

Lamentations

“A Funeral Dirge”

I. Introduction to Lamentations

Lamentations was written in response to the fall of Judah and the destruction of Jerusalem. Judah's fall was in three stages.

- 605 B.C. 1st Deportation, during King Jehoiakim's reign; Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (Shadrach, Meshach, Abed-Nego) were taken captive
- 597 B.C. 2nd Deportation, during King Jehoiachin's reign; his refusal to pay tribute brought the Babylonian army back. It is during this Deportation that Ezekiel was taken captive.
- 587 B.C. Siege, of almost three years, results in the collapse of the city walls and destruction of the city

The final stroke and destruction of the city is recorded three times in the Old Testament narrative: 2 Kings 25, 2 Chronicles 36, and Jeremiah 52.

Lamentations is a funeral dirge; a song of grief. Earliest tradition credits the Book of Lamentations to Jeremiah and it has been placed after his prophesy as an appendix. Tradition also hold, Jeremiah wrote Lamentations from a cave on Golgotha, where he watched the rubble that was once Jerusalem, smolder to ash. Today you can visit a place just outside the walls of the ancient city called “Jeremiah's Grotto” where legend asserts Jeremiah sat weeping, praying and writing his funeral song for Jerusalem.

Lamentations has five distinct parts; corresponding with its five chapters. When the books of the Bible were originally written, they did not contain chapter or verse references. The Bible was divided into chapters and verses to help us find Scriptures more quickly. In a few places, chapter breaks are poorly placed and as a result divide content that should flow together. The chapter divisions commonly used today was developed by Stephen Langton, an Archbishop of Canterbury. Langton put the modern chapter divisions into place in around A.D. 1227. However, the five divisions of Lamentations were designed by the author, Jeremiah. We might consider Lamentations as five separate poems all with the same theme: Weeping for the fall of the nation.

Lamentations was written as an acrostic (a composition written following an ordered sequence of letters to form a word.) In Hebrew an acrostic follows the Hebrew alphabet. Each verse begins with the next letter of the alphabet in sequence. The twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet correspond to the twenty-two verse. Chapters 1, 2, 4 are acrostics and each contain twenty-two verses. However, there are two exceptions. Chapter 3 has sixty-six verses and is an acrostic where each letter corresponds to three verses: Verses 1 – 3 all begin with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, verses 4 – 6 all begin with the second letter of the alphabet, and so on. The other exception is Chapter 5. It has twenty-two verses, but it is not an acrostic; perhaps because it is a prayer.

Lamentations is part of the Hebrew “Megillot” or scrolls designed to be read at the various annual feasts.

Song of Songs	Read at Passover
Ruth	Read at Pentecost
Ecclesiastes	Read at Tabernacles
Esther	Read at Purim
Lamentations	Read at the anniversary of the destruction of Jerusalem

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It was very important to Jeremiah and the Jewish people to remember the truths of Lamentations. Although a sorrowful song, Lamentations reminds us of the mercy of God. It is a book filled with comfort for those who suffer.

II. Outline of Lamentations

Lamentations naturally divides into five parts corresponding with its five chapters.

Chapter 1

Chapter one is an acrostic. Each verse begins with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet in sequence. Each verse consists of three lines. Chapter one further divides into two parts.

Verses 1 – 11 weeping for the city.

Verses 12 – 22 weeping by the inhabitants of the city.

Verse 1 begins with the word “How?” This is the Hebrew name given to the book. The Greek title found in the Septuagint and carried into our modern Bible is “threnoi” or Lamentation. The Septuagint contains the following preface to Lamentations:

“It came to pass after Israel had gone into captivity and Jerusalem was laid waste, that Jeremiah sat weeping and composed this lament and said, . . . ‘How?’”

Webster’s Dictionary defines a lamentation as “mourning aloud or wailing”. The Greek title better explains the content of the book. The Hebrew title answers the all-important question of “why”.

Jeremiah lists four reasons for this lament in Chapter 1.

1. **Lamentations 1:3** “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...”
The first is obvious. They are weeping because the city is destroyed and the people are captives.

2. **Lamentations 1:5** “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.”

