

## **Lamentations Bible Study Notes**

Wesley 2025

Lamentations is perhaps the most neglected book in the Bible. And yet it gives voice to the horror of human suffering. Jerusalem - the sacred city of the Israelites - is in ruins to the army of Babylon. This book is a “Summons to remember realities endured by real people like ourselves, to bear witness and to pay heed to their voice.” (Wright, 2015, 1) The question we must ask is when tragedy strikes what do we do with the silence of God?

Bible study is led by Rev Dr Bruce Stevens over five weeks (note dates because not weekly) in foyer (bring a Bible).

Week 1 *Introduction* Wednesday 11am-noon 8 October

Week 2 *Chapter 1* Wednesday 11am-noon 15 October

Week 3 *Chapter 2* Wednesday 11am-noon 5 November

Week 4 *Chapter 3* Wednesday 11am-noon 12 November

Week 5 *Chapter 4-5* Wednesday 11am-noon 26 November

### **Week 1 Introduction**

Lamentations is perhaps the most neglected book in the Bible. And yet it gives voice to the horror of human suffering. It is a “Summons to remember realities endured by real people like ourselves, to bear witness and to pay heed to their voice.” (Wright, 2015, 1)

### **History**

Babylon had risen to power after the collapse of the Assyrian Empire. In 609 BC Josiah, the last good king of Judah, was killed in the battle of Megiddo trying to prevent the Egyptians from coming to the aid of the Assyrians. In 605 BC Babylon defeated the Egyptians and was the dominant imperial power the whole region for the next 70 years. The prophet Jeremiah warned about apostasy and the folly of seeking alliances. In 597 BC Jehoiakim rebelled against Babylon but surrendered Jerusalem. This led to the first deportation but most of the city was spared. For 10 years king Zedekiah, who was meant to be a puppet, eventually rebelled against

Babylon but this time Nebuchadnezzar besieged and destroyed Jerusalem in 587 BC. After Zedekiah's sons were killed, he was blinded and taken as a prisoner to Babylon. Effectively the nation was destroyed with the removal of all leadership, walls torn down and the city burnt. The temple built by Solomon was looted, defiled and destroyed by fire.

This was not to be the end of the story. Eventually Cyrus, the Persian king, would allow the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem in 539 BC.

## **Background**

The author in the Hebrew text is anonymous. However, the Septuagint and later versions attributed it to Jeremiah. This supports a later church tradition of Jeremiah is the author. In relation to the fall of Jerusalem "Jeremiah also abutted a lament for Josiah, and all the singing men and the singing women have spoken of Josiah in their laments to this day. They made this a custom in Israel; they have recorded in the Laments (1Chronicles 35:25). This may refer to Jeremiah and Lamentations, but there is no allusion to King Josiah in the book. There are some similarities between the texts of Jeremiah and Lamentations but also significant differences in vocabulary.

The Jews had a tradition of making ritual laments over Jerusalem almost immediately after its fall (Jer 41:5. Zech 7:3-5). The book was probably written about 550 BC possibly in Jerusalem or in Babylon. Setting is literary and liturgical, not historical even though it focuses on a historical event (Garrett and Pearson, 2022, 432). Lamentations is a series of five dirges (lament poems) over the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC.

In some ways Lamentations is unique in the Bible. No other book is made up entirely of lament poems. An example of another lament is David's over Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:18-27). The Hebrew word for dirge is *qinah* typically sung over a dead person.

*To Do:* Read and discuss (2 Samuel 1:18-27). Also a number of the Psalms read as laments.

In near Eastern literature of the time there are laments over Sumerian cities such as Ur (the first no later than 2000 BC).

Lamentations is an acrostic poem (meaning alphabetical, the lines start with the Hebrew alphabet like a-b-c...; Other acrostic columns are Psalms 34, 37, 111,112, 119, 145 and Proverbs 31:10-31). So each chapter 1-2,4 has 22 verses. Chapter 3 has 66 verses with the first three verses beginning with *alef*, et cetera. The fifth chapter has 22 verses but is not acrostic. This form of poetry may have had some liturgical value, for example aiding memory, but it also may be pure art.

