

## **The Way of Jesus: Good Grief** **Matthew 5:4**

### **Introduction:**

Jesus never called his followers to seek out suffering. Sure, he told us to take up our cross and follow him, but that command has a much deeper meaning than actively seeking trouble. Of course, throughout the history of the church, there have been some who have thought that God wanted us to pursue suffering. The Puritans were people who deeply loved God. They have been unfairly characterized as people who were always of a gloomy disposition. Some Christians seem to think there is great virtue in being perpetually downcast. There was a little girl who was being raised by strict Christian parents who remarked as drove past a country farm, “O look, Mommy! That horse must be a Christian. He has such a long face!” There was a season in my early adulthood when I was so passionate about serving God that I asked him to bring suffering into my life, knowing that trials were the common pathway of spiritual shaping that all godly leaders experienced. But that yearning for suffering cultivated a distorted view of God that led me into deep misery. In his mercy, God helped me to realize that he is good and doesn’t take pleasure in the afflictions of his people. No. God does not call us to seek out suffering. In this broken world, it will come of its own accord. And nobody’s fooling anyone. We all suffer at different points in our life.

Aside from Jesus and Job, there was probably no person in the Scripture who suffered more than the prophet, Jeremiah. Because of his speaking out for righteousness, he was beaten and imprisoned many times. He was accused of treason and survived several assassination attempts. Jeremiah was a model of perseverance under extreme pressure. But perhaps the greatest suffering that Jeremiah endured was the torment he felt in his soul, mourning the unrepentant sin of his people and the eventual destruction of the beloved city, Jerusalem.

In the book of Lamentations, he pours out his soul to God:

I am the man who has seen affliction  
under the rod of [God’s] wrath;  
he has driven and brought me

into darkness without any light;  
surely against me he turns his hand  
again and again the whole day long.  
He has made my flesh and my skin waste away;  
he has broken my bones;  
he has besieged and enveloped me  
with bitterness and tribulation;  
he has made me dwell in darkness  
like the dead of long ago.  
He has walled me about so that I cannot escape;  
he has made my chains heavy;  
though I call and cry for help,  
he shuts out my prayer;  
he has blocked my ways with blocks of stones;  
he has made my paths crooked.  
He is a bear lying in wait for me,  
a lion in hiding;  
he turned aside my steps and tore me to pieces;  
he has made me desolate;  
he bent his bow and set me  
as a target for his arrow.  
He drove into my kidneys  
the arrows of his quiver;  
I have become the laughingstock of all peoples,  
the object of their taunts all day long.  
He has filled me with bitterness;  
he has sated me with wormwood.  
He has made my teeth grind on gravel,  
and made me cower in ashes;  
my soul is bereft of peace;  
I have forgotten what happiness[a] is;

so I say, “My endurance has perished;  
so has my hope from the Lord.”  
Remember my affliction and my wanderings,  
the wormwood and the gall!  
My soul continually remembers it  
and is bowed down within me.  
But this I call to mind,  
and therefore I have hope:  
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;[b]  
his mercies never come to an end;  
they are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.  
“The Lord is my portion,” says my soul,  
“therefore I will hope in him.”  
The Lord is good to those who wait for him,  
to the soul who seeks him.  
It is good that one should wait quietly  
for the salvation of the Lord.  
It is good for a man that he bear  
the yoke in his youth.  
Let him sit alone in silence  
when it is laid on him;  
let him put his mouth in the dust—  
there may yet be hope;  
let him give his cheek to the one who strikes,  
and let him be filled with insults.  
For the Lord will not  
cast off forever,  
but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion  
according to the abundance of his steadfast love;  
for he does not afflict from his heart

or grieve the children of men.

Lamentations 3:1-33

Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” (Matthew 5:4) That is because, in every situation for the believer, God is there. God is faithful.

### **Song of Preparation: Great is Thy Faithfulness #44**

#### **Happy are the Unhappy?**

This Beatitude is truly a startling paradox. It is almost as if Jesus is saying, “Happy are the unhappy.” It’s counter to our happiness-obsessed culture and thinking. It flows naturally out of the first Beatitude: blessed are the poor in spirit. But it is a step deeper. It is one thing to know your spiritual poverty; that is confession. But feeling grief and mourning over your condition is called contrition. While we tend to recoil from such a painful emotional state, the Scriptures say over and over again that God meets us on that hallowed ground.

The Lord is near to the broken hearted

And saves the crushed in spirit. (Psalm 34:18)

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;

A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. (Psalm 51:17)

#### **Mourning for What?**

Most study Bibles, books and commentaries that address the Sermon on the Mount stipulate that the focus of mourning in this text is sorrow for our sins or for the sins of others. I agree with that position – it flows naturally from the first Beatitude – and fits the context of the other surrounding verses. We’ll talk more about that in a few moments... But I don’t believe Jesus’ words here are strictly limited to mourning for sin. I think Jesus is offering hope and peace and meaning in any of our deepest sorrows.

A person who is mourning is immersed in grief over some kind of loss. It could be the death of a loved one, the loss of a relationship, a job, an opportunity, a cherished possession, or for our

children, their innocence. I believe the Second Beatitude applies to each of these situations and more. The wise Preacher of Ecclesiastes wrote some very perplexing words. A passage that I frequently quote at funerals is...

It is better to go to the house of mourning  
 than to go to the house of feasting,  
 for this is the end of all mankind,  
 and the living will lay it to heart.  
 Sorrow is better than laughter,  
 for by sadness of face the heart is made glad.  
 The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning,  
 but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

Ecclesiastes 7:2-4

Jesus knew these words. That's why he could affirm the great paradox: blessed are those who mourn. Jesus knew the faithfulness of God. He is affirming that those who are blessed – those who are pursuing God and his kingdom – will be comforted in their deepest sorrows. God will not abandon them. He will meet them in their grief and give them the grace that they need.

