

Lamentations

Spring 2005

Introduction

The book of Lamentations is a sorrowful postscript to the book of Jeremiah. Through the use of five funeral dirges, Jeremiah grieves over the fate of Jerusalem because of her sin. "It is a mute reminder that sin, in spite of all its allurements and excitement, carries with it heavy weights of sorrow, grief, misery, barrenness, and pain. It is the other side of the 'eat, drink, and be merry' coin." [Swindoll, *The Lamentations of Jeremiah*, Introduction]

Title

The title of the book is taken from the first Hebrew word, translated "Alas!" or "How" and was a characteristic cry of lament or exclamation (2 Samuel 1:19; Jeremiah 9:19). Rabbinic writers referred to the book as "dirges" or "laments," describing its contents. The Septuagint [the Greek version of the Hebrew Old Testament translated in the 200s B.C.] translated the title as "dirges." The English translators followed this pattern and named the book "Lamentations."

Author and Date

The book doesn't name its author, but Jewish tradition says Jeremiah wrote it. The Septuagint has added these words as an introduction: "And it came to pass, after Israel was taken captive, and Jerusalem made desolate, that Jeremiah sat weeping, and lamented with this lamentation over Jerusalem, and said ..."

Assuming Jeremiah did author the book, it must have been composed within the narrow period of time after Jerusalem fell to Babylon in 586 B.C. (1:1-11) but before Jeremiah was taken to Egypt after Gedaliah's assassination (583-582 B.C.). The vivid descriptions and deep emotions expressed in the book indicate the book was written shortly after the events occurred, possibly in late 586 B.C. or early 585 B.C.

Historical Background

From 588 to 586 B.C. the army of Babylon ground away at the defenses of Jerusalem (2 Kings 25:1-10). So Judah's early flush of excitement and euphoria following her rebellion against Babylon was replaced with uncertainty and fear. Her ally, Egypt, had been vanquished in battle as she tried in vain to rescue Judah from Babylon's grasp. One by one the other cities in Judah were crushed (Jeremiah 34:6-7) till only Jerusalem remained before the Babylonian hordes.

Within the city the ever-tightening siege by Babylon's armies began unraveling the fabric of society. Starving mothers ate their own children (Lamentations 2:20; 4:10). Idolatry flourished as the people cried out to any and every god for deliverance. Paranoia gripped the people until they were willing to kill God's prophet as a traitor and spy just because he spoke the truth.

The long siege ended abruptly on July 18, 586 B.C. The walls were then breached and the Babylonian army began entering the city (2 Kings 25:2-4a). King Zedekiah and the remaining men in his army tried to flee, but were captured (2 Kings 25:4b-7). It took several weeks for Nebuchadnezzar to secure the city and strip it of its valuables, but by August 14, 586 the task was completed and the destruction of the city began (2 Kings 25:8-10). The armies of Babylon burned the Temple, the king's palace, and all the other major buildings in the city; and they tore down the walls of the city which provided her protection. When the Babylonians finally finished their destruction and departed with their prisoners, they left a jumbled heap of smoldering rubble.

Jeremiah witnessed the desecration of the Temple and the destruction of the city (Jeremiah 39:1-14; 52:12-14). The once proud capital had been trampled in the dust. Her people were now under the harsh hand of a cruel taskmaster. With all these events stamped vividly on his mind, Jeremiah sat down to compose his series of laments. [*The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, "Lamentations"]

Relationship to Deuteronomy 28

All the hardships experienced by Jerusalem in the book of Lamentations had been predicted about 900 years earlier by Moses. God had warned of the consequences of disobedience, and God had faithfully

carried out those curses. (See the chart on the next page.) Therefore, that makes Lamentations a book of hope for Israel. God was faithful in carrying out every aspect of the covenant He had made. The same covenant that promised judgment for disobedience also promised restoration for repentance (Deuteronomy 30:1-10). Thus Jeremiah could offer hope in the midst of despair (Lamentations 3:21-32). The prayer of Lamentation 5:21-22 is the response of faith, a calling on God to fulfill the final part of His covenant and to restore them as a nation from captivity.

Structure and Style

Lamentations is a series of five laments, or funeral dirges. Each chapter is a separate lament. A lament was a funeral poem or song written and recited for someone who had just died (see 2 Samuel 1:17-27). The song usually emphasized the good qualities of the departed and the tragedy or loss felt by those mourning his death. Jeremiah was lamenting the tragic “death” of the city of Jerusalem and the results of her demise which were being experienced by the people [*Ibid.*].

