

LAMENTATIONS

INTRODUCTION. This book of the Bible is a collection of five poems “lamenting” the destruction of Jerusalem. The book was probably composed during the Babylonian Exile by one or more authors who likely witnessed the destruction of God’s holy city.

Even though Lamentations is placed amongst the prophetic books, its form or makeup is more closely related to some of the psalms, especially the psalms of lament. Concerning the biblical literary form called lament, Fr. Ronald Witherup writes:

“In the Bible a lament is a faith-filled act in which people pour out their hearts to God and plead for his mercy. A lament does not merely catalogue one’s misfortune. It places the reality in God’s hands and concludes in praise of God’s grandeur, wisdom, and power that are beyond all human comprehension.” (The Bible Companion, p.134)

The Book of Lamentations reflects the prevalent theology of the time, namely, that has God caused the destruction of Jerusalem as punishment for sin. It could be said that the sins of the people have led inevitably to the ruin of Jerusalem and that God has allowed this to happen. But Lamentations recognizes that the defeat of the Jews is not a defeat for God. It gives hope to the survivors that by repentance and trust in God, Israel can survive.

OUTLINE:

The book is divided into five poems of lamentations.

First lamentation – chapter 1: The author expresses his grief as he looks upon a ruined city (vv. 1-11). Then Jerusalem confesses her sins and her hopes and her anger against the enemy (vv. 12-22).

Second lamentation - chapter 2: Continues the author’s description of a destroyed city (vv. 1-10). In vv. 13-22, the poet addresses the city from the depths of compassion beginning with: *“To what can I liken or compare you O daughter Jerusalem.”*

Third lamentation - Chapter 3: This lamentation is an individual cry of sorrow. While the poet speaks most of the poem, in verses 25-47 other voices speak from a group of sages or wise persons and other friends, baffled by the tragedy (vv. 40-47). Despite the torture

and misery of verses 1-24, the poem ultimately expresses deep faith in God’s grace and power.

Fourth lamentation – chapter 4: The fourth lamentation returns to the style and mood of the first two. The opening verses tell the end of nobles and children (vv. 1-10), followed by a meditation on Jerusalem (vv. 11). After the responsibility is placed upon the religious leaders (v. 13-20, the poem ends with a curse upon the enemy (v. 21).

Fifth lamentation – chapter 5: This lamentation is often called *“The Prayer of Jeremiah”*. This liturgical prayer sustains its beauty and serenity despite its topic of rejection and tragedy. It asks very little, only that the Lord remember.

Attentive readers will see subtle dramatic movement within each poem and between the poems; a range of emotions is fully expressed – grief, anger, near despair, glimmers of hope and joy, and the will to carry on.

COMMENTARY

CHAPTER 1: The loneliness of daughter Jerusalem, now abandoned and disgraced

“How lonely she is now, the once crowded city.... Bitterly she weeps at night.... Judah has fled into exile.... (vv 1-3)

“Gone from daughter Zion is all her glory....” (v.6)

“Her filth is on her skirt....” (v.9)

“Come all you who pass by the way; look and see whether there is any suffering like my suffering....” (v.12)

“...My groans are many, I am sick at heart.” (v.22)

We have all seen how a skillful reporter with a TV camera can go to the scene of a terrible accident and paint for us a graphic picture of the events. The opening section of Lamentations consists of a commentary on the tragedy that is the destruction of Jerusalem, the city of God, and the desecration of the Temple.

The book paints for us a series of pictures describing a shattering event. It is a bit like a grieving person who talks incessantly about the loss of a loved one.

In part 2 of this first poem (vv 12-22), Jerusalem speaks of her sorrow: *“Come all you who pass by, look and see if there is any suffering like my suffering”* (v.12)—words we hear during our Holy Week liturgies.

In verse 18, there is recognition that God is justified in punishing Jerusalem.

Pause: What was the biggest or toughest loss you have experienced? What helped you to deal with it?

CHAPTER 2: God’s wrath against Jerusalem

“How the Lord in his wrath has detested daughter Zion....” (v.1)

“...He has consumed Israel....” (v.5)

“My eyes are spent with weeping....” (v.11)

“Your prophets had for you false visions....” (v.14)

“...Whom have you ever treated like this?....” (v.20)

The writer is mad at God for his total lack of mercy. What will their enemies think of such a God?