I don't go looking for trouble anymore. But I thank God for the troubles that I have had. I've always been a risk-taker, so I've had my share of failure. My childhood was marvelously happy. But like most people, I experienced my share of troubles during adolescence. My hopes and expectations were sometimes shattered and I would mourn their loss. At the time, I learned a song that I often sang during my long walks in the desert:

I've had many tears and sorrows,  
 I've had questions for tomorrow,  
 There've been times when I didn't know right from wrong.  
 But in ev'ry situation, God gave blessed consolation  
 That my trials come to only make me strong.

I've been to lots of places  
 And I've seen lots of faces,  
 There've been times I felt so all alone  
 But in my lonely hours, yes those precious lonely hours  
 Jesus let me know that I was his own

*Through it all, through it all  
 Oh, I've learned to trust in Jesus,  
 I've learned to trust in God.  
 Through it all, through it all,  
 I've learned to depend upon his Word.*

I thank God for the mountains  
 And I thank him for the valleys  
 I thank him for the storms he brought me through  
 For if I never had a problem, I wouldn't know that God could solve them  
 I'd never know what faith in God could do.

Andre Crouch © 1971 Manna Music

Reading those words now, over forty years later, they are even truer for me today than they were back then. Andre Crouch, who just recently passed away, captured the wisdom of the Preacher of Ecclesiastes. He learned the valuable lessons from the house of mourning.

But the promises of God's comfort in sorrow are not for everyone. Now some may be offended by that statement. After all, I am a pastor and one of the responsibilities of my role is to comfort the afflicted. Truth be told, I'm not very good at giving comfort. I can't make it better. But what I can do is point the mourner to the One who does give real comfort.

And that's the catch. God comforts those who look to him in faith. Those who look to God in their grief, and only those who look to God, are truly blessed.

Most pastors that I've met would rather do funerals than weddings. I know that seems strange – perhaps like where all a bunch of curmudgeons. I'll tell you why that is: it's because most people are looking for God at funerals. And that's our passion and calling – to point people to God. But from time to time we have the tragic duty of officiating at a funeral where the mourners have no desire to look to God. They just want to do their duty and get on with their life. For them, there is no comfort. This Beatitude does not apply to them. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” For them, there is no comfort. Only those who look to God will find the comfort that they seek.

### **Don't Waste Your Sorrows**

Everybody has sorrows. For those who walk in the way of Jesus, we have the promise that we will be comforted in our grief. Moreover, those trials will do the wonderful work of pushing us into the strong supporting arms of the Lord where we learn to trust him. That is a blessing, indeed, if we will allow God to do his work. That is how God's people profit from, rather than waste their sorrows.

But there is a sorrow and a grief that brings the greatest joy. In truth, unless we know this sorrow, we will never be truly blessed. It is sorrow for sins: ours and those of others.

As a kid, I never had AD – Attention Deficit, but I sure was afflicted with HD – Hyperactive Disorder. I broke so much stuff around the house that my older brothers derisively called me “Rectangle.” While visiting my grandparents one summer as a child, I was given a chase lounge in a bedroom to sleep on. Just like at home, I ran and took a flying leap to land on it. It was so much fun I did it several times, not knowing that I had punched a large hole into the plastered walls.

One thing you never want to do is disappoint your grandparents. They are the people who never discipline you, give you candy and love you just because. Well, put two and two together. I got in trouble and my grandfather was mad at me. I don't think I ever felt more embarrassed and sad about what I had done. My parents spanked me for what I had done – because that's what you did back then. But it didn't relieve my guilt. Not until my grandfather invited me up to his lap,

gave me a hug and forgave me. The darkness that had overwhelmed my young soul was immediately lifted.

God is the one who loves you unconditionally, no matter what you have done. And you and I – all of us – have knocked the plaster out of the walls. In fact, we’ve torn the house down, if you will allow that metaphor. We have greatly wronged God. There is no greater place of blessing than to recognize our offense to God and be overwhelmed with mourning for our actions.

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

Because when we come to that place – and only when we come to that place of mourning for our sins – and confess them and turn from them, God will forgive us. Just like when my grandfather pulled me up to his lap and forgave me... “The greatest of all comfort is the [forgiveness] pronounced upon every contrite mourning sinner.” (Stott, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 42)

The kingdom of God is almost always about people being together. There is a time to mourn alone. But mostly, our mourning should be shared together. That’s why we have funeral services. Hiding our pain is suicidal, as our suffering turns in on us in bitterness and envy. Someone has said that “me, too” are the two most powerful words in our language because when someone else shares our pain, we are no longer alone. We need to know that others hurt with us, because tragedies – like sin – have the power to send us into exile. But when we share our stories of pain, we move from exile into community. That’s why Jesus’ brother, James wrote, “Confess your sins to each other...so that you may be healed.” (James 5:16)

This morning we’re gathered together in community. Hear the invitation from the old hymn:

Come, ye disconsolate, where’er ye languish,  
 Come to the mercy seat, fervently kneel.  
 Here bring your wounded hearts, here tell your anguish;  
 Earth has no sorrow that heav’n cannot heal.



Joy of the desolate, light of the straying,  
Hope of the penitent, fadeless and pure!  
Here speaks the Comforter, tenderly saying,  
“Earth has no sorrow that heav’n cannot cure.”

The invitation is open to you. Come and share your grief. “Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal.”

**Invitation Hymn – Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior #346**