

Lamentations 1

As we approach Lamentations we look at these chapters as an acrostic poem. Each chapter has been delineated into 22 sections, with each section starting with the letters of the Hebrew Alphabet.

We are participating in a funeral service for a nation. A grieving sigh is heaved by the poet who mourns the fall of his beloved Jerusalem. "Lamentation" is a word that has fallen on hard times. It is virtually dead to our contemporary ears. The moan issued here by the grieving prophet knows no counterpart in today's culture.

Lamentations 1(NIV)

1 How deserted lies the city,
 once so full of people!
How like a widow is she,
 who once was great among the nations!
She who was queen among the provinces
 has now become a slave.

2 Bitterly she weeps at night,
 tears are on her cheeks.
Among all her lovers
 there is no one to comfort her.
All her friends have betrayed her;
 they have become her enemies.

3 After affliction and harsh labor,
 Judah has gone into exile.
She dwells among the nations;
 she finds no resting place.
All who pursue her have overtaken her
 in the midst of her distress.

4 The roads to Zion mourn,
 for no one comes to her appointed festivals.
All her gateways are desolate,
 her priests groan,
her young women grieve,
 and she is in bitter anguish.

5 Her foes have become her masters;

her enemies are at ease.
The Lord has brought her grief
because of her many sins.
Her children have gone into exile,
captive before the foe.

6 All the splendor has departed
from Daughter Zion.
Her princes are like deer
that find no pasture;
in weakness they have fled
before the pursuer.

7 In the days of her affliction and wandering
Jerusalem remembers all the treasures
that were hers in days of old.
When her people fell into enemy hands,
there was no one to help her.
Her enemies looked at her
and laughed at her destruction.

8 Jerusalem has sinned greatly
and so has become unclean.
All who honored her despise her,
for they have all seen her naked;
she herself groans
and turns away.

9 Her filthiness clung to her skirts;
she did not consider her future.
Her fall was astounding;
there was none to comfort her.
“Look, Lord, on my affliction,
for the enemy has triumphed.”

10 The enemy laid hands
on all her treasures;
she saw pagan nations
enter her sanctuary—
those you had forbidden
to enter your assembly.

11 All her people groan

as they search for bread;
they barter their treasures for food
to keep themselves alive.
“Look, Lord, and consider,
for I am despised.”

12 “Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?
Look around and see.
Is any suffering like my suffering
that was inflicted on me,
that the Lord brought on me
in the day of his fierce anger?”

13 “From on high he sent fire,
sent it down into my bones.
He spread a net for my feet
and turned me back.
He made me desolate,
faint all the day long.

14 “My sins have been bound into a yoke;
by his hands they were woven together.
They have been hung on my neck,
and the Lord has sapped my strength.
He has given me into the hands
of those I cannot withstand.

15 “The Lord has rejected
all the warriors in my midst;
he has summoned an army against me
to crush my young men.
In his winepress the Lord has trampled
Virgin Daughter Judah.

16 “This is why I weep
and my eyes overflow with tears.
No one is near to comfort me,
no one to restore my spirit.
My children are destitute
because the enemy has prevailed.”

17 Zion stretches out her hands,
but there is no one to comfort her.

The Lord has decreed for Jacob
that his neighbors become his foes;
Jerusalem has become
an unclean thing among them.

18 "The Lord is righteous,
yet I rebelled against his command.
Listen, all you peoples;
look on my suffering.
My young men and young women
have gone into exile.

19 "I called to my allies
but they betrayed me.
My priests and my elders
perished in the city
while they searched for food
to keep themselves alive.

20 "See, Lord, how distressed I am!
I am in torment within,
and in my heart I am disturbed,
for I have been most rebellious.
Outside, the sword bereaves;
inside, there is only death.

21 "People have heard my groaning,
but there is no one to comfort me.
All my enemies have heard of my distress;
they rejoice at what you have done.
May you bring the day you have announced
so they may become like me.

22 "Let all their wickedness come before you;
deal with them
as you have dealt with me
because of all my sins.
My groans are many
and my heart is faint."

A Lonely City

We open bemoaning Jerusalem's status to widowhood, slavery, and exile. Pilgrims no longer flood her streets at feast times; her friends have turned against her; and her enemies have become her masters. Famine threatens the few remaining inhabitants, who mourn the city's better days of the past. The poet acknowledges the punitive hand of God in humbling the former capital. The public nakedness of the divinely defrocked princess city brings such shame that she cannot even look at herself. Jerusalem lacked foresight by persisting in the sins that rendered her covenantally "unclean" and therefore deserving of punishment. Worst of all, God's aiding the defilement of his temple by pagan invaders verifies the intentional withdrawal of his presence from Zion.

This opening verse sets the tone for the whole collection. Judging from his passion and the richness of his detail, we can assume that the writer was an eyewitness to the fall of Jerusalem and was most likely recording his impressions within a reasonable time frame of the actual event. He watches the city from the perspective of the third person for the first half of the dirge and then performs a literary stroke of genius by switching the perspective to the first person in the last half of the work. The shift carries with it a powerful intimacy that invites a personal response from the reader or the listener. I say "listener" because Lamentations is one of the five books that make up the megilloth that were read aloud once a year for liturgical purposes in their appropriate season. Every year in mid July, the Hebrew ear is fed again with these mournful strains as they assemble in their synagogues to commemorate the destruction of the temple.