Verses 1-8 describe the Lord as an enemy. There is not only physical devastation but also spiritual annihilation. The priests and prophets lie dead in the sanctuary (v.20). There is no more religious education (v.9). The esteemed elders sit on the ground in humiliation (v.10).

Verse 12. The poet turns to his own grief: “Is there any suffering like my suffering?”

Verse 14. The prophets are condemned for trying to whitewash a terrible situation.

Verse 20. Daughter Zion (Jerusalem) speaks to the Lord about the terrible things he has done to her: *“Must women eat their offspring to survive?”*

The poem ends on a note of total disgust with God who turned their feast days into a banquet of death (v.22).

Pause: Can you begin to imagine how you would feel if everything you held dear was taken away? How would this impact your faith?

CHAPTER 3: Hope in the midst of despair

“I am a man who knows affliction....” (v.1)

“He has left me to dwell in the dark....” (v.6)

“Even when I cry for help, he stops my prayer.” (v.8)

“My soul is deprived of peace....” (v.17)

“The favors of the Lord are not exhausted.... They are renewed each morning....” (vv. 22-23).

“My eyes torment my soul at the sight of all the daughters of my city.” (v.51)

“I called upon your name, O Lord, from the bottom of the pit. You heard me call.... You came to my aid and said, ‘Have no fear!’” (vv. 55-57)

“Pursue them in wrath and destroy them....” (v.66)

This lament poem is a wonderful example of a man tethering between despair and hope. We can see this from the above-quoted verses. On the one hand, he feels God lives in a dark cloud and no one can reach him. God even stops our prayer (v.8). The writer feels he has no future; his soul is deprived of peace. Yet in verse 22 he states that “the favours of the Lord are not exhausted, his mercies not spent” (v.22). In verses 55-57, the writer experiences God as coming to his aid. The God who is the source of his trouble is also the source of help. Like every person of faith, the writer struggles to keep faith in the midst of darkness. The lament closes in verses 59-66 with the longest passage in the book asking that the Lord to punish the writer’s enemies.

Pause: Have you ever experienced a time of spiritual dryness when it seemed God was absent and had ignored your prayers? If so, what was that like for you?

CHAPTER 4: Miseries of a besieged city

“How the sacred stones lie strewn on every street corner....” (v.1)

“The tongue of the suckling cleaves to the roof of its mouth in thirst....” (v.4)

“The hands of compassionate women boiled their own children....” (v.10)

“Because of the sins of her prophets and the crimes of her priests....” (v.13)

Introducing this fourth poem, Robert Davidson writes: *“In this fourth poem the mood has changed. We no longer hear any agonizing questions. The struggle for faith seems to be over, at least for the moment. There are no more urgent appeals to God. It is quietly accepted that what has happened is the Lord’s doing, the outpouring of his anger, the expression of his displeasure* (vv. 11, 16). *But the tragedy remains, misery abounds. Imprinted in the poet’s mind is the painful contrast between the city as he once knew it, and as it is now”* (The Daily Bible Study Series - Jeremiah Vol 2 & Lamentations, p.204).

The gold that once filled the Temple now lies tarnished on the streets. But it is the picture of hunger and famine that bothers the poet the most. The blame for the devastation is placed on the shoulders of the prophets, priests and kings.

CHAPTER 5: The prophet’s lament and supplication

“...Our inherited lands have been turned over to strangers, our homes to foreigners. We have become orphans, fatherless; widowed are our mothers.... On our necks is the yoke of those who drive us....” (vv 1-5)

“The wives of Zion were ravished by the enemy....” (v.11)

“The joy of our hearts ceased....” (v.15)

“You, O Lord, are enthroned forever.... Why, then should you forget us?....” (v.20)

The lament for the devastation that has befallen the people and their city continues. Their land has been taken over by strangers. They now have to pay for water and wood, their wives have been raped, their young are forced to do menial jobs. All the joy and laughter has been taken out of the community. It has become a community with no heart and in the grip of shame.

Pause: Can you recall a very bad time in your community that had been brought on by a local tragedy? If so, what helped your community to bounce back?

Resources

- Collegeville Bible Commentary
- Daily Bible Study Series – Jeremiah Vol. 2 and Lamentations
- The Catholic Bible-Personal Study Edition