



LAMENTATIONS

• LESSONS FROM LOSS •



Lamentations: Lessons from Loss

How lonely sits the city that was full of people!

How like a widow has she become,

she who was great among the nations!

She who was a princess among the provinces has become a slave.

A few years ago I would have found these opening verses of Lamentations somewhat hard to relate to. Never had I come across a city deserted from war, famine or other forms of calamity. Somehow in 2021, it feels easier to picture the awful reality of these verses, despite living in the privileged protection of a first-world country.

The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple around 587 BC by Nebuchadnezzar signified the largest existential crises Israel had faced as a nation up to that time. The nation had already experienced its share of conflicts and tragedies, but this one went right to the core of questioning their identity as Yahweh's chosen people. It wasn't just the breaking of cities and religious symbols. It was the crushing of their collective spirit.

Lamentations is a cathartic cry to God in the face of enormous loss and suffering. Unlike the book of Job which is focused on an individual suffering without a perceived reason, Lamentations considers a community experiencing the devastation of God's judgment against Israel's sin. The writer weeps and cries out

inconsolably for the city of Jerusalem and its surrounding kingdom, exploring the theological questions that are raised by Jerusalem's defeat. The chapters of Lamentations are far more bitter than sweet. The book does not finish with a happy account or even hopeful prophecy of a future restoration. Lamentations finishes with the writer wondering whether God has rejected them forever.

Many faithful Christians endure their entire lives with questions around suffering, trauma and consequence that are never answered. Lamentations both frees us to experience these questions and exposes us to true depth and possibility of human anguish. It presents a mere glimmer of hope that can only be illuminated by looking further down the road to God's answers in history.

It's not an easy book to read, but like all of Scripture, it's a book for our time.

Abraham Gunn

Study 1

Lamentations 1:1-22

How lonely sits the city that was full of people!

Context

Lamentations opens with the reality of Jeremiah's prophecies coming to fruition. The Southern Kingdom - Jerusalem and Judah - has been utterly devastated by Babylonian armies with many of the nation exiled and taken captive. The writer reflects on the site of ruin, lamenting the destruction that has occurred while considering its significance. Israel had received numerous warnings both from Moses (Deuteronomy 30-31) and Jeremiah about what the consequences of their sin would be. Sadly, these prophecies and warnings were ignored.

1. The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple took away the sacrificial system and the capital city - essentially ending its national existence. What theological questions would an Israelite be asking in this moment?

Observation

2. Jeremiah used the image of a bride to personify Jerusalem and its relationship to Yahweh (Jeremiah 2:2-3). How does this connect with Jerusalem portrayed as a widow in Lamentations 1:1-2?
3. In verses 3, 8, 9 and 14, what are some key admissions in the reflections on the calamity they had experienced?

Meaning

4. Verses 18-22 describe Jerusalem's situation as absolute isolation and abandonment. How do you respond to the writer wishing the horrors that they had experienced to occur to their enemies?

Study 2

Lamentations 2:1-22

After the Exodus when God liberated and brought Israel out of Egypt, God established a covenant with Israel and gave them a set of commandments. These commandments were designed to help Israel live as a nation that was set apart - holy and distinct - for God.

In Leviticus 26, God describes the immense blessing that he would bring if Israel observed his commandments, showing thankfulness to the one who freed them from slavery in Egypt. In this same chapter, God also describes the punishment that would result from Israel's disobedience.

The second chapter of Lamentations poetically describes the extent of destruction in Judah as part of the exile to Babylon. Unlike the first chapter, here we see God portrayed as the active source of Judah's destruction.

Icebreaker

1. A common question Christians are challenged with is 'If God is good, why does he allow suffering in the world?'. How would you respond to this question?

Context

2. Leviticus 26 describes the blessings that would come from Israel's obedience to God and the consequences of disobedience. These commandments were designed to help Israel live as a holy nation, set apart for God.

What does Leviticus 26: 14-33 tell us about God's standards when it comes to holiness and sin?

Observation

3. In Lamentations 2, what details of the destruction in Judah stand out to you the most and why?
4. The phrase 'daughter of Zion' and 'daughter of Jerusalem' are used many times in Lamentations 2. How does this portrayal of God's relationship with his people contrast with the destructive imagery?