In chapters 1–4, each chapter is arranged alphabetically. That is, each verse begins with the next letter in the Hebrew alphabet. One possible reason was as a memory aid. Another reason might be to emphasize to the readers the complete nature of their suffering because of sin. Jerusalem’s judgment was “from A to Z.” Maybe it was for both reasons.

Chapters 1 and 5 focus on the people. Chapters 2 and 4 focus on God. Chapter 3 is a pivotal chapter, which is Jeremiah’s response in the midst of the affliction. An outline would be:

- First Dirge: Jerusalem’s Desolation because of Her Sin (chapter 1)
- Second Dirge: God’s Punishment of Jerusalem’s Sin (chapter 2)
- Third Dirge: Jeremiah’s Response (chapter 3)
- Fourth Dirge: God’s Anger (chapter 4)
- Fifth Dirge: The Remnant’s Response (chapter 5)

Chapter One — First Dirge Jerusalem’s Desolation because of Her Sin

Jeremiah’s first dirge establishes the book’s theme—the sorrow of sin. Five times in chapter 1 he noted that Jerusalem’s cries for help after her fall went unanswered—*there is none to comfort her* (verses 2, 9, 16-17, 21). The city had turned from the protection of her God to pursue foreign alliances and lifeless idols. Now when she needed help the most, she was alone and defenseless.

Jeremiah’s lament over Jerusalem’s desolation (verses 1-11)

Verse 1—Jeremiah listed three ways the city had changed:

1. The city was now deserted.
2. The city that had once been great among the nations was now reduced to the status of a widow (hopeless despair).
3. The queen had now become a slave—the city that used to rule other nations was now forced to serve the nation of Babylon.

Verse 2—Jerusalem *weeps bitterly in the night ... she has none to comfort her*. Why? She had abandoned Yahweh, her true Friend and Lover for other lovers and friends [idol gods and foreign alliances] who abandoned her. In fact, *they have become her enemies*.

Verses 3-6—*Judah has gone into exile under affliction to Babylon. She dwells among the nations, so instead of pilgrims coming to Jerusalem for the feasts, the roads of Zion are in mourning because no one comes because the Temple is destroyed (see v. 10). Her priests are groaning ... her virgins are afflicted ... her little ones have gone away ... her princes have become like hunted bucks. Why? Her adversaries have become her masters.*

NOTE: The word “Zion” (verses 4, 6) referred originally to the hill in Jerusalem on which the city of David was built (2 Samuel 5:7; 1 Kings 8:1). Later when the Temple was built on Mt. Moriah (just north

of David's city) and the Ark of the Covenant was transferred there, Mt. Moriah was called Mount Zion (Psalm 20:2; 48:2; 78:68-69). Eventually Zion included the entire city of Jerusalem, including David's city, the Temple mount, and even the western hill on which the city later expanded. The term "Zion" is also often associated with God's dwelling place.

Why did all this happen? *For the Lord has caused her grief because of the multitude of her transgressions.*

Verse 7—Now she is homeless, and she remembers all her precious things that were from the days of old. Now her adversaries saw her and mocked at her ruin.

Verses 8-9—After having described what happened to Jerusalem, Jeremiah explains why it happened. Jerusalem sinned greatly, therefore she has become an unclean thing. She is reaping what she sowed. Why did she sin greatly? She did not consider her future; therefore she has fallen astonishingly. Sin leads only to death and destruction (Ezekiel 18:4; Romans 6:23).

Application—In the garden of Eden, God told Adam and Eve if they ate the fruit now, they would die in the future. Satan's tactic was to get them to give up the future for the present, whereas God had told them to give up the present for the future. We have the very same decision all the time. The heart of temptation is to convince you to give up the future goal or reward for the present. God said that trials are giving up the present "reward" for the reward of maturity (James 1:2-16), and Jesus said, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth ... but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Matthew 6:19-20).

Verses 10-11—Two results that Jerusalem received because of their sin:

- 1. The Temple was desecrated. ... the nations enter her sanctuary, the ones whom Thou didst command that they should not enter ... The building that the people had falsely relied on for their security (Jeremiah 7:2-15; 26:2-11) was now defiled before their eyes by Gentiles who were not supposed to enter it. They had evidently thought that God would not destroy "His building." But they learned too late that God does not hold stones in higher regard than obedience (Isaiah 66:1-2). Disobedience brings destruction.*
- 2. They experienced famine. All her people groan seeking bread; they have given their precious things for food. The futility of materialism became evident for those who had more silver and gold than bread.*

Application—Beware of using things as "good luck" charms. For example, thinking God will hear prayers in a church building or chapel more than He hears them elsewhere, when the Bible says, it's "the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much" (James 5:16). It's your obedience to God, not where you are, that impresses God (see also Isaiah 66:1-2).

