

Lamentations

Lamentations is the third of five books in the Old Testament referred to as the “major prophets”

- They are typically longer than the other twelve “minor prophets”

But Lamentations is only five chapters long

- *Why is it termed a “major” prophecy?*

Mainly because Jeremiah was the author of this book

- Because of this association, it is joined with the book of Jeremiah¹⁹

Church history and ancient tradition have ascribed Jeremiah as the author

- Also, the perspective of this book is that of an eyewitness account
- Someone who was there and experienced it all

We also know from 2 Chronicles 35 that Jeremiah wrote laments for King Josiah (35:25)

As you compare Jeremiah and Lamentations, you see many similarities²⁰

- It is because of these that the books are accredited to the same author

The historical background for this book is found in the book of Jeremiah which we just finished surveying

- Judah has failed to repent of her sins
- If she continues on with a hard heart, God will discipline her

What means did God use to discipline the pride of the southern kingdom?

- *Babylon*
- *They destroyed the city and deported many from the city*

July 9, 586 B.C. was the date of Jerusalem’s destruction

- The temple was burned on August 15²¹

The book of Jeremiah warned of the coming judgment that would come if the nation did not repent

- Lamentations looks back to that event which was anticipated in the book of Jeremiah
- The fall of Jerusalem

This book was probably written soon after the Fall of Jerusalem to Babylon

- But probably written before Jeremiah was taken away to Egypt²²

¹⁹ Gerard Christin, *The Bible Panorama*, 330.

²⁰ Bruce Wilkinson & Kenneth Boa, *Talk Thru the Bible*, 207.

²¹ MacArthur, 202..

²² Chrispin, 330.

Imagine seeing all of this firsthand²³

- The destruction of the walls
- The destruction of the towers
- The destruction of homes
- The destruction of the palace
- The destruction of the temple

The Babylonians ransacked the city of Jerusalem for a year and a half (588-587 B.C.)²⁴

- We cannot even begin to imagine the effect this devastation had on the nation

We all remember the pictures from the World Trade Center on September 11

- There is a certain element of zeal and righteous anger that still lingers in our minds as we think back to this event

Now imagine September 11 happening

- Only the World Trade Centers were the religious hub of America

That is a small taste of what we are talking about in the destruction of the city of Jerusalem

All of this would have been painfully fresh in his mind

- These images would be etched into his memory for the rest of his earthly days

Thus, the book of Lamentations is a book of mourning

- Jeremiah's heart was grieved as he saw his people deported out of the city and the city itself destroyed²⁵

The title of the book comes from the opening Hebrew word which means, "lament" or "to cry aloud"²⁶

- It commonly opens a dirge
- So this book is a funeral dirge over the destruction of the city of Jerusalem

The book comes at us as five chapters²⁷

- Chapter 1 – 22 verses
- Chapter 2 – 22 verses
- Chapter 3 – 66 verses
- Chapter 4 – 22 verses
- Chapter 5 – 22 verses

²³ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Handbook*, 201.

²⁴ Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament*, 615.

²⁵ Dr. Alan B. Stringfellow, *Through the Bible in One Year*, 81.

²⁶ Stringfellow, 81.

²⁷ Dever, 615.

Chapters 1, 2, 4 and 5 each have 22 verses

- They are set up in an acrostic fashion
- The verses cycle through the Hebrew alphabet which has 22 verses

Chapter 3 has 66 verses

- It is set up as a triple acrostic
- In other words, verses 1-3 each begin with the first Hebrew letter, verses 4-6 begin with the second Hebrew letter, and so forth

Many times, the Hebrew language places more emphasis on the middle part of a passage

- It is called a chiasmic structure where the events culminate in the middle of a passage
- That is the case with this book

Chapter 5 is unique in that it has 22 verses, but it does not follow the acrostic pattern like the other chapters

Hence, the book is set up as a poetical dirge

- It has rhyme and meter
- It has a definite pattern

We know of other passages in the Hebrew Bible that are set up in an acrostic format

- What are they?
 - o Psalm 119 – Hebrew letter used eight times in a row
 - o Proverbs 31:10-31 – each letter used once

Why would Jeremiah outline the book in an acrostic format?

- Perhaps he wanted to show the extent of the devastation in a complete manner²⁸
- It would be equivalent to us saying, “A to Z” – emphasizing the beginning and the end

Also, the acrostic format would help in memorizing the book²⁹

- Even to this day, the Jews read this book publicly to remember the destruction of Jerusalem

Ironically, the city was destroyed twice

- 586 B.C.
- Then again in A.D. 70
 - o So the Jews have two destructions to remember

The book of Lamentations details the destruction of Jerusalem and its people because of their sins

- They had failed to repent

²⁸ Wilkinson & Boa, 207.

