

LAMENTATIONS

Lesson 55

When I was studying to preach, one of the courses required for my degree was entitled, “Practical Aspects of Preaching.” I took the course, and chuckled over the course contents. One might think the practical aspects of preaching would include speaking to the problems of people’s lives or some other “practical aspect” of the preacher’s job. In truth, the course boiled down to two real areas of study: weddings and funerals. I thought it a bit humorous that weddings and funerals were deemed the “practical” aspects of a preacher’s job.

In the process of the term, we were required to write multiple weddings and funerals. I had three fictitious funeral assignments, each a fictional scenario with made-up facts about the “decedent.” One funeral was for a good and elderly woman who was a long time member of the church. A second was for a child who had died. The third funeral I had to write was for a good fellow who was a life-long, avowed atheist!

I failed to keep copies of my funeral papers, but I do remember the basic lessons taught on *how* to preach a funeral. This probably stayed in my memory because, while funerals are one of my least favorite things to do, I have been called upon to preach a few dozen. Those practical lessons from over thirty years ago form the core of each service. We were taught that the substance of a funeral should center on two main thrusts:

1. Remember and recall the life of the departed to aid those attending in the grieving process.

There is something that can aid in healing as we publically remember, mourn, and grieve. Walking through one’s times on earth, the happy and the sad, gives an expression to a spectrum of emotion and provides some level of balm for those pained and hurting.

2. Affirm the faith in the Lord, his care and comfort, and his promised eternity.

Of course, this was much easier to do in the first two funerals. It took a bit of finesse to do it in the funeral of the atheist! It never seemed quite right to simply say, “I can guarantee you, Mr. So and So is no longer an atheist!”

The Old Testament includes several funeral dirges. Similar to funeral services today, these compositions were written to express grief with an eye toward some

measure of resolution and healing. The book of Lamentations contains five of these funeral dirges. They are the subjects of study in this lesson.

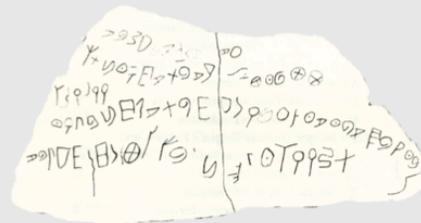
BACKGROUND

If the accounts in 2 Kings and Chronicles give the facts behind the fall of Judah and Jerusalem, and if Jeremiah and Ezekiel give the theology behind the fall, then we can go to Lamentations to read the emotions of the fall. Lamentations is a short book of five chapters, each separate chapter being an individual poem that expresses a lament over the pain, misery, and despair experienced after Judah's fall. These poems of anguish also expound on the hope for the future, although even that hope at times is cloaked in language of despair.

If we were studying the poems as written in their Hebrew language, we would immediately notice several things that we miss in our English translations. First, the first four poems (chapter one through four) are each acrostics. Their acrostic form follows the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Scholars debate the exact reason for the acrostic, some believing it a part of the artistic touch. One prominent

HEBREW ACROSTICS

Acrostics are not unusual in Hebrew poetry. A number of Psalms follow an alphabetic pattern, with successive verses beginning with successive letters. In Lamentations, the first, second and fourth chapter/poems, each verse begins with successive letters of the alphabet. In the third chapter/poem, the stanzas are in an acrostic triplet, where three verses each start with the alphabet letter (verses 1-3 are *alef*, 4-6 are *bet*, 7-9 are *gimel*, etc.). The fifth chapter/poem is not an acrostic, but it does contain twenty-two verses, the same number as there are letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Chapters 2-4 reverse the normal order of two Hebrew letters (*ayin* and *pe*) giving a good illustration of an alternate alphabetical order found in Psalm 9 and in the "Izbet Sartah Abecedary." This pottery shard with writing pictured at the right was uncovered in excavations at Izbet Sartah (perhaps the Biblical Ebenezer) in 1974. The first four lines seem to be random letters, while the last line is the Hebrew alphabet written left to right! Scholars date this writing in the range of 1100 to 1000BC. This alphabet (called an abecedary because it is the ABC's) reverses the order of the *ayin* and *pe* also. See, Wurthwein, Ernst, *The Text of the Old Testament*, (Eerdmans 1995), at 230f.