Meaning

5. Verse 17 says 'The Lord has done what he has purposed; he has carried out his word, which he commanded long ago'.

When we discuss God's faithfulness, we often focus on the blessings. With this and Leviticus 26 in mind, how should we understand God's faithfulness in light of his judgment? What does this reveal about his character?

6. God is very active in Lamentation 2 and has been attributed as the bringer of destruction. What are the tensions that arise from seeing God acting in a seemingly destructive way?

Application

7. God has demonstrated that he is faithful to his covenant with Israel, both in blessing and consequence. How can we develop better responses to God's faithfulness in both blessing and consequence?

8. We see the promised blessing and consequence of God's covenant displayed in full on the cross. Jesus took on the wrath of God that was due to us - suffering in our place and becoming a sacrifice once and for all, so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

How can we use this understanding of God's faithfulness towards judgement whilst also providing a means of grace to see hope amidst the suffering in our world?

Study 3

Lamentations 3:1-66*

**Instead of reading all 66 verses in one go, feel free to break it up and read as you go.*

Context

"The voice is that of a lonely man speaking out of the suffering and grief as a representative of the whole people. The poet sees his hardship as a form of God's justice but paradoxically this is what gives the poet hope, and it leads him to offer the only hopeful words in the whole book.

The poet reasons, if God is consistent enough to bring his justice on human evil, then he will also be consistent with his covenant promise to not allow evil to get the final word. And so, through this poet God's judgement becomes the seedbed of hope for the future."

- The Bible Project -

Observation

1. Which of these cries of affliction feel heart-wrenching to you (verses 1-20)?

2. How are these reminders of hope surprising given the situation Israel was in (verses 21-30)?

3. How does the author make sense of their alienation from God (verses 37-54)?

4. How does the poet express dependence on God for rescue and vindication (verses 55-66)?

Meaning

5. How is God's faithfulness to punish and faithfulness to save displayed at the cross? See Romans 3:25-26 or any other verses.

Application

6. How can God's faithfulness to punish and faithfulness to save be a warning and comfort in my day-to-day wrestling with sins?

7. How does my citizenship in heaven (purchased by the cross) enable me to hope, seek and wait upon the Lord? See Lamentations 3:25-26 and Philippians 3:20-21.

Study 4

Lamentations 4:1-22

Context

"It is a vivid and disturbing depiction of the two-year siege in Jerusalem that contrasts how things used to be in Jerusalem of the past and how terrible they became in the siege.

The children used to laugh and play in the streets but now they beg for food. The wealthy used to eat lavish meals but now they eat whatever they can find in the dirt. And the royal leaders used to be full of splendour but now they are famished and dirty and unrecognizable.

And the anointed king from the line of David has been captured and dragged away. The poem's power comes from the shock of these contrasts and its exploring the depth of the suffering that Israel brought on itself."

-The Bible Project-

Observation

1. Describe Israel's plight by contrasting the before and after (verses 1-10).

2. How has Israel's spiritual leaders impacted the people under their care (verses 11-16)?

3. What does the future hold for God's people and his enemies (verses 17-22)?

Meaning

4. What does God's willingness to deconstruct Israel's leadership (as an act of judgement) reveal about God?

5. How is God's punishment of his enemies a source of hope for his people? See Colossians 2:13-15.

Application

6. How have failures in Christian leadership impacted the lives of people today?

What can we do to support and protect the leaders in our church?

7. How does the truth that God judges impartially impact the way we love those who mistreat us?

Meaning

3. What does the author attribute the people's suffering to (verse 7)? How does one generation bear the consequences of a former generation's sin?

Note: The author may be referring to Israel finding provision from Egypt and Assyria instead of returning to God (Jeremiah 42:13-18).

4. Look where the author locates Israel's hope (verses 19-22). How do the cries of the author echo those of Christ (Mark 15:33-38)?

5. This prayer appears to end with a tone of uncertainty, questioning God's relationship toward his people (verses 20 and 22). How would you reconcile this posture of questioning with true faith?

