

Lamentations • Chapter Study

INTRODUCTION

As we return to our mid-week study after a 3-month shift into small groups, we pick it up where we left off.

Following our usual pattern of studying thru entire books of the Bible, alternating between the Old & New Testaments, we've just finished The Letter of James on Sundays.

We'd just finished The Prophecy of Jeremiah before the break.

So now we pick it up at what many consider a kind of **Appendix** to Jeremiah, who's known as "The Weeping Prophet."

Fitting then that the Appendix is titled, **Lamentations**.

As we'll see, that label is **both fitting & misleading**.

Yes, the book is 5 chrs, each being a poem of lament.

But the overall theme of the book is the faithfulness of God.

The Situation is this . . .

While the author is never mentioned, ancient Jewish tradition attributes the book to the prophet Jeremiah.

The **Book** of Jeremiah says he **composed laments** in light of the judgments of the Kingdom of Judah God sent him to announce.

There's also a strong similarity in language between the 2 books.

The 5 poems we find in Lamentations are funeral dirges over the loss & destruction of Jerusalem, which we know Jeremiah witnessed.

Such funeral dirges over the loss of major cities was a common practice of the ancient world, dating all the way back to the Sumerians.

If you were with us in our study thru Jeremiah, you'll remember that he lived a long time and thru the reign of several of Judah's last kings.

Jeremiah was sent by God to warn the people judgment was coming.

They'd forsaken their covenant with Him & turned to idols.

Though God had warned them about the dire consequences of forsaking Him, they refused to repent, so they'd crossed the line of judgment.

That judgment would come in the form of the Babylonians would lay siege to Jerusalem, destroy the city and temple, kill most of the people & haul the rest off into captivity.

While **it was too late** for the kingdom, Jeremiah said, it **wasn't too late** for individuals to repent & turn back to God.

The nation was doomed; but individuals who forsook their idols & put their faith in God could be spared the full brunt of judgment.

They'd lose their land, but taken into exile in Babylon they could prosper and produce a generation of sons & daughters who'd return to Judah & Jerusalem to rebuild.

Well, everything happened exactly as Jeremiah foretold.

The Babylonians arrived, led by their warrior king – Nebuchadnezzar.

Jerusalem fell & was reduced to a pile of smoking ruins in 586 bc.

The glorious temple of Solomon was demolished.

The destruction of the city & temple was a blow to the people of God that prompted Jeremiah to compose Lamentations.

What we find here are 5 poems that rehearse the warning God gave the people of Israel thru Moses a thousand years before in Deut. 28.

It's there God announces how He will bless his covenant people when they obey & follow Him.

But he also warns them of the curses that will come on them if they turn from Him to worship idols.

Many of the specific curses mentioned in Deut. 28 are lamented over here.

You see, while these poems are funeral dirges, they aren't **complaints**.

They're affirmations of God's faithfulness.

That faithfulness is a two-edged sword; it cuts both ways.

Both God's promises of blessing & judgment are sure.

How Lamentations resolve in the blessing of God's faithfulness is His promise that if **after judgment**, His people repent & return to Him, He will restore them.

Jeremiah wrote this looking back on God's faithfulness to judge.

As he expresses his grief, he rises in faith to anticipate a day of future blessing.

This hope comes from his firm conviction that God will win out over evil & grace triumphs over sin.

FORM

Before we dive in, a brief word about the form of these 5 chs.

Each chapter is a separate poem.

Chs. 1-4 are an acrostic; Each verse begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

Since there are 22 letters, there are 22 vs.

Except ch. 3, which has 66, each letter getting 3 vs.

Ch. 5 isn't an acrostic, though it's still 22 vs.

CH. 1

¹ How lonely sits the city *That was* full of people! *How* like a widow is she, Who *was* great among the nations!

The princess among the provinces Has become a slave! ² She weeps bitterly in the night, Her tears *are* on her cheeks; Among all her lovers She has none to comfort *her*. All her friends have dealt treacherously with her; They have become her enemies.

