## Lamentations

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**Background**

**Theme ~ Mourning the Fall of Jerusalem**

- This book has been compared to a funeral for the city of Jerusalem and called “a mournful postscript to the Book of Jeremiah.”
- The reason for the fall is God’s judgment on sin.
- “No other entire OT book contains only laments, as does this distressful dirge, marking the funeral of the once beautiful city of Jerusalem (cf. 2:15). This book keeps alive the memory of that fall and teaches all believers how to deal with suffering.”

**Author ~ Jeremiah**

- Jewish tradition holds that is Jeremiah.
- The Septuagint adds an introduction with his name in it: “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…”
- “The Aramaic Targum of Jonathan, the Babylonian Talmud, the Peshitta, and the Vulgate all made statements that attribute the work to Jeremiah.”
- “Internal evidence also points to Jeremiah as the author. Several ideas used by Jeremiah in his prophecy reappear in Lamentations (cf. Jer. 30:14 with Lam. 1:2; and cf. Jer. 49:12 with Lam. 4:21). In both books the writer said his eyes flowed with tears (Jer. 9:1, 18; Lam. 1:16; 2:11); and in both the writer was an eyewitness of Jerusalem’s fall to Babylon and pictured the atrocities that befell Jerusalem in her last days (Jer. 19:9; Lam. 2:20; 4:10).”

**Date ~ 586 - 583 B.C.**

- The fall of Jerusalem is fresh in the mind of Jeremiah.
- Thus it is best to see the book as being written between 586 BC when Jerusalem fell and 583 BC when Jeremiah was forced to go to Egypt.
  - And most likely it was in 586 BC.

**Structure:**

- Lamentations contains 5 dirges or funeral laments, each making one chapter of the book.
- These poetic laments have some very specific characteristics.
  - While they express the author’s deep grief and sorrow, they are not just basic or simple poems quickly composed to during a time of sorrow.
  - They are carefully thought out and carefully constructed to convey the truths that they do.
- “The Book of Lamentations has a definite structural balance. Chapters 1-2 and 4-5 parallel each other and are arranged in a chiasm pattern. Thus chapters 1 and 5 focus on the people

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3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
while chapters 2 and 4 focus on the Lord. Chapter 3 provides the pivot for the book, pointing to Jeremiah’s response in the midst of affliction.”

• “The structure’s most striking feature is the use of the acrostic, or alphabetical arrangement, in which successive lines of the poem begin with consecutive letters of the alphabet. The acrostics employed in Lamentations are, of course, not apparent in English translations.
  o There are twenty-two verses in chaps. 1–2, corresponding to the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Each verse is composed of three lines; the first word of each verse begins with a consecutive Hebrew letter.11
  o Chapter 3 has sixty-six verses of one line each. The first three verses begin with the first letter of the alphabet; the next three verses begin with the second letter, and so on.
  o Chapter 4 has twenty-two verses of two lines each; the first word of each verse begins with consecutive Hebrew letters.
  o Chapter 5 contains twenty-two verses, but it is not an acrostic (cf. Ps 103); nor does it contain the Qinah meter. Perhaps the breakdown in the pattern that characterizes the previous chapters was deliberate in order to suggest chaos and despair.”

• “A crucial, though often overlooked, characteristic of the Book of Lamentations is its relationship to Deuteronomy 28. As John A. Martin has noted, “The author of the Book of Lamentations was attempting to show the fulfillment of the curses presented in Deuteronomy 28” (“The Contribution of the Book of Lamentations to Salvation History.” Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1975, p. 44).”

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11 In chaps. 2–4 the order of the Hebrew letters [and p is reversed. No satisfactory explanation has been proposed for this reversal.


I. The First Lament: Jerusalem’s Devastation (1:1–22)

- “Jeremiah’s first dirge established 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” (vv. 2, 9, 16-17, 21). The city had turned from the protective care of her God to pursue foreign alliances and lifeless idols; and now, at the time she needed the help of others most, she found herself alone—destitute and defenseless.”

A. Jeremiah’s Sorrow (1:1–11)
- Jeremiah stands and looks over the city, seeing the scene of her destruction.
- Verses 1 – 7 describe what happened to her, while vv. 8-11 describe why.
  - She is desolate, lonely, destroyed (vv. 1-7)
  - And the reason is because of her sin (vv. 8-11)

B. Jerusalem’s Sorrow (1:12–22)
- In these verses Jeremiah takes the perspective of Jerusalem, surveying her situation.
- She is afflicted and in pain (v. 12).
- This is because of her sin (v. 18).
- She is abandon by the other nations she once turned to as her “lovers” (v. 19).
- Verses 20-22 contain Israel’s cry to the Lord for help.