The Hebrews were renowned throughout the Middle East as singers and musicians. Their poetry had rather striking features that loses something in its translation. One of the most striking features was the use of parallelism. "How like a widow is she, who was great among the nations!" (v. 1). This second part is synonymous with the first. Each part is a total unit of thought and syntax, yet the second is laid alongside of the first, in this case, repeating the same idea but clothing it in a different image.

In order to keep loneliness from being an abstraction, we are invited to picture a widow, recently bereaved. Not only is force created by this parallel repetition, but it is also created by a strong accentual quality. Major words carry one stress and minor words are unstressed or often linked together. The groupings then result in a strong rhythmic pattern that lends dramatic resonance.

When the Roman emperor Titus conquered Jerusalem in a.d. 70, he stamped a coin to commemorate her loss and his gain. The image on that coin was none other than the image of a widow, bowed and shrouded in grief. "The princess among the provinces Has become a slave!" (v. 1). Once "full of people," she is now all alone. The husband she has lost is none other than the Lord Himself, the generous provider, the gentle protector, and the lover whose love she had never returned. No wonder there are sleepless nights filled with tears (v. 2). They are not simply

tears of remembrance; they are tears of bitterness over lost opportunities for reconciliation. No one comforts her; “She finds no rest” (v. 3). This strain will be caught again in the final prayer of chapter 5.

If only she could forget “the days of her affliction and roaming” (v. 7), it might not then be so painful. In a great rush of remorse, “Jerusalem remembers all her pleasant things That she had in the days of old” (v. 7). Instead of the sweetness of these memories being a comfort to her, they haunt her because they are now irretrievable. The “roaming” she had so desired is now all that she has. Like all sin, it had masqueraded as a desirable thing but now is nothing but an affliction.

When she had the chance, “she did not consider her destiny” (v. 9). If only we could hear these words today and think seriously about our destiny and about the consequences of our roamings. In this culture we insure ourselves against all kinds of losses. We take out policies that cover disability, health, fire, theft, casualty, and so on. We insure ourselves against so many calamities, most of which will never happen, but we don’t take care enough about our souls, to insure them against the one thing that most certainly will happen. We make so little provision for our eternal destiny.

“The adversary has spread his hand over all her pleasant things” (v. 10). The whole collection of dirges and poetry never departs from the theme of old Jerusalem’s loneliness and calamity. Brighter images, however, are found in the whole sweep of Scripture. Centuries later, John described the New Jerusalem, showing this time the bride and not the widow. “Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev. 21:2). Here is another writer using the same metaphor hundreds of years later, seeing the city as a woman. This time she is in her splendor, adorned for her husband in the full dignity of her redemption, under a new marriage covenant.

The last half of the dirge is told from the first person. “Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?” (v. 12). The widow clutches at each passerby, not allowing them an escape. “Behold and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow” (v. 12). Grief over lost opportunity for repentance is meant to be observed and not ignored.

“From above He has sent fire into my bones” (v. 13). The physical feelings of grief are handled with candor in verses 13–15. The feeling of being tangled in a net, of being faint, of being weighed down with a yoke of guilt, of being trampled underfoot and crushed, all become stark realities by virtue of being made personal in the metaphor of one grieving widow. Yet, at the same time, they describe aspects of the siege. Fiery darts, catapulted over the wall, would light up the night sky with their terror and then burn in the bones of the city.

“My eye, my eye overflows with water; because the comforter, who should restore my life, is far from me” (v. 16). The husband who had so yearned to comfort was gone. How like the words of Jesus as He looked over the same city, soon to undergo its siege from the Romans, soon to be

widowed again: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” (Matt. 23:37). Now the widow is inconsolable. All pleas for comfort seem unprofitable. “Zion spreads out her hands, But no one comforts her” (v. 17). Those who should be friends have become adversaries. So it was with the nations around Jerusalem. They did not come to her aid. Moab even joined forces with the Babylonians during the final siege. “I called for my lovers, but they deceived me; ... they have heard that I sigh, but no one comforts me. All my enemies have heard my trouble; they are glad that You have done it” (vv. 19–21).

In the final verses of this dirge, the widow continues to appeal to the passersby to learn from her example. “Hear now, all peoples, and behold my sorrow” (v. 18). The senses of sight and sound are being appealed to, not merely for pity but for the lesson of righteousness. “The Lord is righteous, for I rebelled against His commandment” (v. 18). Finally the cause of the tragedy is identified. It rises in a moan that echoes through the dirges to follow. “My heart is overturned within me, for I have been very rebellious” (v. 20).

Jerusalem was not the only city, Israel was not the only nation who would suffer for their rebellion. She is the great example, the conscience of the nations. Addressing the God who holds the whole world in His hands and inviting His inexorable justice, the widow cries, “Let all their wickedness come before You, and do to them as You have done to me” (v. 22). This funeral is the business of every nation and of every individual.

The city deploras her own plight, with an interruption by the poet appearing in verse 17. Jerusalem, the “virgin daughter of Judah,” protests her unparalleled pain. That God will similarly strike the enemies of Zion is the dearest wish of the despondent, self-pitying city—not to vindicate God’s righteousness, but merely as revenge for herself and to gain company in her misery.