

Lamentations

by Ross Callaghan

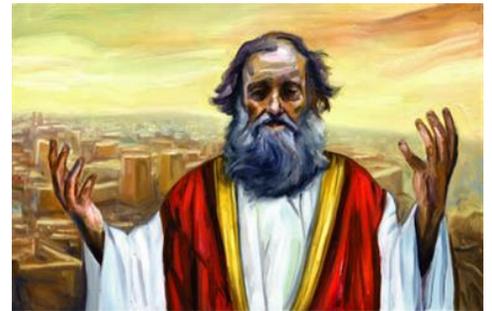
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The Book of Lamentations is made up of five poems expressing deep sorrow about the fall of Israel and the destruction of Jerusalem. It is part of the third section of the Hebrew Bible – the Ketuvim or Writings, and is the 25th book of the Old Testament in the Christian Bible. In Judaism the book is traditionally recited on the fast day of Tisha B'Av ("Ninth of Av"), mourning the destruction of the first and second temples.

'Lamentations' (Hebrew אֵיכָה, *Eikhah*) means 'alas' and is linked with sorrow, wailing, weeping or woe.

Author

Lamentations does not give the name of its author. Traditionally the author is considered to be the prophet Jeremiah even though the book has a slightly different style and viewpoint from Jeremiah's other writings. Jeremiah's authorship is based on 2 Chronicles 25:35 which says *Jeremiah composed laments for Josiah, and to this day all the men and women singers commemorate Josiah in the laments. These became a tradition in Israel and are written in the Laments.*



Date

If the book of Lamentations was written by Jeremiah it must have been written just after the fall of Jerusalem (586 BC).

Background

Chapter 25 of 2 Kings and Chapter 36 of 2 Chronicles describe the awful events that took place when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonian armies. The fall of Jerusalem and the defeat of Judah was the culmination of a long period of rebellion against the Lord, led by a succession of evil kings. Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 BC, and the people of Judah taken into captivity in Babylon. This captivity lasted for a period of 70 years as predicted in Jeremiah 25:11 and 29:10. The captivity ended in 538 BC after the fall of Babylon to the Persian king Cyrus the Great, Cyrus then gave the Jews permission to return to their land so they could rebuild their temple. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe the return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple.

It was because of the Lord's anger that all this happened to Jerusalem and Judah, and in the end He thrust them from His presence. 2 Kings 24:20.

The Lord raised Jeremiah up as a prophet in the period before the captivity, but his message was consistently rejected. Jeremiah proclaimed God's judgment on the nation of Judah for their apostasy against the Lord and their great sinfulness, making clear that the results of this sin would be the destruction of Jerusalem and the taking of the nation into captivity. Jeremiah became known as the 'weeping prophet' because he felt so deeply about the nations' rejection of the Lord. His life was threatened on numerous occasions and he was often put in prison.

The five laments in the Book of Lamentations reflect Jeremiah's deep sorrow regarding this situation, especially as the fall of Jerusalem meant much more than ignominious defeat and exile. The covenant that God had made with the Israelites was of blessing for obedience or judgment for disobedience. The Israelites had willfully disobeyed the Lord and now His judgment was being poured upon them. This indicated that God's wonderful promises for the nation of Israel would not be fulfilled, which Jeremiah knew would lead many to question the Lord and His promises.

Jeremiah had a lot to lament!

Structure In the original Hebrew, each poem is written in a distinct pattern. Unfortunately the pattern is somewhat lost when translated into English.

- Lamentations 1 is an acrostic poem made up of 22 three-line segments, each beginning with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet in their natural order. Each segment becomes a verse in our English Bibles. It laments the captivity of the citizens of Jerusalem and the desolation of the city.



- Lamentations 2 is also a three-line acrostic poem like Chapter 1, but two of the Hebrew letters are transposed so are out of order. It also laments the destruction of Jerusalem but places more emphasis on God’s judgment.
- Lamentations 3 is also a three-line acrostic poem but each line of a segment begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet, rather than just the first line of each segment as in the first two poems. This means Chapter 3 has 66 verses rather than 22 verses in the other chapters. The same Hebrew letters are transposed as in Chapter 2. This lament is more personal with Jeremiah expressing his deep grief about what has happened, but also his hope and joy for the future because God is a covenant-keeping God.
- Lamentations 4 is also an acrostic poem, but is composed of two-line segments. The first lines of each segment are in the natural order of the Hebrew alphabet. This lament shows that God’s judgment on the people was well-deserved because of their rebellion and sin.
- Lamentations 5 is not an acrostic poem, but it contains the same number of letters as the Hebrew alphabet. It is a powerful prayer in which Jeremiah describes the peoples’ sufferings and asks God to restore their fortunes.

