



THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS



Mike Glover

INTRODUCTION

The dictionary says that a lament is ‘a passionate expression of grief or sorrow’ and that’s what we find in the book of Lamentations. We find the heart-breaking outpouring of a human heart which is in deep sorrow, expressed in poetry. When you read through it, you can’t miss the grief being expressed and the heartache as the writer reflects after his beloved Jerusalem is totally destroyed and now lays in ruin.

THE AUTHOR

Although not mentioned in the book itself, it’s widely accepted that Jeremiah was the author because of the similarities between the Book of Lamentations and the Book of Jeremiah itself, **Jeremiah 7:21 / Lamentations 1:15 / Jeremiah 9:1 / Jeremiah 1:18 / Lamentations 1:6**.

According to tradition, Jeremiah retired after the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar to a cavern outside the Damascus gate, where he wrote this book. That cavern is still there to this day and on the face of a rocky hill, on the western side of the city, the locals now call it ‘the grotto of Jeremiah’.

THE BOOK

The Book of Lamentations is a kind of follow-up to the Book of Jeremiah in as much as it tells the grisly story of how the people died by the famine and by the sword. Lamentations show the sorrow that Jeremiah felt at the fall of Jerusalem. There’s no doubt he was an eyewitness to the actual fall and we see him sitting on a hill, opposite Jerusalem, and giving us all the sad details of the fall. I suppose we could say that Lamentations is all the sad and gory details of the fall of his beloved city.

THE BOOK CONSISTS OF FIVE SEPARATE POEMS

In **Lamentations 1** we see Jeremiah dwelling on the various miseries oppressed by which the city sits as a lonely widow weeping sorely. In **Lamentations 2** we read about these miseries which are described in connection with the national sins that had caused them. In **Lamentations 3** we read of hope for the people of God. The punishment would only be for their good, a better day would dawn for them.

In **Lamentations 4** we read about his laments over the ruin and desolation that had come upon the city and temple but realises it’s because of the people’s sins. In **Lamentations 5** we read a prayer that Zion’s reprimand may be taken away in the repentance and recovery of the people.

ALPHABETICAL ACROSTICS

An acrostic is a composition in which the initial letters of each line or unit, when taken together, spell something meaningful. An alphabetic acrostic starts with the first letter of the alphabet, and each successive line begins with each successive letter until the alphabet is finished.

One of the many interesting rhetorical features of the Hebrew Bible is its use of alphabetical acrostics. These acrostics are not ‘hidden codes’, they are literary compositions in which the writer has used the letters of the Hebrew alphabet as the initial letters for a sequence of verses. **Psalm 25 / Psalm 34 / Psalm 37 / Psalm 119.**

The first four poems, chapters, are acrostics, each verse begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet taken in order. The first, second, and fourth have each twenty-two verses, the number of the letters in the Hebrew alphabet.

The third has sixty-six verses, in which each three successive verses begin with the same letter. The fifth isn’t acrostic. The main reason they were written this way was probably because they would be easier to remember.

SUMMARY OF LAMENTATIONS

Lamentations is basically a book of very sad poems, Jerusalem which once stood in all its splendour was now in ruins, God ‘lived’ there in the temple but this also lay in ruins. Nebuchadnezzar had come in and totally destroyed it all, along with killing many Jews in the process. The young men were taken into captivity, the Babylonians raped the young Jewish women.

We must remember that Jeremiah saw all of this, he knew exactly what had happened, but he also recognised that God’s own people weren’t so innocent, they broke God’s laws time and time again, they became as evil, as the false gods they ended up worshipping and so God had to punish them, **2 Chronicles 36:14-17.**

No wonder he’s heartbroken, but amongst all the heartbreak and sorrow there’s a glimmer of hope, he knew that God actually does care about His people and so he prays that one day, his people could return to their beloved city.

THE TEXT

‘How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations! She who was queen among the provinces has now become a slave. Bitterly she weeps at night, tears are on her cheeks. Among all her lovers there is no one to comfort her. All her friends have betrayed her; they have become her enemies. After affliction and harsh labour, Judah has gone into exile. She dwells among the nations; she finds no resting place. All who pursue her have overtaken her in the midst of her distress. The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to her appointed festivals. All her gateways are desolate, her priests groan, her young women grieve, and she is in bitter anguish. Her foes have become her masters; her enemies are at ease. The LORD has brought her grief because of her many sins. Her children have gone into exile, captive before the foe. All the splendour has departed from Daughter Zion. Her princes are like deer that find no pasture; in weakness they have fled before the pursuer. In the days of her affliction and wandering Jerusalem remembers all the treasures that were hers in days of old. When her people fell into enemy hands, there was no one to help her. Her enemies looked at her and laughed at her destruction.’ Lamentations 1:1-7

We can almost hear the pain in Jeremiah’s voice as he describes Jerusalem as a woman whose husband and children have been taken away from her. She’s a city in great mourning and feeling extremely lonely, especially when she reflects upon her once greatness, **Isaiah 47:8 / Revelation 17:7.**

Those who were once her political allies are described as ‘her lovers’ and so in some way she feels as though they should have helped, but they didn’t, they weren’t able to and so she feels betrayed even by them, **Jeremiah 40:11 / Isaiah 39:5-7 / Isaiah 47:8-9.**

Oh, the heartache of this once vibrant city, where thousands of people travelled along the roads to join in with the feasts, now ceased to come, the feasts had stopped, the priests had no one to serve and the city lay in ruin. The Israelites had now become slaves to the Babylonians and they in turn had become very wealthy.

