

# Spiritual Mourners Comforted

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*Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.*  
Matthew 5:4

Having established the awareness of one's spiritual poverty as the foundational experience of the citizens of God's kingdom, Christ continues His description of these citizens as "they that mourn." This too is one of the essential features of Christ's verbal portrait of the Christian. We will examine this feature by considering the nature of this mourning, its blessedness, and the comfort that is promised to such mourners.

## ***The Nature of This Mourning***

The mourning of which Jesus speaks is not natural mourning. Christ is not calling blessed those who are merely grieving because of circumstances pertaining to this life. This mistaken assumption is often expressed on sympathy cards. This beatitude does not address the mourning that is natural to all sinful men as they must deal with the inescapable reality of sorrow and death in a fallen world. In fact, none of the traits articulated in the Beatitudes describe traits that might naturally be found in men. All of these marks are spiritual—the result of the Holy Spirit's work within the heart.

Thus, the mourning Christ addresses here is intimately related to the poverty of spirit delineated in the previous beatitude. He is saying that His people, in recognizing who they are before God, will mourn over their spiritual bankruptcy. And why do true believers grieve over their spiritual poverty? Why will true believers not speak of it casually and on a merely intellectually level? Why is their experiential awareness of this poverty so deeply painful to them that it will cause them to mourn?

The meaning of the term *to mourn* will provide us with the answer. As the Living Word of God, Christ chose His words carefully and precisely. The word He uses here to describe the mourning of the poor in spirit is analogous to the mourning of someone who has lost a loved one. What characterizes the mourning of someone who has to bury his or her beloved spouse, of children burying their parents, or of parents burying children? It is an expression of love for the one who died.

The explicit mourning of this beatitude is thus a mourning that proceeds from and is defined by love. It is the spiritual mourning of a regenerated heart. In regeneration, the Holy Spirit makes a sinner spiritually alive, making him a new creation. The moment the Spirit grants life to a sinner dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1), the heart will be ignited with love for God. With that love being shed abroad in his heart (Rom. 5:5), the regenerated sinner will begin to love God and everything that pertains to Him: His Word, His law, His church, His house, His service, His son, and so on. He will then recognize and begin to love the law as the will of God, which in turn will produce heartfelt spiritual mourning, for he will then begin to grasp that his spiritual poverty—his comprehensive and systemic sinfulness—is defined by his transgression of the law and his failure to obey it.

Psalm 51 articulates this spiritual mourning for us, for even though David had sinned grievously, he was and remained a man who deeply loved God. He had sinned heinously and grievously, living without real repentance for at least nine months. In response to Nathan's

withering indictment, however, David bowed his head and mourned deeply. As a spiritual mourner, he confessed, “Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight” (Psa. 51:2–4).

Such a confession is the hallmark of God’s saving work in the heart. He repeatedly awakens sinners to the reality that they are transgressors, and that becomes a matter of great and abiding sorrow to regenerated souls. Thus, a true believer is someone who will grieve over sin until his last breath. The prophet Zechariah prophesied that, when the Spirit would be poured out on the people of Israel and they would be convicted of having crucified the Messiah, “they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn” (Zech. 12:10).

There you have it: mourning as an expression of love! Such mourning is a foundational trait of genuine spiritual life. In fact, Jesus teaches unequivocally that in this world the true citizens of His kingdom will always grieve over sin.

Do you recognize yourself in that? Are you one of those mourners in Zion? Have you ever grieved over your sinnership before God? Do you understand what David meant when he said, “Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight”? Reader, if you cannot at all relate to such mourning, you are not a Christian and do not belong to God’s kingdom. We live in a day when many claim to be Christian who know nothing of such mourning—many who embrace a Christianity that one might refer to as a frivolous Christianity. It is defined by false joy or false happiness, and there is a complete absence of such spiritual mourning.

However, Jesus also does not say, “Blessed are they who produce a flood of tears; blessed are they who mourn loudly.” Rather, He is describing here a state of the heart. We all have a unique constitution, causing some believers to respond to the bitter reality of their sinnership more emotionally than others. Thus, Jesus is not saying here that physical tears determine whether you belong to His kingdom. Instead He is speaking of a state of the heart and a continual experiential awareness of who we are and remain in ourselves. A true believer is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, who actively and continually teaches us and will always keep us conscious of our sinnership—of our inherent unholiness.

True believers will thus mourn continually over their transgressions and indwelling corruption until God delivers them from the body of this death. Think only of all the sins you have committed in thought, word, and deed during this past week. How painful can be the spiritual and experiential awareness of having sinned against God and each other! At such moments we can be so vulnerable to the whisperings of Satan, saying, “You say that you’re a Christian. Aren’t you fooling yourself? Do you think that a true believer would’ve thought, said, or done such a thing? Do you think a true believer would have so readily yielded to that kind of temptation?” How devious is the liar from the beginning! First, he will endeavor to make us fall into sin, and then, when we have sinned, he will seek to bring us to despair by blinding us to the gospel and its comfort.