The poems may have been written in these patterns to help memorization. Symbolically the patterns may also represent the full range of sorrow (from alpha to omega) that Jeremiah was feeling as he lamented over the fall of Jerusalem.

Themes The fall of Israel and the destruction of Jerusalem was a catastrophic event in Israel’s history. The Book of Lamentations enabled Jeremiah to express his deep sorrow concerning this terrible event, but also provided a way that Jews at the time (and for all time) could also vent their sorrow. It is still used in this way, today.

The book shows that the awful situation in Jerusalem was a result of God’s judgment, and that in judging the nation God was keeping His side of the covenant He had made with Israel. They had sinned against God and now were paying the price for that sin. (1:8-9, 14; 4:13, 2:5-7). God’s justice meant He could not ignore sin, even if it was the sin of His own people. (1:18). What was happening did not mean God had rejected Israel. Rather it was a result of her own willful disobedience. (2:17, 3:31-33).

But, because God loves Israel, the book also provides much hope and comfort as well. God is a God of faithfulness, mercy and love. (3:22-27). If the nation will return to Him, put their trust in Him again, and fully walk in His ways God will keep His promises and bring restoration and renewal. (3:40-42, 5:21,22). *Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.* 3:22-23.

Outline

Lamentations 1:1-22.

The first poem is a lament about the desolation of Jerusalem, and the captivity of its people. *How deserted lies the city, once so full of people. She who once was queen among the provinces has now become a slave.*

In verse 3 Jeremiah refers to Deuteronomy 28:64-65 where Moses warned the people that if they disobeyed God they would *go into exile* and find *no resting place*. This awful prediction has now been fulfilled: *The Lord has brought her grief because of her many sins. Her children have gone into exile, captive before the foe. All the splendor has departed from the Daughter of Zion.*

The consequences of Israel's sin are many: the city is *desolate*; there is *bitter anguish*; Jerusalem's treasures are in enemy hands; her people groan, and her enemies gloat. Jeremiah weeps because *Jerusalem has become an unclean thing* and *no-one is near* to give him comfort.

In the midst of all this suffering Israel confesses that God was in the right to bring this great judgment: *The Lord is righteous; I rebelled against His commands*. He had decreed judgment for disobedience and now He was bringing it to pass, even if it was for the sin of His own people.

The first lamentation ends with a prayer in which the people acknowledge that their *distress* and *torment* is because they have been *most rebellious*. They ask God to now pour His judgment on their enemies and bring the great evil to an end.

Lamentations 2:1-22.

The second lament is also a poem about the destruction of Jerusalem but it has a stronger emphasis on God's judgment than the first one. Jeremiah shows that God has poured His wrath on His people with great anger. *How the Lord has covered the Daughter of Zion with His anger. In fierce anger He has cut off every horn of Israel. He has burned in Jacob like a flaming fire that consumes everything around it. The Lord is like an enemy; He has swallowed up Israel; He has multiplied mourning and lamentation.*

God's anger due to the nation's sin has resulted in enormous destruction: Jerusalem has been *laid waste*, and her walls and gates destroyed. The temple has been abandoned, its sanctuary destroyed, and the people have stopped worshipping the Lord. Jeremiah is in *torment within* when he sees this destruction, especially because of its effect on children and infants. He feels helpless in the situation and lays the blame for what has happened on prophets who were *false and worthless* because they did not expose the peoples' sin and so ward off the upcoming captivity. But he also recognizes that *The Lord has done what He planned; He has fulfilled His word, which He decreed long ago.*

Now the people's *tears flow like a river*, but there is no respite. Jeremiah prays that they would now call out to the Lord reminding Him that never before has there been such a time when God poured His anger on His people and *slaughtered them without pity*.

Lamentations 3:1-66.

