

THE LORD IS MY PORTION: THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

Week One: Introduction & Outline

The faithful Jeremiah spent many years pleading with God's people to repent of self-indulgence and spiritual indifference. When they remained prideful and stubborn, God allowed the pagan Babylonians to conquer Judah, destroy Jerusalem, and take most of the people prisoner to Babylon. God's love is too great to allow him to stand by idly when his people desperately need spiritual discipline. Though his methods in our own lives may be less dramatic, we can be certain that he will discipline us too when we need it.

Jeremiah was deeply sincere, compassionate, and sensitive. Though he truthfully spoke the warnings and rebukes that God proclaimed through him, Jeremiah did so sadly, for he agonized over the spiritual desolation he saw and the terrible discipline that he knew was coming.

When all that the prophet foretold and feared did indeed come to pass, Jeremiah remained a faithful and sympathetic observer. Years earlier, the prophet had composed a series of laments on the passing of King Josiah, the spiritual reformer (2 Chronicles 35:25). Now, Jeremiah describes the fallen city with the same perceptiveness, faithfulness, and sense of loss. This fresh set of laments and observations are collected in the book of Lamentations.

In the ancient Hebrew Scriptures, the title of the book is equivalent to, 'How', which is the first word of three of the chapters. Here, this does not mean 'in what fashion', but rather, 'to what degree!' The prophet laments, for example, 'How deserted lies the city' (Lamentations 1:1), 'How the Lord has covered the Daughter of Zion with his anger' (2:1), and 'How the gold has lost its luster' (4:1). In each case, he marvels sorrowfully over the grief caused by sin and pride.

Yet the weeping prophet always had hope for the future, for he knew that God's love and mercy are even greater than his anger and discipline. In the midst of his desolation, he remembers that 'the Lord is my portion' (3:24), in whom he puts all of his hope, both now and forever. Thus Lamentations impresses upon us the nightmarish spiritual consequences of turning away from God, while at the same time reminding us that God always stands ready to restore and strengthen us when we turn back to him. If we believe, no disaster is final, and no devastation is incurable.

While Lamentations echoes these and similar themes throughout the book, it also has a fairly clear arrangement. Each chapter consists of a separate, self-contained lament with its own specific theme. In the original Hebrew, four chapters are written as acrostics: in chapters 1, 2, and 4, each verse begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in order. (The first verse begins with aleph, the second with beth, and so forth.) In chapter 3, each set of three verses begins with the same letter, again in order.

The book's main themes are as follows: The prophet describes the desolation and suffering of the fallen city (Lamentations 1), and then the divine, righteous anger that has brought such discipline upon them all (Lamentations 2). The faithful observer expresses his own feelings of helplessness and sadness (Lamentations 3), and observes the useless nature of everything the nation had wrongly relied upon (Lamentations 4). The book concludes with a heartfelt appeal to God for forgiveness and hope (Lamentations 5).

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2007

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Week Two: The Fallen City (Lamentations 1)

Lamentations begins with an honest, forthright depiction of the city of Jerusalem in the wake of its capture and destruction by the Babylonian army. The faithful prophet Jeremiah is well aware that this devastation and anguish have come about as a result of the nation's own sin and selfishness, and he fully understands that a loving God had no option but to discipline them in order to bring hope for the future. At the same time, the prophet's sympathetic nature makes it impossible for him to look around without feeling a deep sense of regret and sorrow. The scene as a whole illustrates for us in memorable fashion the inevitable results of sin.

Amongst the many pertinent thoughts in this chapter, a number of general points stand out in particular. It is impossible not to feel a sense of emptiness (see, for example, 1:1 and 1:4). Jeremiah feels keenly both the loss of population and the loss of activity that goes with it. The very roads and gateways seem to mourn their sudden lack of purpose, for there are few persons left to make use of them. Indeed, large portions of the city must have felt like a ghost town.

Such a sight would be rather eerie, yet physical desolation is not nearly so sad as spiritual desolation can be. Human beings are created to be vessels for God to fill, to love, and to use. Yet we can so easily allow ourselves to become soulless creatures living only in pursuit of shallow, worldly aims. To God, this looks every bit as bleak and sad as a once-great city that has suddenly been deprived of its residents and the activity they brought to it.

This desolation also contrasts sharply with the city's past glory. Once Jerusalem was glorious, respected, and even feared, but now it has been brought low (1:1b, 1:6). Former enemies are now masters, and former friends have abandoned or betrayed her (1:2b, 1:5, 1:19). The blessings that the people took for granted are now gone, and they are left with a sense of loss that is made even worse by the dawning realization that they themselves are responsible.

Our own lives are filled with a wide variety of experiences, both good and bad. Sometimes we experience undeserved blessings, while at other times we, like Jeremiah, suffer for the sins of others. But at all times, we are better off when we trust God and remain close to God. During the tough times, God provides precious hope and gives meaning to our lives. During pleasant experiences, a relationship with God reminds us of his compassion for us, and reminds us that there are even greater joys waiting in the next life.

