

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN

(Matthew 5.1-4)

Introduction

One of the things you can't fail to notice when you read the Gospels is that those who tended to hang around Jesus were outcasts. Unreformed alcoholics, unloved prostitutes, unemployable rejects, untouchable lepers, unpopular traitors, unfortunate losers...

And Matthew 5.1-12, what we call the beatitudes, is a list of the kind of downcast and dispirited people the Lord wants to bless. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who are persecuted. Blessed are the meek. And blessed are those who mourn.

Jesus speaks blessing over lives that pain and grief and sorrow and loss have done their best to spoil.

Mourning

Tonight, we are focusing on just one of the eight blessings that Jesus speaks and it's in v4. It's a really strange verse. Jesus says, "Blessed are those who mourn." It's almost to say, "Happy are those who are unhappy."

But remember that Jesus first spoke these words to ordinary people in first century Galilee. For the last *600 years* their people had been almost constantly oppressed and put down.

They were harassed and hounded by the Philistines, then they were attacked and assaulted by the Assyrians, then they were beaten up by the Babylonians, then they were ground down by the Greeks.

And now the jackboot of Imperial Rome was at their throat. Anyone who stepped out of line could be crucified and thousands were. But, into that reality, Jesus brings good news.

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There are futurologists now predicting that some babies born today will live to the age of 130. But it doesn't take a futurologist to work out that people will always die, even if they live to 130 or 150.

They might argue over the birth rate in 100 years' time, but everyone knows that the death rate then will be the same as it is today, and always has been; 100%.

This side of eternity, there will always be death, so there will always be grief.

The word used here is the strongest one there is for 'mourning' in the Greek language. The root of it is the word you would use to describe a glass that's been dropped on a stone floor; it means utterly shattered or smashed to bits.

Jesus is talking about a deep, inward pain that takes hold of you, and crushes you, leaving you shattered and bereft with the gnawing, aching emptiness of loss...

But Jesus says there's a blessing for those who walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

I want this evening to speak this blessing, in Jesus' name, over three different kinds of people. Maybe you will relate to one, two, or all three.

1) Those Who Mourn Life's Sorrows

Firstly, it's a promise for anyone in Christ who is literally afflicted by the pain of grief.

Isaiah saw the ministry of the Messiah as one that would:

"...bind up the broken hearted...
proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,
provide for those who grieve
to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes,
the oil of joy instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair."

Jesus, the anointed one, speaks blessing on the stricken and crushed.

Even Jesus grieved at Lazarus' tomb. As soon as he saw the grave, he welled up and he wept.

"Jesus wept." The shortest verse in the Bible. People say it casually, almost as a swear word today, but it's a precious and holy thing; Jesus enters our deepest, rawest, bitterest human experience and he says, "I know" and he weeps too at the utter ugliness and wretchedness of death.

The Gospel singer Sheila Walsh once talked about a present she received from a friend.

She says: "When I opened the gift, I wasn't quite sure what it was. The small glass bottle was a beautiful cobalt blue, about two inches tall, covered in silver filigree."

A note explained that it was actually a tear bottle from an antique store in Israel. Tear bottles were common around the time of Christ. Mourners would collect their tears as they walked toward the graveyard to bury their loved one, a keepsake to show how much that person was loved.

She says, "I treasure this little bottle because it reminds me of a profound spiritual truth David wrote about in Psalm 56, at one of the lowest points of his life. David had been captured by enemies in Gath, but he found comfort in the fact that God saw everything he was going through and caught every single tear he shed."

Do you ever feel alone? Have you ever thought, 'No one on this earth understands the depth of my suffering?'

David knew that God notices every tear and sigh from his children. Do you question that God loves you that much? Or can you rest in that truth today?

2. Those Who Mourn Over Their Own Sin

Secondly, "blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted" is a promise for those who grieve over their own sin.

This doesn't mean that God wants us to be morbid and melancholy; miserable sinners, and the more miserable the better. No! "The joy of the Lord is your strength" the Bible says.

But you can never fully appreciate how wonderful God's love is until you have understood how desperate you are for God's mercy over your life.

The night I became a Christian in July 1979, I'll never forget it, I just cried and cried.

I had had no peace with God, I had been a restless wanderer always looking for more, for reality. I was sick of my superficial life with no depth, no integrity. Layer upon layer of vanity and of my fake, wasted life, the sheer mess I had made of things, just came pouring out. But, in minutes, those tears became tears of joy.

In 2 Corinthians 7, Paul talks about this. He says to the Christians in Corinth, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death."

If you are grieving over the emptiness of life, come back to Christ, the way, the truth and the life tonight. Give your heart to Christ! Why would you not?

3. Those Who Mourn over Society

Thirdly, "blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted" is a promise for those who weep over the tragic injustices of society.

The godly Victorian Bishop of Liverpool J.C. Ryle once said, "Others may think it enough to mourn over dead bodies. For my part, I think there is far more cause to mourn over dead souls."

According to the United Nations, an estimated 40 million people are victims of modern slavery; a quarter of them children.

Worldwide, \$2.4 trillion are spent annually on an industry that creates or manages violence (the arms industry), while a tiny proportion of that - \$175 billion - would eradicate world hunger with one investment.

In Psalm 119 the writer says, "Lord, I weep rivers of tears because your law is not kept."

Jeremiah, the longest book in the Bible by word count, is a book drenched with tears. He is called the weeping prophet.

"Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears, I would weep day and night" he says, and he goes on to list all that's broken in the country he loves.

Jesus wept over Jerusalem and its stubborn unbelief. It was grievous to him. He saw they were going to reject him, their Messiah, and so forego the only opportunity they'd get to be made right with God.

The Chaplain General to the UK prison service said that when he first went into the prisons, he thought he would take Jesus in with him. He thought they'd be so dark, so hopeless, so Godforsaken that when he came in as a Christian, people would see the difference.

But do you know what he said? He said, "I realized, after about a week, that Jesus was *already there!*" Already present with the lowest of the low. God is doing amazing things in our prisons, did you know that?

When we grieve and look to Jesus, he sends his Spirit to enfold us in love. Prayers do effect change. Jesus is coming back. And when he does, the Bible says, "God will wipe away every tear from our eyes."

Ending

A testimony to end.

A man named Earl had far too much money. He did not need to work. He took all kinds of drugs, including heroin. At the age of thirty he ended up in hospital, utterly broken and messed up.

Someone came to visit him in hospital and gave him a New Testament. He was thrilled. The paper was very thin and was ideal for rolling joints. He rolled and smoked his way through Matthew, Mark and Luke.

When he came to John's Gospel, he started reading. As a result of reading the words of John's Gospel, he encountered Jesus and was filled with joy.

The psychologist in charge of his case was a very attractive young woman, who had been a model. One day she said to Earl, 'Look, I have it all –

success, beauty and endless qualifications – yet I am not fulfilled. Your life is a mess yet you seem to have something – a new peace and an overflowing joy. What is it?’

Then he led her to faith in Jesus Christ. Later they were married. Two lives; a down and out and an up and out were radically changed by the word of God.

Because our God brings life out of death. “Blessed are those who mourn. They shall be comforted.”

Let’s pray...