II. The Second Lament: The Lord’s Anger Explained (2:1–22)

- “Charles Swindoll has appropriately titled this chapter “Words from the Woodshed.” The focus of Jeremiah’s attention moved from the personified city of Jerusalem to the punishment inflicted by God. The first 10 verses depict the anger of God as He systematically dismantled the city in judgment. Verses 11-19 contain (a) Jeremiah’s anguished cry as he wept over the destruction of the city he had loved and (b) his call for the people to cry out to God. Verses 20-22 give the people’s response, in which Jerusalem again cried out for the Lord to see her plight.”

A. The Lord’s Perspective (2:1–10)
- The extent of God’s wrath up on Jerusalem is complete.
- His wrath affects:
  - The stronghold, kingdoms, princes (v. 2, 5)
  - The tabernacle, feasts, Sabbath, king, and priest (v. 6)
  - The altar, sanctuary, palaces, house of the Lord (v. 7)
  - The walls (v. 8)
  - The gates, king, princes, law, prophets (v. 9)
  - Elders, virgins (v. 10)
B. A Human Perspective (2:11–19)

- “Jeremiah cried out in anguish at the scene he had been surveying. He sketched five portraits of Jerusalem’s condition which prompted his cry.”
  - #1: vv. 11-12 ~ the starvation of children as parents stand by helplessly
  - #2: v. 13 ~ a man trying to comfort a friend
  - #3: v. 14 ~ “false prophets hastening rather than hindering Jerusalem’s downfall.”
  - #4: vv. 15-17 ~ A mocking enemy rejoicing in his victory over them
  - #5: vv. 18-19 ~ the people in ceaseless prayer to God (for their dying children).

C. Jeremiah’s Prayer (2:20–22)

- Jeremiah calls out to God to look upon the situation. He is bringing his sorrow and the sorrow of the people before the Lord.
- Everyone is afflicted in the worst ways:
  - Women eating their children to survive (v. 20).
  - Priests killed in the sanctuary (v. 20).
  - People of all ages are dead in the streets (v. 21).
- But Jeremiah knows that the reason for all of this is God’s judgment for sin (v. 22).

III. The Third Lament: Jeremiah’s Grieves Expressed (3:1–66)

- “Chapter 3 is the heart of Jeremiah’s short book. This chapter gives the book a positive framework around which the other chapters revolve. The black velvet of sin and suffering in chapters 1-2 and 4-5 serves as a fitting backdrop to display the sparkling brilliance of God’s loyal love in chapter 3...
  The chapter may be divided into three sections. Jeremiah detailed his afflictions during the time of Jerusalem’s fall (vv. 1-18). But his knowledge of God’s ways in the midst of his affliction produced hope, not despair (vv. 19-40). So Jeremiah could lead Israel in prayer to God for deliverance, restoration, and vindication (vv. 41-66).”
- There has been some question as to the identity of the one speaking in this chapter, but it seems clear that the first person speaker is Jeremiah.
  - When he speaks in the plural (us, we) is referring to himself and the nation of Israel.

A. His Distress (3:1–20)

- This section details the distress and sorrows that Jeremiah had experienced.
- Clearly his prophetic ministry had not been easy.
- The difficulty of his ministry, lack of answered prayer, etc. was due not to sinfulness on the part of Jeremiah, but rather due to the sinful unrepentant heart of Judah.

B. His Hope (3:21–38)

- In the midst of such awful pain and destruction from God’s judgment, Jeremiah’s hope was in the Lord.
- This section contains a beautiful expression of Jeremiah’s trust:

  Lamentations 3:21–25 ~ 21 But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: 22 The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; 23 they are new every morning; great is

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12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
your faithfulness. 24 “The LORD is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.” 25 The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him.

