our sin, grief and shame well up in our hearts. When those who are near to us suffer, we sorrow over their situation. When we hear of calamity striking some distant place, we lament and pray for those affected. An enemy can be mourned by a truly great person like David when he tore his clothes, wept, and fasted for Saul when he died (2 Samuel 1:11-27). When we become aware of God's dealings with His people, we can even grieve over how people treat God.

Kinds of Mourning

1	For yourself
2	For others close to you

³ Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Darrell L. Bock

3	For others not close to you
4	For enemies
5	For how the world treats God

We don't often see Jesus crying, apart from a few times. However, these precious incidents help us see that weeping has its place and that Jesus was deeply moved by what happened around him. He was not some Stoic unaffected by external realities.

He wept when Lazarus died (John 11:32-35).

He wept over Jerusalem (Luke 13:34-35; 19:41-44).

He may have wept in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:44).

Do you mourn, or are you too calloused? Do you comfort those who mourn?

Solving the Problem of Evil

Ultimately, the Kingdom is the best balm truly to comfort us when we suffer. This does not mean that Christians don't grieve when they lose someone, but that we don't sorrow in the same way as everyone else:

1 Thessalonians 4:13-14

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.

Although we often do not understand why certain tragedies strike or what God's role is in each situation, we do know that this is not how God initially designed the world to be and that one day He will set it right again. So even if injustice and inequality often prevail today, we have a rock solid hope to comfort us in the toughest of times and are aware that God sees all, knows all, and will one day heal all.

Revelation 21:3-5

And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be *any* death; there will no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." And He said, "Write, for these words are faithful and true."