

Pastor Don Nelson

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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“GOOD GRIEF”
Matthew 5:4

☑ {?} To mourn is to “**stand outside in a frigid winter night – all the body heat seeping out of your skin.**”

☑ {M. Bardsley} To mourn is to “**journey**” barefooted “**through a forest of razorblades**” without “**anesthesia.**”

☑ {Lauren Oliver} To mourn is to “[sink],” to “[be] **buried**” alive, to thrash about “**in water the... color of kicked-up dirt,**” “**Every breath...full of choking.**”

In anguished eloquence our poets depict heartache as a blinding fog, a crushing weight, a violent seizure, an overwhelming flood, a consuming fire. They evoke the pain, confusion, and vulnerability that accompany deep sadness. Is it any wonder we try to escape it?

We try to *deny* grief, pretending that everything is fine, ignoring the distress of others, and even refusing to discuss painful topics.

We try to *avoid* grief altogether, striving for uninterrupted health and happiness, bypassing potential threats, and even closing our hearts to love.

When grief does strike we try to *distract* ourselves, scurrying from one event to the next, filling every waking minute with entertainment or hobbies or exercise.

And we try to *numb* ourselves. We use food, drink, medication, alcohol, immoral sex and illicit drugs to quiet our senses and cloud our minds.

Some of these strategies are always wrong. Any one of them can backfire and inflict damage when misused. Many of them can be beneficial *if* exercised in a constructive manner to an appropriate degree.

☑ {J.K. Rowling} Case in point: devouring a quart of ice cream in one sitting is not a nutritionally sound choice. But in the worst moments, when “**you feel as though you will bleed to death with the pain,**” it might be the best alternative open to you.

We fear grief, for the most part. From this many infer that God the Father should – and probably will – protect his people from intense sorrow.

☐ And then we come to Matthew 5:4 where his Son declares, “**Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.**”

On the *natural* level this makes some sense. We know that opening up to one’s grief promotes healing. On the other hand, we have seen that persisting in denial, avoidance, distraction or numbing can result in harmful side effects.

☑ {Katie McGarry} Having said this, the Messiah is not Dr. Phil, and the Beatitudes are not a self-help manifesto. Besides, this is not a universal psychological law. Nearly everyone adapts to grief; but not everyone is comforted in a meaningful way. A fictional character speaks for many real mourners when he says, “**Your soul [weeps] and no matter what you [do], there [is] no way to comfort it. A section [withers] and [becomes] a scar... For people like [us], our souls [contain] more scar tissue than life.**”

▣ **“Blessed are those who mourn.”**

{McKnight} We tend to think of the word **“blessed”** as a synonym for “happy.” Research shows that most people visualize happiness as a subjective **“good feeling about oneself, one’s life, and one’s situation.”**

That is OK. What isn’t OK is imposing our meaning on Scripture so that we hear: **“[Happy] are the poor in spirit... [Happy] are those who mourn,”** and so forth. Jesus means something different

✎ {McKnight} His kind of blessedness **“is not about feeling good,”** it is **“about *being* good.”** It has nothing to do with health, wealth, and social success, and everything to do with loving God, self, and neighbor.

{Lk 18:19} **“It is about being good”?** **“No one”** including me **“is good – except God alone”!**

{Is 64:6} **“It has everything to do with loving God, self, and neighbor”?** **“All [of] *our* righteous acts are like filthy rags”!** That’s me at my best.

Suddenly the Beatitudes sound like burdens. And they would be, *if* this depended on us and our strength. Thank God, it doesn’t!

✎ Being blessed is seeing the Savior as he is, sharing in his life, and participating in his mission by his grace and power. We don’t make ourselves good, *Christ in us does*. We don’t enable ourselves to love, *Christ in us does*. We don’t open our own eyes, initiate divine fellowship, and choose the mission, *Christ in us does*. Understanding this equips us to properly interpret the whole Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes in general and this one today.