Then, painful as it may be to acknowledge it, we should learn to perceive the connection between sin and spiritual desolation. In Lamentations, this connection is indisputable (1:8, 1:9, 1:20). God's rewards and punishments are not crass, short-term reactions, such as the ways that worldly persons repay one another. Let us then not allow God's patience and forbearance to cloud our minds and hearts. By writing the book of Lamentations, the compassionate prophet gives us a chance to learn from the mistakes of others, so that we can serve the living God in joy and peace.

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Week Three: The Day Of Divine Anger (Lamentations 2)

Most humans eagerly embrace the Scriptures' teachings about God's love, grace, and blessings, but we are usually reluctant to accept and understand his unchanging righteousness and his unalterable opposition to sin and selfishness. Thus, in the second of his five laments, the sorrowful prophet Jeremiah makes it emphatically clear that what has happened to Jerusalem has come to pass according to God's will. It was a regrettable necessity, but this misfortune was no accident. God's people must realize this if they are to recover and rebuild spiritually.

This is, in many respects, a shocking chapter. It overtly depicts God pouring out woes on his unfaithful people, and it makes clear that God is well aware of their sufferings and deprivations. In a number of places (such as 2:4 and 2:5), the writer even states that God has openly become an enemy to his people. The call to us, as faithful readers many centuries later, is to determine and understand why God acted in this way. For we also must learn to accept this side of God's character, however much at odds it may be with our personal wishes.

From God's viewpoint, one of the tragedies of the situation is that he has had to destroy the things he himself had lovingly given to his people. Because they persistently took his blessings for granted, accepting them as earned rewards rather than as gracious gifts, he had to take them away so that they could adjust their thinking. The glory he himself had given them had to be withdrawn (2:1). The strength he had carefully nurtured in them had made them prideful rather than grateful, so he had to cut them off from it (2:3; horns are a symbol of strength). He even allowed pagans to desecrate the temple, its altar, and its sanctuary (2:7).

We likewise must never forget that we are nothing without God. Without God's grace, we could not continue to live for even a minute. None of our accomplishments or abilities or blessings have been earned or deserved; they all come by God's grace. Let us remember this always and praise him for it, so that he will not have to withdraw these things from us as well.

Now, with harsh discipline having been rendered, God is well aware of the widespread despair, pain, and confusion among the people. As compassionate as he is, he must temporarily refrain from ending his people's suffering. He is not cold-hearted, and it grieves him to see his people's tears (2:11), their hunger (2:12), and their other sufferings. But their calls for help will be in vain until they realize why this all has happened.

All these calamities have occurred because the people strayed from God. He allowed the world to harm them, by simply taking away his protection, which they had come to take for granted. It is easy to see the many lessons that these events hold for us. Wise believers will learn to appreciate a little more each day just how dependent we are on God, and just how gracious he is to us. Since all it costs us is our pride, why should we not eagerly take this lesson to heart?

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Week Four: A Man Who Has Seen Affliction (Lamentations 3)

Upon the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC, the prophet Jeremiah wrote a series of laments that are collected in the book of Lamentations. Jeremiah was an especially appropriate observer of this era of Israel's history, for he combined an unfailing faithfulness to God with a nearly inexhaustible supply of compassion and sensitivity. Even as he had proclaimed the coming doom of faithless Judah, he did so sorrowfully. Yet the prophet's very nature convicts us of the absolute necessity of remaining faithful to the truth, regardless of our personal feelings, wishes, or preferences.

The third lament is the most personal, and many commentators point out how Jeremiah here looks beyond his own sufferings, and observes the ruins as if he were a kind of 'everyman' character. The thoughts expressed in this chapter could represent the perspective of anyone who had lived through the disaster and then humbly turned to God as a result.

In this lament more than any of the others, the writer openly expresses his feeling that God has personally attacked him and harmed him. Over and over in the first 20 verses, he says things like "He (God) has driven me away", "He has besieged me", or "He has walled me in". The faithful writer knows the whole truth of what has happened, of course, but his pain and sorrow are so great that he must express these thoughts in order to strengthen his faith in God and to learn the lessons God is teaching.

Almost everyone, from the loudest self-proclaimed atheist to the most faithful believer, has moments when he or she blames God for some or all of life's misfortunes. The irony of this is that many so-called atheists openly blame God for many of the horrors in the world, and yet claim that he does not exist - a rather obvious contradiction. Meanwhile, many believers try to hide their moments of doubt and spiritual anguish, because they would prefer to maintain appearances. But we have the examples of David, Jeremiah, Paul, and many others in the Scriptures to show us that the first step in resolving our doubts is to be honest about them.

And in fact these expressions of agony soon give way (beginning in 3:21) to the awareness that God has never left his people, and that God is ready to show compassion to those who turn to him. Amongst the many other insights in this section are verses 22-24, which form the source of a popular devotional song, and which express the central theme of the book. In saying, "the Lord is my portion", the writer understands that God himself (and God alone) is the ultimate reward and the true source of hope for the faithful.