Instead of listening to Jeremiah who counseled them to humbly submit to God's judgment, the last few kings of Judah conspired with the neighbors to resist the Babylonians.

That only ensured when the Babylonians arrived, they'd been further brutalized because they resisted.

Though Jeremiah had specifically warned them not to align themselves **w/Egypt**, the kings of Judah did - & Egypt betrayed them.

As a side note: It has ***ever been*** the call of God to His covenant people Israel to trust Him & Him ***alone***.

He's warned them time & again against making alliances w/other nations.

HE is their salvation & He intends to use world events & the threat of enemies as a way to affirm His love & care for them.

When they depend on ***others***, it short circuits their awareness of God's presence & protection.

The modern state of Israel ought to exercise caution in its alignments and alliances.

It must not depend on ***any*** nation, for that nation will end up disappointing & betraying Israel.

So – how does this square w/the promise God made in Gen. 12 to bless those who bless His people & to curse those who curse them?

Simple: Those who maintain a positive & helpful posture toward the nation of Israel and the Jewish people will be blessed.

But on Israel's part, **THEY** must look to the Lord ***alone*** as their Provider & Protector.

Think of it like a marriage.

Bill is married to Sherry. As her husband he is called to ***provide for & protect*** her.

Now, Bill is going to ***look kindly*** on ***any other man*** who treats Sherry w/respect & honor; who's kind to her & wishes her well.

But Bill is going to have a hard time w/anyone who mistreats or holds ill-will toward his wife.

For HER part, Sherry should look to Bill ***alone*** as her provider & protector.

What happens if she starts looking to ***someone else*** to fill those roles, even slightly?

Bill gets rightly jealous, because he & HE ALONE is to be Sherry's provider & protector.

In the 10 Commandments, God says it – ***He is a jealous G6d!***

He is Israel's husband; her provider & protector & Israel is to look to Him alone to be those for her.

God wants the nations of the world to be favorable toward Israel, & He's promised to bless those who are.

But they must ***never usurp*** what He is for His people.

And Israel must never look to them to be what God alone **WILL** be.

Judah, Israel's southern kingdom, willingly chose to forget that & looked to her neighbors to assist them against Babylon.

THAT foolish trust only added more grief to her judgment.

³ Judah has gone into captivity, Under affliction and hard servitude; She dwells among the nations, She finds no rest; All her persecutors overtake her in dire straits.

I mentioned Lamentations refers to Deut 28 & the curses to come on the Jewish nation if they turned from God.

Deut. 28:65 warned . . .

Among those nations you will find no repose, no resting place for the sole of your foot.

⁴ The roads to Zion [Jeruz] mourn Because no one comes to the set feasts. All her gates are desolate; Her priests sigh, Her virgins are afflicted, And she *is* in bitterness.
For centuries, the City of Jeruz was a place of great celebration & vibrant life as the people came from all over to celebrate the annual feasts.

Now it was a pile of burnt rocks.

⁵ Her adversaries have become the master, Her enemies prosper; For the Lord has afflicted her Because of the multitude of her transgressions. Her children have gone into captivity before the enemy.

Deut 28:44 warned . . .

[Your enemy] will be the head, but you will be the tail.

V. 32 added . . .

Your sons and daughters will be given to another nation.

Jeremiah brings in these ancient warnings; showing how God is faithful to keep His promise – including the hard ones.

He's building a case for God's faithfulness, because if He kept His word about cursing, He'd keep His word about blessing.

⁶ And from the daughter of Zion All her splendor has departed. Her princes have become like deer *That* find no pasture, That flee without strength Before the pursuer.

Deut 28:25 said . . .

The Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies. You will come at them from one direction but flee from them in seven.

