

## “Blessed are those who mourn” (Matt. 5:4): A Contextual Reflection

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### Abstract

*The statement about mourning in Matthew 5:4 is among the main teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). Mourning is among the valuable activities done externally for the purpose of grief resolution. In light of the Hehe of Iringa and the Bena of Njombe, using a qualitative approach and reader-response criticism and documentary analysis as methods, this article reflects on Jesus’ statement about mourning. It argues that Jesus’ statement is an admonition for the Christian community to mourn as a divine life process that, being a divine enforcement for eschatological achievement, will eventually make them subjects of the kingdom of heaven. The reflection concludes that mourning springs from a sense of sin, from a tender conscience, and from a broken heart. It is a godly sorrow over rebellion against God and hostility to God’s will. Thus, mourning provides no less than six benefits: acquiring blessings, comfort and inheriting the kingdom of God through repentance; promoting relaxation for further living; rebuilding lost relationships between individuals and God; living as daily advocates of God’s call for mission through the law of love in and to the world; managing difficulties and changes in life for coping, recovery and life-giving; and obtaining the necessary and important learning and re-learning.*

**Keywords:** Mourning the loss; Matthew 5:4; Kingdom of heaven; Blessings and future Comfort; Beatitudes; Reader-Response Criticism

### Introduction

Jesus’ statement about mourning (Matthew 5:4), as is in the title of this article, signifies that mourning is an imperative task (*cf.* Clinebell, 1984:223). On the one hand, in Jesus’ statement, mourning draws, counts, and qualifies a person to become both blessed and comforted in the future (Matthew 5:4). On the other hand, Arndt *et al* (2000:795) ask a question: “How can you be blessed when you’re in mourning?” Pink (2011:15) also asks: “if ‘blessed’ why do they ‘mourn’? If they mourn, how can they be blessed? Only the child of God has the key to this paradox, for ‘happy are they who sorrow’ is at complete variance with the world’s logic. Men have, in all places and in all ages, deemed the prosperous and the gay to be the happy ones, but Christ pronounces blessed those who are poor in spirit and who mourn.” Based on Arndt *et al.* and Pink’s questions, several other questions may be asked: What did Jesus really mean with his statement that emphasises the significance of mourning before receiving

blessings and final comfort? How can one bless and bring comfort while the statement of Jesus authenticates mourning to servants? Equally, can contemporary servants appreciate a mournful life that Jesus himself seemed being against it? The problem noticed in Jesus' statement is that it hardly complies with an existing reality that he himself faced and that faces contemporary Christian communities.

On the basis of the above background and questions, this article argues that despite the fact that Jesus' statement considers mourning to be a divine process that burdens servants, it encourages them to practice it for them to obtain blessings and future comfort from God (*cf.* Matthew 16:25; Luke 6:21). It is a divine enforcement for eschatological achievement. Therefore, the task of this article is to analyse and critically reflect on the implications of this text as Jesus admonished while integrating it contextually with the Christian communities in Africa using an example of the *Hehe* and *Bena* of Iringa and Njombe regions in Tanzania. The analysis, reflection and implications will help church servants to obtain possible ways to handle mourning in their ministry and life for blessings and future comfort according to Jesus' prescriptions.

To fulfill the above-intended task, the following questions will guide the navigation process: first, what are the nature and characteristics of mourning? Second, what is the biblical context of Jesus' statement about mourning for servants' further blessings and future comfort? Third, how did Jesus perceive the loss during his human lifetime and what implication do such perceptions bring to our contemporary Christian communities? Fourth, what did Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:4 imply to his servants? Fifth, what obligations and opportunities does Jesus' statement offer to servants? Sixth, how can Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:4 be applied to empirical scenarios portrayed through mourning the losses in Tanzania? These questions are helpful in reflecting about the statement of Jesus for servants to become blessed, comforted and heirs of the kingdom of heaven in the future.

The main navigation approach for this article is qualitative, using methods of reader-response criticism and documentary analysis. The approach is qualitative because it deals with people's lived experiences in a particular context, in this case, the *Hehe* of Iringa and the *Bena* of Njombe (*cf.* Kielmann, Cataldo & Seeley 2012). Reader-response Criticism is used as a method because it focuses on current readers and the way they create meaning according to their current contexts (Petric 2012). The documentary analysis method is used because the study is library-based and seeks to ascertain the views of scholars about Jesus' statement (Bowen 2009). Written documents were consulted, such as books, articles and other available materials, whether in print or handwritten, to serve as main sources for referencing, supporting claims, and evidencing to substantiate the presented and discussed arguments. The argument of the article is also based on my reading of Matthew 5:4 as an ordained pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, having served in my role for more than twenty years. Thus, through obtaining the respective answers to the study questions and methodological perspectives, the article expects to offer an important contribution towards the meaning and significance of Jesus' enforcing statement about mourning the losses as stated in the gospels in relation to the contemporary lives of Christian communities.

## Nature and Characteristics of Mourning

This section surveys the nature and characteristics of mourning in general before focusing on the biblical understanding of mourning. Jesus’ statement about mourning to qualify for blessings and future comfort strikes the hearts of contemporary Christians as his servants (*cf.* Clinebell 1984:222). Pink (2011:15) writes, “Mourning is hateful and irksome to poor human nature: from suffering and sadness our spirits instinctively shrink. It is natural for us to seek the society of the cheerful and joyous.” If mourning stands to qualify people for their blessings and future comfort, then, peace and happiness may become impractical. Once a person loses something or situation that is meaningful to their life, situations of grief and guilt erupt. Consequently, the state of mourning pervades one’s life. What are the nature and characteristics of the phenomenon of “mourning” and its meaning, dynamics and the characteristics associated with it? The definitions, dynamics and characteristics will highlight and bring some important reflections about the context and weight radiating on it.

