

Lamentations: A Chapter by Chapter Study

Introduction

Jeremiah is believed to be the author of this book, although there is no claim as such in the book itself. Most scholars agree to the authorship due to the verbiage and style of writing, as well as some loose references in 2 Chronicles and the book of Jeremiah.

This book was contained in a single scroll titled “ekah”, which is translated into English as “How...!” This is also the first word in the first, second and fourth chapters. When being translated into the Septuagint, the Greeks thought this title a little too vague and named it “Lamentations” which it has been known as ever since.

The purpose of Lamentations is to mourn over the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. The author shows great pain and sorrow over what has transpired.

It is Jewish tradition to read the entire book out loud on the ninth day of Ab, which is believed to be the date of the destruction of the first temple. Catholics also read at least portions if not the whole book during Holy Week.

What does the word “lament” mean?

There are two definitions that apply to the title of this book. The first is the English dictionary translation meaning to express sorrow, grief or regret. The second definition is a more historical reference to a form of poetry used to express those same feelings in dramatic format. This form of expression was common during the time of Jeremiah not just in the Bible, but in many different cultures of that era.

The entire book is made up of “Laments”. The first, second, fourth and fifth chapters are all 22 verses long, which is also the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. The third chapter also contains 22 three-line poetic units but is also in an alphabetical-order format. The first lines of each poetic verse of the first unit all begin with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, all three lines of the second verse begin with the second letter, and so on. This same poetic form can be found in Psalm 119. The different kinds of poetic formats throughout this book indicate that not only was the author passionate about the subject matter but that each thought was carefully laid out in precise structure. Although there are many laments found in the Bible, this book is the only one made up solely of laments.

Because of the artistic nature of this book, it is recommended to read an edition that may not adhere to a literal translation. One suggestion would be “The Message” translation as this speaks more to the spirit of the Word rather than the exact text of the Word (see link in the References section). However, most of this study will speak to the text from either the New American Standard Bible or the New King James version as there are more study guides based on those translations.

Chapter 1

The first lamentation is over the loss of Jerusalem and her fall to Babylon.

V1-2

The image of Jerusalem as a weeping woman is portrayed with great emotion by Jeremiah. This once beautiful and joyous place had loyal audiences with other nations. Now those allies betray her and mock her.

V3-6

Jeremiah changes from the image of a woman to the city itself. Its once full markets are now barren. The temple which used to hold festivals is now devoid of life. The majority of inhabitants have been taken into slavery. Both the enemies and allies of Jerusalem take joy in the fall of this once great city.

V7

This verse expresses great pain in the fact that Jerusalem in days past had it all: glory, allies, great leaders, prosperity, food and drink in abundance. This makes the collapse all the more difficult going from everything to nothing.

What do you think Jesus felt like being separated from God during the crucifixion?

V8-11

Jeremiah returns to the portrait of a woman here describing a once royal and highly regarded queen now an undesirable vagrant in the streets. The description even goes so far as to say that she has nothing to hide her menstrual cycle.

What does the phrase “she did not consider her destiny” mean?

This is meant to be a life application lesson about looking ahead before going down a path. The Jews chose an ungodly path and even ignored the warning that the Lord gave them. They chose what appeared to be an easy path instead, but it led to great hardships.

Verse 10 acknowledges that God allowed, even commanded this fall to happen. Jerusalem was given to the unclean enemies of the chosen people.

V12

Just as most people feel their own sorrow cannot be understood by anyone and that they have fallen further than those around them, Jerusalem feels their misery is incomprehensible. Yet the prophets still acknowledge that this is the hand of God at work as punishment. Jerusalem brought this upon themselves.

V13-15

In Jeremiah 20:9, the reference to “fire in my bones” is also used, ascribing the authorship of this book to the prophet. These verses are various images of a destroyed Jerusalem at the hand of its’ Maker.

V16-17

A wailing, weeping, filled with tears version of Jerusalem is displayed here. The sorrow is made all the deeper in that there is no comfort offered either from God or man. Jerusalem has become detestable. According to Jewish custom, a woman during her menstrual cycle was unclean and untouchable, not to be so much as even seen. Verse 17 compares Jerusalem to this same tradition.