A true believer will be painfully aware of the fountain of corruption that abides within him. True believers will therefore mourn before God over those sinful thoughts and inclinations that others know nothing about. They will be conscious of the fact that God knows their hearts and the secrets within. They live in *coram Deo*, “in the presence of God.” Thus, when a sinful thought crosses a believer’s mind or when he senses a sinful desire, he will grieve over it and confess it before God. Here the difference between the believer and a hypocrite becomes

apparent. The hypocrite is concerned only about the outside of the cup. As long as the external and visible aspect of his life is acceptable, he is not concerned about what transpires within.

It is not so with a true believer! He can understand David, who said in Psalm 38:6–7: “I go mourning all the day long. For my loins are filled with a loathsome disease.” Dear reader, are you experientially acquainted with that loathsome disease?

One of the marks of spiritual growth is an ever deepening awareness of that loathsomeness that causes believers to mourn. They mourn over their lack of conformity to Christ. They know they are called to a life of Christlike obedience. Yet so often they perceive so little Christlikeness within themselves. Believers also mourn over their wretched tendency toward unbelief that discredits God and the promises of the gospel. Despite all that God has done for us, and that He has never proven Himself to be unfaithful, we so readily default to unbelief. Immediately following Hebrews 11, the renowned chapter on faith, the apostle addresses unbelief as being the sin that so easily besets us.

Believers also mourn over not having an experiential sense of God’s favor or nearness. Sometimes God can seem so distant that believers may think, “Has God forgotten me?” How painful that can be! To a believer there is nothing sweeter than to experience a sense of God’s favor and nearness. When that is absent, he will grieve over it—especially when he senses that it is sin that causes separation between God and our soul. Romans 7 is therefore so highly valued by all believers, for there we hear the groaning of the apostle Paul, an experienced and mature Christian, who mourns deeply over his sinfulness and indwelling corruption, exclaiming in holy despair, “O wretched man that I am!”

### ***The Blessedness of Mourning***

However, as deeply as Paul mourned, he greatly rejoices when immediately thereafter he cries out, “I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” This profoundly illustrates why Jesus says, “Blessed are they that mourn”—who grieve over sin, over their indwelling corruption, and over the loss of God’s nearness and favor. He proceeds to define the blessedness of all for whom this is a painful reality, adding, “for they shall be comforted.”

Believers do mourn indeed, but they will also be comforted! The Greek verb “to comfort” is *parakaleo*, and its noun form is *parakletos*. We recognize this noun at once as one of the glorious titles of the Holy Spirit (Paraclete). Jesus said, “If I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you” (John 16:7). Here Christ refers to His own Spirit as the Comforter, for it is the special and prominent ministry of the Holy Spirit to comfort the mourners in Zion.

To understand the Spirit’s ministry as the Comforter, we need to reflect for a moment on His unique place in the Trinity and His work in the divine economy of redemption. Scripture identifies the Holy Spirit as both the Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of the Son (Rom. 8:9). Scripture also records for us that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son (John 15:26; 16:7). That double procession is *the* unique distinctive of the Holy Spirit as the third person in the divine Trinity. His procession gives us a glimpse into the fact that the Trinity is an everlasting love relationship between the Father and the Son, who dwell in constant and infinite fellowship with each other in the person of the Holy Spirit. In His glorious person, He is the personal bond of love that unites the Father and the Son. Thus, in the Spirit, the Father communicates His infinite love to His Son (the Spirit proceeding from the Father to the Son), and in the Spirit, the Son communicates His infinite love to the Father (the Spirit proceeding from the Son to the Father).

The Spirit's ontological function within the Trinity also defines the nature of His redeeming work in the hearts of sinners. As the Spirit of the Father, He will infallibly lead us to the Son. Thus, when He convicts us of our sin, He is doing so in order to lead us to the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to find salvation and comfort in Him alone. Jesus therefore said, "Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth . . . He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you" (John 16:13–14). As the Spirit of the Father, He will glorify the Son and lead sinners to Him. Only in the Son, as the Mediator Jesus Christ, can we be reconciled with the Father and receive a full pardon for our sins.

This explains why Christ designates the Holy Spirit as the Comforter, for He will see to it that sinners cannot find any comfort outside of the Lord Jesus Christ. He will not permit us to find comfort in our mourning, our tears, our repentance, or our conversion—as precious as these spiritual fruits are—because the Holy Spirit will not rest until we rest in Jesus alone.

In fact, the Holy Spirit engages Himself as such during the entire lifetime of believers, continually and repeatedly making room for the Lord Jesus Christ in our soul. In so doing, He will make Christ increasingly precious to us. There can be no spiritual growth without this spiritual mourning and growing awareness of our sinful condition. Only in this way will we grow in the grace and the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, not having any expectation of self. Only then will Christ become and remain the sole resting place for our soul, increasingly becoming our all and in all.

### ***The Comfort Promised to the Mourners in Zion***

Therefore, the Spirit will never do a half work! When He causes us to mourn, He also comforts us, for in the way of mourning over our spiritual poverty He makes room in our hearts for Jesus and His finished work. The Holy Spirit will empty us in order to fill us with the blessed fullness found in Jesus Christ.