The third lamentation begins with a graphic and very personal description in which Jeremiah laments how the Lord has afflicted him: *I am a man who has seen affliction by the rod of His wrath. He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light. Indeed He has turned His hand against me again and again, all day long*. When he remembers this affliction his soul is downcast within him, but then he calls to mind the Lord's great love and the whole tone of the poem changes. With joy he affirms the love and faithfulness of God. *Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for Him"*. He knows that *men are not cast off by the Lord for ever. Though He brings grief; He will show compassion, so great is His unfailing love.*

Both calamities and good things come from the Lord so we can't complain about the calamities when we are being punished for our sins. Rather we should *examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the Lord. Let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven and say: We have sinned and rebelled and You have not forgiven.*

On the basis of this Jeremiah believes that God will vindicate him before his enemies. He has *called on God* and God heard his cry You came near when I called You and You said “Do not fear”.

This poem describes Jeremiah’s journey from affliction to despair; then to recognition of God’s love and faithfulness; then to repentance, and then on to assurance. It is a journey that the afflicted of all ages can take if they recognize that God is in their situation and put their full trust in Him.

Lamentations 4:1-22.

The fourth poem shows that God’s judgment on Jerusalem was well deserved. All parts of the community were guilty of sinning against the Lord and have suffered His wrath as a result. *The Lord has given full vent to His wrath; He has poured out His fierce anger. He kindled a fire in Zion that consumed her foundations.* The Lord’s anointed (i.e. Israel), *our very life breath*, was caught in the enemy’s traps. *We thought that under His shadow we would live among the nations.*

The poem finishes with a sense of hope because the punishment and exile of the Daughter of Zion (Israel) *will one day end*; while the God will punish the sin of the Daughter of Edom (i.e. all the other nations round about) and expose their wickedness.

Lamentations 5:1-22.

The last poem is a heartfelt prayer in which Jeremiah describes the sufferings of his people and asks God to restore their fortunes. He asks God to *remember what has happened to us; look and see our disgrace*, especially that Israel has had to bow down to other nations. *Joy has gone from our hearts; our dancing has turned to mourning* and now the city *lies desolate*. He reminds God that *You, O Lord, reign forever; Your throne endures from generation to generation*, and asks that God would not forget His people. *Restore us to Yourself, O Lord, that we may return; renew our days as of old, unless You have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure.*

Lessons for today from Lamentations

The book of Lamentations is not one of the most popular books in the Bible! It does, however, have many significant lessons to teach us, especially as many today are in a similar state to the people of Israel just before God’s judgment fell on them. Lamentations can teach us:

- It’s good and healthy to lament our sin (as long as we also do what Jeremiah did: confess the sin, deal with it, and re-commit to lives to our faithful and loving God).
- God is loving and faithful as part of His being. Regardless of what we do God will still love us and will be faithful towards us.
- God is also just and true to His word. He has said that He will judge sin, and He will.
- When God judges our sin it can be very unpleasant, especially when we experience the consequences of our sin. While we are going through these unpleasant times it may not feel like God still loves us and is faithful towards us.
- The law of sowing and reaping is very powerful, and universally applicable. *As you sow so shall you reap.* Galatians 6:7,8. 2 Corinthians 9:6; If we sow to righteousness we will reap the benefits of righteousness. If we sow to sin we will reap the consequences of that sin.
- God sees history from a different perspective to us. We see what is happening to us at the moment and this is all-important for us. God sees the past, the present and the future, and is continually working to bring about His eternal purposes for our lives. The troubles we go through must be seen in this light. *Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.* 2 Corinthians 4:17,18.
- God is faithful to His word and to Israel. After the 70 years in captivity the nation was restored to their land and the temple was rebuilt. Unfortunately the lessons from the captivity were soon forgotten and the peoples of Israel were later dispersed throughout the world, in fulfillment of God’s promise. *The Lord will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other.* Deuteronomy 28:64.

Discussion questions

Why was Jeremiah sometimes called the weeping prophet? What was he weeping about? What did he do to stop the situation that caused his weeping? Did the people listen to him?

What situations today could (or should) cause great lamentations in us, like those in the Book of Lamentations? What could (or should) we do about these situations? What can we learn from the Book of Lamentations that will help in these situations?

Trace the background history that led up to the lamentations. Why was Judah being judged by God and Jerusalem destroyed? What happened to bring about this judgment and destruction? What happened as a result? What happened afterwards? What lessons did the nation learn from this?

What qualities of God's character are demonstrated in the Book of Lamentations?

What have you learned from your study of Lamentations? How will you apply this in your life?