- Clearly this is how Jeremiah endured the pain and difficulty of his own ministry and the pain and difficulty of watching Jerusalem under judgment.
- The rest of this section expresses Jeremiah’s trust in the goodness and faithfulness of God

C. His Counsel/Prayer (3:39–66)
- Jeremiah calls Judah to return to the Lord (v. 40) which would involve acknowledging their sin before Him (v. 42).
- Jeremiah then recounts his own sorrow and persecution (vv. 48–63).
- He ends with an imprecatory prayer against his enemies based on the justice of God (vv. 64–66).

IV. The Fourth Lament: God’s Wrath Detailed (4:1–22)

- “Chapter 4 parallels the judgment discussed in chapter 2. After describing the response of an individual in the midst of judgment (chap. 3), Jeremiah again returned to survey the scene of calamity in Jerusalem. He contrasted the conditions in Jerusalem before and after the siege (4:1–11), explained the causes for the siege, (vv. 12–20), and gave a call for vindication from Zion (vv. 21–22).” 14

A. For Jerusalem (4:1–20)
- Israel has gone from being “fine gold” and “sacred stones” (vv. 1–2) to being “earthen jars.”
- Her beauty is now gone.
- Once again the picture of suffering children (dying of starvation and uncared for) is used to show the depth of the suffering from God’s judgment (vv. 3–4).
- It is a total role reversal from opulence to extreme poverty (vv. 5–10) and the reason is God’s wrath (v. 11).
- Jerusalem seemed invincible (v. 12) yet because of her sin God brought destruction upon her (vv. 13–20):
  - Her prophets and priests were wicked (vv. 13–14)
  - She tried to turn to foreign nations rather than God (v. 17)

B. For Edom (4:21, 22)
- Edom rejoiced in Jerusalem’s downfall, but God would bring judgment on Edom as well.

V. The Fifth Lament: The Remnant’s Prayers (5:1–22)

- “The prophet’s final dirge breaks the pattern established in his earlier laments. The acrostic pattern and qînâh meter are not used. In fact the entire chapter is more properly a prayer than a lament. Chapters 1–3 each close with a prayer to the Lord (1:20–22; 2:20–22; 3:55–66) but no prayer is included in chapter 4. Therefore it is possible to see chapter 5 functioning as the prayer following chapter 4 and serving as the book’s concluding prayer.
- The prayer itself is composed of two sections, each of which summarizes the response the remnant needed to make. The first response is a call for God to remember their condition (5:1–18). This section also includes a confession of sin. After the call for God to remember

is a call for God to restore Judah (vv. 19-22). In context this is a call to restore both the land of Israel and the blessings of the covenant (Deut. 30:1-10)."  

A. To Be Remembered by the Lord (5:1–18)  
- Jeremiah calls on God to remember his people (v. 1)  
- Here reminds God of the difficulty that Israel is facing (vv. 2-18) and includes in this acknowledgement of their sin (vv. 6-7).

B. To Be Restored by the Lord (5:19–22)  
- Jeremiah ends with an acknowledgment of God’s sovereignty and a plea for Him to restore the nation of Israel.

“Contemporary applications that can be made from the Book of Lamentations include the following: (1) the wickedness of any people will eventually result in the disintegration of that society; (2) we should never take God’s past blessings as assurance that they will continue when we continue in sin; (3) our nation and our churches are subject to God’s judgment when they are no longer faithful; (4) God fulfills his word; (5) though many solutions for human suffering have been proposed, ultimately the only satisfactory way to deal with it is through deep and abiding faith in God in spite of the circumstances.”  

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Preaching Lamentations

1. **Preach Against Sin**
   - God had warned the nation what would happen if they continued in sin (Deut. 28) but they did not listen.
   - Romans 1:18-32

2. **Preach on Hope**
   - Chapter 3 is the central focus of the book and everything changes when Jeremiah says: “But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope” (3:21).
   - In the Old Testament, the hope of God’s people was His covenant faithfulness and love for them. Now we get to see that faithfulness and love demonstrated in the most glorious way through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
   - Romans 5:1-5; 1 Peter 1:3-6

3. **Teach People How to Suffer**
   - Wrong views on suffering: complaining/grumbling, despair, depression, questioning God, seeking comfort at any cost, etc.
   - Right views on suffering: humility, trust and hope in the Lord, confession of sin as appropriate, joy, learning from God, etc.
   - James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 1:6-9; Romans 5:3-5; 2 Corinthians 4:16-18
   - God brings trials and suffering for our good and for our sanctification. We need to teach our people (and ourselves!) to come under these trials and learn all that God would have us to learn through them.