suggestion is that it puts a beginning and ending to the expressed grief that otherwise might ramble on and on. It is as if each poem expresses its measure of grief thoroughly, from A to Z.¹

A second noticeable feature in the Hebrew that gets lost in translation is the pattern of the verses. For most of the poems, the first stanza has three Hebrew words (with three accents), while the following stanza has two Hebrew words (with two accents). This produces a pattern when said out loud where the second stanza “seems, as it were, to die away...and a plaintive, melancholy cadence is thus produced.”²

There is a large scholarly consensus that Lamentations (at least the first four chapters) was written by one or more who were eyewitnesses to the fall of Jerusalem. The descriptions vividly convey the pain and agony of the events and the loss. The verses are not reconstructed or imagined anguish. They are filled with bitter experiences that have altered the life of the writer. While later traditions ascribed authorship to Jeremiah the prophet (who certainly composed at least one lament for King Josiah³), the author(s) of Lamentations are unknown. The name of the human who wrote the laments is irrelevant in light of the subject matter of the laments!

A study of the laments could take different forms. It would be instructive to consider the themes expressed, because the lamentations speak to important theology about sin, confession, hope, mercy, and dependence upon God. The forms are also worthy of study for the way they give a formal expression of grief, as opposed to simply an emotional outburst. Not surprisingly, Jews today read these poems annually on the day set aside to grieve the loss of the temple (on

¹ See discussion in Hillers, Delbert, *The Anchor Bible: Lamentations*, (Doubleday 1972), at xxvff. One translation that tries to keep the acrostic feature is Knox, Ronald, *The Holy Bible*, Sheed & Ward 1950).

² This cite to 19th century Hebrew scholar Karl Budde (in *Das hebraische Klaglied*, 1882) is reproduced from Grossberg, Daniel, notes to Lamentations, *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford 2004), at 1588.

³ 2 Chron. 35:25 notes,

Jeremiah also uttered a lament for Josiah; and all the singing men and singing women have spoken of Josiah in their laments to this day. They made these a rule in Israel; behold, they are written in the Laments.

Of course, we do not have the lament for Josiah still today, nor do we have the book of Laments that includes Jeremiah’s lament for Josiah. From this verse, some argue that Jeremiah must have been the “lament” composer for Judah. Yet, this argument is refuted in the same verse that speaks of a book of laments. Clearly, others composed laments.

Tish‘ah be‘av).⁴ Still another approach to study might lie in the various strands of thought that are found in the tapestry woven through the poems. The poems offer the prophet’s insight into God’s judgment for sin and coming grace. They also express the priest’s liturgical expressions of confession and hope. A third strand is found in the wise man’s struggle to understand the mysteries of suffering at the hands of a loving God.⁵

Instead of these approaches, however, we opt to simply consider each of the five poems, noting some important features of each, while trying to put the main thoughts into prose, leaving the poetry for further study and meditation.

THE LAMENTS

Chapter 1 – Then and Now: A Lamentation of Contrasts

The first poem begins with the Hebrew word meaning “Alas,” and typically used at the start of a lament or funeral dirge. (The same word starts Lamentations two and four also, convenient in an acrostic because it begins with *alef*, the first Hebrew alphabet letter.) This word signals the great anguish and emotion associated with death. In this first lament, the word sets up the coming contrasts before what was and what is. Jerusalem used to be “full of people,” but now sits “lonely.” She was “great among the nations,” but now lives in the shadow of death like a “widow.” Once she was regal, a “princess,” but now is a “slave.”

This change in status brought “bitter weeping” in the night, with “tears on her cheek.” It was not mere bad luck or misfortune that befell Jerusalem; she brought it on herself. She had trusted other “lovers” than the Lord, and they were her downfall, so the LORD brought judgment upon her. The judgment left her enemies dancing while Jerusalem’s roads were empty and devoid of all festivities. Her children became captives of her foes.

As the lament continues, the contrast is continually brought to mind with memories of how things were, compared to how things changed:

Jerusalem remembers in the days of her affliction and wandering all the precious things that were hers from days of old (Lam. 1:7).