⁷ In the days of her affliction and roaming, Jerusalem remembers all her pleasant things That she had in the days of old. When her people fell into the hand of the enemy, With no one to help her, The adversaries saw her *And* mocked at her downfall. ⁸ Jerusalem has sinned gravely, Therefore she has become vile. All who honored her despise her Because they have seen her nakedness; Yes, she sighs and turns away. ⁹ Her uncleanness *is* in her skirts; She did not consider her destiny; Therefore her collapse was awesome; She had no comforter. "O Lord, behold my affliction, For *the* enemy is exalted!"

The eloquence of Lamentations is astounding.

Even secular scholars declare that the language here is w/o peer in the ancient world.

While many funeral dirges for both individuals and cities have been found, none approach the beauty of language found here.

What makes Lamentations especially moving is that it expresses such intense emotion, yet the author was able to organize his thoughts into an acrostic.

Imagine a man who's just lost his wife & in the throes of his grief, he doesn't just cry out in sorrow, he composes an amazingly beautiful & heart-wrenching poem.

That's what we find here.

But there's a phrase here I want to highlight; v. 9 –

She [Jeruz] did not consider her destiny . . .

This failure streams in 2 directions.

First = Jerusalem forgot what she was supposed to be – the Holy City of God.

The City of David he founded for God's glory.

The city that was supposed to be a light to the rest of the world of the goodness of God.

That was her mission. That was the vision David had had for Jerusalem.

God promised Abraham that in him and his descendants all the nations of the Earth would be blessed.

When God called Israel to be His covenant people in the Exodus at Mt. Sinai, He said he would make them a light to the Gentiles.

God's plan was to reveal Himself first to Israel, then use them as a missionary nation to bring the knowledge of Him to the rest of the world.

Jerusalem was to be the center of all that; the place of the temple & the glory of God was revealed.

THAT was Jerusalem's *intended destiny*; the inspired vision & mission David had for the City.

And may I say, **THAT'S going** to be Jerusalem's future when Jesus, the Messiah, David's Son

comes. He will realize & implement David's vision & mission.

Second = Jerusalem did not consider her destiny in the sense that her leaders refused to consider the consequences of their actions.

This is the perpetual error of sinners; they *ignore consequences*.

They turn their back on *inevitability*.

They assume the rules apply to everyone but themselves.

Others deserve what they get – but not them.

Others can't lie, cheat, & steal – & if they do, they need to be punished, specially if it's to **them** they lie, cheat & steal.

But when THEY'RE the lying, cheating thieves, they think they're exempt from the consequences – & have the audacity of blaming God when life goes south for them!

¹⁰ The adversary [Babs] has spread his hand Over all her pleasant things; For she has seen the nations enter her sanctuary, Those whom You commanded Not to enter Your assembly.

To a faithful Jew, no sight was more tragic than to see a godless pagan standing in the holy precincts of the temple.

Even most Jews weren't allowed there – only the consecrated priests of the line of Aaron could enter the holy place.

Picture Fidel Castor in his Cuban military uniform, smoking one of his big Cuban stogies, sitting at that big desk in the Oval Office of the White House.

You're about a **third** of the way to the shock & chagrin of a Jeremiah's dismay here.

¹¹ All her [Jeruz's] people sigh, They seek bread; They have given their valuables for food to restore life. Now Jeremiah gives voice to a lament the City itself would utter.

“See, O Lord, and consider, For I am scorned.” ¹² “*Is it* nothing to you, all you who pass by? Behold and see If there is any sorrow like my sorrow, Which has been brought on me, Which the Lord has inflicted In the day of His fierce anger. ¹³ “From above He has sent fire into my bones, And it overpowered them; He has spread a net

for my feet And turned me back; He has made me desolate *And* faint all the day. ¹⁴ “The yoke of my transgressions was bound; They were woven together by His hands, *And* thrust upon my neck. He made my strength fail; The Lord delivered me into the hands of *those whom* I am not able to withstand. ¹⁵ “The Lord has trampled underfoot all my mighty *men* in my midst; He has called an assembly against me To crush my young men; The Lord trampled *as* in a winepress The virgin daughter of Judah. ¹⁶ “For these *things* I weep; My eye, my eye overflows with water; Because the comforter, who should restore my life, Is far from me. My children are desolate Because the enemy prevailed.”