²⁹

The once proud city of Jerusalem now lies in rubble because of the Babylonian overthrow³⁰

- What a contrast!

Yet even with the gloomy realities of such a destruction, Jeremiah displays great compassion and sorrow of heart³¹

- He is still the weeping prophet as we saw in the book of Jeremiah

In some ways, Jeremiah acts in a similar manner as Christ Himself who cried over the sins of Jerusalem, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. ³⁸ Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! ³⁹ For I say to you, from now on you shall not see Me until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!'" (Mt 23:37-39)

- Both Jeremiah and Jesus identified personally with the sins of their people

Also like Jesus, Jeremiah was afflicted, beaten, and persecuted without cause

But even in the midst of such devastation, the author sees an element of hope

- God has never failed him in the past
- God has promised to be faithful

Nearly eight hundred (800) years prior, Joshua warned the Israelites of the consequences of their disobedience

- If they failed to obey, they would be "destroyed...from off this good land which the LORD your God has given you" (Josh 23:15, 16)

For forty (40) years, Jeremiah proclaimed warnings to the nation of Judah

- But they went unheeded as the nation continued to grow in stubbornness, pride, and other sins

It would have been tempting for him to say, "I told you so" after the city was destroyed

- But that wasn't the perspective of Jeremiah
- Instead, he shows incredible tenderness and compassion toward those who were affected

It was almost as if Jeremiah was sorry that his prophecies had come true

- Perhaps it is like a doctor who must tell his patient that he/she has a terminal disease
- It isn't the best news, but the truth must be told

³⁰ Wilkinson & Boa, 207.

³¹ Chrispin, 330.

The book of Lamentations has a number of different foci³²

- God's judgment in response to Judah's sin
- God's faithfulness to His people
- God's right to judge due to His holy and righteous standard
- God's desire to hear the prayers of His people
- God's warning to future generations

As we look at each chapter, we will see these various foci highlighted

I. Chapter one

The situation is pretty desperate

- The city is destroyed
- The walls and towers are destroyed
- The people are deported

Notice the cause of this destruction

- "the LORD has caused her grief because of the multitude of her transgressions" (1:5, emphasis mine)
- "Jerusalem sinned greatly, therefore she has become an unclean thing" (1:8, emphasis mine)

What were the people of God to do?

- Confess their sins!
 - o "The LORD is righteous; for I have rebelled against His command" (1:18)
 - o "See, O LORD, for I am in distress; my spirit is greatly troubled; my heart is overturned within me, for I have been very rebellious" (1:20)
 - o "Let all their wickedness come before Thee; and deal with them as Thou hast dealt with me for all my transgressions; for my groans are many, and my heart is faint" (1:22)

When times of suffering and affliction come, humility and confession of sin must come as well

- This is not to say that all affliction and suffering come on us because of our sin
- But it is also true to say that some of it does come our way because of our sin

Do our hearts long to be restored to God after such times?

- Or do our hearts become more and more hardened?

Also notice that the nation of Judah confessed her own sins³³

- She didn't attempt to blame her sins on other
- Neither did she confess the sins of the Babylonians!

³² MacArthur, 203.

³³ Dever, 618.

II. Chapter two

We continue to see the desperate situation here in chapter two

- But we also see that God is working, even in a time of discipline

All sorts of hideous sins were committed during this time

- Cannibalism was being practiced by mothers (2:20)
- Some priests and prophets had been killed in the temple
- Other false prophets were continuing to proclaim peace and security (2:14)

But the biggest thing that I want to point out is who is to be credited with this destruction

- On one hand, it is because of the sins of Judah
- On another hand, it is because of the nation of Babylon

But more than these two, Jeremiah labors to show that it is the LORD who has caused this destruction!

- In 2:1-8, the author alludes to “the Lord” or “He” a number of times to emphasize this point

There is no mention of Babylon in this book (even though Babylon is mentioned over 150 times in the book of Jeremiah)

- That is because they were not ultimately responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem
- God was!