A couple of problems with riches: the more you have, the more they are served. The bigger the house, the more there is to clean. The more cars you have, the more gas to buy. It takes up our time and energy. Do you let the dishes go to make sure you spend time alone with God and in His Word, or do you skip time with God to make sure the dishes are done? Also, the more problems you solve with money, the more you will think that money can solve all problems. If, in fact, your money seems to solve a problem, it's a gift of God (Ecclesiastes 3:13). You could pour a lot of money into something and not solve the problem at all.

Jerusalem's Plea for Mercy (verses 12-22)

In this section, the focus changes to Jerusalem calling to those around to see her condition, *Look and see if there is any pain like my pain ... which the Lord inflicted ...* First she calls out to others (verses 12-19) and then to the Lord (verses 20-22).

Verses 12-15—Jeremiah used four metaphors to describe God's work against Jerusalem:

- 1. From on high He sent fire into my bones*
- 2. He has spread a net for my feet*
- 3. The yoke of my transgression is bound ... He has made my strength fail ... the Lord has given me into the hands of those against whom I am not able to stand [Babylonians]*
- 4. The Lord has trodden as in a wine press the virgin daughter of Judah*

Verses 16-17—Jeremiah pictured Jerusalem as a weeping widow (verses 1-2), who *stretches out her hands; there is no one to comfort her*. To those around her, *Jerusalem has become an unclean thing among them*. The word used for “unclean” referred to the ceremonial impurity associated with menstruation (Leviticus 15:19-20; Ezekiel 18:6).

Verses 18-19—Jerusalem acknowledges that *the Lord is righteous*. They confess, *I have rebelled against His command*. Because God is righteous, He does not allow sin to continue unchecked. Those who enjoy the temporary pleasure of sin will reap a horrible price. Now Jerusalem is paying the cost of that rebellion: *pain ... captivity ... deceived by alliances with foreign nations and idols ... death by famine*.

Verses 20-22—Jerusalem cried out to God. *See, O Lord, for I am in distress; My spirit is greatly troubled; My heart is overturned within me*. Again, she mentions her sin, *for I have been very rebellious*. Whether on the street or in the house, *it is like death*, from sword, starvation, and plague. For the fifth time in the chapter she mentions, *There is no one to comfort me*.

She calls upon God to extend His judgment to her enemies, *that they may become like me*. Jerusalem wanted God to judge the sins of her enemies as He had judged her sins:

- *Oh, that Thou wouldst bring the day which Thou has proclaimed*—“the day” was the “day of the Lord” which had already been announced by the prophets. This was the time when God’s judgment would extend to all the earth to avenge injustice and bring about the Age of Righteousness that had been promised.
- *let all their wickedness come before Thee*
- *deal with them as Thou has dealt with me for all my transgressions*

This did not happen at that time, but God said He would judge all nations during and after the still-future Tribulation period (Isaiah 62:8–63:6; Ezekiel 38–39; Joel 3:1-3, 9-21; Obadiah 15-21; Micah 7:8-13; Zechariah 14:1-9; Matthew 25:31-46; Revelation 16:12-16; 19:19-21).

Application—*The result of sin and rebellion against God is pain and death. It’s interesting what the writer of Hebrews said about Moses. “By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter; choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin; considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward” (Hebrews 11:25-26). Sure, sin is a pleasure that is enjoyed—but the end is pain and death. If you think anything else, you are deceiving yourself. In Hades, the rich man was “in torment” and Abraham told him, “remember that during your life you received your good things ... but now ... you are in agony” (Luke 16:19-31). The result of sin and rebellion against God is pain and death.*

Chapter Two — Second Dirge

God’s Punishment of Jerusalem’s Sin

Charles Swindoll titled this chapter, “Words from the Woodshed.”

God’s Anger (verses 1-10)

Verses 1-5—*How the Lord has covered the daughter of Zion with a cloud in His anger!* Four times (verses 2, twice in verse 5, and verse 8) it’s said *He has swallowed up....* Over and over it says, *He has ... or the Lord has....* Make no mistake—The real cause for Jerusalem’s calamity is God. He is the One who destroyed the city and its people. Verbs like *thrown down ... cut off ... burned ... slain ... poured out ... destroyed....* Therefore, the people were *mourning and moaning*.