Then Jeremiah returns to his own lament . . .

¹⁷ Zion spreads out her hands, *But* no one comforts her; The Lord has commanded concerning Jacob [Israel] *That* those around him *become* his adversaries; Jerusalem has become an unclean thing among them.

Then again Jerusalem speaks . . .

¹⁸ “The Lord is righteous, For I rebelled against His commandment. Hear now, all peoples, And behold my sorrow; My virgins and my young men Have gone into captivity.

Deut 28:41 warns . . .

You will have sons and daughters but you will not keep them, because they will go into captivity.

Jerusalem continues . . .

¹⁹ “I called for my lovers, *But* they deceived me; My priests and my elders Breathed their last in the city, While they sought food To restore their life. ²⁰ “See, O Lord, that I *am* in distress; My soul is troubled; My heart is overturned within me, For I have been very rebellious. Outside the sword bereaves, At home *it is* like death. ²¹

“They have heard that I sigh, *But* no one comforts me. All my enemies have heard of my trouble; They are glad that You have done *it*. Bring on the day You have announced, That they may become like me. ²² “Let all their wickedness come before You, And do to them as You have done to me For all my transgressions; For my sighs *are* many, And my heart *is* faint.”

CH. 2

[1-10]

In this ch. the prophet describes how the great & mighty of Judah were brought low.

It's like God Himself has gone to war against them.

And the violence He's wreaked is like the damage done to a house of cards.

Judah built its walls & fortresses; & they seemed invincible.

But the Babylonians came w/a new way of waging war that reduced their defenses & strongholds to rubble.

Picture a kid making a Lego fort that's 2 feet square and 1 ft. high.

Take a long time. It's got battlements and fortifications around the walls and from the perspective of a Lego person – mighty!

Now picture an M1 Abrams tank running it over.

That's the picture captured here.

Jerusalem is a Lego fortress & the Babylonians are a modern tank.

[11-17]

Then Jeremiah expresses his own utter sorrow & grief at seeing the destruction of the city & people he loved so much.

¹⁵ All who pass by clap *their* hands at you; They hiss and shake their heads At the daughter of Jerusalem: “*Is this the city that is called ‘The perfection of beauty, The joy of the whole earth’?*”

This harkens back to Deut 28:37

You will become a thing of horror and an object of scorn and ridicule to all the nations where the Lord will drive you.

The faithfulness of God that's the theme of these chs. becomes clear in v. 17 -

¹⁷ The Lord has done what He purposed; He has fulfilled His word Which He commanded in days of old. He has thrown down and has not pitied, And He has caused an enemy to rejoice over you; He has exalted the horn of your adversaries.

[18-20]

Jeremiah then puts a lament into the mouths of Jerusalem's enemies.

Even they are distressed by the horrors of its destruction.

And indeed we know the siege became so bad the people were reduced to cannibalism.

²⁰ “See, O Lord, and consider! To whom have You done this? Should the women eat their offspring, The children they have cuddled? Should the priest and prophet be slain In the sanctuary of the Lord?”

Deut 28:53 foretold

Because of the suffering that your enemy will inflict on you during the siege, you will eat the fruit of the womb, the flesh of the sons and daughters the Lord your God has given you.

V. 21 fulfills Deut 28:50

²¹ “Young and old lie On the ground in the streets; My virgins and my young men Have fallen by the sword; You have slain *them* in the day of Your anger, You have slaughtered *and* not pitied.

²² “You have invited as to a feast day The terrors that surround me. In the day of the Lord's anger There was no refugee or survivor. Those whom I have borne and brought up My enemies have destroyed.”

CH. 3

As I said, while the other chs are all 22 vs, ch. 3 is 66, with each letter of the Hebrew alphabet getting 3 vs.

[1-21]

Jeremiah utters a ***personal lament*** over what's happened city, kingdom, & people.