However, the Spirit of the Father who leads us to the Son will also, as the Spirit of the Son, lead us to the Father. The ultimate objective of redemption is that in obtaining full reconciliation in the Son, one may return and be restored into the favor of the Father. The definitive outcome of the redeeming work of a triune God will be the restoration of the Father-child relationship between God and fallen sons and daughters of Adam. That's what Adam enjoyed and then lost!

Jesus has this in mind when He says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." The essence of our spiritual poverty and wretchedness is rooted in the fact that, in Adam, we have lost that Father-child relationship with God. Thus, if God is not your Father, then all that you may have enjoyed in this world is but imaginary happiness. It is counterfeit and illusory, for in the end you will have nothing. If God is not your heavenly Father in Christ, you are truly of all men most miserable! If, however, God is your Father in Christ, you have everything indeed (1 Cor. 3:22–23)!

Therefore, the same Spirit who leads us to the Son will also lead us to the Father. He first leads us to the Son to find forgiveness and reconciliation in Christ, then He leads us to the Father. On the basis of the finished work of Christ, we may then rejoice in the fact that God shall forever be our Father. Jesus profoundly summarized this by saying to Mary Magdalene on the day of His resurrection, "Go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God" (John 20:17). To put it plainly, Christ is saying that the purpose of His redeeming work—His death and resurrection—is that His Father can be our Father; His God can be our God.

Thus, the Holy Spirit's work ultimately revolves around the person and work of Jesus Christ. Apart from Him there can be no reconciliation, and apart from Him, we cannot be restored into a Father-child relationship with God. Jesus underscores this when He says, "He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you" (John 16:14).

The Lord Jesus Christ will ever be the great focal point of the comforting ministry of the Holy Spirit. Isaiah prophesied this regarding the Lord Jesus Christ, and Jesus, in Luke 4, opens the Scriptures to Isaiah 61, saying, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . . to heal the brokenhearted." Here we have the affirmation of what Christ says in the second beatitude: "To comfort all that mourn; to appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness" (Isa. 61:2–3). Isaiah prophesied that this would be the essence of the Messiah's ministry, which He would achieve through the Holy Spirit, the Comforter.

Consequently, all of God's servants are given the great commission: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem . . . for she hath received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins" (Isa. 40:1–2) Preachers, as God's spokesmen, have to be faithful in proclaiming the gospel to you over and over again, and we must therefore declare to every believer that in Jesus Christ they have received double for all of their sins. Since we have a double problem as sinners (being guilty and filthy), God has provided a double remedy in Christ. In 1 John 2:1–2 we read, "If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous: and he is the propitiation for our sins." Already in the Old Testament, God had appointed the morning and evening sacrifice. He knew that His people would sin daily, and He wanted them to understand that there was a daily and double remedy for sin.

Thus, when we succumb to sin, we should not remain there but rather flee to the Lord Jesus Christ, our Advocate with the Father in heaven. When our indwelling corruption troubles us, that wretched and polluting fountain within, the Spirit will comfort us by directing us to Christ, in whom a fountain has been opened against sin and all uncleanness (Zech. 13:1). When we grieve over our lack of conformity to Christ, the Holy Spirit will comfort us by reminding us that we are accepted in the Beloved (Eph. 1:6). When we grieve over our unbelief, the Spirit will comfort us by reminding us of the wonderful truth that even our unbelief cannot annul the faithfulness of God. "If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful: he cannot deny himself" (2 Tim. 2:13).

The Holy Spirit will ever comfort us, as recorded in Isaiah 51:3: "For the LORD shall comfort Zion . . . ; joy and gladness shall be found therein." That explains what Paul means in 2 Corinthians 6:10: "As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing . . . ; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things." There you hear the confession of a man who mourns and knows himself to be poor in spirit—sorrowful and mourning, yet always rejoicing because of the comforting work of the Holy Spirit. Thus, Isaiah could prophesy, "And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away" (Isa. 35:10).

Dear believer, the day is coming that you will mourn and weep no more. God will then wipe away all tears from your eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying. Believer, you have a sinless future before you. The day of your complete deliverance is coming, when you shall mourn no more. Blessed indeed are they that mourn, because they shall be forever comforted!

Reader, if you know nothing of that mourning, that grieving over your sin and indwelling corruption, these words of Jesus are then applicable to you: "Woe unto you that laugh now! for ye shall mourn and weep" (Luke 6:25). That's what hell will be—a place where men and women

will be weeping and gnashing with their teeth. There you will weep forever and never be comforted—never! How wretched are they who laugh now and who shall weep forever!

God forbid that this would be applicable to either you or me. Therefore, dear reader, have no rest until you know yourself to be one of God's people as described here in the Beatitudes. James 4:8–9 says, "Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded. Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned into mourning, and your joy to heaviness." In that way, you will learn that you need the Lord Jesus Christ. In that way, you will be led to the comfort that is to be found in Christ alone. Only in that way will this beatitude become applicable to you: "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted."