

## Jesus' Kingdom Movement

### *The Gospel of Matthew*

## Lord, Fill My Emptiness, Part 1: Grieving and Celebrating

### *Matthew 8:1 – 4*

#### **Introduction:**

Today I'd like to talk about two spiritual practices that I think would be good to build into our lifestyles in some way: Grieving and Celebrating. The reason is so we can be emotionally healthy with Jesus.

One of the most challenging things for me as a young person was to handle pain. When I was in high school, I was playing basketball, and I came down on the other guy's foot, and I rolled my ankle. The next day, there was a huge bruise and lots of swelling. But a few days later, my friends and I went to Disneyland in California because we had already planned on it. So I walked around on it all day. Later on, I learned that I had torn a ligament. That's pretty bad. But that was one way I had of dealing with pain. I just gritted my teeth and forced it to go somewhere else in my mind. How many of you can relate to that? Have you done that?

Well I also did that emotionally. When I was around nine years old, my dad came home from a party right next door. My dad was drunk, and he had just punched our neighbor in the face. Like me, my dad is Japanese-American, and he had thought that our next door neighbor, who was a white American, had made a racial insult. And when my dad got drunk, he got angry. And I was pretty familiar with that at home. So my dad punched our neighbor. Even though my dad apologized to our neighbor the next day, in our family, we never talked about that episode. As a family, we just forced it to go somewhere else. And how did I deal with it? I just gritted my teeth and forced it somewhere else in my heart.

#### **Context:**

This week at Rescued we begin a miniseries called *Lord, Fill My Emptiness*. It is going to be very practical, because the emptiness and filling that we're talking about are biblical spiritual practices which the people of God have done for centuries. Some spiritual practices involves emptying part of our lives in order to make space for God to fill. To start off, I'd like to share about grieving and celebrating. Grieving is like starting with a blank canvas, emptying ourselves of our denial, maybe our fears, and allowing Jesus to help us write out the story of our pain. That's grieving. Celebrating is allowing Jesus to remind us of His goodness. In the secular world, grieving and celebrating don't really go together. But with Jesus, they can, and they do. Each of us needs some kind of rhythm of grieving and celebrating.

Now for some of you, this might not be hard. If you sit down in silence, maybe you'll start crying. But for those of you for whom it's harder, let's explore some steps. Maybe, like me, you want to protect your family, for example. You were raised to not air the family's dirty laundry. If you were abused, you might even feel like you have to protect your abuser. Then you wonder why you get involved with people who treat you badly. In romance. In friendship. Whatever. Because in your heart, you've given other people permission to treat you that way. You've got to say it was wrong, know for sure that God says it was wrong, and then you can start to grieve it, and really own that emotionally, in your heart. You might ask, 'Wait, Mako, doesn't Jesus tell us to forgive others?' Yes, absolutely, but your forgiveness doesn't mean much if you think it's okay for others to treat you badly. When you know deep down that God loves you, and wants good relationships for you, then you can also deeply forgive people.

Or, maybe you're like me, and you were raised to just be tough. Don't cry. Don't show weakness. Especially for men. If you sprained your ankle, keep walking on it. Whatever's going on at home, just walk it off. Or maybe you think it's just water under the bridge. Things happened, and the past is the past. But the pain builds up. Grieving is what gets it out. If you don't grieve, you wind up hurting yourself, and others. Maybe that's how you survived back then. But now, you're old enough to change your heart habits.

We don't like feeling pain, even as the people of God. For example, most praise songs are happy, happy, joy, joy, closure, closure, closure songs. And I'm glad for them. We need them. But when we need to express our pain to God, what songs can we reach for? In the Bible, grieving is a big part of life. The Jewish people were an oppressed minority group for most of their history. And then there was their own sin. So 40% of the Psalms in the Bible's

*Book of Psalms* are lament songs, grieving songs, songs that help people express their pain and get it outside of ourselves. Many of them even end with a, 'How long, O Lord?!?' I don't think we want to cut ourselves off from 40% of the Psalms. There's an entire book in the Bible called *Lamentations* written to grieve a community tragedy: the city of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonian Empire. That happened because of their sin, so they were grieving their own sin. Some of us here at Rescued, including myself, are grieving not speaking up to express loving concern about certain behaviors. Well, Jesus said in Matthew 5:4, 'Blessed are those who *mourn*,' or *grieve* sin. And so I am convinced that grieving is something we must consciously do to be human, and to be healthy with Jesus. We celebrate God's goodness, too, alongside our grieving, not as a shortcut or a distraction, but as a complement so we can grow in both grieving with God and celebrating God together.

### **The Man Covered with Leprosy: 8:2**

We're going to look at the Gospel of Matthew 8:1 – 4. It's the first close-up healing story in Matthew's Gospel. A few weeks ago, I described how the Gospel of Matthew is like a teaching curriculum. Part 1 is an introduction to Jesus and his teaching which speaks to our hearts. Part 2 is a collection of healing stories, because Jesus is our healer. This is the first of those stories. In this story, Jesus heals a man of leprosy: <sup>8:1</sup> When Jesus came down from the mountain, large crowds followed Him. <sup>2</sup> And a leper came to Him and bowed down before Him, and said, 'Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.'

Now at first you might be surprised that I'm drawing on this story. After all, this is a healing story. It should be about celebration, right??? Yes and no. Let's be on the same page to understand this. Leprosy is a disease that kills nerve endings so that you are unable to feel. You don't feel pain. Now at first, you might think, 'Awesome! That'd be great to not feel pain! Like how I tried to not feel my ankle pain or my family pain.' But that's dangerous because it makes you vulnerable to more and more injuries.

So just in case we don't know or don't appreciate this, let me illustrate this. When you go for a walk, you start out putting your foot down heel to toe, heel to toe. But over time, your muscles get tired and feel some pain. So your body automatically adjusts, you bring of your body weight forward, and you start putting your foot down more flat. Your body adjusts because you feel pain. If your feet and legs did not adjust, you would wind up with bruises and ulcers on your feet. You'd have all kinds of injuries and one day your toes would probably fall off. The same thing happens when you sit in chairs. Your body automatically adjusts every so often. If you stand for a long time, your body adjusts every so often. Imagine not knowing when you're bleeding, or not knowing if you're burned. You'd get infections. That's why pain is important to feel. If you had leprosy and didn't feel pain, you would keep reinjuring yourself.

So leprosy was the most terrifying disease of the ancient world, kind of the HIV/AIDS of its day. It was contagious. It was devastating. According to Leviticus 13, the Jewish community would set up a limited quarantine, and only the Jewish priests would check in on the lepers. God used leprosy in the Old Testament to teach His people what sin does to us. It's not that this guy who had leprosy was more sinful than other people, or did something wrong so that he were cursed. No, it didn't work like that. Biblically, sin is like a disease in us, a corruption in us, a condition in which something in us is fighting against something else in us. That's on a spiritual level. On the physical level, flu or cancer or leprosy is when something in us is fighting against something else in us on the physical level. So that's why diseases are physical representations of what sin is on a deeper, spiritual level. Leprosy illustrates what sin is like. When we sin, we SHOULD feel pain. We SHOULD feel the pain of guilt if we do something wrong. If someone else sins, especially if they sin against us, we SHOULD feel pain. But we might develop leprosy of the soul. In English, we speak of having a 'seared conscience.' That's leprosy of the soul, where you don't feel an appropriate regret or pain about wrongs we've done. That's what makes sin so dangerous.

### **Jesus' Touch: 8:3**

So Jesus heals this guy of leprosy. Let's linger on how he did it. All of a sudden, Jesus 'stretched out his hand and touched him,' according to Matthew 8:3. Now Jesus' power to heal came from his spoken word, as we'll see in just a minute. But his compassion is demonstrated in his touch. Jesus isn't afraid of getting this disease. And maybe this guy had open sores, but Jesus touches him anyway. Maybe on his shoulder. Maybe on his face. Maybe he held his hand. Who knows how long this guy had gone without human touch, and Jesus touched him. Jesus is not afraid to touch us, in the places where we feel most ashamed, and most sinful, and most dirty, and most untouchable. Jesus is actually drawn to the places in us like that. He says, 'That place! Don't hide it from me. I want to touch that. I want to speak words of life there. And as you regain feeling, I want my touch to be the first thing you feel there.'

Maybe you're afraid that grief is like a monster that will consume you, like God won't be there with you to pull you through it and defeat the monster. But Jesus will reach out for you. The phrase 'stretched out his hand' here in Matthew 8 is the same phrase used in the Old Testament when God 'stretched out His hand' and delivered Israel out of Egypt (Ex.3:20; 7:5; Ps.136:12; Ps.138:7). Only this time, Jesus stretched out his hand to deliver people out of diseases, demonic stuff, and death. He will reach out for you. He won't give you up.

The story goes on: <sup>3</sup> Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, 'I am willing; be cleansed.' And immediately his leprosy was cleansed.' In an instant, Jesus changes this guy's life. He could go back to his family and friends. He could get a normal job. He could get married and make love to his wife. He could hold his children. All the shame of his disease is gone. All the isolation, gone. Jesus is awesome, right?!? That's great, right?!?

But Jesus also takes away his weird immunity to pain. Now, this guy could it when he stubs his toe. He could feel his muscles get sore. And when he reenters community with others, he's going to feel the sin of others and his own sin. And now, he has this experience of Jesus' healing to look back on. He knows Jesus calls him to feel things in an honest way, in a godly way, in a fully human way. Then he'd think of Jesus' touch again.

Illus: Everyone who knew me when I was a young man up until I was about 21, would say that there were certain parts of my emotional life that were turned off. And I had gone away for college, and every summer, I had gone home but I had wanted to avoid my parents' fighting, my dad's alcohol use, and all of that craziness. But that year, I was learning from Scripture more about Jesus' presence in me by his Spirit. And I felt like he said, 'Mako, I'd like you to love your parents and younger sister as much as possible when you go home this summer.' My first reaction was, 'No way! I don't want to be hurt like that.' But I read Scripture and I believed it was true that Jesus was healing me of something very deep. I listened to my mom and dad tell their personal stories, and it almost seemed like I was listening to them for the first time. Some things I did learn for the first time, like how my mom ran away with me when I was a few months old, because things were that bad, but her sister persuaded her to come back. I heard the pain of their marriage. I heard my dad's pain of feeling like a failure, and the pain of his childhood in the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II and how that affected him. I was feeling this pain for the first time. So I would weep, and then I would journal my conversation with God. That journaling was my process of grieving. Sometimes I journaled twice a day because so much was going on.

I share that story because I think we need a structured way of feeling things. For me, that is journaling. For you, it might be different. Maybe it's taking a long walk. I like going to the Arboretum, because I like being reminded that spring comes after winter, just as God brings life out of death. Maybe for you, it's reading certain Psalms. Psalm 4 is a song of grieving. It says, 'Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness! You have relieved me in my distress; be gracious to me and hear my prayer.' (Ps.4:1) It's saying, 'God, I'm hurting here. Please change what's going on!' Psalm 56 records one of God's many responses to our grieving: 'You have taken account of my wanderings; put my tears in Your bottle. Are they not in Your book?' (Ps.56:8) Even when God doesn't change the circumstances, God hears our grief, shares in our grief, carries us in our grief. Israel as the people of God sang songs like that regularly. Because they knew that pain is important to feel but we can't let it pile up in us. We have to let God into it, and let God draw it out of us. God invites His people into some kind of rhythm of grieving and celebrating. It's something we do in community.

Illus: A few weeks ago, I was having a conversation with Valerie's husband Al. And Al gave me permission to tell this part of his story. Al showed me this video that had been taken of him climbing a ladder and a pole to a platform that looked like it was as high as a three or four story building. And he was supposed to jump off this platform to grab this ball that was hanging out there beyond his reach. It was a learning exercise. Al and each of the men who were doing had to name something in their lives that this jump represented. Al said it represented exploring how his earthly father did not prepare him for manhood. So taking this leap off this platform was supposed to feel like a huge risk, like am I going to fall into pain and grief? But in reality, Al was wearing a harness and four men on the ground was holding him up with ropes. That represented accountability and support. And so grieving now is very different than when he was 13 years old, for example. When he was 13 years old, his mom died suddenly. And Al didn't know how to grieve that. Instead, he sought comfort in food, then drugs and alcohol. But now, with Jesus and others holding him up, he can explore, and grieve, in a very different way.