Jeremiah is quick to point out that all of this was the Lord’s doing, the city was in ruin because of the people’s sins and as a result, God punished them. Just as Jeremiah speaks about Jerusalem as a woman, he also speaks about the people of Jerusalem as the ‘daughter of Zion’. The leaders of Jerusalem are described as ‘princes’ but Jeremiah says there is no leadership left, they’re gone.

We can imagine the Jews being in captivity, reminiscing over the good old days when things were going great and as a result of remembering their past, it’s easy to understand why they would cry out when they came to understand this was all because of their sinful actions. They’ve now become the laughing stock of the nations around them.

‘Jerusalem has sinned greatly and so has become unclean. All who honoured her despise her, for they have all seen her naked; she herself groans and turns away. Her filthiness clung to her skirts; she did not consider her future. Her fall was astounding; there was none to comfort her. ‘Look, LORD, on my affliction, for the enemy has triumphed.’ The enemy laid hands on all her treasures; she saw pagan nations enter her sanctuary—those you had forbidden to enter your assembly. All her people groan as they search for bread; they barter their treasures for food to keep themselves alive. ‘Look, LORD, and consider, for I am despised.’ Lamentations 1:8-11

There’s no escaping the greatness of her sin, she is described as a woman who’s become unclean. Her once pure heart has now become a heart full of evil and weaknesses and her evil character wasn’t a secret anymore, it became known to all, and as a result, everyone turned away from her.

It’s clear the people lived for the here and now and didn’t stop to consider their future, it’s also clear that they forgot God and what God had concerning their future if they disobeyed Him, **Deuteronomy 28:24 / Jeremiah 25:9-11.** The Babylonians came, entered the temple and took all the treasures out of it, **Jeremiah 52:18 / Daniel 5:2.** Any treasure which was leftover, the Jews used to bargain with for food in order to survive, **2 Kings 25:3**, this is desperate times which need desperate measures.

‘Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look around and see. Is any suffering like my suffering that was inflicted on me, that the LORD brought on me in the day of his fierce anger? ‘From on high he sent fire, sent it down into my bones. He spread a net for my feet and turned me back. He made me desolate, faint all the day long. ‘My sins have been bound into a yoke; by his hands they were woven together. They have been hung on my neck, and the Lord has sapped my strength. He has given me into the hands of those I cannot withstand. ‘The Lord has rejected all the warriors in my midst; he has summoned an army against me to crush my young men. In his winepress the Lord has trampled Virgin Daughter Judah. ‘This is why I weep and my eyes overflow with tears. No one is near to comfort me, no one to restore my spirit. My children are destitute because the enemy has prevailed.’ Zion stretches out her hands, but there is no one to comfort her. The LORD has decreed for Jacob that his neighbours become his foes; Jerusalem has become an unclean thing among them.’ Lamentations 1:12-17

We read of a cry of desperation from Judah, to anyone who can help, the city is on its knees, begging for some kind of compassion. Again, we read of a hint of confession from Judah, they admit that it was because of their own sins that they are being punished. We can almost hear the sorrow in their words, the pain is like fire in their bones, God’s punishment has really broken His people.

Her punishment was so great, they feel like they’ve been given a yoke to wear around their neck. The young men either died in war or had been taken into captivity and so there was no relief from the sorrow and grief that the people were suffering.

Jeremiah says that the people couldn't stop crying because no one came to comfort them. Others stay away from them just like they would avoid an unclean woman during her period, **Isaiah 23:11 / Leviticus 20:18**.

'The LORD is righteous, yet I rebelled against his command. Listen, all you peoples; look on my suffering. My young men and young women have gone into exile. 'I called to my allies, but they betrayed me. My priests and my elders perished in the city while they searched for food to keep themselves alive. 'See, LORD, how distressed I am! I am in torment within, and in my heart, I am disturbed, for I have been most rebellious. Outside, the sword bereaves; inside, there is only death. 'People have heard my groaning, but there is no one to comfort me. All my enemies have heard of my distress; they rejoice at what you have done. May you bring the day you have announced so they may become like me. 'Let all their wickedness come before you; deal with them as you have dealt with me because of all my sins. My groans are many and my heart is faint.' Lamentations 1:18-22

If people want to get right with God they first have to admit they are sinners, and that's what we see happening here, they openly admit that they have 'rebelled' against God, **Jeremiah 9:21**.

Like we often do today, especially with our children, they wanted others around to learn from their mistakes, they basically say, 'the reason our city and our people are in the condition they are now, is simply because we sinned against God, please don't make the same mistake because you reap what you sow', **Job 4:5 / Proverbs 22:8**.

The nations that the Israelites trusted for deliverance, disowned them. Just like what happened to Egypt, the Israelites were punished for working against God's plan to discipline His people for their rebellion. And so, when the disaster came, the character of the religious and civic leaders was revealed as they selfishly looked out for themselves in order to survive.

It seems, since they admitted their guilt, they finally would just accept God's punishment upon them, they finally got it and understood why they were being punished. Just as a side note, Israel never committed idolatry again when they finally came out of captivity.

Remember that God had used His prophets not only to warn Israel about what would happen to them if they rebelled against Him, **Deuteronomy 32:25**, but He also used the prophets to warn other nations that He would bring swift judgment and punishment on anyone who tried to harm His people. We know that God used the Assyrians and the Babylonians to punish His own people, but we mustn't forget that those nations, didn't see it that way, they wanted to wipe Israel off the face of the Earth.

