

**The Puzzle of the Beatitudes:**  
***Blessed Are Those Who Mourn***  
Isaiah 61:1-4; Matthew 5:1-2, 4

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Picture a young couple holding hands and standing beside the grave of their only child. They dare not speak, or a wave of sorrow will overcome them. So they stand in silence and stare, a gripping pain tearing at their stomachs.

How can we call them blessed?

Imagine a man sitting alone at his kitchen table. His wife of twenty years has left him for an old flame. He expected to grow old with his wife. He wanted them to welcome grandchildren and look back over the years with fond memories. He sits quietly and listens to the tick-tock of the clock on the wall.

How can we call him blessed?

Or consider a man who stands before a judge because his bad choices erupted in his face. He never intended for those choices to affect his children, his wife, and their friends. He caused great pain to many and now is humiliated. The weight of his sin smothers him.

How can we call him blessed?

Yet here it is directly from our Lord in his most famous sermon: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

These “blessed” introduce Jesus’ great teaching to the disciples that we now call the Sermon on the Mount—Matthew 5, 6, and 7. If you read only three chapters from the Bible in your lifetime, I urge you to make them these three. When Jesus gets to the end of this sermon, he reflects back over what he has just taught and tells his followers, “Now, you who build your lives upon these teachings will be like the wise man who built his house

upon a rock. When the rains came and the winds blew, that man's house, i.e., his life, stood strong."

I don't see how anyone could read this second beatitude and not find it puzzling. In Luke's version, called the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus is even more specific, "Blessed are you that weep." So we must take this head-on today and ask, what is blessed about mourning and weeping?

Remember, the word "blessed" means "fortunate." It suggests being in a privileged position, well off. I mentioned last Sunday that it is akin to the Hebrew word "shalom," which is normally translated as "peace" or "completeness" or "contentment."

Jesus is saying here that those who mourn are to be considered fortunate: "How fortunate are you...." They are in a privileged position, well off, somehow complete. And the word he uses for mourning is a strong word. This is not just sadness. He's not talking about mild depression. Jesus is talking about lamentation that is expressed in great sorrow and copious tears. This is not the grief one might experience when a third cousin's mother-in-law whom you hardly know dies. This is passionate grief, an intense sense of loss, helplessness, and despair. It is what you feel when you lose someone you love deeply. It is what we feel when our marriage dissolves. It is what we feel when our sins do indeed come back to haunt us.

Some of you need no further description, do you? You are well acquainted with mourning. You know that this kind of mourning knocks the props out from under us. It cares not how many college degrees we have or how much money we make. It cares not about the accolades we have received. It is not interested in how many friends we have on facebook, which neighborhood we live in, or the kind of car we drive. Mourning humbles us. It takes us down and dares us to get up. And mourning has no switch we can flip to turn it off. It's there when we go to sleep, and it's there again when we wake.

And Jesus says, "Blessed are those who mourn." Some translate the word "blessed" as "happy." That is completely inappropriate. There's nothing happy about what Jesus is describing here. It is "blessed," however, and here's why. The passionate grief, the tears, are an indication that we have loved deeply, and Jesus knew that that is life at its best. When we

mourn, it means we have experienced others at a deep and meaningful level. That loss, then, creates, not just sadness, but lamentation expressed with sorrow and tears. Jesus wasn't saying that they were fortunate because they were mourning. He was saying that they were fortunate because they had loved so deeply; they had lived life at its best.

The British poet Tennyson understood this. His poem *In Memoriam* was a requiem for his dear friend Allen Henry Hallam, who died suddenly of a brain hemorrhage in 1833. The poem wasn't finished until 1849, sixteen years later. It reflects Tennyson's search for understanding. What was the meaning of his grief? How was he to make sense of such a great loss? Here are the verses most of us remember:

*I hold it true, whate'er befall;  
I feel it when I sorrow most;  
'Tis better to have loved and lost  
Than never to have loved at all.*

Perhaps Jesus was saying that the “unblessed” person, the most “unfortunate” person, is the one who never mourns. The person who has never mourned has never loved. That person has missed what life is about. As painful as the mourning is, it is not as painful as the life that never loves anyone.

This passage from Tennyson is less familiar. He tried to find words to express his grief and found that only one primal language is sufficient.

*So runs my dream, but what am I?  
An infant crying in the night  
An infant crying for the light  
And with no language but a cry.*

Now I need to be very clear about this beatitude. Jesus is not saying here that mourning is something we should seek. It's not being held up as a virtue. While Jesus deems it blessed, he is not charging his disciples to go and create a situation that will cause mourning. No, mourning will find us. Eventually mourning will find us, knock us to our knees, and then we will understand: indeed, it is better to have loved and lost—and mourned—than never to have loved at all.

Jesus says that these people will be “comforted.” It is a word that means “to help” or “to encourage.” Sometimes it is translated as “salvation.” Notice that Jesus uses future tense. It is actually future passive. They “will be comforted.” It is something that will be done to them in the future. Jesus believed and taught that a future realm awaits, a new creation, where God will destroy sin and death and will wipe away all tears. You may ask me to tell you more specifically what that will be like, but I cannot. I can tell you that it is an undeniable teaching of our Lord. And he says that when the new creation is complete those who mourn today will be comforted.

Now, I’ll tell you what my wife said. We discussed this at lunch Thursday. She said, “But, David, I don’t want to wait to be comforted. I need it now and want to feel God’s comfort now.”

She’s smart! This second beatitude does not suggest that there is no comfort in the present. We’ve all found that our faith brings significant comfort during times of mourning. But it doesn’t take it away, does it? It doesn’t take the grief away. We carry it every day. Over time it may become less acute. But we carry our grief to our grave. And then the ultimate comfort, which only God can give, occurs.

So blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Here’s my translation of this second beatitude:

*How fortunate are those who weep because of their loss; it means they have loved deeply, which is life’s greatest aim. They can rest assured that in the end God will be their salvation.*

Jesus looked out at the crowd that gathered on the mountainside to hear his sermon and said, “Now, you who build your lives upon these teachings will be like the wise man who built his house upon a rock. When the rains came and the winds blew, that man’s house, his life, stood strong.”

### Closing Prayer

Lord, you know us. You know that we are a community of mourners. We have loved deeply, and we have lost. We wait for your comfort. Amen.