Verses 6-7—God even tore down His Temple, *like a garden booth*, a temporary shelter used by a farmer in his field for shade, easily torn down. The *feast and Sabbath, the altar, and His sanctuary*—all gone.

Verses 8-10—The *wall and gates* of the city, which used to protect the people, were destroyed. The human wall of protection was also destroyed: the Davidic dynasty was driven from its throne, *her kings and her princes are among the nations*. Without the Temple, the function of the priests had been nullified. *The law was no more*. Also, the *prophets find no vision from the Lord*. Thus every group charged by God to lead the people—the king, priests, and prophets—was affected by Jerusalem’s fall.

Therefore, everyone, from the elders to the virgins, mourn.

Jeremiah's Grief (verse 11-19)

Jeremiah cries and his spirit is broken seeing the anguish of the people and Jerusalem. He sketches five pictures of Jerusalem:

1. *Verses 11-12*—The first sketch shows the starvation in Jerusalem during the siege. The saddest scene in any war are the sufferings of the children. Jeremiah's *heart is poured out on the earth*, he is emotionally drained, as he hears the children calling for food, *as their life is poured out on their mothers' bosom*. She has no food for them, and they waste away in her arms.
2. *Verse 13*—Jeremiah would like to comfort Jerusalem, but *your ruin is as vast as the sea; who can heal you?* The judgment is so severe, so huge, that no comfort can be given.
3. *Verse 14*—The false prophets were to announce the coming disaster and urge the people to repent. Instead *they have not exposed your iniquity so as to restore you from captivity*. They hastened the downfall by their *false and misleading oracles*.
4. *Verses 15-17*—The enemies mock Jerusalem, *"Is this the city of which they said, 'The perfection of beauty, a joy to all the earth?'"* But Jeremiah reminds the people, it's not the enemy who has done this destruction to Jerusalem, *The Lord has done what He purposed; He has accomplished His word; He has caused the enemy to rejoice over you...*
5. *Verses 18-19*—Jeremiah encouraged the people to pour out their heart in prayer to God. *Let your tears run down like a river day and night; give yourself no relief*. And the focus of their grief was *for the life of your little ones who are faint because of hunger*.

Jerusalem's Pleas (verses 20-22)

The city cries out to God, *"See, O Lord, and look!"* The siege against the city was so severe and the starvation so great that some parents became cannibals and ate their own children. This was predicted in graphic detail by Moses when he warned Israel of the consequences of disobedience to God's Law (Leviticus 26:27-29; Deuteronomy 28:52-57).

The priests and prophets were *slain in the sanctuary of the Lord*. The bloodthirsty Babylonians made no distinction between age and sex, they butchered young and old, *virgins and young men: On the ground in the streets lie young and old ... fallen by the sword—dead, bloated bodies*.

Yet, so no one forgets, Jeremiah reminded the people that God was the one responsible for the slaughter. *Thou has slain them ... Thou hast slaughtered, not sparing*. The Babylonians prevailed only because God let them prevail. God had warned Israel what He would do if she disobeyed Him, and He faithfully carried out His word. Those He loved, *whom I bore and reared* were now *annihilated*.

Application—All sin is against God (Psalm 51:4; Romans 3:23). He is the One who determines what is right and what is wrong. Also, Babylon succeeded because God caused them to succeed. What happens in our lives is because God causes it to happen. Cry out to God in your pain.

Chapter Three — Third Dirge

Jeremiah's Response

Chapter 3 is the heart of Jeremiah's short book. It gives the book a positive framework around which the other chapters revolve. It displays the sparkling brilliance of God's loyal love. Instead of 22 verses, it has 66 verses—3 verses for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This chapter also does not have the opening lament word "How" that the first two chapters have. Instead, it's a first-person narrative describing the writer's personal reaction to the suffering he has experienced. Parallels between this writer and Jeremiah in the book of Jeremiah are:

- Hated by their countrymen (Jeremiah 1:18-19; Lamentations 3:52)
- Ridiculed by those they tried to help (Jeremiah 20:7-8; Lamentations 3:63)
- Had plots made against their lives (Jeremiah 11:18-19; Lamentations 3:60)
- Were cast into watery pits (Jeremiah 38:4-13; Lamentations 3:53-58)
- Wept over the people's destruction (Jeremiah 9:1; 13:17; 14:17; Lamentations 3:48-49)

Therefore, it is probable that the person talking in chapter 3 is Jeremiah himself. Yet his description goes beyond himself to include all the people, which is obvious in his switch from the singular to the plural (“we,” “us,” “our”) within the chapter (verses 22, 40-46). So it seems that Jeremiah used his own experiences because the things he suffered represented things that many Israelites had suffered. [Bible Knowledge Commentary, “Lamentations”]

Jeremiah’s Afflictions (verses 1-18)

Verses 1-3—Jeremiah has seen the affliction *because of the rod of His wrath*. Instead of the light of God’s guidance, he walks in darkness. ... *against me He has turned His hand*.