At the heart of these insights is the awareness of the all-encompassing wisdom of God's will. Whether good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant, exciting or terrifying, everything that happens is subject to God's rule (see, for example, 3:38-39). In times of ease and plenty, we ought to give lavish thanks to God for his kindness. In times of suffering and fear, we ought to commit ourselves that much more to doing God's will. For in all cases, the presence of God will help us to understand, to accept, and to hope.

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Week Five: The Gold Has Lost His Luster (Lamentations 4)

Amongst many other lessons, Jerusalem's fall revealed the useless nature of the things in which the nation had placed its trust. Rather than relying on God and trusting his teachings, the people had put their confidence in worldly wealth, worldly leaders, and worldly standards of success and goodness. This policy is always spiritually disastrous, whether in ancient times or in today's world.

Throughout this fourth lament, Jeremiah points out the numerous sources of false hope and false confidence that have been exposed by the fall of the city. At the same time, he expresses ongoing sorrow and suffering, to portray how the people are gradually coming to understand the reasons for the disaster, even as they continue to bemoan their misfortune.

The lament first indicates the uselessness of material things that the people had once valued highly. The precious gems littering the streets (4:1) dramatically illustrate the uselessness of gold and wealth. The people's wealth was useless, both in curing their spiritual ailments and also in warding off God's discipline. This lesson must usually be learned anew by each generation.

Likewise, the people had undue pride and undue confidence in themselves: in their strong young men (4:2), in royalty and nobility (4:7-8), and in their spiritual leaders (4:13, 4:16). In all these cases, the surface appearance of strength, purity, and spirituality was only an illusion. Given the many spiritual problems in the community, they should have seen through the illusion, but like so many persons they simply believed what they wanted to believe.

They had also taken considerable pride in being God's people, to the point that they had come to consider themselves to be invulnerable. For God had truly rescued them from many perils that, without his presence, would have destroyed most nations. Indeed, now that Jerusalem has fallen, even the unbelieving nations can hardly believe that Jerusalem has really been destroyed (4:12). But now it is clear to everyone that belonging to God's people does not confer immunity from the negative consequences of sin.

Every individual and every nation has its own list of false sources of hope and confidence. Sometimes we can see them for what they are, but cannot bring ourselves to give them up: material wealth and popularity are examples of this. At other times, we allow worldly influences to prevent us from even questioning our sacred cows. In our own society, for example, it is taken as a given that things such as 'democracy', capitalism, and the 'rule of law' are sources of blessing. Yet all of these things are contrary to the teachings of the New Testament, and they lead countless persons astray in their search for God. We receive our blessings from God alone, and it is blasphemous to credit them to human philosophies or human forms of government.

The lament ends on a positive note, comparing Israel with its pagan neighbor Edom (4:21-22). When God punishes his people, it is not fatal and it is never final. God's people can know that the time of suffering will end, for God will not prolong it even a moment longer than is needed for his people to learn what he wishes to teach them.

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Week Six: Renew Our Days (Lamentations 5)

After its lengthy expressions of sorrow, regret, and pain, the book of Lamentations closes on a quiet note of hope for the future. Even as the faithful observer Jeremiah describes the sadness and horrors around him, he is fully conscious that God's nature itself provides an undying promise of hope and mercy. The prophet knows that God does not discipline with the goal of punishment for punishment's sake, but in order to renew his people when they stray from him, and to prepare them for better things in the future.

This fifth and final lament contains, in fact, some particularly important points that the sorrowful observer wants to make. The original Hebrew text emphasizes this by changing to a different format for this chapter only. Although the English translations cannot, unfortunately, render the change conveniently clear, it is still worthwhile to be aware of it.

The first four chapters of Lamentations are acrostics, in which each verse begins with consecutive letters of the Hebrew alphabet (the first verse begins with aleph, the second with beth, and so forth). The third chapter goes even further, in having each group of three verses begin with the same letter, in the same pattern (three starting with aleph, three starting with beth, and so on). But in this final lament, the author abandons this technique, as if to say that his closing thoughts must be rendered as directly as possible, without literary enhancement.

The message of the lament is rather simple. Most of it recites and recapitulates the sufferings God's people have endured since the fall of Jerusalem (5:1-18). The style is more concise and straightforward than it is in the previous laments, because the purpose is different. The writer used the earlier laments to work through his (and the people's) spiritual confusion and agony, but now he is moving towards a conclusion. Thus the same things are now recounted for a new purpose: rather than expressing emotion and asking for help, the writer knows that it is now time to accept everything that has happened and to move on according to God's will.

The closing verses thus form a sober expression of our need for God and our dependence on God (5:19-21). If God's people had taken these lessons to heart earlier, they could have spared themselves many sufferings. But it is time to put the past behind. They have had their time of self-reproach and self-pity, but these will no longer serve any purpose. In his compassion, God knows that we need time to recover from disappointments and disasters, but he also knows that there comes a time when we must put things behind us.

The closing thoughts are summarized in verse 21, "Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may return; renew our days as of old . . ." The desire for restoration with God is crucial to spiritual recovery. The awareness of the need to return to him provides a course of action for the spiritually struggling. And the knowledge that only God can truly renew us provides the humility that weak believers (that is, all of us at one time or another) will need in order to appreciate the blessings that God has in store for us.

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