Each of the five chapters or poems have a distinct view.

Lamentations 1: Jerusalem is personified as a woman. The poet agrees over what has happened to her and in some lines she speaks her pain and sorrow.

Lamentations 2: The prophetic perspective. This is pronounced by the prophet. The city has sinned and God has responded with judgement.

Lamentations 3: Throughout most of this poem a man stands as an example, an archetype, reciting his suffering and his grief over the city.

Lamentations 4: The grim reality of Jerusalem after judgement.

Lamentations 5: An outcry. This is entirely a prayer delivered by Jews and recounts how they have suffered.

Why did I choose such a bleak book for a Bible study? I'm interested in the impact of trauma and this case on a community. The book of Lamentations expresses pain in a vivid way and I think provides the early steps on a path of emotional and spiritual healing.

Many aspects of the theology of Lamentations are evident. It assumes that God has a covenant with Israel and looks upon this nation with compassion. However, God also is just and brings judgement. Interestingly, though Lamentations speaks of Jerusalem's guilt as a root cause of the suffering, it spends less time on this topic than we might have expected. It does not enter into specifics of how the people violated the covenant and it never explores adultery or promiscuity in the female image of Zion. The question asked is how and when will God stop punishing Israel and save the nation? But God does not answer the question. (Garrett and Pearson, 2022, 439). It is not like the book of Job which wrestles with *why*.

An interesting comparison to Lamentations is Jewish post-Holocaust literature. *Discuss*: Have you seen films such as *Schindler's List* (1993) or read related books?

While Lamentations has a number of voices. There is a sense that those suffering are allowed to speak. To express the totality of their pain, as it were from A-Z, or in Greek alpha-omega.

There is one voice we never hear - God never speaks. He doesn't interrupt.

The voices of the suffering protest. There is no question that God exists, that they have sinned and broken the covenant for what they question is the 'proportionality' of the suffering inflicted on them by the Babylonians in the day of God's anger.

## **Week 2 Lamentations Chapter 1**

*To do*: Read Chapter 1, (one side) identify losses in chapter, (other side) find any reason for suffering.

The first word of chapter 1 is *'eka* which is like the old English expression alas, but it includes elements of how? Why? The poet cannot understand how this could have happened.

Jerusalem is personified as a woman. Some commentators have labelled her Lady Zion. "How like a widow she has become... She that was like a princess among the provinces has become a vassal" (1:1) "She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all the lovers she has no one to comfort her." (1:2) The lovers are nearby city states such as Edom. But it also conveys the image of the covenant as a marriage commitment (Hosea and Jeremiah use this analogy). The poet is implying that her suffering is a result of religious promiscuity. Why do you think the poet uses the woman image? Is there anything more confronting than the tears of a woman and destitute children?

Note that in the first half of the chapter (verses 1-11a) she is described in the third person; in the second half (11b-22) Lady Zion speaks for herself.

*Reflect*: Verses 7 to 10 how is Lady Zion shamed and violated? How do you react to this image? Note that a woman caught in adultery might have her

skirt lifted and genitals exposed which is here implied as nakedness. Verse 10 is graphic, “Enemies have stretched out their hands over all the precious things, she has even seen the nations invade her sanctuary.” The Hebrew word *Yad* or hand could be used as a euphemism for the male sexual organ. The picture is of Jerusalem being raped!

*Discuss:* Sexual violence is an instrument of war. Women being destroyed and men being humiliated because they cannot protect them.

The poet lists many losses such as destruction of the city, loss of the temple and its worship, the glory and prestige of its nobility, loss of Jerusalem’s wealth and anyone of significance was taken into exile. The people were under the dominion of Gentiles.

There is a rising crescendo of imagery: lonely widow, a degraded Princess, a whore, a rape victim, the betrayed lover, abandoned wife, and a mother mourning the loss of her children.

Lady Zion pleads “Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on me on the day of his fierce anger.” (1:12). She interrupts to speak for herself. The first appeal is to God “Look, O Lord, and see how worthless I have become.” (1:11) Will God listen? We are given no answer.