Verses 4-6—Jeremiah’s misery—he is broken in body (*my flesh and my skin waste away*) and broken in spirit (*encompassed me with bitterness and hardship*).

Verses 7-9—He is imprisoned and God refused to acknowledge his prayers for help. His way was crooked and blocked. It’s like he had nowhere to turn.

Verses 10-13—He pictures God in two ways: (1) as a bear or lion in hiding waiting for Jeremiah to pass so He can attack and maul him and (2) himself as a target at which God shoots His arrows into Jeremiah’s inward parts. That is, God has specifically chosen Jeremiah for adversity.

Verses 14-18—Jeremiah is a laughingstock. He is mocked. He is filled with bitterness. His *soul has been rejected from peace*. He has *forgotten happiness*. So he says, “*My strength has perished, and so has my hope from the Lord.*” He is in deep despair.

Jeremiah’s Hope (verses 19-40)

Verses 19-24—Jeremiah’s condition parallels Judah’s. His outward affliction and inner turmoil pushed him toward despair. However, one thought crowds out the hopelessness that has threatened to overwhelm him. *This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope*.

Application—*Sometimes you have to remember what you know to be true of God and let that override your fears and circumstances. Learn as much about God and His Word as you can when you have a time of peace. Then when trouble comes, you can remember, like Jeremiah did.*

- *The Lord’s lovingkindnesses never cease*, that is, they are never finished or complete. God was punishing Judah for her sin, but He did not reject her as His covenant people. “Lovingkindness” is the Hebrew word *hesed*, meaning “loyal love” (translated as the Greek word *agape* in the New Testament). God was sticking with the people He had chosen. In fact, God’s loyal love could be seen in His faithfulness in carrying out the curses He had promised while at the same time preserving a remnant.
- *For His compassions never fail*—“compassion” has a root Hebrew word for “womb,” and it’s in the pl. for intensity. It’s the intense tender feelings of a mother for her baby from her womb.

Application—*Because of God’s lovingkindness and compassion, He will not tolerate evil. His people must pay the consequences of their evil. He loves them enough to not let them continue down their evil path. It’s “tough love.” To tolerate sinful behavior is not love—it’s destruction. But the world has now defined “love” as tolerance. That’s not the Bible’s definition of love. It’s not God’s love.*

- God’s lovingkindnesses and compassions *are new every morning*. They are a fresh supply every morning, like the manna was in the wilderness.
- Therefore, Jeremiah concluded, *Great is Thy faithfulness*. “Great” means abundant, multitude, ten thousand, numerous, older, more, severe, uncompromising. “Faithfulness” means trustworthy, door posts, support, “amen”, truth, firm, reliable. So, for example, God is ten thousand times more reliable than anything else. He’s uncompromisingly trustworthy and truthful.
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Application—*God is faithful to His own character and His Word. We don’t get to define what He is faithful to!!*

- Because of this limitless grace of God, Jeremiah said, *“Therefore I have hope in Him.”* He could now wait for God to restore His people. He could trust God despite his circumstances because he now understood how inexhaustible was God’s supply of loyal love.

Verses 25-40—The God who brought about the cursings of Deuteronomy 28 will bring about the restoration promised in Deuteronomy 30. Judah’s afflictions were not the cruel acts of a temperamental God who delighted in inflicting pain on helpless people. He does not enjoy making people suffer. But He does bring temporary suffering as a means to force Judah back to Himself. Jeremiah lists seven things about the nature of Israel’s sufferings:

1. Affliction should be endured with hope in God’s salvation, that is, ultimate restoration (vv 25-30).
2. Affliction is only temporary and is tempered by God’s love and compassion (vv. 31-32).
3. God does not delight in affliction (v. 33).
4. If affliction comes because of injustice, God sees it and does not approve of it (vv. 34-36).
5. Affliction is always in relationship to God’s sovereignty (vv. 37-38; see also Job 2:10).
6. Affliction ultimately came because of Judah’s sins (v. 39).
7. Affliction should accomplish the greater good of turning God’s people back to Him (v. 40).

[*Bible Knowledge Commentary*, “Lamentations”]

Application—You can respond to suffering two ways: you can become bitter and hardened in your spirit and blaspheme God (Revelation 16:11, 21) or through it draw closer to God (Romans 8:18; 2 Timothy 1:8).