But their arrogance became the basis upon which God's judgment upon them was just. Those nations around who had done nothing but rejoice at what was happening to Judah and Jerusalem were themselves going to suffer because they rejoiced at what was happening to God's people.

APPLICATION

There are times in our lives when we must be broken for the healing process to begin, it's during those dark, sorrowful times we must turn to God who will lovingly and gently restore us to Himself. We all have to take responsibility for our own actions, since we've all sinned and fallen short of God's standards, **Romans 3:23**, we need to recognise our own sinfulness.

As Christians, we were blessed to obey the first law of forgiveness, which was at our baptism, **Acts 2:38** and as Christians, we're blessed if we obey the second law of forgiveness, which is when we confess our sins to God, **1 John 1:9**.

CHAPTER 2

INTRODUCTION

In **Lamentations 2** we find Jeremiah developing his thoughts from **Lamentations 1** which describes how the people of Judah and Jerusalem recognise how far they have moved away from God and how they now accept God's punishment because they realise that everything has happened because of their sinful actions in leaving God.

'How the Lord has covered Daughter Zion with the cloud of his anger! He has hurled down the splendour of Israel from heaven to earth; he has not remembered his footstool in the day of his anger. Without pity the Lord has swallowed up all the dwellings of Jacob; in his wrath he has torn down the strongholds of Daughter Judah. He has brought her kingdom and its princes down to the ground in dishonour. In fierce anger he has cut off every horn of Israel. He has withdrawn his right hand at the approach of the enemy. He has burned in Jacob like a flaming fire that consumes everything around it. Like an enemy he has strung his bow; his right hand is ready. Like a foe he has slain all who were pleasing to the eye; he has poured out his wrath like fire on the tent of Daughter Zion. The Lord is like an enemy; he has swallowed up Israel. He has swallowed up all her palaces and destroyed her strongholds. He has multiplied mourning and lamentation for Daughter Judah. He has laid waste his dwelling like a garden; he has destroyed his place of meeting. The LORD has made Zion forget her appointed festivals and her Sabbaths; in his fierce anger he has spurned both king and priest. The Lord has rejected his altar and abandoned his sanctuary. He has given the walls of her palaces into the hands of the enemy; they have raised a shout in the house of the LORD as on the day of an appointed festival. The LORD determined to tear down the wall around Daughter Zion. He stretched out a measuring line and did not withhold his hand from destroying. He made ramparts and walls lament; together they wasted away. Her gates have sunk into the ground; their bars he has broken and destroyed. Her king and her princes are exiled among the nations, the law is no more, and her prophets no longer find visions from the LORD. The elders of Daughter Zion sit on the ground in silence; they have sprinkled dust on their heads and put on sackcloth. The young women of Jerusalem have bowed their heads to the ground.' **Lamentations 2:1-10**

The chapter begins by identifying God as the One who has been working against Jacob, that is Israel and Judah because they left God and He was the one who poured out judgment upon the people. The word 'anger' occurs six times in this chapter and the word 'wrath' is found twice. It's clear to understand that because they had defied God's will, they fell into the hands of God, and so experienced His wrath. **Hebrews 10:31**.

The word 'cloud' is used to describe how they were overwhelmed with tragedy. Israel was once a beautiful place, it had the temple within it, but by the time Nebuchadnezzar was finished, the temple was destroyed and so that wonderful symbol which they loved so much and took so much pride in was literally taken away, **Jeremiah 52**. His footstool, the mercy seat of the temple was literally destroyed.

The word 'horn' in this passage represents strength but notice it was God Himself who brought Israel's strength to an end. He brought everything which stood for strength, their buildings, their leaders, king, priests, and elders to an end. By the time God was finished, there was nothing left to identify her as a nation among the nations of the world, **Isaiah 42:24ff**.

The magnificent temple of stone and beauty was swept away as if it were a gardener's stall made of branches and leaves.

'My eyes fail from weeping, I am in torment within; my heart is poured out on the ground because my people are destroyed, because children and infants faint in the streets of the city. They say to their mothers, 'Where is bread and wine?' as they faint like the wounded in the streets of the city, as their lives ebb away in their mothers' arms. What can I say for you? With what can I compare you, Daughter Jerusalem? To what can I liken you, that I may comfort you, Virgin Daughter Zion? Your wound is as deep as the sea. Who can heal you? The visions of your prophets were false and worthless; they did not expose your sin to ward off your captivity. The prophecies they gave you were false and misleading. All who pass your way clap their hands at you; they scoff and shake their heads at Daughter

Jerusalem: 'Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of the whole earth?' All your enemies open their mouths wide against you; they scoff and gnash their teeth and say, 'We have swallowed her up. This is the day we have waited for; we have lived to see it.' The LORD has done what he planned; he has fulfilled his word, which he decreed long ago. He has overthrown you without pity, he has let the enemy gloat over you, he has exalted the horn of your foes.' Lamentations 2:11-17

We often read in the papers or see it in the news when a city is torn apart by war, the people are just ripped apart with grief, this is their home, where they were raised, all their friends and family live there, they work there, they had fun there, all those memories gone in a moment.

In these passages we can almost feel the pain of Jeremiah, he is overwhelmed with grief and moved to tears as he laments over the devastation of his beloved city and people, he's moved because his people no longer dwell there, **Jeremiah 9:1 / Jeremiah 14:17**.