⁴ While reading, the congregation and the reader typically sit on the floor or on low benches in a posture of mourning. Reading Lamentations on the anniversary of the temple’s destruction is a practice that dates back millennia. Even in the day of Jeremiah, there was a grieving for the loss (Jer. 41:4-5), a process that continued when the Jews returned from exile (Zech. 7:3-5; 8:19).

⁵ La Sor, William, *et al.*, *Old Testament Survey*, (Eerdmans 1985), at 622.

But those are mere memories, now gone forever. She has fallen and her foes “gloat.” Previously blind to her sins, Jerusalem now sees how “filthy” she had become. Her “nakedness” and shame are on display for all to see, and even she now “groans” and “turns away,” unable to look at herself. In words descriptive of a sexual assault, Jerusalem and the temple were invaded as “the nations enter the sanctuary, those whom you [God] forbade to enter.”

The lament continues to circle around the misery of the now compared to the then, linking it to the hand of God in righteous judgment upon the wretched sin. This was “inflicted” by “the LORD” in his “fierce anger.” His judgment came as “fire” that burned through to the “bone,” leaving Jerusalem “stunned” and “faint.”

One particularly powerful analogy is found in Lamentations 1:14.

My transgressions were bound into a yoke; by his hand they were fastened together; they were set upon my neck; he caused my strength to fail.

One is reminded of the picture found on the tomb walls of the Egyptian Vizier Rekhmire (c. 1450 BC) where slaves are toiling in the production and carrying of bricks. The picture of the slave carrying a yoke laden with bricks is particularly illustrative. This heavy yoke was a product of Jerusalem’s own sins. They became the heavy burden that crippled life. Sin has this ability to “crush” one, like grapes “trodden as in a winepress.”



This left Jerusalem in “tears.” There was no excuse any more, no rationalization. The jig was up, and the charade was over.

The LORD is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word (Lam. 1:18).

And with the groaning unceasing, the laments continue.

Chapter 2 – That Which Was High Was Brought Low

Meditating on the second lament produces an image expressed over and over in different forms. Constantly, words and images are used that project falling and being low. In the first half of the lament, the narrator speaks of the LORD having “cast down from heaven to earth the splendor of Israel.” The strongholds are “broken down.” The kingdom and rulers are “brought down to the ground in dishonor.” The might of Israel is “cut down” as God “poured out his fury.” The walls “lay in ruins” and the gates “have sunk into the ground.” The elders “sit on the ground” with “dust on their heads.” Young women have “bowed their heads to the ground.”

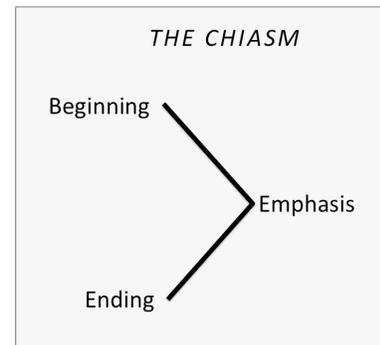
As the prophetic voice begins to speak in verse 11, the theme continues. The picture is not pretty with eyes “weeping” and “stomachs churning” with vomit “poured out to the ground.” The failure of the people to hear the words that YHWH had given prophetically in warning resulted in his judgment “thrown down without pity.” Naturally, then, the peoples tears now “stream down like a torrent” joining everything else on the ground.

The second lament ends with Jerusalem speaking, crying to YHWH to see what has happened. The young and old are dead, their bodies lying in the dust of the streets.

This constant image of the “ground” and things “broken down,” “poured out,” and “in the dust,” leaves the feeling as well as the picture of a city and people destroyed and in shambles. There is no “comfort” for a place that had lived on sin and false security from “false prophets.” The “ruin is as vast as the sea,” and the laments continue.

Chapter 3 – Amidst the Worst, There is Hope for the Best

The Lament in chapter three is the middle lament. The five laments each have elements of a “chiasm,” something we have seen in a number of Hebrew stories and poems. As a reminder, the chiasm was a literary construction where the beginning and ending function as bookends, with echoing themes, words or thoughts, while the center is the point of emphasis.