★ **“Blessed are those mourn”** is an invitation to see Jesus as he is, share in his life, and participate in his mission *even in regard to mourning*.

Consider what we know about Jesus and mourning.

{Jn 11:33-35} After Lazarus died Jesus visited his sisters Mary and Martha. Mary fell at his feet, and

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. “Where have you laid him?” he asked.

“Come and see, Lord,” they replied.

Jesus wept.

The Savior mourned his friend’s death and the bitter distress it caused the man’s sisters and other friends.

{Lk 19:41-44} On Palm Sunday he wept over Jerusalem

and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come ...when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.”

The Savior mourned the violent cataclysm which would come in 70 A.D., and the spiritual darkness which blinded his people to God's way of peace.

{Mt 23:37} The next day he lamented, **“Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.”** The Savior mourned the immorality, injustice and idolatry that deafened his people to God's truth and hardened them against his love.

{Mt 26:38} Before his arrest Jesus confided in Peter, James and John: **“My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.”** The Savior mourned his impending bodily torment, the torture of betrayal, denial, hatred, and humiliation – and our defilement and sin for which he went to the cross.

There are other examples.

Two things stand out.

① The Messiah mourned as an act of love.

Jesus grieved when his surrogate father Joseph died. That is *στοργή* [storgē], familial love.

Jesus wept when his friend died. That is *φιλία* [filia], the warm affection of friendship.

And Jesus lamented his enemies' destruction. Knowing they would get what they deserved gave him no pleasure; he *mourned* it. That is *ἀγάπη* [agapē], selfless goodwill.

② The Messiah mourned suffering and death and, with equal force, the sin that caused it.

{Mt 27:46} I am confident the Lord never regretted his decision to die for our sake, not even when he mournfully cried, **“My God... why have you forsaken me?”** He most certainly bewailed our iniquity!

As he wept over Jerusalem, it was as much for their sin as it was for the city's looming annihilation.

{Is 53:3} As the embodiment of *αγάπη* Messiah was **“a man of sorrows, [acquainted] with [grief].”**

If we see Jesus, share his life, and participate in his mission we will mourn as he has mourned. That is good grief!

▣ But that is not the end of it! **“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”**

When Jesus preaches at Nazareth, he uses Isaiah 61:1-2 as his text. He does not quote verse 3, but everyone in the congregation knows what comes next:

**“The Spirit of the Lord...has sent me...
to comfort all who mourn,
and 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.**

Each promise of abundant life in the kingdom of God it is an act of consolation. So is each event of healing, exorcism, and restoration of the dead. As is

each kind word to an outcast, each shared meal with a tax collector, each touch of a leper, each pardon of a repentant sinner.

{Jn 14:16} The ultimate act of consolation is when he conquers the grave, ministers to his hopeless disciples, and (fifty days later) sends the Holy Spirit (whom he names “**advocate**” or “**comforter**”).

At present our comfort is partial and temporary. Those who are healed, get sick again. Those who are forgiven, sin again. This is in keeping with what Jesus said: “**they will be comforted**” is in the future tense.

{1 Th 4:13} But what a glorious future it will be! “**Look! God’s dwelling place [will be] among the people, and he will dwell with [us]. [We] will be his people, and God himself will be with [us] and be [our] God. He will wipe every tear from [our] eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain**” (Rev 21:3-4). Yes, we do still “**grieve**” – but not “**like the rest, who have no hope**”! Although our comfort is not yet complete and eternal, still it is real.

✎ I assert that being blessed is seeing Jesus as he is, sharing in his life, and participating in his mission by his grace and power. If so, every Christ Follower is called to serve in his ministry of comfort.

{Gal 6:2; Ro 12:15} Do we “**carry each other’s burdens**” and “**mourn with those who mourn**”?

Do we mourn sin as well as loss and death?

? *Having received comfort, do we share it with others?
Are we Messiah’s agents of restoration, freedom,*

acceptance, and forgiveness? Do we radiate the hope of resurrection life?

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

Matthew 5:4 is the word of the Lord.