Jeremiah’s Prayer (verses 41-66)

Verses 41-47—Here Jeremiah urges the people to confess their sins to God because of their suffering. This section is written in the plural (“we,” “us,” “our”). Verse 40, *let us examine and probe our ways*, has the result of repentance, *let us return to the Lord*, and prayer, *we lift up our heart and hands toward God in heaven*, and confession, *we have transgressed and rebelled*.

- Judah’s troubles because of her sin: God’s anger (vv. 2:1, 3, 6,11; 3:43); having unanswered prayer (vv. 8, 44); being like *refuse ... in the midst of the peoples* (v. 45); being scoffed at by her enemies (vv 2:16; 3:46). Finally, *panic and pitfall have befallen us, devastation and destruction*.

Application—If we think the church is Israel, then we will conclude that if we do the “right” thing, God will bless us with prosperity (as He promised He would do for Israel). The flip side of that coin is that if we are suffering, it’s because of something bad we did (as Job’s friends kept telling him). But those were the conditions of the Mosaic Covenant. The New Covenant was inaugurated at the cross. We live in the age of grace. Sin is paid for on the cross. It’s not that sin should increase so grace can increase (Romans 6:1-2). But today we suffer for believing in Christ and doing good (Philippians 1:27-29; 1 Peter 2:13-25).

Verses 48-51—Because of the destruction of ... my people, Jeremiah’s eyes pour down unceasingly, without stopping, until the Lord looks down and sees from heaven. He will pray until God responds.

Verses 52-55—Jeremiah relates his own misery, cry to God for help, and his deliverance as an example of the future deliverance God would bring to the nation. The people from Jeremiah’s own hometown plotted to kill him (Jeremiah 11:18-23); everybody at the Temple demanded that he be executed (26:7-9; he was beaten and thrown into prison as a traitor (37:11-16), and toward the end of the siege, he was lowered into a muddy cistern to be starved to death (38:1-6). From there, he *called on Thy name, O Lord.*”

Verses 56-58—Jeremiah’s prayer from the pit was answered. *Thou didst draw near when I called on Thee ... Thou has redeemed my life*. God rescued him from the pit (Jeremiah 38:7-13). So Jeremiah was a living example to Judah of God’s loyal love and faithfulness.

Application—Don’t forget—this was based on the conditions of the Mosaic Covenant. We don’t have those promises. Yes, we pray. We pray for God’s will to be done. We pour out our feelings to God. We ask Him for help and wisdom. BUT we don’t demand fulfillment of promises God never made to us. And we give thanks for answered prayer (James 1:17). But sometimes God doesn’t deliver us (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). Paul prayed three times for his “thorn in the flesh” to be removed. God did not heal him and answered him, *“My grace is sufficient for you.”*

Verse 59-66—Jeremiah called on God to *judge my case*. He said that *Thou hast seen all their ... schemes against me*. Jeremiah wants God to *recompense them, O Lord, according to the work of their hands. ... Thou wilt ... destroy them*. This was fulfilled historically when Nebuchadnezzar invaded Jerusalem and the leaders responsible for rejecting and persecuting Jeremiah were punished by Babylon (Jeremiah 39:4-7; 52:7-11, 24-27). Jerusalem was also persecuted by her enemies, but she could be confident that God would avenge her before her enemies if she would turn to Him.

Application—*Verse 64 says that God “will recompense them, O Lord, according to the work of their hands.” Then it seems that at least part of that recompense is “Thou wilt give them hardness of heart...” (v. 65). The Hebrew word for “hardness” means “a hard shell about the heart, a covering of the understanding, a blindness of heart.” So hardening here is seen as a payment or consequence of their work.*

We believers are warned that hardness will be the result of our actions: “Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God ... lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Hebrews 3:12-13).

Another warning for us believers: “... walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, ... because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality, for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness” (Ephesians 4:18-19).

Chapter Four — Fourth Dirge

The Lord’s Anger

This chapter parallels the judgment described in chapter 2.

Contrasts Before and After the Siege (verses 1-11)

Verses 1-2—The gold is a picture of the *precious sons of Zion*. Now they are regarded as *earthen jars*, common and of no value. If one was broken, just throw it out and get a new one.

Verses 3-5—Jackals traveled in packs, usually in areas of destruction (Isaiah 35:7), yet even *they nurse their young*. But in Jerusalem, the parents ignored the cries of the children for food. The parents had become *like ostriches* who trample their own eggs (Job 39:14-18). The infants and little ones were dying of thirst and starvation. And those who used to eat *delicacies* are now desolate, and those who wore fine *purple garments*, now lay in *ash pits*.

