

## **The Beatitudes, Part Three: Mourning**

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Have you ever been acquainted with anybody who truly desires to mourn? No doubt we have all known people who were deeply depressed with the way things were going in their lives. Perhaps we have all been that way ourselves at some point. When we are dejected and despondent, we make efforts, sometimes very strenuous ones, to get rid of the heavy spirit that is depressing our sense of well-being. So great is the human desire to seek "happiness" that it seems as if the whole world has bent every effort to find as many entertaining diversions as can exist to distract the mind from the tensions of living in this fast-paced culture.

In the Bible mourning is a poignant image used to evoke the deep anguish that we experience when God judges or appears to be angry, distant or silent. It is a quality that is hateful and irksome to our spirit; we are not naturally motivated to seek it. Since it is perfectly normal for human nature to seek the cheerful and joyous, we shrink from suffering and sadness.

Thus, it seems paradoxical that Jesus calls those who mourn "blessed"! One commentator wryly suggests that it is as if Jesus is saying, "Happy are the unhappy!" This strikingly highlights how different God's perception of human well-being is from mankind's. One might ask, "If the Christian is blessed, why does he mourn?" Or, "If he mourns, how can he be considered blessed?"

This beatitude is almost completely contrary to the world's logic. Indeed, at first glance it also seems to be contrary to another of Jesus' statements in John 10:10: "The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly." To people in all places and ages, men deem as blessed the prosperous and happy, but Christ pronounces the poor in spirit and sorrowful as blessed.

Undoubtedly, a biblical key, perhaps several, disclose this incongruity. Does God confer some benefit upon the character of those who mourn? Is there something about the mindset of the sorrowful that helps them to view both self and life itself from a more stable and realistic basis? Could Jesus be speaking of a certain kind of mourning different from the mourning associated with death, catastrophes, frustration of dashed hopes and other tragic events?

### **An Oriental Custom**

Grief over the death of a loved one or the suffering of some other personal tragedy by Middle Easterners as a highly visible, public, and even professional custom, is a well-attested practice in the Bible. We will not show the procedures here in any detail except to note that the Bible records some of the significant features. Jacob donned sackcloth following the "death" of Joseph (Genesis 37:34). In II Samuel 13:19, Tamar publicly lamented the loss of her virginity through rape by putting ashes on her head, tearing her clothing and crying. Deuteronomy 21:10-14 even directs the Israelites to allow a maiden taken in warfare to shave her head, pare her nails, remove her native clothing, and bewail being wrenched from her father and mother for a month. Other signs of mourning include:

» Covering the lower part of the face (Leviticus 13:45).

- » Cutting the flesh and to some extent fasting (Jeremiah 16:6-7).
- » Beating the thighs (Jeremiah 31:19; Ezekiel 21:12).
- » Beating the breast (Luke 23:48).

The Bible records many more instances of the established cultural customs of those times.

This does not mean God endorses all of these customs, but He duly records what the people did. He makes vivid use of their practices for our instruction, especially in the prophecies. His non-endorsement of many of these practices is verified by an admonition Jesus gives elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount.

Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. (Matthew 6:16-18)

This does not directly address the practice of visible, public expressions of grief, but the principle drawn from them nonetheless shows a balance God expects. Enough is in His law to reveal that He is not against mourning a personal tragedy. But public display and the studied approach of the Oriental cultures—that focuses attention on the self—does not have His approval. We can conclude that the mourning Jesus calls a blessing in Matthew 5:4 is most assuredly not the highly visible and dramatic kind seen in the above scriptures, but is a private, spiritual quality inseparably linked to the other beatitudes.

### **A Special Kind of Mourning**

Evidently, a specific type of mourning is the kind that receives the comfort of God. Millions, perhaps billions, of mourners in the world do not come within the scope of Jesus' statement. These mourners may even be under God's condemnation and far from receiving any of His comfort.

The Bible shows three kinds of sorrow. The first is the natural grief that arises from tragic circumstances. The second is a sinful, inordinate, hopeless sorrow that can even refuse to be comforted. Perhaps the outstanding biblical example of this is Judas, whose remorse led him to commit a further sin, self-murder. Paul, in II Corinthians 7:10, calls this "the sorrow of the world [which] produces death." The third sorrow is godly sorrow. In the same verse, Paul writes, "For godly sorrow produces repentance to salvation, not to be regretted. . . ."