Even though his fellow Israelites didn't understand who they were, Jeremiah knew that his people were the people of God, and we can but only imagine what's going through his mind as he sees his country come to an end and cease to exist. There's no hiding the pain and sorrow that Jeremiah is feeling and no doubt his fellow Israelites were feeling the same.

Imagine being in existence as a nation for a thousand years but in a matter of moments, you cease to exist, Jeremiah says, this has happened to no other nation in such a short period of time.

We can imagine them longing to return, **Psalm 137**, longing to be restored, and when people are desperate for good news, there's always a false prophet around to tell you what you want to hear.

These false prophets were speaking to the Israelites and giving them false hope, **1 Kings 18:19**. They were supposed to be preaching against the sin of the people but instead, they excused their sinful actions and because of this, they actually sealed the fate of the nation.

Much like many religious organisations today, the false prophets preached what the people wanted to hear, and what the people wanted to hear was confirmation of their idolatrous behaviour and so, these false prophets must take responsibility for the fall of Israel, **Jeremiah 14:14-16 / Jeremiah 23:9-40**.

It's sad but true that even today many preachers won't stand on God's Word and as a result, they are by default, turning the people away from God, **2 Thessalonians 2:6-9**.

Israel as a nation got to the stage where they became so arrogant that they were claiming to be a special nation that had been created by God, which was true, but as a nation, they proclaimed this to all the other nations around, under the presumption that God was actually rejecting all the other nations on Earth.

Because of this boasting, we can imagine the other nations making a laughing stock out of them, we can imagine them saying, 'you're not so special now, are you!'

As a result of this, the other nations would obviously mock God Himself, saying that He was no different from all the other 'gods' whom they worshipped.

Notice that Jeremiah says, 'The LORD has done what he planned; he has fulfilled his word, which he decreed long ago.'

We can trust God at His word, when He gave Israel the law at Mount Sinai, He told Israel that if they abandoned His commandments, He would abandon them, and then bring them to destruction, **Leviticus 26:16 / Deuteronomy 28**.

We all know when people receive a great privilege it comes with greater responsibility, Israel had the privilege of being a chosen people, and so, protected from the hostility of the nations around them by God's protective care and other nations were aware of this.

However, when they abandoned the One who created them as a nation, they had to be destroyed, why? Simply because the other nations had to see and understand that God wouldn't accept His people leaving Him to worship other gods, **Deuteronomy 28:52ff.**

‘The hearts of the people cry out to the Lord. You walls of Daughter Zion, let your tears flow like a river day and night; give yourself no relief, your eyes no rest. Arise, cry out in the night, as the watches of the night begin; pour out your heart like water in the presence of the Lord. Lift up your hands to him for the lives of your children, who faint from hunger at every street corner.’ **Lamentations 2:18-19**

Here we read Jeremiah expressing a prayer for the people. The walls of the cities figuratively stood for the people and so, here we see Jeremiah describing how the people in desperation, cry out to God for deliverance, **Isaiah 14:31.**

‘Look, LORD, and consider: Whom have you ever treated like this? Should women eat their offspring, the children they have cared for? Should priest and prophet be killed in the sanctuary of the Lord? ‘Young and old lie together in the dust of the streets; my young men and young women have fallen by the sword. You have slain them in the day of your anger; you have slaughtered them without pity. ‘As you summon to a feast day, so you summoned against me terrors on every side. In the day of the LORD’s anger no one escaped or survived; those I cared for and reared my enemy has destroyed.’ **Lamentations 2:20-22**

It’s not uncommon to find someone else expressing how others feel and here Jeremiah is expressing the feelings of his fellow Israelites, **2 Kings 6:28-29.** Again, in their desperation, they asked for God to think again about them as a nation.

In other words, they asked God for a second chance and in doing so, Jeremiah spoke about some of the devastating things which took place during the destruction of Jerusalem. And what was their hope? Their hope lay firmly on God’s mercy.

APPLICATION

It’s such a blessing to know that God isn’t only a merciful God but a God of second chances. Most of us lived our lives in rebellion against God without even knowing it but He was merciful enough to send His Son to die for each of us, and He is merciful enough to give everyone some time to repent before He comes back, therefore giving us a second chance, **2 Peter 3:9.**

I think if we are honest enough with ourselves, we would admit that He is the God who gives us chance after chance after chance to live right for Him.

The Israelites had to learn that arrogance wasn’t the answer, yes, they were God’s chosen people, but they shouldn’t have boasted about it to the extent of condemning others around them as if they could do no wrong.

In the church today, we must be careful of having the same attitude, yes, we’re God’s chosen people, **1 Peter 2:9,** but we shouldn’t arrogantly pronounce to the world that, ‘we belong to God; therefore, we can’t do any wrong, we’re going to heaven and the rest of you are doomed for hell!’

CHAPTER 3

INTRODUCTION

Take a moment to read the background for **Lamentations 3**, where you will read about the events in Jeremiah's life, **Jeremiah 20 / Jeremiah 38**. **Lamentations 3:40-47** express the feelings of an individual.