Verse 6—Jerusalem’s sin is *greater than the sin of Sodom* and her punishment was worse than Sodom because Sodom’s was short (*in a moment*), while Jerusalem’s lasted for months. And Jerusalem’s destruction was despite the assistance from Egypt while Sodom had no assistance (*no hands were turned toward her*).

Application—*How could Jerusalem’s sin be worse than Sodom, of which God said, “... their sin is exceedingly grave” (Genesis 18:20)? Because the people of God had the Word of God. With more knowledge comes more responsibility. Paul told the believers at Thessalonica, they were to not act immorally “... like the Gentiles who do not know God” and “he who rejects this [instruction] is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you” (1 Thessalonians 4:5, 8). Not only did the Jews have the Law, they had the prophets whom God sent them over and over. And they had a history of God’s miraculous intervention in their lives and ancestors who were mighty people of God (like Moses, Joshua, Samuel, and David). So when they turned their back on God, it was worse than Sodom. So it is today. When someone is raised in a Christian home, for example, and goes to Sunday school, goes to church camp, is part of Young Life or Youth for Christ, and then turns away from God, it is worse than someone who has not been raised with that knowledge.*

Verses 7-9—The *consecrated ones* (lit. Nazirites—the vow of Samson and John the Baptist) who were *purser than snow, they were whiter than milk*, now their appearance is *blacker than soot ... they are not*

recognized ... *their skin is shriveled*. He comments that it is better to be killed by the sword, a quick death, than to *pine away ... with hunger*.

Verse 10—The children who had been starving (vv. 4-5) were now victimized by their starving parents, *compassionate women boiled their own children; they became food for them* (see 2:20).

Verse 11—Jeremiah concluded this section by again stressing that *the Lord has accomplished His wrath, He has poured out His fierce anger, and He has kindled a fire in Zion which has consumed its foundations*. God was the source of Zion's punishment (see 1:12-17; 2:1-8; 5:20).

Causes for the Siege (verses 12-20)

Verse 12—Jerusalem was strengthened (2 Chronicles 32:2-5; 33:14), with a water supply into the city with the digging of Hezekiah's tunnel. So the kings considered it impregnable. So *the kings ... did not believe ... that the adversary and the enemy could enter the gates of Jerusalem*. Yet God caused Babylon to enter Jerusalem. Why the siege?

1. *Verses 13-16*—God scattered Jerusalem's leaders (priests and prophets) because they had led the people into sin. They were actually shunned as unclean lepers and were forced out of the covenant community.
2. *Verses 17-19*—Instead of trusting in God, Jerusalem had turned to Egypt for protection from Babylon. *Looking for help was useless ... we have watched for a nation that could not save*. Both Jeremiah (37:6-10) and Ezekiel (29:6-7) warned this would be useless.
3. *Verse 20—the Lord's anointed*—refers to the kings because oil was poured on their heads to indicate that they were set apart for their task by God (see 1 Samuel 10:1; 16:1; 1 Kings 1:39-45; 2 Kings 11:12). When Jerusalem fell, King Zedekiah tried to escape toward the Jordan River (Jeremiah 39:2-7), but he was captured. The leader Jerusalem looked to for security ("*Under his shadow we shall live among the nations*") was powerless to protect her.

Application—*So Jerusalem's religious leaders did not protect her, her alliances with other nations did not protect her, and her political leader (her king) did not protect her. She did not trust God for protection and turn to Him in repentance. What religious things, alliances, or political/societal things do we look at for protection? For example, if I take my child to Sunday school (religious), they'll learn all they need to know about God, so I don't teach them as their parent. Or if we're friends (an alliance) with another Christian family, I won't have to think about the relationship my child has with their children. Or if we have freedom in a democracy (political), we'll always be free to express our beliefs in God.*

Call for Vindication (verses 21-22)

Because of the Mosaic Covenant (Deuteronomy 28–30), these verses show the contrast between Israel and the Gentile enemy of Edom (Esau-ites, living on the east side of the Dead Sea). Edom was rejoicing over the judgment against Jerusalem. But not for long, for *the cup will come around to you as well*. The Jews had the hope that when *the punishment of your iniquity has been completed ... He will exile you no longer*, that is, they would be restored. But Edom could only expect judgment, no restoration.

Chapter Five — Fifth Dirge

The Remnant's Response

Chapters 1 (vv. 20-22), 2 (vv. 20-22), and 3 (vv. 55-66) close with a prayer, but chapter 4 does not. So chapter 5 is probably the prayer that follows chapter 4.