V18-19

Again, Jerusalem acknowledges that God is just in this punishment and that it is well earned.

What is meant by the expression “I called for my lovers, but they deceived me”?

Just like a harlot would be forsaken by those that employed her, Jerusalem has been forsaken by the supposed allies that they had treaties with. Egypt abandoned the Jews completely even after stating they would offer their support.

V20-22

The closing of this poem is Jerusalem shown on her deathbed, crying out for help to the God from which she had turned away. One small comfort that she asks for is that her enemies suffer the same fate as herself. The sighs and faint heart at the end indicate that there is little life left in her.

Chapter 2

The second lamentation is over the wrath of God that has fallen on the chosen people because of their sin.

V1-5

The cloud of God’s glory has been replaced with the darkness of God’s anger.

What do the titles ‘daughter of Zion’ and ‘daughter of Judah’ imply?

These are supposed to mean positions of royalty. Being a king, queen, prince or princess was a privilege, but it also meant there was responsibility. The Jews enjoyed the privilege having a covenant with God gave them, but they ignored the responsibilities that came with that title and now they must pay the price.

V6-7

God is now the enemy of the Jews and does not want their empty worship. The places which were once holy are now as vile as the sins that the people have committed. Note the list found in these two verses:

- Feasts and Sabbaths are no longer observed
- The altar has been rejected
- The sanctuary has been abandoned
- The walls of the palaces have been turned over to heathen enemies

V8-10

What does it mean to have ‘stretched out a line’ and ‘not withdrawn His hand from destroying?’

This is an intentional and calculated demolition. God intends to leave nothing standing.

Not only will the city and temple be destroyed, but the organized government and leadership will be done away with.

- The royalty has been taken captive
- “The Law” or the spiritual leadership has been stripped of their duties
- The prophets receive no more insight from God
- The community leaders were too stunned to know what to do other than mourn

- The younger generation was in the same state of shock as their elders

What does it mean that the 'prophets find no vision from the Lord'?

Although Daniel and Ezekiel were both active prophets during this time, they offered no comfort concerning this current debacle. Ezekiel only warned of the doom they were facing and some future prophecies concerning the redemption of the Jews and the fate of their enemies at a much later date. Daniel gave prophecies which would not be fulfilled for many decades if not centuries and his vision did nothing to offer compassion to the current situation. Also, neither of them were actually in Jerusalem during this time.

V11-12

This is the description of Jeremiah's grief. He is physically sick at the thought of all of this. He is watching as his city and its inhabitants fall victim to the sins they have committed.

V13-14

In both the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, there were numerous false prophets claiming that God was going to rescue His people. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel rebuked them and asked the Jews to repent. The empty comforts of false prophets mean nothing now. This is a direct reprimand to those false prophets who deceived the people.

V15-17

What does this section mean? Who is it speaking of?

Even prior to the establishment of a monarchy in Jerusalem, the city was recognized as a place of joy and beauty. The peak of Jerusalem would be during the reign of Solomon. The surrounding nations were in awe of the Jews and even became jealous of the power and position the Jews held. With the fall of Jerusalem, those jealous nations could now thumb their noses at this once powerful city and rejoice in the Jews' despair. And all of this is from the punishment of God.

V18-19

Who is the supposed speaker of these verses?

Jeremiah is portraying the adversaries of the Jews here in what might be their prayer against Jerusalem. They pray in great joy that Jerusalem is gone and hope that it never returns.

V20-22

Jeremiah is expressing the agony over the perishing nation of the Jews. As is mentioned in Ezekiel, cannibalism has taken place as the supplies run out while under siege from the Babylonians. Agonizing death, hunger, sorrow, weeping and wailing take place as God not only turns His back on the people, but commands the retribution for the inequities of the Jews.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 is the longest chapter in Lamentations being three times longer than any of the other chapters. There are 66 verses with every three verses starting with a single letter in the Hebrew alphabet. Verses 1, 2 and 3 all start with the first letter, verses 4, 5 and 6 all start with the second letter and so on. In the first two chapters, the songs were spoken from the point of view of a personified

Jerusalem. Chapter three speaks as a singular representation of the Jews or the Jewish nation personified.