'I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of the LORD's 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. He has made my skin and my flesh grow old and has broken my bones. He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship. He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead. He has walled me in, so I cannot escape; he has weighed me down with chains. Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer. He has barred my way with blocks of stone; he has made my paths crooked. Like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in hiding, he dragged me from the path and mangled me and left me without help. He drew his bow and made me the target for his arrows. He pierced my heart with arrows from his quiver. I became the laughingstock of all my people; they mock me in song all day long. He has filled me with bitter herbs and given me gall to drink. He has broken my teeth with gravel; he has trampled me in the dust. I have been deprived of peace; I have forgotten what prosperity is. So, I say, 'My splendour is gone and all that I had hoped from the LORD.' **Lamentations 3:1-18**

Notice that this chapter begins with the words, 'I am the man', which refers to Jeremiah himself. We can see that because he loved his people so much, their pain became his pain, their sorrow became his sorrow, **Romans 12:15**. Every single emotion Jeremiah expressed was an expression of a nation who were suffering. As the nation, Jeremiah bore the burden of the tragedy and the grief of all the people.

Notice that God had turned the brightness of life into a dim and hopeless future, in other words, we could describe it as 'the great depression', which took place back in the 1930s, but instead of it being a worldwide depression, this was a national one. Jeremiah thought that because the future was so dark it was as if he was actually dead, **Psalms 143:3** and I guess as a nation they were dead.

God's punishment was so destructive that it literally removed any joy from His people, they were now captives in a foreign land with no reason to rejoice. Although God was using the Babylonians to punish them, the Babylonians took advantage of this to such an extent that they wanted Israel to bow down to them and worship their gods, **Job 16:13**.

Israel cried out whilst in Babylon, but they were going to have to stay there for seventy years, **Leviticus 25:4 / Jeremiah 29:10-14 / Jeremiah 25:12**.

In their dilemma of captivity, God remained against them as a fierce bear or lion. As Jeremiah during his ministry was mocked by the people, now the nations mocked the captives, in other words, they were now reaping what they had sown.

As you can imagine if you move home and live in another country, at first you constantly think about what life was like back there but as time goes by you begin to think about it less than you did at first. The Israelites were the same, they forgot what it was like to live in that great land which was flowing with milk and honey. Sadly, the only people who would have a chance to return would be their children and grandchildren because everyone else would die in captivity.

'I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: 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.' The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD. It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is young. Let him sit alone in silence, for the LORD has laid it on him. Let him bury his face in the dust—there may yet be hope. Let him offer his cheek to one who would strike him and let him be filled with disgrace. For no one is cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone. To crush underfoot all prisoners in the land, to deny

people their rights before the Most High, to deprive them of justice—would not the Lord see such things? Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come? Why should the living complain when punished for their sins?’ Lamentations 3:19-

39

Jeremiah has just poured out his heart in despair and now he’s waiting on some kind of response from God. He asks God to remember his affliction, that is the affliction of all the people. The people had been humbled because they recognised they had abandoned God and they were humiliated in captivity because they lost their identity as God’s people.

And it’s in this humiliation that Jeremiah remembers that God doesn’t hate people who are broken. He remembered that God is compassionate, and because He is compassionate he found hope in the fact that a compassionate God wouldn’t leave him and His people in a state of hardship, he remembers that God is faithful, **Isaiah 45:7 / Amos 3:6**. Just like God fed the Israelites in the wilderness daily with manna, **Exodus 16:34**, just like our daily bread, **Matthew 6:11**, He gives us enough for each day, nothing more, nothing less, ‘they are new every morning.’

Notice he says that God is his ‘portion’, in other words, God is the fullness of all our desires and because He is the fullness of our desires, this helps us see that God Himself is indeed our only hope.

We all remember what it was like growing up being disciplined by our parents and when we grow up that discipline actually helps us discipline ourselves. Jeremiah says that Israel would remember the discipline of God in her youth, which would help her disciple herself in the future and it was only through discipline that could Israel be set free from captivity.

The idea of ‘offering your cheek’ was a sign of humility, in other words, if they just accepted what was happening to them in captivity, they would eventually be blessed when they are set free to return home, **Isaiah 50:6 / Matthew 5:36**. As difficult as it is, even today, when we go through some kind of suffering, we like the Israelites, need to see that God is working in our suffering, **2 Corinthians 12:8-9**.

Although some people believe God is some kind of evil taskmaster, Jeremiah tells us that God isn’t a ‘mean’ God, He doesn’t look at the here and now but looks to the future. His punishment on Israel was for the purpose of restoring them back to His ways, this is the same purpose for us going through trials and suffering today, **James 1:1-2**.

I don’t know of a single parent who actually enjoys punishing their children, and I don’t believe for one moment that God gets any pleasure out of punishing His children. Notice that God won’t allow them to suffer forever but when they abandoned God, He punished them, but it broke His heart in doing so.

‘Let us 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. ‘You have covered yourself with anger and pursued us; you have slain without pity. You have covered yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can get through. You have made us scum and refuse among the nations. ‘All our enemies have opened their mouths wide against us. We have suffered terror and pitfalls, ruin and destruction.’ Lamentations 3:40-47

Jeremiah here places himself with the people, and so he speaks as a third person. It’s so easy to look at others around us, but here Jeremiah asks the people to examine themselves, in other words before any kind of repentance can come about we first need to see and admit our own sinfulness.

After recognising and admitting their own sinfulness, comes their confession. There was no way that Israel could get back to being right with God until they realised that they had moved far away from God and keeping His commands.

Now, remember that one reason they were destroyed as a nation was simply because they didn’t know themselves that they had abandoned God, and so, how could they repent of something they weren’t aware they had done? **Isaiah 1:25**. Sinners can’t repent if they’re not aware of their need for repentance, **Jonah 3:5-10**.