As 21st century western civilization thinkers, we have a tendency to read for important things at the beginning and ending of writings. Reporters have a mantra, “Don’t bury your lead!” because of the importance in our culture of putting the emphasis “front and center.” That was not always so, and the center portions of ancient writings often call out for emphasis in our reading and understanding.

The individual lamentations have elements of chiasms within them. Lamentations 1:1 begins with a city “great “ with people (in the Hebrew; the English translates the word “full”) and “great” among the nations. Lamentations 1:22 ends with the groans “great” (translated “many”). Lamentations 2 is bookended with the wrath and anger of the LORD. The word is used twice in 2:1 as well as verses 2,3, and 4. The word then appears at the end in verses 21 and 22. While we are not suggesting that all these individual poems are clear chiasms, there is clearly present the Hebrew approach of tying beginnings and endings with points of emphasis in the center. That takes on importance as we consider the center

lament, Lamentations 3. This lament is, in some ways, the most important of the five. In its core and center, it contains the message that sustains the rest of the book, and keeps one alive in the midst of the greatest misery.

Lamentations three begins with the most miserable status. Take time to read and consider these powerful verses (1-18). Words and phrases that highlight the horrible conditions of the speaker are emboldened:

I am the man who has seen **affliction**
under the **rod of his wrath**;
he has driven and brought me
into **darkness without any light**;
surely **against me he turns his hand**
again and again the whole day long.

He has made **my flesh and my skin waste away**;
he has **broken my bones**;
he has **besieged** and enveloped me
with **bitterness and tribulation**;
he has made me dwell in **darkness**
like the dead of long ago.

He has walled me about so that **I cannot escape**;
he has made **my chains heavy**;
though I call and cry for help,
he shuts out my prayer;
he has **blocked my ways** with blocks of stones;
he has **made my paths crooked**.

He is a bear lying in wait for me,
a lion in hiding;
he turned aside my steps and **tore me to pieces**;
he has made me **desolate**;
he bent his bow and set me
as a target for his arrow.

He **drove into my kidneys**
the arrows of his quiver;
I have become the **laughingstock** of all peoples,
the object of their **taunts** all day long.
He has filled me with **bitterness**;
he has sated me with wormwood.

He has made my teeth grind on gravel,
and made me cower in ashes;
my soul is bereft of peace;
I have **forgotten what happiness is;**
so I say, “My **endurance has perished;**
so has my hope from the LORD.”

Reading this I realize I should think twice before I ever complain about anything that has happened to me! This is the most shocking recognition of unbearable destruction in life. May God forgive me for ever complaining about a “bad day!” Here, we read of the doom that processed from God’s righteous judgment on people who would never listen to Him. It took this doom, to produce people ready and longing for God’s grace. This experience produces the center turning point that is the chiastic focus of Lamentations.

The turning begins with verses 20 and 21 where, with his soul bowed within him, the writer calls to mind a central truth that sustains him and allows him to continue living in the face of misery:

But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
“The LORD is my portion,” says my soul,
“therefore I will hope in him.”
The LORD is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul who seeks him.
It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the LORD (Lam. 3:21-26).

As the centerpiece of Lamentations, this passage speaks of God’s mercy, even as his righteous judgment burns unceasingly. There is a certain purity of trust and faith coming forth from fires of unfathomable affliction. One cannot help but put the results set out in this lament next to the prophetic word of Isaiah just issued in the preceding century:

How the faithful city
has become a whore,
she who was full of justice!
...
Your silver has become dross,

your best wine mixed with water.

...

Therefore the LORD declares,
the LORD of hosts,
the Mighty One of Israel: "...I will turn my hand against you
and will smelt away your dross as with lye
and remove all your alloy (Isa. 1:21-25).

The faith proceeding forth in this lament has absolutely nothing to do with anything earned, merited, or deserved. It is simply a recognition of God, his character, and his work. God is not trying to bring all things to ruin. He seeks to bring beauty forth from the ugliness of evil and corruption. After proclaiming God's steadfast love, the lament instructs God's people to live accordingly. They are to "test and examine" their ways and "return to the LORD!" They are to "lift up hearts and hands to God in heaven."