This verse better explains why, “because of transgressions”. The same truth is repeated in Verse 8: “Jerusalem sinned gravely. . .”

According to Webster’s, transgression is to

Violate a command, law, or duty

To go beyond a boundary or predetermined limit

Judah fell because they went beyond the guidelines found in the Word of God. These guidelines were mapped out for Israel in Deuteronomy 28. The Word of God is designed to keep boundaries in our lives. Freedom is not to outside the pre-determined boundaries, but to live according to them.

Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher of the 18th Century, declared that man is truly free, not when he is in bondage to his desires, but when he lives by a standard above his own appetites.

That standard is the Word of God.

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3. **Lamentations 1:9** “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 third reason for their lamentable condition was a failure to consider their destiny. Destiny is the predetermined course of events. In this case, it refers to the life God intended for them. God chose Israel and promised blessings if they obeyed His Word. The same principle applies to the Christian today.

The Good Shepherd, who laid down His life for the sheep, promises to give all that is necessary for His children.

Romans 8:32 “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?”

John 10:10 “The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.”

The abundant life includes peace in the storm, joy in sorrow, love, comfort, provision, help, direction and eternal life. We need to keep in mind that the blessings flow from obedience.

4. **Lamentations 1:20** “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.”

The final reason for the lament was rebellion. One possible definition for rebellion is “resisting management”. Judah did not want God telling them what to do.

Luke 19:14 “But his citizens hated him, and sent a delegation after him, saying, ‘We will not have this man to reign over us.’”

The human heart is in rebellion against God. Until that is surrendered, we cannot have abundant life.

Chapter 2

This is also written as an acrostic and focuses on the anger of the Lord.

He covered Judah with a cloud of anger.

Lamentations 2:1 “How the Lord has covered the daughter of Zion with a cloud in His anger! He cast down from heaven to the earth the beauty of Israel, and did not remember His footstool in the day of His anger.”

Showed no pity throwing down His wrath

Lamentations 2:2 “The Lord has swallowed up and has not pitied all the dwelling places of Jacob. He has thrown down in His wrath, the strongholds of the daughter of Judah; He has brought them down to the ground; He has profaned the kingdom and its princes.”

His fierce anger blazed like a burning fire.

Lamentations 2:3 “He has cut off in fierce anger every horn of Israel; He has drawn back His right hand from before the enemy. He has blazed against Jacob like a flaming fire, devouring all around.”

He stood like an enemy against Judah.

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Lamentations 2:4 “Standing like an enemy, He has bent His bow; with His right hand, like an adversary, He has slain all who were pleasing to His eye; on the tent of the daughter of Zion, He has poured out His fury like fire.

His purpose was to destroy the city.

Lamentations 2:8 “The LORD has purposed to destroy the wall of the daughter of Zion. He has stretched out a line; He has not withdrawn His hand from destroying; therefore He has caused the rampart and wall to lament; they languished together.”

The judgment of God is often difficult for us to reconcile with His love and mercy. However, Lamentations 2:17 helps to clear the confusion.

Lamentations 2:17 “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.”

God is only doing what He promised He would do to those who rebel against His Word as stated in Deuteronomy 28:15, 25, 49, and 52.

Lamentations 2:13 asks an important question:

Lamentations 2:13 “How shall I console you? To what shall I liken you, O daughter of Jerusalem? What shall I compare with you, that I may comfort you, O virgin daughter of Zion? For your ruin is spread wide as the sea; who can heal you?”

How can Judah be consoled and healed? These are the empty words of prophets who speak against God’s Word and are of no value

Lamentations 2:14 “Your prophets have seen for you false and deceptive visions; they have not uncovered your iniquity, to bring back your captives, but have envisioned for you false prophecies and delusions.

Judah’s restoration would come from returning to the Lord.

Lamentations 2:19 “Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the watches; pour out your heart like water before the face of the Lord. Lift your hands toward Him for the life of your young children, who faint from hunger at the head of every street.”

Chapter 3

This chapter is also written as an acrostic, arranged as twenty-two triplets, each beginning with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

Jeremiah explains his personal condition in Lamentations 3:18.