God did what He promised to Israel, and He brought destruction to the people because they broke their covenant relationship with Him. In their abandonment of God, they disobeyed the conditions of the covenant.

Notice Jeremiah says that they have ‘covered themselves with a cloud’, this is simply a way of saying they enveloped themselves with their sinfulness to such an extent they couldn’t see properly. They left God and didn’t live according to His will and as a result, God wouldn’t hear their prayers, remember that our prayers today are only answered when they are in agreement with the will of God, **Psalm 66:18 / 1 John 5:14**.

‘Streams of tears flow from my eyes because my people are destroyed. My eyes will flow unceasingly, without relief, until the LORD looks down from heaven and sees. What I see brings grief to my soul because of all the women of my city. Those who were my enemies without cause hunted me like a bird. They tried to end my life in a pit and threw stones at me; the waters closed over my head, and I thought I was about to perish.’ **Lamentations 3:48-54**

Here we read about Jeremiah making intercession for the destruction of the people. He cries out to God because of his remorse over the immoral living of the people, and the destruction that resulted from God’s punishment of the people. He never stops pleading until the Lord took notice of the difficulty His people were in, **Matthew 15:21-28 / 1 Thessalonians 5:17**, in other words, he wouldn’t stop praying until he got some kind of an answer from God. Jeremiah recalls his own experience when he was rejected by his own people and thrown into a pit, **Jeremiah 38:6-13**. It seems now the entire nation was in a pit in their captivity and they too were in desperate need of deliverance, **Jeremiah 37:17-19**.

‘I called on your name, LORD, from the depths of the pit. You heard my plea: ‘Do not close your ears to my cry for relief.’ You came near when I called you, and you said, ‘Do not fear.’ You, Lord, took up my case; you redeemed my life. LORD, you have seen the wrong done to me. Uphold my cause! You have seen the depth of their vengeance, all their plots against me. LORD, you have heard their insults, all their plots against me—what my enemies whisper and mutter against me all day long. Look at them! Sitting or standing, they mock me in their songs. Pay them back what they deserve, LORD, for what their hands have done. Put a veil over their hearts, and may your curse be on them! Pursue them in anger and destroy them from under the heavens of the LORD.’ **Lamentations 3:55-66**

Jeremiah recalls the time when God answered his prayer for deliverance from the pit in which his people had thrown him into and now he asks God to remember His people who are in the pit of captivity. The very people who threw Jeremiah into the pit were long gone but the people as a whole didn’t listen to his message, they didn’t listen when he told them they had to accept their punishment by the Babylonians, but if they didn’t accept it, they would die. Sadly, they didn’t listen, they didn’t accept, and many died.

When Jeremiah was writing this, he looks around and sees God’s people as a people who have been thrown into the pit of captivity. He then asks God to render to the captors the same judgment that He had rendered to those who had personally cast him into the pit before the fall of Jerusalem.

APPLICATION

In the midst of all this doom and gloom, Jeremiah remembers a glimmer of hope, he remembers the steadfast love of the Lord. Often when we’re going through difficulties it’s hard to see the love of God because we’re so focused on our problems and trials. We often come to the conclusion that God has abandoned us and left us to it, this is simply not true.

Ask yourself this question, if God loved us so much BEFORE we became Christians, **John 3:16 / Romans 5:8**, what makes us think that He will love us less AFTER we decide to obey Him and follow His ways?

This doesn't make any sense to think that way, He loves us, He cares for us and He promises that He will help us through any difficulties which come our way, **1 Corinthians 10:13**.

The next time you feel as though you're in a pit of despair, try praying more often, read His Word more often, and spend time with other Christians who will help you focus not on your struggles but on what really matters, God Himself, **Matthew 6:33-34**.

CHAPTER 4

INTRODUCTION

Lamentations 4 contrasts what Jerusalem used to be like, with the current state of the city after the Babylonians came along and destroyed it in 586 B.C.

'How the gold has lost its lustre, the fine gold become dull! The sacred gems are scattered at every street corner. How the precious children of Zion, once worth their weight in gold, are now considered as pots of clay, the work of a potter's hands! Even jackals offer their breasts to nurse their young, but my people have become heartless like ostriches in the desert. Because of thirst the infant's tongue sticks to the roof of its mouth; the children beg for bread, but no one gives it to them. Those who once ate delicacies are destitute in the streets. Those brought up in royal purple now lie on ash heaps. The punishment of my people is greater than that of Sodom, which was overthrown in a moment without a hand turned to help her. Their princes were brighter than snow and whiter than milk, their bodies more ruddy than rubies, their appearance like lapis lazuli. But now they are blacker than soot; they are not recognized in the streets. Their skin has shrivelled on their bones; it has become as dry as a stick. Those killed by the sword are better off than those who die of famine; racked with hunger, they waste away for lack of food from the field. With their own hands compassionate women have cooked their own children, who became their food when my people were destroyed. 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 kings of the earth did not believe, nor did any of the peoples of the world, that enemies and foes could enter the gates of Jerusalem.' **Lamentations 4:1-12**

Ah, Jerusalem, the city that shone so wonderfully at one time has now become a place of devastation. Here Jeremiah describes the moral change which has taken place, Jerusalem which was that great and glorious product of the people is now an ash heap, with the ashes scattered all over the city's streets.

We can almost imagine ourselves walking through what's left of Jerusalem, there is ash everywhere, and there are dead children laying in the streets. Like broken pots of clay, they just lay dead, which meant the people to whom this prophecy was written had no future in the land.