V1-9

These verses speak of the terrible affliction on the Jews. Jeremiah paints a heavily depressing picture of the suffering being endured by the Jews at this time.

What does it mean to be 'walled in' or 'hedged in' as verse 7 says?

For those that have read Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado' this should be familiar. The Assyrians are the first to make death by immurement popular. A person would be forced to stand in a location as the walls were built up around them with no escape. They would stay here until they died.

V10-18

These verses paint God as an enemy in many forms.

What is wormwood in verse 15?

Wormwood is a type of plant which can be used as a spice in small amounts but is very bitter and can be poisonous when used in large quantities. The Greeks translate this word as 'absinthion' which mean 'undrinkable'. In this use, Jeremiah is saying that God has judged the Jews and sentenced them to death by bitter poison.

What does it mean 'broken my teeth with gravel' in verse 16?

There is more than one possibility for this verbiage. One aspect is simply having your face trampled in rough dirt. Another harsher possibility is that while the Jews ran out of food, they used small pebbles in place of wheat to make bread and their teeth slowly chipped away.

V19-29

Many translations put a break in the chapter at this point to divide the suffering of the Jews in first 18 verses and the hope of God's mercy in the remaining verses.

In verses 19 and 20, the Jews have sunk to their lowest point having been broken down to nothing. It is from here that God can rebuild. Only when the vile sin has been removed and the realization that they are nothing without God can they be made whole again.

In verse 23, Jeremiah declares "Great is Your faithfulness". In spite of the suffering, even because of the suffering, can God's people be renewed. The next few verses will decry the same sentiment of starting over and being reminded that God can and will redeem them.

- The Lord is my portion
- I have hope in Him
- The Lord is good to those who wait for Him
- It is good to wait silently for the salvation of the Lord

Verses 27-29 speak of how it is better to be disciplines when you are young so that your life lessons can establish good habits early on. Even if you don't understand the lessons being taught while they are happening, the coming years will reveal the good discipline that has been learned.

V30-36

Have you ever been harshly disciplined by your parents? Do you think this was fair? Do you resent the punishment or are you a better person for it?

These verses indirectly compare God to a scolding and rebuking parent. The punishment may seem harsh, unfair, maybe even unjust. But God also displayed tremendous patience while waiting for His children to repent. In order for them to be corrected and brought up properly, God had to punish His children.

V37-39

To complain about the punishment being received by God would be like an inmate on death row who is guilty of multiple murders complaining about his impending doom.

V40-47

As he did so often and loudly in the past, Jeremiah is asking the Jews to repent. It is too late to escape the wrath of the Creator, but this lesson should also not be lost on those who are receiving it.

V48-51

Jeremiah again expresses physical distress at the punishment even knowing that it is just. But he trusts that God will bring comfort once again to those suffer.

V52-56

Jeremiah reiterates how horrible the attack on the Jews is. The Babylonians were merciless in their pursuit of Jerusalem and their capture of the Jewish nation.

V57-63

Even after all the afflictions of this chapter, Jeremiah has confidence in the redemption that God has planned for His people. He welcomes the comfort of the Almighty. The knowledge that those who welcome the pain of the Jews will also be judged brings even more comfort, not because Jeremiah wants more suffering, but because those who mock the Jews in turn mock God.

V64-66

Jeremiah does not want vengeance for himself or for the Jews, but vengeance belongs to the Lord.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 expounds upon the idea briefly seen in chapter 1 of the transition from everything to nothing. The entire chapter is a comparison of the comfort and riches of what once was to the desolation that now is.

V1-2

What is the gold that is mentioned in these verses?

The Babylonians made a habit of taking the best and brightest of the young generations from any nation they conquered. This is how Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego all came into the presence of Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah is lamenting over the loss of the next up-and-coming generation.

V3-6

What does the reference to ostriches mean here?

It was thought in those days that ostriches were cruel to their young by being careless about their eggs and inattentive to their young.

Read Ezekiel 16:48-49. Ezekiel makes a reference to Jerusalem being more sinful than Sodom. Here, Jeremiah says that the punishment is worse than that of Sodom by being more prolonged.