Mourning, grief or sorrow is not a good thing in itself. What motivates it, combined with what it produces, is what matters. Thus, II Corinthians 7:10 states a vital key: The mourning that Jesus teaches is a major spiritual component of godly repentance that leads to or helps to produce the abundant life of John 10:10.

This principle arises often in secular life because humans seem bound and determined to learn by painful experience. For example, only when our health is either breaking or broken down, and we are

suffering the painful effects of ignorantly or willfully ignoring health laws, do we make serious efforts to discover causes that lead to recovery of health and relief from the pains of disease. At that point we truly want to bring the comfort of good health back into our life.

Solomon addresses this truism in Ecclesiastes 7:2-4:

It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for that is the end of all men; and the living will take it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by a sad countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

Solomon is in no way saying that feasting and laughter are to be avoided, but rather he is comparing their relative value to life. Feasting does not contain an inherent power to motivate positive change in the way one is living. Instead, it motivates one to remain as he is, feeling a sense of temporary well-being. Contrariwise, sorrow—especially when pain or death is part of the picture (Psalm 90:12)—has an intrinsic power to draw a person to consider the direction of his path and institute changes that will enhance his life.

This general principle applies to virtually all life's difficulties. Whether health problems or financial difficulties, family troubles or business hassles, in falling into them and being delivered from them, we generally follow this pattern. However, spiritually, in our relationship with God, some variations from this general principle arise because God is deeply involved in leading and guiding our creation into His image.

In this case not everything is happening "naturally." He intervenes in the natural processes of our life and calls us, revealing Himself and His will to us. His goodness leads us to repentance. By His Spirit we are regenerated, taught, guided and enabled. He creates circumstances in our life by which we are moved to grow and become like Him in character and perspective, but some of these circumstances cause a great deal of sorrow. By His grace He supplies our every need so that we are well equipped to meet His demands on our life and glorify Him.

But Jesus' teaching never detaches this principle of sorrow or mourning from God's purpose because the right kind of mourning properly directed has the power to motivate wonderfully positive results. God definitely wants results, fruit produced through our relationship with Him. As Jesus says, "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples" (John 15:8).

Concerning Matthew 5:4, William Barclay writes in his commentary, *The Gospel of Matthew*:

It is first of all to be noted about this beatitude that the Greek word for *to mourn*, used here, is the strongest word for mourning in the Greek language. . . . It is defined as the kind of grief which takes such a hold on a man that it cannot be hid. It is not only the sorrow which brings an ache to the heart; it is the sorrow which brings the unrestrainable tears to the eyes. (p. 93)

This illustrates mourning's emotional power, indicating it has enough power to produce the resolve to accomplish more than merely feeling badly and crying.

### **At the Beginning of Conversion**

Mourning always precedes genuine conversion, for there must be a real sense of sin before the remedy, or deliverance from it, will even begin to be desired. But even here we must note a distinction because many people will quickly acknowledge they are sinners—some even with a measure of pride, a smile and a wink—who have never mourned over the fact. Sin, though, is serious business indeed when we consider that it is ultimately responsible for all the pain, disease and death, including our own and our Savior's.

How do we measure against those whom the Bible uses as standards of mourning? Consider the woman of Luke 7:36-38:

Then one of the Pharisees asked Him to eat with him. And He went to the Pharisee's house, and sat down to eat. And behold, a woman in the city who was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at the table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of fragrant oil, and stood at His feet behind Him weeping; and she began to wash His feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head; and she kissed His feet and anointed them with the fragrant oil.

This episode demonstrates a contrast between two attitudes of mind and heart. Simon, conscious of no need, had neither love toward Christ nor a desire for forgiveness. His impression of himself was that he was a good man in the sight of God and men. The woman, on the other hand, seems aware of nothing except her sinfulness and her great need of forgiveness. This resulted in mournful weeping over her destitution and love for the One who could fill her need.

Perhaps nothing shuts us off from God more firmly than human self-sufficiency (Revelation 3:17). It is a strange phenomenon that the more clearly we see our sins the better person we are. Perhaps the most damaging of all sins is to be conscious of no sin. The supreme lesson in this vignette is that the woman's attitude not only resulted in forgiveness but also played a major role in producing gratitude and loving devotion for Christ in her.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son unveils a clear progression from awareness of pain arising from want and recognition of sin then on to sorrow for what he had become and done. Repentance, forgiveness and acceptance were the fruit.