In chiasm form, the third lament does not end with this positive affirmation and instruction. It moves back into the current state of affairs noting the rebellion and transgression that was "not forgiven." God wrapped himself "with anger and pursued" the transgressors, "killing without pity." In words reminiscent of the early verses, the people are "scum and garbage," made so by God. The lament continues with phrases of "devastation" and "destruction," eyes flowing "with rivers of tears."

The final word in this lament adds an assurance that God will also mete out his justice to those abusing the fallen. God will also "pursue them in anger and destroy them." The laments continue.

Chapter 4 – The All-Encompassing Judgment

In the fourth lament, several different groups become the focus of description and attention. The desolation of the city, with its gold dimmed and the temple stones strewn about, pales in comparison to what has happened to its people. The lament starts with the children. While even wild animals feed their children, in Jerusalem there is no such blessing. "The tongue of the nursing infant sticks to the roof of its mouth for thirst; the children beg for food, but no one gives to them." Those children that once had a good life, with wonderful food and fine clothing, were left rummaging in the ash heaps of the garbage dump simply to find something edible.

In this way, the "chastisement" of the Judahites was more severe than that of Sodom. The lament notes that at least Sodom's judgment came swiftly, as opposed to the prolonged misery of Jerusalem. People left behind are not

recognizable. Their skin bears the appearance of the impossible life they have before them. Death was a better fate than the misery of surviving.

No one ever thought that Jerusalem would be breached. Neither the Assyrians nor the Egyptians had ever been able to accomplish that military feat. The lament emphasizes that the defeat came from the LORD giving “full vent to his wrath” as he “poured out his hot anger,” and “consumed the foundations” of Zion. God accomplished what no enemy had before.

God did so because of the sins of the people. In addition to children, this lament demonstrates the effect of God’s judgment on the religious leaders, both prophets and priests. These leaders sins included more than their false teaching; it also included responsibility for spilling innocent blood. The “clean” priests were themselves defiled with blood, and relegated to wandering through the streets, blind and untouchable. People shouted, “Away! Unclean!” and “Do not touch!” These leaders were scattered, fugitives wondering earth with no home, and no honor.

The lament ends remembering how the “pursuers” were unavoidable. Like the other laments, the Babylonians are not mentioned here by name. Their name is irrelevant in the story. They were never the real judges of Israel. As Jeremiah and Ezekiel explained, they were simply God’s tools. This judgment was God’s judgment for God’s purposes. It was a punishment that would last until God’s purposes were “accomplished.” Then the people would be in exile no longer. But that was in the future. For now, the laments continue with one last one.

Chapter 5 – A Final Plea

In the last lament, the acrostic is abandoned. The lament holds twenty-two verses, the number of letters in the alphabet, but the words are not pretty, and neither is the message. This message is a deeply felt plea for God to change things, but it is written with no confidence that he would. It begins with a plea for God to take action out of respect for what had happened to the people. The nation had “fallen” and the people were “disgraced.” They had no hope of a future, but were “orphans” and “widows.” They bore the “sins” of their “fathers,” and the pain was bitter. Their “women were raped” and their “princes hung.” They were bereft of “joy,” living a life of hard “slavery.” Their “sin” had brought them “woe.”

The plea is then placed at the end, as at the beginning, but without an assurance God would act!

But you, O LORD, reign forever;
your throne endures to all generations.
Why do you forget us forever,

why do you forsake us for so many days?
Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored!
Renew our days as of old—
unless you have utterly rejected us,
and you remain exceedingly angry with us.

This grim ending is so dire, that when Lamentations is read publically in a Jewish synagogue, the last verse is followed by a repeat of the second-to-last verse, “Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old.”

CONCLUSION

Going to funerals is difficult for me, even if I did not really know the deceased. Undoubtedly, that is one reason I do not like to conduct or preach them. I see the pain and hurting, but more than that, I feel it. It becomes part of me, and the empty feeling in my stomach, the questions of what will be the demise of those I love dear, settle in my mind, refusing to leave. I find myself pushing the importance of faith, even as I struggle with the pain of life and death.