Arndt et al. (2000:795) define “mourning” from its Greek root “*pentheō*”, meaning “to experience sadness as the result of some condition or circumstance, be sad, grieve.” The word “*pentheō*” reflects the Greek connotations; that it “is more than just to be sad, grieve, or mourn. It is to grieve about something or someone, whether expressed (transitive) or unexpressed (intransitive).” Importantly, the definition provides little reflection on the direct causes and processes of mourning situation(s). Thus, to Arndt et al., in mourning there are sadness, grieving and other conditions seen, observed in words and actions or through hidden languages such as body signs. However, other definitions might comprise dimensional parameters of mourning as opposed to grief.

According to the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (12<sup>th</sup> ed.) (2021: 934), the word “mourn” means to “feel deep sorrow for the death of (...), feel regret about the loss of something.” Nonetheless, in this Dictionary, the term ‘mourning’ refers to “deep sorrow for a person’s death.” (p, 935) Different from the descriptions of Arndt et al., the dictionary also touches the source of mourning – the loss due to death of a person or loss of a significant object. Other literatures add that mourning comprises various external social and religious performed activities and processes, sometimes derived from psychoanalytic literature or cultural responses that are triggered by the events of losses. For example, Howarth (2011:4–5) argues that mourning is used interchangeably with bereavement, where “Bereavement is understood to be the experience of having lost a loved one to death; grief to be various emotional, physiological, cognitive, and behavioral reactions to the loss; and mourning to be the cultural practices through which bereavement and grief are expressed (...).” (*cf.* Abi-Hashem 1999:310–311; Mulemi 2017). “Mourning thus encompasses the visible personal and collective expressions of grief.” (Mulemi 2017). It involves moderating, integrating, regulating, learning and adjusting the emotions through actions in psychological, behavioral and sociological processes. Mourning takes a person into a new world life with recovery status, hopeful living that is full of future potentials (Shear 2012:122; *cf.* Wilson 2002; Meyer 1993:178–240).

The definitions from Arndt et al., *English Dictionary*, Howarth, Abi-Hashem, Mulemi, Shear, and mostly of Pink, favour the purpose of this study. They allow one to grasp mourning as a response process coming out through emotional, physical,

behavioral, and cultural tasks. They can be of thoughts, feelings and actions that relate to the event of loss, for example, of death or meaningful objects. Gregoire and Jungers (2013:74) add that, “Others (...) have used the term mourning similarly to refer to the process of coping with a loss (...)” dependent on the depth of attachment (cf. Floyd 2008:80–88; Mbiti 1969:149–153; Njau 2010:11–19, 49–57). However, most of the above definitions are individualistic, focusing on the experiences of individuals. As will be seen, mourning among the Hehe and Bena communities of Tanzania will comprise communal lament and grieving about the death of close relatives or leaders of such communities, not just individual experiences. In such communal mourning, African communities, the Hehe and Bena communities of Iringa and Njombe Tanzania in particular, are directed to build hope in an eschatological future comfort despite their current mourning experiences.

### **Biblical Setting of Jesus’ Statement about Mourning**

This section highlights and grasps the biblical and contextual understanding of Matthew 5:4 from the first speaker and audience and then relates it to the contemporary context. The mourning stated by Jesus has its background in the time of Hezekiah, King of Israel during the prophecy of Isaiah, when Sennacherib king of Assyria attacked and challenged Jerusalem boasting arrogantly. The prayers of Israelites towards the Lord convinced the Lord to send the Prophet Isaiah to comfort the mourners of Zion (Isaiah 61:2–3). Mourners of Zion mourned because of the devastation of the first Temple in 587 BCE. It is clearly written: “He comforted the mourners in Jerusalem. His powerful spirit looked into the future, and he predicted what was to happen before the end of time, hidden things that had not yet occurred.” (Sirach 48:24–25). Therefore, it seems that the mourning that Jesus admonished was fulfilling the prophet’s mission.

Basically, the statement about mourning in Matthew 5:4 is among the main teachings of Jesus within the larger context of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). It appears that the original audience of the Sermon on the Mount referred to people gathered by Jesus from varied lives and backgrounds (Matthew 4:23–25; 5:1; 7:28–29). Most likely, Jesus’ disciples were the first audience (inner circle) to hear what Jesus communicated in the Sermon, before the larger crowd of people (a larger circle of listeners). They were challenged to find the authentic interpretation of God’s will in the Torah through Jesus’ teaching (Fox, 1938:20; *cf.*, Copeland 2007). Following this line of understanding, Copeland (2007:3) argues that “Both the setting and the use of a particular phrase should lead us to conclude that the theme of Jesus’ sermon on the mount is: ‘The Gospel Of The Kingdom Of Heaven.’” Theologically, the setting on the mountain evokes the imagery of Jesus as a new Moses and the mountain as a place of divine revelation and liberation (*cf.* Fox 1938:20). Similar imagery appears in the Pentateuch, where God appears on mount Sinai and Moses receives divine instructions to take to the people people. Most of the important events of Jesus’ life take place on mountains: the Torah is revealed to Moses and received by Moses at Mount Sinai, Jesus reveals God’s will in the form of a Sermon at a mountain, and the temptations of Jesus (Matthew 5:8–10), the feeding of four thousand (Matthew 15:29–39), the transfiguration (Matthew 19:1–9), Jesus’ arrest (Matthew 26:30–35) and Jesus’ Great Commission (Matthew 28:16) all take place on mountains. Hence, there is more

emphasis regarding the significance of a place of utterance, ‘the mountain’. As Pink clearly states:

[W]e must notice the place from which this Sermon was preached. (...) While the scribes and Pharisees had Moses’ chair to sit in (...); our Lord Jesus, the great Teacher of truth, is driven out to the desert, and finds no better place than a ‘mountain’ can afford. (...) Christ preached this Sermon, which was an exposition of the Law, upon a mountain, because upon a mountain the Law was given: and this was also a solemn promulgation of the Christian Law. (...) when the Law was given the Lord came down upon the mountain, now the Lord ‘went up’ into one (...) — a blessed change!" (Matthew Henry). We believe there is yet a deeper significance in the fact that Christ delivered this Sermon from a mountain. Very often the noting of the place where a particular utterance was made supplies a key to its interpretation." (Pink, 2011:7–8).

In his view, Fox (1938:6) states that Jesus summed up and demonstrated everything that he taught at the mount in order to prove that he was a humble authority for the world. The value of the message that Jesus brings in the Sermon on the Mount is unique because it contains statements of perfect truth about the nature of God and man, life, the world and their relationships. His “teaching is not a mere abstract account of the universe”; rather it “constitutes a practical method for the development of the soul and for the shaping of our lives and destinies into the things that we really wish them to be.” (Fox 1938:7). The teaching tells about ‘the meaning of life, death, mistakes, yielding to temptation, sickness, overcoming evils, health, happiness and related ideas’ (p.7). The Sermon is considered a practical guide to life for the Christian community to inherit the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:3, 10, 19, 20; 6:10, 33; 7:21) (Fox 1938:14; Copeland 2007:3). The remaining verses and chapters discuss and appreciate the definitions, character and blessedness of citizens of the kingdom of heaven (Mt 5:3–16), mainly in chapter 5. However, Amevenku and Boaheng (2016:3) quote Wilder, arguing that among the five divisions of Matthew’s gospel, chapters 5–7 are concerned with discipleship, even though Jesus speaks to both the disciples and “to the hearing crowd” as he shows “the way to life and the way to death (...)”. It is about “living the Christian life. (...) the sermon on the Mount ‘addresses those who are already Christians and that divine grace produces life described in the Sermon.’” (Amevenku and Boaheng 2016: 9). Thus, Amevenku and Boaheng (2016:15) conclude that humans can understand and interpret the Sermon on the Mount in different ways; most important is to surrender and obey – i.e., to do and obey it throughout our lives. Therefore, it is within the parameters of the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus’ statements and scholars’ concentrations on the ‘beatitudes examine the character and blessedness of those who are citizens of the kingdom of heaven’ (Copeland 2007:5).

Mourning for blessedness and future comfort due to losses, as indicated in Matthew 5:4, is the second beatitude statement of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Fox (1938:19–20) articulates that “The Sermon on the Mountain opens with the Eight Beatitudes. (...). The Beatitudes are actually a prose poem in eight verses which is complete in itself, and it constitutes what is practically a general summary of the whole

Christian teaching. It is a spiritual, more than a literary synopsis, summarizing the spirit of the teaching rather than the letter.” Jesus was exclusively concerned with the “teaching of general principles” that had also to do with mental states in order to grasp all important spiritual aspects of life and salvation for. In it, Jesus taught about the great possessions that keep people chained to the rock of suffering, that is their exile from God. Such possessions include confidence in our own and familiar judgments; spiritual and intellectual or academic pride; sentimental or material attachment; habits of life that have no desire to renounce; concern for human respect; or vested interest in worldly honour and distinction; self-satisfaction and cocksureness; and social prestige. These possessions tempt people away from the Truth – Jesus as the main channel towards the kingdom of God. To trust in these possessions is to shut the gate into the kingdom of heaven (Fox 1938: 22–23).

However, Chambers (2017:10) was aware that “the teaching of Jesus Christ comes with astonishing discomfort, because it is out of all proportion to our natural way of looking at things. Jesus puts in a new sense of proportion; and slowly we form our way of life on the line of His precepts.” Fox (1938:24) stimulates our discussion as he writes that “Mourning or sorrow is not in itself a good thing, for the Will of God is that everyone should experience happiness and joyous success.” Chambers (2017:7–8) responds,

Our Lord began His discourse by saying, ‘Blessed are . . . ,’ and His hearers must have been staggered by what followed. According to Jesus Christ, they were to be blessed in every condition which they had been taught—from earliest childhood—to regard as a curse. Our Lord was speaking to Jews, and they believed that the sign of God’s blessing was material prosperity in every shape and form. Yet Jesus said people are blessed for 8 SERMON ON THE MOUNT exactly the opposite: “Blessed are the poor in spirit. . . . Blessed are those who mourn,” and so on. (*cf.*, pp. 12-13).

Hence, this part aims at locating the setting, meaning and significance of Jesus’ statement in beatitudes.

Commentators confirm that the statement of Jesus, “Blessed are those who mourn,” (Matt. 5:4) is found in his beatitudes as recorded within Matthew 5:3–11 to show the supremacy of the grace of God. Beare (1981:127) distinguishes “blessedness” articulated in the beatitudes with mere worldly “happiness”, saying, “This blessedness is not something that can be attained by any ‘pursuit of happiness’; nor by any kind of social reconstruction that can be made the basis of political programmes. Jesus is not represented as an advocate of social and economic reform, or political revolution. The satisfactions promised to the blessed are not of their achieving; they are the gift of God.” Moreover, Neil (1962:337) writes:

Beatitudes describe the character of those who would be subjects of the kingdom, and a strange picture they present. All their attributes are the direct antithesis of ordinary secular values: they are the humble in heart, the merciful, the pure in heart and peace-makers. Such are the men [sic] of the Kingdom of God, or Kingdom of heaven, as Matthew calls it. Jesus knows that these are not the martial

self-assertive qualities that ride rough-shod over all opposition. The world being what it is, persecution and misrepresentation are inevitable. (cf., Fox 1938:24–25).

From the quotation above, similar to Fox, Neil (1962) shows that the statements of Jesus in the beatitudes are mainly for those expecting to be members of the kingdom of God; those who are forgiven by the grace of God. A gift that God cannot be forced to provide, a possible meaning of poverty in spirit embraced by Matthew. Whoever wishes to be among the subjects of the kingdom of heaven should abide according to the characteristics described in the beatitudes. However, the attributes that qualify people to enter and inherit the kingdom seem distinct from ordinary and secular values. Neil expounds that Jesus admonished that any servant who expects to be a member of the kingdom of God will never escape persecutions and other worldly misfortunes. Accordingly, mourning becomes an inclusive qualification for the blessed ones.

In *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible [Matthew 5:1–2; 3–12]* (2008:1292), the discourse of the Saviour, Jesus Christ, on the Mount as widely elaborated in all the New Testament gospel, is “a famous sermon.” “It is a practical discourse. [It is] (...) the scope of which is, not to fill our heads with notions, but to guide and regulate our practice.” The commentary provides two main important directions that Jesus wants to admonish in these total beatitudes: first, it “proposes blessedness as the end, and gives us the character of those who are entitled to blessedness (very different from the sentiments of a vain world), in eight beatitudes, which may justly be called paradoxes (v.3–12).” (Henry 2008:1292). Second, it prescribes duties as ways and gives rules for those duties. He directs his disciples to understand themselves as the salt and the light of the world (v.13–16); to understand that they are to be governed by the moral law as a general ratification of the law, and are instructed to live as servants’ (v.17–20). It rectifies and reforms the gross corruptions which the Scribes and the Pharisees had introduced in their exposition of the law and an authentic explication of diverse branches that ought to be explained and vindicated (v.20). Moreover, the admonition explicates almost all commandments regarding keeping the Sabbath, observing ethical and relationship laws (vv.21–48). “[T]he scope of the whole is, to show that the law is spiritual.” (Henry 2008:1292). Thus, in Matthew 5:4, Jesus teaches all servants to practice mourning with high morale and spirituality, while worshiping God and living by the fruits of the Holy Spirit (John 4:23–24; Romans 2:29; Galatians 5:22–23).

Matthew 5:4 is an eschatological text, a text of hope for mourners of Jesus’ time. It is a concrete and brave promise to end the mourning experiences and to bring the dawn of the fully realised Messianic comfort. Mourning is among the qualities that will help the Christian communities understand and draw favour from God to inherit the kingdom of heaven. To this extent, Matthew 5:4 portrays that future joys depend on present suffering and duties, a rule that seems to contradict some of Jesus’ own experiences during his human lifetime. The next part focuses on the various perceptions of Jesus on mourning his own losses and the implications that such experiences have for contemporary Christian communities.

### **Jesus' Perceptions towards Mourning the Losses and Their Implications**

Jesus' statements in the Beatitudes stand as important teachings in the Christian faith. His statement about being blessed and promise that mourners will be comforted after mourning while he himself was against such things seems a paradox. However, Jesus' attendance, crying at a death event, adjusting the mourning processes, performance of healing, exorcisms and raising up of the dead are incredible practices that point to his negative appreciation to mourning situations of losses (*cf.* Mbiti 1969:149–153; Mitchell & Anderson 1983:95–98). There are several stories in the New Testament talking about Jesus' negative reactions towards mourning the losses; conversely, some losses are unrecognised by the society, such as miscarriages and stillbirths (Staudacher, 1987:101–105). These stories raise questions about Jesus' understanding of mourning, his appreciation, and the way he struggled for or against it.

A few instances will suffice to demonstrate a general picture of Jesus' perception of mourning losses during his human lifetime. There are stories showing that he did not wait for the future blessings and comforts of God as he himself admonishes in the text. First, considering the death of his friend Lazarus in John 11:1–37, Jesus himself was against mourning that loss. The perceptions and adjustments of Jesus in the Gospel of John seem to disagree with those in the Gospel of Matthew (5:4). Floyd (2008:87) verifies that some of Jesus' statements about grief and mourning losses have been difficult for most people to understand:

Jesus demonstrates compassion toward those who mourn, recognizing their pain. When Mary and Martha are hurting following the death of their brother, Lazarus, Jesus comes to see them and raises Lazarus from the dead. Just prior to restoring their brother to life, John 11:35 notes that Jesus wept. It seems that, in part, Jesus is responding to the pain that His friends are experiencing.

Jesus sympathised with mourners in that death event by groaning and weeping. He struggled to adjust even the mourning of the relatives of the deceased, friends, and others. Finally, Jesus demonstrated his power to raise Lazarus from death, an act that denotes a struggle against loss to adjust or regulate the mourning.

Second, in his Gethsemane event, Jesus himself struggled against his own death that would cause mourning to his relatives and most members of the community (Matthew. 26:36–46). He prayed heavily and continuously to avoid his death (*cf.*, vv.37–39) while confirming the weakness of his human flesh (v.41). He struggled against the loss manifesto, an attempt to adjust the mourning that was ahead of him, his relatives and friends. He wanted to convince His Father to allow him escape his then-potential loss in the form of death. The *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (2013:309) states that “‘Gethsemane,’ ... is the location of Jesus' prayer in lonely anguish before his arrest (Matthew 26:36; Mk. 14:32)’ by Judas.” The place where he faced difficult ‘moments of despair due to the cup of suffering but showed exemplary faithfulness to his Father's will’. It was also at this place where he manifested his “experience of turmoil” as he prayed “... with strong crying and tears to the one who was able to save him (*cf.* Hebr. 5:7; Lk. 22:44).” (p.312). Therefore, Jesus understood, perceived and suffered his mourning event as a heavy yoke due to accompanied anguish, turmoil, loneliness and dying (p.312).

Third, in healing the blind, lame, lepers, deaf, raising up the dead, preaching good news to the poor, and blessing whoever is not offended at him (Matthew 11:5–6) are also vivid evidences portraying Jesus as being against these mournful kinds of losses. Jesus’ mourning seems to reflect his mercy and compassionate spirit toward and upon people who are in arduous situations. Mourning becomes an important and imperative activity for restoring the lost and/or broken body or soul (Matthew 11; Romans 12). As Vanier (1988:1-2) argues, people are in darkness and brokenness, whereby, some are our brothers, sisters, spouses, children, relatives, friends, and neighbours. They may be poor, rich, weak, lonely and oppressed, sinful or wounded, helpless and guilty, insecure, misunderstood and unrecognised. They experience pain and darkness, and call for healing from which to receive springs of joy now. Thus, servants experiencing burdens need Jesus for restoration (cf. pp. 5–13, 97).

While Jesus’ statement considers mourning as a divine loss to servants for blessings and future comfort from God, he himself also insists on the necessity for people to have a compassionate spirit to whoever suffers loss and is in a state of mourning. Vanier (1988:4–76) highlights that Jesus broke, violated or adjusted his admonitions into ‘relationship, compassion or communion in mourning on the path to and for peoples’ wholeness.’ Jesus “is hidden in the poor, the weak, the lonely and the oppressed. Let us walk together along this path with our sisters and brothers in this broken world of ours. Let us walk together along this path with Jesus, and discover that it is a path of hope.” (p.3, cf. pp. 110–113). Following his perceptions, approval, adjustments and the instructions to servants about mourning losses during his human lifetime, Jesus brings a new direction of thoughts and practices towards that blessing and future comfort. He enforces the existence of obligations and opportunities to servants as his successors.

### **Jesus’ Statement as an Obligation and Opportunity to Servants**

We have noticed in the above section that being fully divine and human, Jesus passed through various individual and social mournful losses. This section grapples with the actual implication of Jesus in his statement to match with the admonitions and adjustments performed during his human lifetime. To Albright and Mann (1971:46), “the favor of God does not rest upon the state of mourning *as such*, but upon those who lament the sin which mars God’s chose [sic!] of Israel. Cf. Isa lxi 2, referring to those who mourn man’s disobedience to God.” Albright and Mann see mourning as being subjected to lamenting sin and disobedience to God. They interpret Jesus’ statement by assimilating to other teachings and admonitions to servants to qualify for inheriting the kingdom of heaven. Their emphasis bases upon the vengeance of God to sinners and future comfort to all who mourn for their forgiveness of sins.

Furthermore, there is a special lesson in Jesus’ weeping and mourning over Jerusalem (Matthew 23:37) for servants and whoever wishes to be a subject of the kingdom of heaven. Floyd (2008:87) writes that “Jesus seems to experience grief over His people’s lack of understanding their role in God’s plan.” Jesus’ awareness and adjustments to mourn losses during his human lifetime were a little bit complex. He seemed both appreciative and uncomfortable with it. He emphasised, struggled and adjusted the grief and mourning. Jesus’ statement would help to make people think and

understand their role and placement in the plan of God for their future blessings, comfort and inheritance of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus wanted to make the weeping rejoice, as Saint Paul remarked: “Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep.” (Rom. 12:15).

On the basis of the above explanations, Gilrain and Dastur (2015) note that mourning is encouraged to signify activeness to deal and process the loss. Albright and Mann (2000), Gilrain (2004) and Neil’s (1962) ideas echo at least two indispensable obligations: first, Jesus’ statement on mourning pushes servants to have deep meditation and repentance commitments in order to be blessed and comforted now and for their future membership into the kingdom of heaven. Second, whoever wishes to inherit the kingdom of God is instructed to practice the burden of mourning akin to the teachings of Jesus in the beatitudes. However, as an obligation, mourning provides an opportunity to overcome negative situations regarding loss events. Without it, life becomes more harmful to individuals (Dastur 2015). Hence, everyone among servants has to comply with Jesus’ emphases on mourning to fulfill God’s mission on earth and in heaven (cf., Mitchell & Anderson 1983; Clinebell 1984; Mlunja 2000; Slaga 2017).