What we find here can leave no one w/the impression Jeremiah was an old curmudgeon who was gleeful at Jerusalem's destruction.

His sorrow was overwhelming.

Then, smack dab in the middle of the book, the prophet pauses to lift his heart & mind above the circumstances that draw forth his laments both before & after.

He lifts his eyes off the smoking ruins of the Kingdom and sets them on God.

When He does, a new infusion of faith fills him.

²² *Through* the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, Because His compassions fail not. ²³ *They are* new every

morning; Great is Your faithfulness.

I invite you to say out loud with me – **HALLELUJAH !!!**

God IS faithful! And His faithfulness is GREAT.

It's surpassing. It's steadfast. It's sure. It's to be depended on.

And while God WILL surely judge sin – ***Sin doesn't have the last word!***

That means ***judgment doesn't finish the story!***

Judgment is a necessary season in history because God is just.

But ***mercy triumphs over judgment*** James 2:13 says.

So Mercy gets the last word. Grace is God's ***last word.***

And who can argue with or gainsay the Lord?

Listen, if Jeremiah could utter this while standing amidst the ruins of Jerusalem, you & I can proclaim it in the midst of an age that's falling apart.

We who follow Jesus weep at the way our culture has turned its back on God.

We lament the loss of virtue & godliness.

And if our nation continues on its current path, history is clear – judgment awaits.

But the cause of Christ will not suffer. / God's glory will not be dimmed.

We must not despair as we lament & grieve the death of America.

Despair is for those who don't believe in God.

Courage & hope belong to those who do – for God is bigger than nations.

They are all, as Isaiah says – “a drop in the bucket.” [40:15]

²⁴ “The Lord *is* my portion,” says my soul, “Therefore I hope in Him!”

Jesus is our portion! Not the Conservatives, the Republicans, the Tea Party.

Not the Evangelicals.

No earthly label or name suffices to mark who & what we are.

We belong to Jesus and He belongs to us.

²⁵ The Lord *is* good to those who wait for Him, To the soul *who* seeks Him.

What are we waiting for? A new president? Congress? Supreme Court?

New iPhone?

Technology?

Star Wars movie?

No! We're waiting for the only One Who can be counted on: King Jesus.

As we wait for Him to come and set up His kingdom and throne, He's good to us.

His reign which will be over all the Earth is available right now in the lives of those who believe and wait.

²⁶ *It is good* that *one* should hope and *wait quietly* For the salvation of the Lord.

While we need to be good stewards with our citizenship, get informed on the issues and vote, we ought not get caught up in angry & loud protests about issues.

Jesus is our example.

The righteous & perfect man, He had lots he could have railed against in His day.

He didn't, because that's not the way to effect lasting change.

Time is short. Jesus will be coming soon.

The best way to spend these past days is quietly growing in grace and reaching out to as many of the lost as we can to pull them into the boat.

²⁷ *It is good* for a man to bear The yoke in his youth. ²⁸ Let him sit alone and keep silent, Because *God* has laid *it* on him;

The attitude of some young people who grow up in a Christian home is to get out of the house when they turn 18, sow their wild oats – have a “good time,” then when they get old, like around 30, too old to have fun anymore, then come back to God.

They're not Amish but they still go on a Rumspringa that lasts a decade or 2.

What really happens is that in those years of spiritual declension, they sow seeds they end up spending the rest of their lives regretting.

There's always regret for sin, but never, ever for walking with God.

When I was in rebellion, there were many mornings-after I woke up in deep regret for what I'd did the

night before.

Drank too much and hung over.

Said & did things embarrassed about.

Fear of disease / being a dad.

But in my walk with God, I've never regretted a night of worship & prayer.

Never regretted leading someone to Jesus.

Helping a brother find victory.

But – you can tell young people these things till your blue in the face and they will still look at you like you're a clueless imbecile.

The genius of youth!

Jeremiah recognized the foolishness of youth and says

²⁹ Let him put his mouth in the dust— There may yet be hope.

