

'Lament', not 'weep'--Matthew 5:4

The question before us is to understand what Jesus meant. We must interpret it from Jesus' point of view, not ours, or anyone else's. The 'lament' here is not crying because you are hurting; nor is it crying in mourning because you lost a loved one. It is lamentation for evil and sin, and the consequences of both. The 'Bible' that Jesus had was the Old Testament, and that is where we must look for the definition of the word.

We can start with Ezra. In 9:1-4 Ezra learns of the sin of the people.¹ In 9:5-15 we have a prayer with identification. Ezra prays, confessing the sin of the people, and as the leader he includes his person in the confession, even though he did not participate in the sin he was confessing. In 10:1 we have Ezra praying, making confession and weeping, prostrate before the house of God. Now note especially 10.6—Ezra isolates himself, does not eat bread or drink water, "for he mourned because of the guilt (infidelity) of those from the captivity." Here we have a concrete case of lamentation for sin and its consequences.

Now consider Daniel. In 9:3 he addressed the Lord God with prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth and ashes. In 9:4-19 we have another prayer with identification. Daniel prays, confessing the sin of his people, including himself in the confession, even though the sin was not his personally. In 9:20-27 Daniel receives a visit and a communication from the angel Gabriel. Perhaps three years later, at 10.2, Daniel affirms that he himself spent three weeks mourning, fasting all the time. Certainly he was not bemoaning any of his own problems; it was because of evil and its consequences.

Now Jeremiah 7:28-29—"This is a nation that does not obey the voice of Jehovah their God nor receive correction. Truth has perished and has been cut off from their mouth. Cut off your hair and cast it away, and take up a lamentation on the desolate heights; for Jehovah has rejected and forsaken the generation of His wrath." The sin of the people went so far as to provoke the wrath of God, so much so that He turned his back on that generation. Here we have another case of lamentation for sin and its consequences.

Now consider two texts that link comfort to lamentation. Isaiah 57:18 says, "I will restore comforts to him and to his mourners". In Luke 4:18-19 Jesus applied the prophecy in Isaiah 61:1-2 to Himself, but He did not quote the entire prophecy. I here use 61.2-3; the Messiah was anointed: "to comfort all who mourn, to console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness."

But exactly how does comfort and solace work? Before paying attention to comfort in this life, let us consider the coming one. When someone laments evil and sin, it is evident that he is on God's side, seeing how He sees. For such people, ultimate and total comfort will come in Heaven. In Revelation 21:4 the great voice from Heaven declares: "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there will be no more death nor sorrow nor weeping nor pain—they will exist no more, because the first things have passed away".

We may start with Luke 16:25—"But Abraham said: 'Child, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus had bad things; but now it is he who is being comforted, and you tormented.'" The account of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus begins in verse 19 and ends in verse 31. In verse 25 both had already died and were in Hades, the 'waiting room' where the spirits of the departed await the final judgment. But since one's final destination is determined by what was done in life, the lost are already separated from the saved. A presumed

¹ Both 9:4 and 10:3 mention the portion of the people who trembled at the words of the God of Israel – it is the 'humble spirit'.

criminal suffers in prison, even before the case is judged. On the other hand, the saints already receive benefits in advance—which is why Lazarus was already receiving comfort.

Now we go to 2 Thessalonians 1:4-8:

“We ourselves boast about you among God’s congregations, referring to your steadfastness and faith in the midst of all your persecutions, and the tribulations that you are enduring 5—the above is evidence that God’s judgment is right, to the end that you be considered worthy of the Kingdom of God, on behalf of which you are actually suffering; 6 since to God it is right to pay back affliction to those who are afflicting you 7 and rest (along with us) to you who are being afflicted, at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with His powerful angels in blazing fire, 8 inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

It is at the time of the second coming of the Lord Jesus that those who have suffered for the sake of the Gospel will enter into their rest. Then they will have permanent comfort, but they will also have the 'comfort' of seeing their persecutors punished. In fact, the certainty that evil will be punished helps us to withstand mistreatment while still alive. Asaph's Psalm 73 clearly addresses this.

In the first verse, Asaph gives the final conclusion so that the reader will not be shaken by what follows. In verses 2-14 he recounts the struggle he had, seeing the prosperity of the wicked while he, seeking to be righteous, suffered. In verses 15-16 he thinks of the negative effect on others if he speaks his mind. Now verse 17: “Until I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end (the fate of the wicked)”. Verses 18-20 deal with the destruction of the wicked. In verses 21-22 Asaph confesses his sin, and verses 23-26 speak of his spiritual restoration. Verses 27-28 conclude the Psalm with appropriate conclusions. We can take comfort in the certainty that evil will be punished, but far more important is the spiritual comfort we receive when we walk with God. 2 Chronicles 7:14 and 2 Corinthians 1:3-5 also speak of the comfort we receive in this life, when we lament evil.

Jonah 3:7-9 provides us with a very interesting practical example. Remembering the context: God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach against it. Jonah goes, but very grudgingly. He delivers the message brutally. Then a miracle happened: the Ninevites repented, starting with the king. Just look at Jonah 3:7-9:

“By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?”

Verse 10 says that in fact God relented from destroying them at that time. There was lamentation over sin, and there was comfort. They trembled at the Word of God!

To conclude, consider what the Lord Jesus said in Matthew 11:29—“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, because I am meek and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” That rest works throughout this lifetime, as well as for eternity. Oh praise God!