### **Empirical Scenarios in Tanzania**

This section merges the former audience and context with the contemporary Christian communities and contexts in Tanzania. Intercultural hermeneutics purports that the previous cultural context should conversate with the contemporary in order to fuse the understanding intended by the first speaker in the respective culture and context. Schreiter, in his publications, insists on the relationships between gospel, church and culture. Those are horizons from two distinct contexts – the Western and the Eastern, thus the former and the contemporary. To make the message effective and appropriate, Schreiter (1997:31, 33; cf., 1985:22–94) emphasises that there must be “a fusion of horizons,” through “*Intercultural communication competence*. The characteristics of intercultural communication competence are *effectiveness* and *appropriateness*.”. After a few dialogues and harmonisation, sometimes done by the interpreter, there is a fusion of understanding in the former speaker’s meaning. Adamo (2015:3) substantiates that “African biblical hermeneutics is the biblical interpretation that makes ‘African social cultural context a subject of interpretation.’ It is the rereading of the Christian scripture from a premeditatedly Afrocentric perspective. Specifically, it means that the analysis of the biblical text is done from the perspective of African worldview and culture.” Moreover, Adamo (2016:5, cf., pp. 1–10) adds that “African cultural studies or African Biblical Studies has three main characteristics: It is ‘liberational, transformational and culturally sensitive’.”. There are vivid African contextual scenarios, processes, tasks and healing issues that can be used as illustrations of mourning the losses reflecting Matthew 5:4 and other life experiences. In this article, to be culturally sensitive, the article integrates the *Hehe* and *Bena* tribes of Tanzania to illustrate the interpretation of mourning as Jesus admonished in his statement so that the former and the contemporary horizons adopt a similar message from him in their varied cultural contexts.

Tanzania is among African countries that share the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* and African religiosity in times of joys and cries. *The admonition of Jesus in Matthew 5:4 relates to the real experiences of mourning that Tanzanian communities and also*

the African emphasise by practice communally during various losses. In the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus addressed the crowd of people and his disciples. The gathering was communal. Issues addressed in the sermon, including the issue of mourning for being blessed and future comfort, were communal. The communal nature of the event in the Sermon on the Mount reflects the way African live and practice under the umbrella philosophy of Ubuntu.

In an African context, this concept is highly emphasised by Mbiti (1969:2), who states that “To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community.” It grows from birth to death in the status of being through the concept “I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am.” Thus, “Such a man [sic] has the attitude that ‘the more *we are*, the bigger *I am*.’” (p.142, *cf.*, p. 113; Schreiter, 1997:37). In line with these ideas, Klinken and Chitando (2021:9) point that “Ubuntu is (...) [a] word, and it has been widely adopted in African philosophy as a concept of human existence in community. It is often translated as ‘I am because you are’ or ‘a person is a person through other people.’” (*cf.*, Beight, J. L. 2007). In this philosophy, the concept of reciprocity is highly emphasised in all communal events, among them death with its mourning processes. Mligo (2021:13) clarifies further:

When a person dies, the mourning is not just individual. The mourning is communal and is done by every individual within the respective community. The death of a person, in African context, is a ceremony. It is a time when people gather together to console one another following the loss of one member in the community. As it is in the wedding ceremony, the gathering is accompanied by eating and drinking. (...) [T]he event is not of the intimate nuclear family alone; rather, it is the event of the whole community. Every person within the community feels the obligation to participate in the facilitation of the event in order for it to be conducted in the required order. (*cf.*, Kokobili 2019:8)

The dominant mourning so far cited in this study is especially mourning over losses due to death, significant objects, and lost relationships between humanity and God, and within the context of the *Hehe* and *Bena* tribes of Iringa and Njombe regions of Tanzania (*cf.* Gehman 1999:7–11). The two Tanzanian tribes share most of their African reciprocal principles (*cf.* Mkayula 1998; Mlunja 2000; Tjitunga 2004). The timely and sudden are mostly highlighted kinds of death losses mournful to *Hehe* and *Bena* people.

### ***Deaths Mourned by the ‘Hehe’ and ‘Bena’ of Iringa and Njombe Regions***

Similar to the empirical research of Mkayula (1998) and Mlunja (2000) on the *Bena* tribe, Mdegella (2010:1) points out that there are at least two types of deaths heavily mournful to the *Hehe* tribe: the “timely death” that happens to aged people and to a person who faces terminal illness; and the second type is the one perceived as a “threat”— a sudden death to a person on whom the family, community, and nation were heavily dependent (pp.1, 11). The “threat” or sudden is sometimes known as the ‘premature or untimely and violent’ death (Floyd 2008:92). Thus, the two kinds of

deaths are normally mourned with strong and painful feelings in the *Hehe* and *Bena* tribes. Music is highly used throughout the processes of mourning any of the death loss events (pp.1–11; cf. Abi-Hashem 1999).