Lamentations 3:18. “My strength and my hope have perished from the LORD

Lamentations 3:4 “He has aged my flesh and my skin, and broken my bones.”

Lamentations 3:10 – 11 “He has been to me a bear lying in wait, like a lion in ambush. He has turned aside my ways and torn me in pieces; He has made me desolate. He has turned aside my ways and torn me in pieces; He has made me desolate.”

Lamentations 3:15-16 “He has filled me with bitterness; He has made me drink wormwood. He has also broken my teeth with gravel, and covered me with ashes.”

Jeremiah begins to cry out to the God in Lamentations 3:19.

Lamentations 3:19 “Remember my affliction and roaming, the wormwood and the gall.”

Lamentations 3:21 “This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope.”

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The answer is found in crying out to God and looking into His Word. In the midst of grievous suffering, Jeremiah finds mercy as He looks to the Lord in Lamentations 3: 22 - 31.

Lamentations 3:22 – 23 “Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.”

We find the proper response to mercy in Lamentations 3:39 - 41

Lamentations 3: 40 “Let us search out and examine our ways, and turn back to the LORD;”

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 is also an acrostic. Jeremiah describes the condition of the people. It is set in contrast with who they were when they follow the Lord.

Lamentations 4:2 “The precious sons of Zion, valuable as fine gold, how they are regarded as clay pots, the work of the hands of the potter!

These verses reveal the cause of their condition. They ignored prophets and priest and they looked to man for answers.

Lamentations 4:16 17 “The face of the LORD scattered them; He no longer regards them. The people do not respect the priests nor show favor to the elders. Still our eyes failed us, watching vainly for our help; in our watching we watched for a nation that could not save us.”

Chapter 5

Though this chapter consists of twenty-two verse, it is not set in an acrostic style. Instead, Chapter 5 is a prayer.

Lamentation 5:1 “Remember, O LORD, what has come upon us; Look, and behold our reproach!

This prayer is a great illustration of 1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us [our] sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Jeremiah speaks of Judah’s condition,

Lamentations 5:1 - 15 “Remember, O Lord, what has come upon us; Look, and behold our reproach! Our inheritance has been turned over to aliens, and our houses to foreigners. We have become orphans and waifs, our mothers are like widows. We pay for the water we drink, and our wood comes at a price. They pursue at our heels; we labor and have no rest. We have given our hand to the Egyptians and the Assyrians, to be satisfied with bread. Our fathers sinned and are no more, but we bear their iniquities. Servants rule over us; there is none to deliver us from their hand. We get our bread at the risk of our lives, Because of the sword in the wilderness. Our skin is hot as an oven, Because of the fever of famine. They ravished the women in Zion, The maidens in the cities of Judah. Princes were hung up by their hands, and elders were not respected. Young men ground at the millstones; Boys staggered under loads of wood. The elders have ceased gathering at the gate, and the young men from their music. The joy of our heart has ceased; our dance has turned into mourning.”

Confession is made for sin.

Lamentations 5:16 “The crown has fallen from our head. Woe to us, for we have sinned!”

Petition is made for restoration and has two results: judicial removal of sin is forgiveness and practical removal of sin provides cleansing.

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Lamentations 5:21 “Turn us back to You, O LORD, and we will be restored; Renew our days as of old . . .”

III. Why Study Lamentations

Lamentations provides good insight into the true effects of sin.

Proverbs 13:15 (KJV) “Good understanding giveth favour: but the way of transgressors is hard.”

Lamentations reveals the extent of God's mercy. After sixty years of ignoring Jeremiah's pleading and continuing in rebellion against God, the nation fell and the people were devastated. Still God wants to forgive and restore.

Lamentations 3:23 -23 “Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.”

No matter how far you have fallen, there is mercy for that.

Lamentations 3:31 “For the Lord will not cast off forever.”

IV. Type of Christ

There are no direct prophesies of Christ in Lamentations. Though the following verse may allude to Christ

Lamentations 3:30 “Let him give his cheek to the one who strikes him, and be full of reproach.”

Jeremiah weeping over Jerusalem is an illustration of Christ weeping over the city six hundred years later.