Sometimes, grieving might feel like falling off a cliff, or plunging into a bottomless pit. But Jesus never lets go of us!! He keeps his hand on us, on our shoulder, on our face, on our hand. And he gives us one another. That's why at times, we grieve together. These spiritual practices like grieving come from the earliest Christians in Egypt and Ethiopia, starting in the 200's and 300's. They formed these communities in monasteries. This is where the idea of a monk or nun comes from. There are lots of reasons why Christians left their homes in cities and went to join these monasteries. One reason was a desire to separate themselves from trauma. Cities back then had a lot of physical violence and sexual violence. And sometimes you need to leave the place where you were hurt in order to recover. You need some space, or emptiness, for Jesus to fill. I share that because I get the question a lot, 'Isn't Christianity a white man's religion?' And then when we do these practices, we think they're just Catholic and European. But they're actually from Egyptian and Ethiopian Christians first. And there are some really powerful stories that have been passed down to us about God working through these communities.

Take this guy as an example: Moses the Ethiopian also known as Moses the Robber! He was part of a gang in Egypt during the 300's AD. In fact he was a big man, and so good at fighting, that he led the gang. He was said to be terrifying. One time when he was near Alexandria, Egypt, he found himself running away from the local police. In the desert, Moses the Robber stumbled upon a group of Christians who had started a small monastery. He was struck by how peaceful and content they were. So right then and there, Moses decided to give his life to Jesus, give up robbery and violence, and join that community. In their daily and weekly rhythms of prayer and work and reflection and worship, he learned how to love Jesus and grieve his sin. A while later, some men from his old gang discovered the monastery and tried to rob them. Moses was able to tie them up, but he didn't want to hurt them further because he had grieved his old lifestyle. Moses the Ethiopian is known as one of the earliest advocates of Christian non-violence! That is the power of a transformed life.



Now we might not be able to run off into some desert somewhere. But that's why we gather here on Sundays. That's why we have Lighthouse groups during the week. And you can have your own time with the Lord. We can still have a rhythm of life around spiritual practices that create some empty space in our lives so Jesus can fill it.

#### **Celebrating: 8:4**

Now this week, the balance in your life that I want to suggest is to have a rhythm of grieving and celebrating. Celebrating God, giving thanks to God. After Jesus healed the man with leprosy, he told him to go see the local priest and take a step in celebrating God. Look at verse 4: 'And Jesus said to him, 'See that you tell no one; but go, show yourself to the priest and present the offering that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.''

To make an offering back then was to celebrate something God did in your life. Yes, it's what Jewish law said. Yes, it's what the community did. Yes, if the community was going to receive this man back as healed, the local priest would have to give him a clean bill of health. But also, making an offering was an expression of celebration. It's saying, 'Thank You, God!' And then this man entered back into the larger stream of Jewish life, where there were regular festivals and holidays and offerings and meals.

Even when we grieve, we celebrate God's goodness. Because ultimately God is undoing all our pain. He came as the man Jesus, and shared in our sinful humanity, that we might share in his healed humanity. So he is undoing

human evil at its source, in each one of us. And we look forward to when Jesus returns and will wipe away every tear from our eyes (Revelation 21:4).

But it's not just that we want to be free from pain. We want to be like Jesus. And Jesus grieved for sin. In John 11, he grieved by the tomb of his friend Lazarus – he bawled his eyes out. Probably had snot coming down his nose. He was grieved that death was the cost of sin, and that the cost was so high. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus was grieved in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before he was hung on the cross. He grieved the cost to himself. And Jesus wanted his disciples to be with him in his grieving. He wanted them to see his grief, to grieve with him, pray with him, and yet speak with him of the Father's faithfulness and goodness and ultimate victory. Jesus still calls us to that.

So I invite you to make space in your life to grieve the pain in your life, the sin in your life. You might discover that there's more to talk about later, but start with something small. And as we do this, we hang on to the promise Jesus made, that he touches us, that he comforts us. Lord Jesus, we cling to your promise, 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.'