“The LORD has done what He purposed; He has accomplished His word which He commanded from days of old. He has thrown down without sparing, And He has caused the enemy to rejoice over you; He has exalted the might of your adversaries” (2:17)

The nation of Judah needed to realize and confess God as their Judge and Ruler

- He was in control of things

If the nation of Judah loses that perspective, theology is compromised

- If we today lose that perspective, theology is compromised

Things don't just “happen”

- God is working out His plan and purpose with exacting precision

III. Chapter four

Let's skip chapter three for the time being

- We will come back to it at the end

In this chapter, the author continues to grieve over the sins of Judah

- Hunger set in and money could no longer protect anyone
- Starvation caused people to take drastic measures (4:10)

Jeremiah places some emphasis on the nation's leaders

- "Because of the sins of her prophets *and* the iniquities of her priests, who have shed in her midst the blood of the righteous,¹⁴ they wandered, blind, in the streets; they were defiled with blood so that no one could touch their garments. ¹⁵ 'Depart! Unclean!' they cried of themselves. 'Depart, depart, do not touch!' So they fled and wandered; *men among the nations said, 'They shall not continue to dwell with us'"* (4:13-15)

Even the leaders of the nation chose idolatry

- Their hearts were not wholly devoted to the LORD

That is as real of a possibility today as it was then

- Those who handle God's Word can just as easily become idolatrous

We have to sound the alarm about sin and its consequences

- It doesn't matter if you are talking to toddlers or youth or adults

We all have a responsibility to proclaim this message!

IV. Chapter five

This chapter proclaims the fifth verse of this dirge

- Women have been abused (5:11)
- Men have been slain (5:12)
- Hunger has reached everyone

Economic stations in life have been lowered:

- Inheritances were given to others (5:2)
- People have become like orphans (5:3)
- People have to pay for drinking water and firewood (5:4)

"The joy of our hearts has ceased; our dancing has been turned into mourning" (5:15)

- What a sad commentary!

The fifth and final chapter of Lamentations is a prayer to God for help for the future

- "Remember, O LORD, what has befallen us; look, and see our reproach!" (5:1)
- "Restore us to Thee, O LORD, that we may be restored; renew our days as of old,²² unless You hast utterly rejected us, *and art exceedingly angry with us*" (5:21-22)

Like the nation of Judah, we must also go to God in prayer when times of suffering come upon us

- There is no need to blame others
- There is no need to complain

We need to pray, and ask God to remind us of our future hope

- As believers, our hope is in the reality of heaven where we will spend eternity with Christ

V. Chapter three

I have purposely decided to save the third chapter until last

- As I said earlier, oftentimes Hebrew poetry reached its climax in the middle, not the end³⁴

The Babylonians had destroyed the city of Jerusalem

- We have already spoken of the damage that was afflicted on the people and the city itself

But this was not the end for the nation of Judah

- Jeremiah had even prophesied that the exile would only last seventy (70) years (Jer 25:11, 12; 29:10)
- This would not last forever

This third chapter, which serves as the focal point of the book, reminds the nation of Judah where their hope should be

- Not on Babylon
- Not on the return to their land

The focus of Judah should have been on God

- His character (3:21-33)
- His actions (3:34-39)
- Their own confession and repentance (3:40-42)

In one of the most quoted verses of the Old Testament, Jeremiah exclaims in 3:21-23, “**This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. ²² The LORD’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. ²³ They are new every morning; great is Thy faithfulness**”

- “**lovingkindnesses**” and “**compassions**” – plural (they are numerous)

The theme of this book could very well be summarized in those four words, “**great is Thy faithfulness**”

- There is a wonderful hymn by that title

Because of the faithfulness of God, Judah could have hope

- Because of His promises, they could have hope

³⁴ Dever, 626.

Even after observing the city of Jerusalem crumble to the power of the Babylonians, the people of God could still hope

This is no different than what must take in our lives

- No matter what comes our way, God's mercies and compassions never cease
- No matter what takes place, great is the faithfulness of God!

I would venture to say that not many of us enjoy going to the dentist³⁵

- Inevitably, he/she will find something wrong with one of our teeth

But why would we voluntarily sit in a chair and allow someone to probe around in our mouths?

- Sharp metal objects scrape away plaque and tartar
- Electronic drills emit a high, ear-piercing sound as it creates pain in our mouths

If I were to come up to you with a sharp metal object and a portable drill in my hand and say, "Let me take a look at your teeth," what would you say?

- As you run away as fast as you could, you would probably say, "NO WAY!"

But when placed in the hands of a skilled dentist, metal objects and drills become helpful

- Although painful for a little bit, the result is a better long-term outlook and life for our teeth

God will sometimes allow some painful times to come in our lives

- They will not be pleasant
- They will not be pain-free

But we know that God has the skill to bring about good from these kinds of situations

- We must learn to trust Him

That was the lesson for Judah

- That is the lesson for us
- And that is the lesson of Lamentations

God loved Judah so much that He took them away from their homeland, allowing what was so familiar to them to be destroyed

- He did this so that they would be forced to trust in Him

God is jealous for His own glory

- He will not tolerate idolatry

Next time, we will discuss Ezekiel and Daniel

³⁵ I am adapting this illustration from Mark Dever, 631.