The Remnant's Prayer for Remembrance (Verses 1-18)

Verse 1—The remnant called on God to *remember, O Lord, what has befallen us; look, and see our reproach!* Of course, God sees everything. Here it is the idea of seeing and acting on what He sees.

Verse 2—The land of Judah had been parceled out *to aliens*. Babylon occupied the land. In addition, nations surrounding Judah took some of the land for themselves (Ezekiel 35:10).

Verse 3—The people became like orphans and widows, without protectors, without rights.

Verses 4-5—The Jews now had to pay the Babylonians for *drinking water* and *wood*. They were *worn out*, and *there is no rest for us*.

Verses 6-8—The Jews *submitted to Egypt and Assyria to get enough bread*. “submit to” literally means, “to shake hands.” It implies the idea of making a pact or treaty (2 Kings 10:15). The Jews made pacts with both Assyria and Egypt, and shifted back and forth between them (see Ezekiel 16:26-28; 23:12, 21). Their sin brought about their death, and their survivors *have borne their iniquities* (see Jeremiah 31:29-30). The present generation saw their punishment being a result of their ancestors’ sins. In Babylon slaves were appointed to be over the Jews.

Verses 9-10—They had to risk their lives in order to get bread. Their *skin has become as hot as an oven, because of the burning heat of famine*.

Verses 11-14—No element of society escaped the judgment:

- *Women in Zion [Jerusalem] and virgins in the cities of Judah* were ravished, i.e., raped.
- *Princes were hung ... elders were not respected*, i.e., crucifixion and torture.
- *Young men worked at the grinding mill ... youths stumbled under loads of wood*, i.e., forced to do tasks usually done by animals (probably because all the animals had been eaten during the siege). Samson had to do the same thing (Judges 16:21).
- *Elders are gone from the gate*—for the Jews, the place of wisdom and justice was gone.
- *Young men from their music*—i.e., joy and happiness were gone.

Verses 15-18—Gloom hung over Jerusalem.

- *The joy of our hearts has ceased*.
- *Our dancing has been turned into mourning*.
- *The crown has fallen from our head*—i.e., the glory and majesty that had belonged to Jerusalem was now gone.
- *... Mount Zion ... lies desolate, foxes prowl in it*.

But Judah had only herself to blame for her present condition, *for we have sinned!* Therefore their *heart is faint* (from hunger) and their *eyes are dim* (from tears).

Application—*Mostly you are where you are because of the decisions you have made. If they are sinful decisions, look around you at the chaos and suffering—you have only yourself to blame—though, like Adam and Eve, we try to blame others. But, on the other hand, others do suffer because of your decisions—especially the children! Sin never happens in a vacuum. You are connected to others, like a figure in a mobil. When you move, everyone else moves, too.*

The Remnant’s Prayer for Restoration (verse 19-22)

Verse 19—Judah was **not** suffering because her God had been defeated by the stronger gods of Babylon. Judah’s God was the only true God, He is sovereign, and He had caused her calamity. Yet this same God who brought about her destruction also had the power to bring about her restoration—if He chose to do so.

Verse 20—The knowledge of God’s ability to restore the nation led to two questions:

- *Why dost Thou forget us forever?*
- *Why dost Thou forsake us so long?*

These are synonymous questions—to forget Judah would be to forsake her. The use of “forget” here is the opposite of “remember” in verse 1. Of course, God cannot “forget” anything. So here the people are asking why God is acting like He had abandoned them for so long. The people of Judah were calling on God to fulfill the remainder of His covenant promise (Deuteronomy 30).

Verses 21-22—The specific action the people requested was, *restore us to Thee, O Lord, that we may be restored; renew our days as of old*, i.e., they wanted to be restored God and, therefore, to the blessings of God’s covenant which included being restored to the land of Israel (Leviticus 26:40-45; Deuteronomy 3:1-10). Their hope was the character of God—His faithfulness to His covenant promises.

Unless Thou has utterly rejected us, and art exceedingly angry with us—He vowed to never utterly reject them (Leviticus 26:44; Jeremiah 31:31-37), so the people could depend on Him to answer their request.

So the book of Lamentations ends on a note of hope. In spite of severe suffering because of her sin, Judah had not been abandoned as a nation. God was still sovereign, and His covenant with Israel was still in operation in spite of her disobedience. God would protect Judah during her captivity and would ultimately restore her as a nation to covenant blessing.

Application—Our only hope is a future rightly related to God. “Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:19).