But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself, he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.'" (Luke 15:14-19)

In another example, the publican stood far off, beat himself upon his breast and cried out, "God be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 18:13). Also, the 3,000 converted on the Day of Pentecost exhibited a similar reaction: "Now when they heard [Peter's sermon], they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?'" (Acts 2:37).

The publican and the multitude who repented at Peter's preaching felt the plague of sin, each in his own heart. This mourning springs from a conscience made tender and a heartfelt awareness of

hostility toward God's will and personal rebellion against Him. It is grief expressed because one has become acutely aware that the morality he holds falls so far short of holiness that shame rises to the surface. One also feels this agony when he realizes that his personal behavior and attitudes have caused the death of his Creator and Savior.

Zechariah 12:10-14 prophesies of a time yet future, after Christ's return, when a great mourning will occur throughout Israel. Judah is especially stricken when by God's grace they are led by faith to recognize their sins:

And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they pierced; they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn. In that day there shall be a great mourning in Jerusalem, like the mourning at Hadad Rimmon in the plain of Megiddo. And the land shall mourn, every family by itself: the family of the house of David by itself, and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Nathan by itself, and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Levi by itself, and their wives by themselves; the family of Shimei by itself, and their wives by themselves; all the families that remain, every family by itself, and their wives by themselves.

This prophecy affords us insight into the painfully heartfelt repentance of an entire nation across every social strata. This ought to give us a clear picture of the depth of feeling God expects when we recognize what our sins have produced. It is very evident that mourning accompanies and motivates the kind of change that God approves. It is no wonder, then, that Jesus says that mourners are blessed.

### **Mourning After Initial Conversion**

When Jesus gives this beatitude, He does not say, "Blessed are those that *have* mourned" but "Blessed are those who mourn." He states it as a present and continuous experience. Repentance is not a one-time experience, nor does human nature, "the old man," simply disappear after we receive the new nature. Christianity involves a continuous learning and growing process. We are not instantly created in the image of God by fiat. God has decreed that we must live by faith, and that requires time and experience. We are created in the image of God through the fires of life's sorrows and adversities, as well as its joys. Even of our Savior, Isaiah writes, "He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3). Paul adds,

Who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. (Hebrews 5:7-8)

The Christian is one whose mind is attuned to God's through an ever-deepening relationship. He has much to mourn over because the sins he commits—both of omission and commission—are a daily sense of grief and will remain so as long as his conscience stays tender. A tender conscience becomes hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. An active and growing relationship with God will lead to an enhanced discovery of human nature's depravity because God will faithfully reveal the massive gulf between His holiness and our corrupt and ever-polluting heart. He will make us conscious of the distance and coldness of our love, the surges of pride and doubt, and the lack of fruit we produce.

The apostle Paul, whom all would consider a most mature Christian, writes,

For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. . . . For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do that I practice. . . . O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:15, 18-19, 24)

Paul was not living a life of sin as he had before conversion. His words reflect the keen perception into the deceitfulness of human nature of a man so close to God he could see virtually every self-centered, evil, twisted and perverted nuance of carnality that still lurked in him. He abhorred it, groaning and yearning for complete deliverance from it!

He says of us in Romans 8:23,

And not only they, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.

In a related verse, Paul also includes us in his thought, "For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven" (II Corinthians 5:2). These verses not only reflect the joy of what lies before us but also the sorrow of living each day with the burden of the world, our flesh and our mind that so easily lead us into sins we have no desire to commit.

In our godly sorrow, we never want to fall short of God's glory or to bring shame upon His name. We want to honor Him by our every thought, word and deed. When we turn aside in some way—no matter how small it may seem to others—we bear an internal burden of sorrow that we wish we did not have, kicking and asking ourselves why we did such a stupid thing! It is an emotional price we must pay because we love Him.

The same apostle reminds us of our indebtedness to Him:

Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been made near by the blood of Christ. (Ephesians 2:11-13)

Earlier, Paul had laid the groundwork for a proper sense of obligation and commitment to Christ by stating a few undeniable facts: That we conducted our lives according to the course of this world, according to Satan's will (verse 2); that we fulfilled the desires of the flesh and the mind (verse 3); and because of disobedience we were as good as dead (verses 1, 5). Through no merit of our own but by God's grace alone, He through Jesus Christ rescues us from this.

In those who understand this deeply and personally, this creates an exquisite sense of indebtedness, devotion and longing to honor Him. It accounts for the sorrow we feel each time we are aware of falling short of fully pleasing Him. This is not bad; it is good because it motivates those who have this in balance to intensify their devotion and redirect their efforts along the right path.