We can't begin to imagine the picture which Jeremiah describes here, the Scriptures tell us that during those 30 months of siege against the city by the Babylonians, the situation was so bad in the city that mothers ended up eating their children, they became like ferocious monsters who turned against their own children. **2 Kings 6:24-30**.

Interestingly, Jeremiah uses the Ostrich to get his point across because these birds were well known for neglecting their own offspring, this is how he describes the mothers of the besieged city, they neglected their own children, **Job 39:13-17**.

The situation in the besieged city got to the point where those living there were digging their way through the city's dumps to find food. Although this is a horrific situation it was only going to get worse, their fate was to be worse than Sodom, remember that Sodom was destroyed in a moment. This really is a sad picture Jeremiah is painting here, the conditions of those who were in Jerusalem went on like this for months whilst the city was being overtaken.

The rulers and leaders who once walked proudly before the people, wearing their expensive garments were now dead, and those rulers and leaders who survived were carried off into captivity in rags. Oh, how they used to enjoy good food and good living, so much so that some of them became fat from their lifestyle, but now they are but skin and bone.

‘But it happened because of the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests, who shed within her the blood of the righteous. Now they grope through the streets as if they were blind. They are so defiled with blood that no one dares to touch their garments. ‘Go away! You are unclean!’ people cry to them. ‘Away! Away! Don’t touch us!’ When they flee and wander about, people among the nations say, ‘They can stay here no longer.’ The LORD himself has scattered them; he no longer watches over them. The priests are shown no honour, the elders no favour.’
Lamentations 4:13-16

There’s no doubting who God said was mainly responsible for the destruction of Israel as a nation, it was the leadership. Sadly, they never learned their lesson because this again would happen in A.D. 70 when the Romans destroyed the temple and the city again, **Matthew 24:1-35**.

Some say that ignorance is bliss, but the leadership truly were ignorant of God’s Word, the prophets preached lies, they gave false hope which resulted in immoral behaviour among the people and it was because of those leaders that the nation came to an end, **Hosea 4:6 / Amos 9:8 / Hosea 13:11**.

Notice that these so-called religious leaders were guilty of bloodshed, this is in terms of those who were actually faithful within the city had to pay the great price of death, we could say they were the innocent victims in all of this, **2 Kings 21:16**.

There was obviously no respect for the leadership, especially when the people came to the realisation that they were actually being led astray. They had preached peace when there was no peace, **Jeremiah 6:14** and they didn’t preach against the sins of the people because like most politician’s today, they didn’t want to lose favour with the people. They liked being popular, instead of preaching what God actually said, it’s sad because it seems as though both the leadership and the people actually believed the lies which were being preached and ended up being condemned because of it, **Jeremiah 5:31 / Jeremiah 6:13 / Jeremiah 23:11-16**.

‘Moreover, our eyes failed, looking in vain for help; from our towers, we watched for a nation that could not save us. People stalked us at every step, so we could not walk in our streets. Our end was near, our days were numbered, for our end had come. Our pursuers were swifter than eagles in the sky; they chased us over the mountains and lay in wait for us in the desert. The LORD’s anointed, our very life breath, was caught in their traps. We thought that under his shadow we would live among the nations.’ Lamentations 4:17-20

It never ceases to amaze me where people look for help, time and time again people seem to go everywhere except God for that help, here Jeremiah tells us that Judah thought that the Egyptians would come to their help, **Jeremiah 7**. They were sadly mistaken because the Babylonians were smart, they turned their attention away from Jerusalem for a short time to deal with the Egyptians, the Egyptians finally gave in and returned home, later around 582/581 B.C., the Babylonians returned to Egypt and totally destroyed the land.

The Babylonians were as swift as eagles, the Jews had no chance of escape, there was no place to hide, even Zedekiah tried to run away and escape from Jerusalem, but the Babylonians caught him too, **Jeremiah 39:4-7**. There were a few Jews who managed to escape to Egypt after they murdered Gedaliah, but the Babylonians went into Egypt to find them and ended up killing most of them.

‘Rejoice and be glad, Daughter Edom, you who live in the land of Uz. But to you also the cup will be passed; you will be drunk and stripped naked. Your punishment will end, Daughter Zion; he will not prolong your exile. But he will punish your sin, Daughter Edom, and expose your wickedness.’ Lamentations 4:21-22

The Edomites were always hostile towards Israel, though they were descendants of Abraham through Esau, but they soon came to an end because of the way they treated Israel. When Jerusalem was under attack from the Babylonians, Edom decided to join the Babylonians, they even went as far as to take advantage of the situation by taking some of the land possessions of the Israelites, **Ezekiel 35:10-12 / Amos 1:11-12 / Obadiah**.

The cup was a cup of judgment, **Jeremiah 25:15-28** and Edom should rejoice while she could because disaster was coming her way and as a result, she would fall under like a drunker in total humiliation. The good news was that Judah had a future, but Edom didn't, they would be totally wiped out of existence, **Obadiah 18**.

APPLICATION

It's so important to have good strong leadership within a congregation, too many times we've seen churches fall prey to false teaching, simply because the leadership won't deal with it or even challenge it because they want to keep the peace. The Lord's church desperately needs strong leaders, **1 Timothy 3:1-7**, otherwise, everyone will be led astray from God's Word.

Our street corners are filled with people proclaiming all kinds of Gospels, our T.V. screens are filled with so-called, 'pastors' who proclaim everything but the Gospel. You never hear words like, repent, judgment, sin and hell being used because people find those words offensive and so for popularity's sake they stay clear of these topics and teach only about the love of God.