A little humility goes a long way. It's the first step on the path to wisdom.

³⁰ Let him give *his* cheek to the one who strikes him, *And* be full of reproach. ³¹ For the Lord will not cast off forever. ³² Though He causes grief, Yet He will show compassion According to the multitude of His mercies. Most likely, Jeremiah aims this at the many Jewish youth the Babylonians spared and led away into captivity.

The prophet calls them to submit to their judgment.

Let the discipline of God work its lesson. / Don't resist what God means to teach.

If they will yield to the Lord, then God can work with them and use them to father the next generation that will return to rebuild.

There's a lesson for us!

Romans 8:28-9 says that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose. That purpose is to conform us to the image of Christ.

Trusting God means looking to Him to work even the hard things, the trials and adversities to the good purpose of making us more like Jesus.

Life is a spiritual gym.

When you work out, say you're doing squats, if you only think about the pain of each rep, you'll quit quickly.

You've lost sight of what the exercise is for.

Each rep aims at the last one; they're only getting you to that last one, which is the last BECAUSE YOU CAN'T DO ANYMORE!

And you do that last one, because it makes the body send healing to the muscles, and makes them stronger, so next time, you can do one more.

And after that, another.

Over time, your body changes and you go from flabby to Fit & Fabulous!

So when you work out, you DON'T just think about the pain of each rep.

If you do, you'll quit quickly.

No – you keep the image of what you'll become fixed in your mind & joyfully finish the workout.

That's the mentality we need regarding hardship & trials.

Don't focus on the pain; look to what God is doing to make you like Jesus in the midst of it.

³³ For He does not afflict willingly, Nor grieve the children of men.

God's no sadist who inflicts pain for the fun of it.

He's not the mean little kid burning bugs with a magnifying glass on the sidewalk.

Ever hardship we endure is **necessary** because of our **lack** of Christlikeness.

But God doesn't get off on our trials. / Don't let the devil tell you He does.

[34-41]

Jeremiah defends God's justice against any charge that He's unfair.

BECAUSE God is just, he makes the appeal . . .

⁴⁰ Let us search out and examine our ways, And turn back to the Lord; ⁴¹ Let us lift our hearts and hands To God in heaven.

This is the key – what the judgment of God has aimed at: Breaking them of their rebellion and moving them to

repent.

When they do, then He'll move to restore them.

History tells us, they did after 70 years of exile in Babylon.

[42-66]

These vs. are Jeremiah's general lament over how wicked and morally ruined the people have become.

CH. 4

This ch is a chronicle of how bad things were. / Everything was upside down & backwards.

CH. 5

¹ Remember, O Lord, what has come upon us; Look, and behold our reproach! ² Our inheritance has been turned over to aliens, And our houses to foreigners.

Deut 28:30 foretold

You will build a house, but you will not live in it.

³ We have become orphans and waifs, Our mothers *are* like widows. ⁴ We pay for the water we drink, And our wood comes at a price. ⁵ *They* pursue at our heels; We labor *and* have no rest.

Deut 28:65 says . . .

Among those nations you will find no repose/rest.

[6-22]

Finds 4 more curses from Deut 28 fulfilled in Judah's destruction at the hands of the Babylonians. [Deut 28:48,30,50,26]

Jeremiah ends by listing off the promises of God, though they're negative.

Chs. 1, 2 & the first part of 3 are laments, as well as the last part of chs, 3, all of 4 & 5.

It's a lament over what God had warned would come to pass.

Nestled in the center, the middle of ch. 3, is an affirmation of God's faithfulness to bless.

And that's the abiding lesson for us.

God is just. He will punish the wicked but bless His redeemed.

NEVER DOUBT IT.

What's our attitude to be in all this?

Certainly we rejoice in God's salvation.

But we don't dance in delight at the judgment of the wicked.

Like Jeremiah, we weep.

Maybe those tears will be the seed that waters the fruit of their repentance.