Preparing this lesson, and writing on Lamentations has produced many of the same reactions. As we look in depth at the anguish and loss expressed in beautiful yet horror-filled poetry, we cannot help but find sadness as well. However, these same verses take us directly to God, the source of life and death, causing us to reflect on our relationship with him. These verses become our points for home.

POINTS FOR HOME

- (1) “*You will repay them, O LORD*” (Lam. 3:64).

How does this whole set of laments sit with you? I love to write and think about God’s love and mercy. His faithfulness and patience warm me, even as I look at my own unfaithfulness and impatience. I like Bono’s prayer in the U2 song “*Yhwh*.” “Take this shirt, polyester white trash made in nowhere, and make it clean... Take this mouth, so quick to criticize, and give it a kiss... Take this heart, and make it brave... Take this soul, and make it sing.” In that song, the chorus says over and over, “YHWH, always pain before a child is born.” That is the part I do not like.

I do not like to think of God's judgment. I do not like to think of God's hand in suffering. It is not how I like to think of him, nor is it the kind of PR I like him to have.

But, the Bible has Lamentations. From the dark clouds of profound agony, we read firsthand renditions of despair and deep pain producing remarkably clear theology. How does it fit with our God of love? I suggest Paul put these ideas into one sentence when he urged the Romans,

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil (Rom. 12:9).

Genuine love abhors evil. The road that Judah walked, on its own choosing and in spite of God's persistent warnings, was a road to destruction. Sin is that, a road to destruction. It is to be abhorred. It leads to misery. The deception of a moment's pleasure or an easy way out is foolish. Who would enjoy a moment and generate a lifetime of misery? We read the lamentations and grieve, but know that this is the end of sin's road, in this life or the age to come. As believers in Christ, we have assurance that the future age is one of victory, but we should never forget sin has consequences in this life. My study in Lamentations has convicted me to care more deeply about Paul's advice. May my love be genuine. May I abhor evil! May I never forget!

- (2) *"My transgressions were bound into a yoke...set upon my neck."* (Lam. 1:14).

Sin can seem so charming and alluring. Like a pretty fruit, ripe for the picking and tasting, sin hides its bitter poison, yet the poison is there. Sin itself weaves into a yoke that is too much to carry, too hard to bear. It fatigues and cripples. It can get lost in the eyes of the sinner, noticeable only later how "filthy" it has left someone. It makes the sinner the slave, unable to support it and unable to live as one might. Paul speaks of the law of sin and death, referencing this same fact, but with a different analogy (Rom. 8:1-2). Into this horrid truth about sin, comes Jesus.

This analogy propels itself into the New Testament where Jesus promises an *incredible* alternative:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. **Take my yoke** upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For **my yoke is easy**, and my burden is light (Mt. 11:28-30)."

This is the real game-changer. Breaking the law of sin and death, removing the yoke of transgression, Jesus offers true life of freedom and liberty. This, of course, is not a liberty to sin – not a freedom to put the heavy yoke back on! This is freedom to walk in the light and the joy of his righteousness! Jesus cleans up the filthy sinner, leaving one clothed in *his* righteousness and beauty. Amen and thank you LORD!

(3) “*He has cast down from heaven to earth*” (Lam. 2:1).

I would not like to live under Lamentations. I can understand why pious Jews reading the book add Lam. 5:21 to the end after reading 5:22. I would not like ending with the sincere question of whether God would ever relent. The idea of “utter rejection” is beyond my ability to handle.

The New Testament does not shy away from the principles of Lamentations in the sense of sin and its consequences. The high are brought low, even in New Testament thought. James taught “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” Peter reiterated that people should “humble yourselves” because “God opposes the proud” (1 Pet. 5:5-6). Paul went to great lengths to explain that everyone living in his or her own merit is worthless before God. But, the New Testament does not end with a repetitive verse saying that *maybe* God will yet show mercy. The New Testament explains the mercy God has shown. God has reached down and, by virtue of his own character, lived up to his own promises, even as man has failed. In Christ, God brought about a salvation that is certain and sure. On Calvary, at a specific point in time and history, God incarnate affirmed his saving love by a permanent act with eternal consequences. The story can end not in judgment but salvation. God’s genuine love will banish abhorrent evil and embrace the redeemed. Praise God, the laments end!