It's a sad fact that many will listen to them, thinking they are preaching the truth, when all the time they are preaching lies, **2 Timothy 3:13 / 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12**.

CHAPTER 5

INTRODUCTION

The first four poems, chapters, are acrostics, each verse begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet taken in order, **Psalm 25 / Psalm 34 / Psalm 37 / Psalm 119**. The first, second, and fourth have each twenty-two verses, the number of the letters in the Hebrew alphabet. The third has sixty-six verses, in which each three successive verses begin with the same letter.

The fifth poem or chapter isn't acrostic, in this prayer, Jeremiah reflects on the past disasters of the people in order to move God to compassion and so with more confessions of sins they committed in the past, they are pleading with God to be merciful towards them.

'Remember, LORD, what has happened to us; look, and see our disgrace. Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, our homes to foreigners. We have become fatherless, our mothers are widows. We must buy the water we drink; our wood can be had only at a price. Those who pursue us are at our heels; we are weary and find no rest. We submitted to Egypt and Assyria to get enough bread.' **Lamentations 5:1-6**

The word ‘remember’ is used not in the sense that God forgets but in the sense of a plea towards God, **2 Kings 19:14**. Here we read of God’s children pleading with Him to keep His promise to deliver them from captivity, whilst they are in captivity they were like helpless orphans and widows who had to buy water and wood in order to survive. The Babylonians only wanted the best of the best and so when they had finished ransacking Jerusalem, they simply left the poorest parts of the lands alone, the people who were left here are so desperate to survive they have no choice but to buy back the very things which once belonged to them from the Babylonians.

What a sad state this is, prisoners in their own land. We can almost feel the humiliation here as they have to buy food from the Egyptians and the Assyrians in order to survive.

‘Our ancestors sinned and are no more, and we bear their punishment. Slaves rule over us, and there is no one to free us from their hands. We get our bread at the risk of our lives because of the sword in the desert. Our skin is hot as an oven, feverish from hunger. Women have been violated in Zion, and virgins in the towns of Judah. Princes have been hung up by their hands; elders are shown no respect. Young men toil at the millstones; boys stagger under loads of wood. The elders are gone from the city gate; the young men have stopped their music. Joy is gone from our hearts; our dancing has turned to mourning. The crown has fallen from our head. Woe to us, for we have sinned! Because of this our hearts are faint, because of these things our eyes grow dim for Mount Zion, which lies desolate, with jackals prowling over it.’ Lamentations 5:7-18

Like so many things in life, people often have to deal with the consequences of other people’s sins. Maybe a drunk driver runs over your child and your child dies and for the rest of your life, you have to deal with the consequences of someone else’s drunken stupidity.

Here the text tells us that the fathers had gone far away from God and His Word and as a result of their stupidity, their children would have to deal with the consequences they find themselves in whilst in captivity. In other words, the children were reaping what their fathers had sown, but the good news was that God knew this and would show mercy on the children, although the fathers would die in captivity.

The ‘sword of the wilderness’, simply means that there were thieves and murderers who lived in the desert and every time those who were hungry were desperate for food, they would go to the desert to find something which meant they put their lives in danger.

These poor people were suffering from starvation, but they were the remnant people who were left behind in a devastated land. They were the survivors of a disaster that was the result of the sins of the fathers. No wonder they felt helpless and hopeless, they must have felt like there was no hope for the future. In all of this Jeremiah is pleading for God to show them mercy.

‘You, LORD, reign forever; your throne endures from generation to generation. Why do you always forget us? Why do you forsake us so long? Restore us to yourself, LORD, that we may return; renew our days as of old unless you have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure.’ Lamentations 5:19-22

Jeremiah’s last words here are a reflection of how the people are feeling and, in their despair, they do what they should have done in the beginning, they cry out to God for help, **1 Corinthians 3:6**.

Like many of us, it’s not until we reach the lowest of lows when we seem like we just can’t go on, when there seems like there is no hope and we end up doing almost anything to survive, we turn to God.

These Jews were at that point in their lives, and although they didn’t see it, God was working in the background, He was working among another nation, He was about to raise up the Medo-Persian Empire who would eventually wipe out the Babylonians, **Daniel 2:39 / Daniel 5:31**.

When the Medo-Persian Empire took over, the Jews would once again enjoy the relief that would come when their brothers would return from their captivity in the east to help in the building of the land and the temple, **Isaiah**

44:28 / 2 Chronicles 36:22-23 / Ezra 1. It was during this time they came to realise that God hadn't completely rejected His people, He very much still loved them and cared for them.

APPLICATION

In the Old Testament, fathers were usually held responsible and when they sinned the whole household was held responsible and ended up reaping the consequences of their father's actions, **Joshua 7:24-25**. Thankfully God doesn't work that way anymore, each person is accountable for their own actions, **Ezekiel 18:20**.

As Christians, we may end up in a dark place because life does that to us at times, but we must never forget that God is still in control and He sees it all. Even though we may feel lost and helpless, we must trust that He is working in the background, working for our good according to His will, **Romans 8:28**.

Like Jeremiah, if we listen and look closely enough, we may see and hear that amongst all our hurt, pain and sorrow, there is hope.

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
His mercies never come to an end;
They are new every morning,
New every morning,
Great is Thy faithfulness, O Lord.
Great is Thy faithfulness!