Among most memorable and widely known loss that took a long time and heavy mourning process for the *Hehe* tribe is the death of Chief Mkwawa, who shot himself during the war between Germany and the *Hehe* in 1898. He was their heroic leader whose passing is a memorable event in Tanzanian history. Mdegella argues that it “became a threat to soldiers of the *Hehe* tribe” because “there was nobody else prepared to be a substitute (chief) who could have had similar heroic characteristics of Chief Mkwawa”, which led to people becoming worried and devastated at the thought of being captured by the enemy (p.1). The mourning of the loss of Chief Mkwawa was magnified by the heroic characteristics that he possessed, the type and mode of war, being a “threat” death and the lack of substitution that could retain and sustain the heroic status of the former chief of the *Hehe* tribe. Mbiti (1969) observes that, “Death is cruel, it ‘stiffens’, ‘cuts down’ or ‘evaporates’ a person, even if he continues to exist in the hereafter. This cruelty of death comes out in funeral dirges.” (p.157). He adds: “This same sense of man’s helplessness in the sight of death, can also be seen in an Akan dirge: *We are bereft of a leader, Death has left us without a leader. (...) We are being carried away. Death is carrying us all away ...*” (p.158. Italics original). Consequently, similar to “timely death”, “threat” death has strong subsequent impacts in human beings’ psychological, spiritual and physical states.” (Mdegella 2010:1–2; cf. Gehman, 1999:10; Njau, 2010:6–19, 49–57). Thus, the mourning process is always “associated with anger, denial, shock and irrational beliefs among families.” (Mdegella 2010:1–2). The statement of Jesus in Matthew 5:1 stands as a statement of hope for future resurrection. As prophets were sent to comfort the mourners in the Old Testament and the subsequent utterance of Jesus in the New Testament, mourning due to death among the *Bena* and *Hehe* requires a celebration of hope for future blessedness and joy.

### ***Tasks undertaken in Mourning the Losses among the Hehe and Bena Tribes***

Jesus statement about mourning in Matthew 5:4 is highly relevant to most African situations of mourning. With regard to the African philosophy of life, Mbiti (1969:149) states that in many societies, death is the most disruptive phenomenon of all. It stands between the human being and spirits, and between the visible and the invisible. “There are many, and often complicated, ceremonies connected with death, burials, funerals, inheritance, the living-dead, the world of the departed, (...) reincarnation and survival of the soul. Death is something that concerns everybody,” and “brings loss and sorrows to every family and community.” (p.149). Mbiti also elaborates that mourning is one of those ceremonies. Therefore, mourning for the eschatological realisation stated by Jesus is not only limited to Jesus audience; it is also for various audiences, including that of deaths occurring among the *Hehe* and *Bena* of Iringa and Njombe respectively.

Mdegella (2010:5) paraphrases from Worden the definition of mourning being a process-task, instead of a state of mind, done to show a successful finalisation. Mourning becomes a necessary activity because it removes a certain kind of poison in humanity. Mourning makes a point of minimising or healing the sharpness of the loss encountered so that the person mourning can bear and overcome the situation for

his/her future life (cf. p. Mdegella 2010:5). The tasks undertaken reflect and preserve the traditions and customs (cf. Gehman, 1999; Meyer 1993:178–193, 235–240; Tjitunga 2004:8–11; Njau 2010:6–19, 49–57).

In mourning tasks are performed in order to demonstrate the reality and significance of loss due to death. Mdegella (2010) states that the *Hehe* people normally start by crying alarms through echoing “out by shrings into the air” or sometimes with a gunshot being fired into air, especially when someone of high status has died. This is an initial point that relates to information about the death event and a starting point of the mourning process (p. 8; cf. Gehman 1999:10; Mbiti 1969:149–159; Meyer 1993:178–193, 235–240). Other tasks done at this initial point include informing close relatives who live far away by using allegorical languages, such as, “*Uwutamwa wigina hilo*” – in English, “The sickness is getting worse.” (Mdegella 2010: 8; cf. Gehman 1999:10–12); washing and dressing the corpse in a separate room or by hanging cloth remnants with some cords to block the sight of corpse from relatives (p. 9); arrangement of the burial timetable depending on the time he/she passed away and his/her status in family and community; the assembling of properties and division of inheritance; the “dissolution of prohibitions and cessation of the mourning signs”; at last, the mourning ends with the smearing or building of the tomb and other rituals (Mdegella 2010: 9–11; cf. Mbiti 1969:149–159; Gehman 1999:12–13, 15–22). Even the *Bena* rituals resemble those of the *Hehe* (Mkayula, 1998; Mlunja, 2000; Njau, 2010). Thus, these tasks carry up reconciliation and “adaptation to loss” (Howarth, 2011:5) due to death or the loss of objects or relationships.

Johnson Ndelwa (2009) has also conducted imperial research on the *Hehe* and *Bena* in Mafinga town within the Iringa region. The study is titled: *The importance of Counseling Intervention regarding the Impacts and Effects of Grief and Loss in the society*. While referring to Worden, Ndelwa states that the existence of grief and loss in a human lifetime may result in suffering, maladaptive behaviour, irrational beliefs and incomprehensible unpredictability, and loss of control, discomfort and violation, trauma and painful situations on a societal level. People who experience these situations are perceived to be in bereavement and mourning experiences (pp.2–3,6). Abi-Hashem (1999:311) concurs that people sometimes react negatively to losses, consequently creating more grief and mourning in life, and so adjustments are required. The common reactions and responses to losses and grief that determine and regulate the mourning process “usually vary in nature, intensity, frequency, and duration”, levels of attack and relationships (Abi-Hashem 1999: 312–314). “[T]heir religious tradition, cultural background, (...) particular season of life (...) and ethnic factors greatly shape the bereavement responses, and regulate the mourning patterns of people.” (Abi-Hashem 1999: 322, 323; cf. Mulemi 2017). Thus, Howarth (2011:4) summarises that “Loss is a universal human phenomenon, but people respond to it with varying degrees of grief and mourning. Although the experience is common, its expression varies across individuals. People grieve in different ways, for different durations, and with manifestations that range from depression to rage to avoidance.” (cf. Neria and Litz 2004:81–83). Repentance and forgiveness are among the ways portrayed by Jesus’ statement in Matthew 5:4 and are implied by the tasks done in African communities, including the *Hehe* and *Bena* of Iringa and Njombe respectively.