## Yet Another Reason for Mourning

The more closely a Christian lives to God, the more he will mourn over *all* that dishonors Him. Notice the psalmist's reaction: "Indignation has taken hold of me because of the wicked, who forsake Your law" (Psalm 119:53). Ezra felt similarly during an incident in his time:

"For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, so that the holy seed is intermingled with the people of those lands. Indeed, the hand of the leaders and rulers has been foremost in this trespass." So when I heard this thing, I tore my garment and my robe, and plucked out some of the hair of my head and beard, and sat down astonished. Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel assembled to me, because of the transgression of those who had been carried away captive, and I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice. At the evening sacrifice I arose from my fasting, and having torn my garment and my robe, I fell on my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my God, and said: "O my God: I am too ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You, my God; for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has grown up to the heavens." (Ezra 9:2-6).

Jeremiah adds his deep lament over the results of Judah's sins, "But if you will not hear it, my soul will weep in secret for your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly and run down with tears, because the Lord's flock has been taken captive" (Jeremiah 13:17). Ezekiel discloses a special blessing from God for those who see the sinfulness of that nation and are moved by it in the right way:

Now the glory of the God of Israel had gone up from the cherub, where it had been, to the threshold of the temple. And He called to the man clothed with linen, who had the writer's inkhorn at his side; and the LORD said to him, "Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and cry over all the abominations that are done within it." To the others He said in my hearing, "Go after him through the city and kill; do not let your eye spare, nor have any pity. Utterly slay old and young men, maidens and little children and women; but do not come near anyone on whom is the mark; and begin at My sanctuary." So they began with the elders who were before the temple. (Ezekiel 9:3-6)

When we consider that the Bible is the expression of God's mind, we then understand that what these men wrote evinces God's indignation and distress over men's sins. He vividly declares His anguish in Ezekiel 33:9-11:

Nevertheless if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul. Therefore you, O son of man, say to the house of Israel: "Thus you say, 'If our transgressions and our sins lie upon us, and we pine away in them, how can we then live?' Say to them, 'As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?'"

Have you ever observed someone doing something with great difficulty and suggested a much easier, less painful way of accomplishing it, only to have your advice rejected? How did you feel? At best, you felt a lingering, sad rejection, and at worst, an angry frustration at the other's hard-headed insistence. These feelings, perhaps, catch the essence of the mourning God respects in those who,

with a sincere desire to help and an intense empathy for the sufferings of the uncalled, pray sorrowfully to Him as He moves to punish.

### **We Face an Uphill Battle**

Those of us in this end-time age may have difficulty comprehending some aspects of the mourning God expects and respects in His children. Our conscience, unless we carefully guard it, can easily adapt itself into accepting its cultural environment. Society's ethics and morals are not constants. There exists a very real pressure for them to decline from God-established standards; what one generation considers immoral or unethical might not be by the next. For instance, what appears on public movie screens over the past thirty to forty years has changed dramatically.

As I write, the President of the United States is on trial for clearly breaking God's commandments and for crimes for which lesser people are presently serving time. The public, however, gives him high approval ratings, perceive his adulteries and sexual perversions as private affairs, and consider his perjury before a grand jury as deplorable but "no big deal."

Paul warns us in Hebrews 3:12-15:

Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, while it is said: "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion."

The mourning Jesus desires is the kind that exhibits a softness of heart that is ready for change in a righteous direction, one that knows it has done wrong and is eagerly willing to have it cleansed into holiness. We of this generation face an uphill battle because, through such media as television and movies, we have vicariously experienced the breaking of God's law in unparalleled frequency and in vividly sympathetic ways. On the screen life is cheap, property is meaningless, sexual purity is scoffed at, stealing is fine "if it's necessary," and faithfulness is nerdish and corny. Where is God in it? How much of this world's attitudes have we unwittingly absorbed into our character? Is our conscience still tender? Is mourning over sin—ours and others'—a vital part of our relationship with God?

Godly mourning plays a positive role in producing the changes God desires to produce His image in us. We need to pray with David, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10). He asks God to give him what did not exist before, that his affections and feelings might be made right, and that he might not have the callused attitude that led him to adultery and murder. A plea of this kind is one that God will not deny. If we are truly serious about overcoming and glorifying God, it is well worth the effort.