V7-10

Verse 7 uses the work Nazirites, which here refers to the nobility. The Babylonian siege became a great equalizer in social terms because it was impossible to distinguish the upper class from the lower class.

The Babylonians were relentless in the taking of Jerusalem. There were no supplies, no weapons, the best of the young generation had been taken captive as palace servants and all other able-bodied Jews outside the walls of Jerusalem became slaves. It was to be a complete and utter conquest. To break the Jews completely, the Babylonians let the inhabitants starve as long as possible, forcing them to eat their own young! They became so completely broken that they wished for death rather than live through this and the guilt of what they had done.

V11-13

Here, Jeremiah takes a shot at the so-called prophets who fooled the people into complacency and certain doom. By telling the people what they wanted to hear, they would become well liked and even sought after for their advice. Instead of seeking the approval of God, they sought the approval of men and their part in the fall of Jerusalem was not to be overlooked.

V14-17

The Jews believed that touching blood or dead bodies would defile them, and they would have to clean themselves before coming before the Lord. The streets were filled with blood and dead bodies from the siege. There was no way not to become unclean.

Who is “the nation that could not save us”?

The Jewish nation had made a pact with Egypt to fight against Babylon, but Egypt would not arrive, nor even make an attempt to help the Jews.

V18-20

The Babylonians had used siege towers constructed to rise above the wall of Jerusalem. The towers were always manned and armed and could see over the walls. If anyone was within view on the streets or buildings below, they would be shot at with slings and arrows, of which the Babylonians had a plentiful supply. These towers also made good lookouts for any escapees trying to flee Jerusalem. The Babylonians were relentless in their pursuit of all who tried to escape.

V20-22

The closing of this chapter addresses the surrounding nations of Edom and Uz who were quite pleased with the fall of Jerusalem. Jeremiah warns them, also, that their time is coming and that they shall suffer the same fate. At the fall of Jerusalem, God's punishment of the Jews was complete. From this point forward the Jews began a slow, uphill climb out of despair and suffering, but they would never reclaim their spot at the top.

Chapter 5

V1-9

This final chapter starts off with Jeremiah pleading with God to look at the dire situation of the Jews. God already knows what is happening, but even Jeremiah who was told beforehand what was to come is so overwhelmed by the catastrophic circumstances that he cannot believe his eyes. Surely God didn't mean for it to go this far! This can be seen as a foreshadowing of our wicked nature to turn away from God and choose an eternity in Hell.

Jeremiah takes a few of these verses to cover some of the items of disbelief.

- The God-given land of the Jews was no longer in the hands of foreigners.
- The only remaining inhabitants of Jerusalem were the old and weak, yet they were expected to keep the crops and markets going.
- Even the most basic of supplies, such as water and firewood, were now a valued commodity which was severely taxed.
- Gathering food in the wilderness was now a hazard as the surrounding region was overrun with thieves and muggers with no soldiers or police to deal with.
- The slaves of the Babylonians were put in charge of the enslaving of the Jews. They had become lower than slaves.

Read Ezekiel 18:2 and Jeremiah 31:29-30.

In verse 7, it states "our fathers sinned and are no more, but we have borne their iniquities". Verse 7 is a reference to these proverbs found in previous scripture.

V10-16

These verses are a continuation of the list of unbelievable aggression towards the Jews.

- Because of the famine, immune systems were weakened, and heatstroke became a serious issue.
- Women were a form of amusement to the Babylonian soldiers. There was no regard for age or dignity.
- The royalty of the city were hung from hooks by chains around their hands and suspended in air. This was a precursor to crucifixion.
- The soldiers were made to work in mills, which was regarded as menial, women's work.
- The youngest boys were made to do the work of grown men and would have become exhausted even to the point of death.

The closing of verse 16 begins the next section of realizing that this punishment has been earned.

V17-19

Jeremiah admits to God that this is a deserved punishment and that every chance was given to turn away from this path.

V20-22

This closing of the Laments is a final prayer to God for restoration. Even in the midst of the chaos and calamity, Jeremiah reminds us that God is sovereign and that He can bring His people back to glory.

References

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