### ***Mourning through Repentance and Forgiveness to Restore Lost Relationships***

Matthew 5:4 plays a part as a tool of comfort for mourners in line with its Old Testament background. The text is a tool not only for reconciliation but also for repentance where the relationship has been lost. A lost relationship can also be restored through repentance and forgiveness in a form of mourning. Whether between individuals or between God and individuals, meaningful mourning may serve a reparative agency in restoring lost relationships (*cf.*, 1Sam. 7:2–6). In these cases, Jesus commands a repentant mourning to servants through repentance for a good relationship with God as well as with their fellow people, ultimately, for love and a peaceful life (Jn. 13:35; Act. 3:19–12; Rom. 12:16; Jam. 5:16).

Repentance and forgiveness through mourning are found also in the African *Ubuntu* lifestyle. Kokobili (2019:8) once expounded Desmond Tutu's Ubuntu theology by saying,

“Tutu's usage of the Ubuntu focuses on the African concept of community which puts emphasis on the integrity of human beings created to live in the image of God even in the midst of conflict (...) To this, Tutu encourages the oppressed to see beyond the experiences of the past but forgive the one who oppressed before and embraces such a person as one family of God. This is because the (...) African society has its traditional Ubuntu lifestyle of love and togetherness of all people regardless of ethnicity.”

Kokobili (2019:8) adds that, “(...) former president Nelson Mandela (...) explained the relevance of Ubuntu while he was growing up in South Africa. To him, Ubuntu means tolerance, respect, humility, forgiveness, togetherness, respect, trust, sharing, etc. which are the core values of society (...)” It is in a similar vein that mourning, as portrayed by Jesus in Matthew 5:4, serves as a repentance tool in most African societies, including the Hehe and Bena ethnic groups

### ***Music as an Instrument for Healing during the Mourning Process***

The main task of Matthew 5:4 is to provide a future hope for mourners. Philip Mdegella (2010:3) undertook a study at Kilolo District within the Iringa region in Tanzania. The main objective for his research was to create awareness in himself and people on how music therapy could and was among useful mechanisms and approaches for healing in the mourning process among the *Hehe*; especially when they encountered significant losses from the deaths of loved ones (Mdegella 2010:1–7). Mdegella's major purpose was to investigate the role of music therapy in the mourning process among the *Hehe* people. He terms music therapy “as the systematic application of music by the therapist to bring about changes in the emotional or physical health of the client; or the ability to experience an altered state of physical arousal and subsequent mood.” (Mdegella 2010:16). It contains several processions of musical tones, rhythm and instruments for pleasing effects resulting from losses. Therefore, it seems clear that music is among instruments useful in providing future hope when mourning the losses.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that Jesus’ statement in Matthew 5:4 compels his servants to mourn as a divine practice for them to be the recipients of blessings, future comfort and the kingdom of heaven. The admonitions found in Jesus’ statement (Matthew 5:4) contribute a theological, psychological, sociological and physiological motivation to Christian communities towards obtaining that blessing and future comfort from God. It is an eschatological statement in which Jesus bestows blessedness unconditionally and without compulsion. It has been stated throughout this article that though the statement of Jesus promises mourners that they will be blessed and comforted in the future, it nevertheless provides them obligations and tasks to fulfill. In the audience of Jesus and modern-day readers and hearers, Jesus’ statement admonishes communities and individual servants to mourn the losses such as the death of beloved ones, significant objects, relationships between fellow people and with God, as viewed in the scenario of the *Hehe* and *Bena* context of Tanzania in contemporary African societies. Jesus’ statement about mourning implies most activities and knowledge pertaining to repentance of sins, *paraklēthēsontai* adoration to God, and meaningful affiliation to humanity. In view of the above reflection, the article concludes that Jesus’ statement enforces mourning to servants in various contexts for at least six benefits: first, to acquire blessings, comfort and inherit the kingdom of God through their practices of repentance; second, to promote relaxation for further living; third, to rebuild lost relationships between individuals and God; fourth, in line with repentance, Jesus’ statement instructs pastors to live as daily advocates of God’s call for mission through the law of love in and to the world; fifth, to manage difficulties and changes in life for coping, recovery and life-giving; and sixth, to obtain necessary and important learning and re-learning. The article suggests that for pastors and Christian communities to practice appropriate mourning of losses as per Jesus’ directives, a contextual interpretation of the text should be sought. A contextual interpretation is necessary because the statement of Jesus on mourning of loss does not have a single meaning for all contexts. Unless a contextual interpretation is seriously engaged, adhering to Jesus’ statement on mourning loss will be an unnecessary burden to Christian communities in most contexts.

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