There are images of siege warfare (v12-15): attack by fire, nets to capture fugitives or pen in prisoners, prisoners often get yoked together by the neck, and trampled on whether dead or alive. No wonder “for these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears” (16).

Five times we hear the desolate refrain “no one to comfort”.<sup>1</sup> This is shocking because grief is usually a communal thing Jewish culture. Five times we hear the sound of groaning. The most repeated word in the chapter is *all*, 17 times, and it expresses the totality the tragedy.

There is a terrible judgement. Wright observed, “The God who was supposed to be inside Jerusalem defending it became the God outside the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Tenor aria in Handel’s Messiah.

city leading the pagan armies into the orgy of rampage, rape and desecration.” (53) Note that rape is not just an instrument of war, but an attack on the bloodlines of the people. This is implied in the verse “the Lord has rejected all my warriors in the midst of me.” (v 15 cf. the Psalm 46:5) “Zion stretches out her hand” (v 17, cf. beggars in Venice).

Lady Zion asked for vengeance, “all my enemies heard of my trouble; they are glad that you have done it. Bring on the day you have announced, and let them be as I am.” (v 21) But it is not a crude cry for vengeance. It is calling upon what God said God would do, let him keep his word. God is a God who is just to destroy wickedness and so the request is for God to be fair. There is no attempt at self-justification just equality of treatment (or both Jerusalem and her enemies).

Application: This is the expression of a traumatised community. Clearly the pain is given voice and expressed, “for my groans are many in my heart is faint.” (1:22) In the emotional dimension the poet expresses intense grief - anguish, “For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears; for a comforter is far from me, one to revive my coverage”. (1: 16) Fire in her bones is a vivid metaphor for extreme agony (1:13). Poetry is written to engage the listener and to invite us into the emotions, even if we don’t want to go!

In the early 1990s Sarajevo was torn by racial and political conflicts. 27 May 1992, a long line of people had queued up one of the still functioning bakeries. A mortar shell fell in the middle of the line and killed 22 people. Smajlovic felt helpless since he was neither a politician or a soldier, he was a musician. He took his cello and played Albion’s Adagio in G minor for the people who died. In spite of the sniper fire around him and obvious risk, he played for 22 days honouring each person who had died. It was his way of entering into the lament.

*Discuss:* Lady Zion makes an appeal which only God can answer. Only God has healing. You think in this chapter God will recognise an element of confession? What is the balance between failure and need? How do we respond as Christians?

## Week 3 Lamentations Chapter 2

**To do:** read the second chapter, one group to notice what is destroyed, and the second to note the response of the people. Did you notice the repetitive word “down”.

We now shift to the perspective of the prophet. All that has happened in judgement is the work of God. Hence, the focus is on God’s control of events. This allows for prayer and intercession after lament. This is an expansion of Amos 3:6 “Does disaster befall the city unless the Lord has done it?”

The structure of the chapter has two halves: there is an account of what the prophet has seen, followed by the prophet speaking. The last two verses Lady Zion appeals to God to look at the consequences of his anger. Will he always be her enemy?

2:1 Begins with how! Lady Zion on is brought down. Indeed, the emphasis is on down, down, down. 2:2-5 focuses on the military aspects of the disaster. God is not an ally but the enemy. Actively opposing Zion. 2:6-7 God has rejected Jerusalem’s sacred institutions including the temple (word used for hut emphasising transience) and all the services. In destroying the temple God has severed the link between heaven and earth. 2:8-9 the defensive structures of the walls and towers are in ruins. 2:9-10 people of all classes, those that have survived the war are suffering in a terrible way. 2:11-16 the poet expresses his grief. 2:17 God has shown his wrath against Zion on. 2:18-22 is a call to prayer and intercession. The essence of the prayer is that the people have suffered unspeakable horrors and God should relent. There is no joy in the misery of the people. The prophet does not say “I told you so!” But the cause is an all-powerful God delivering justice. A relentless series of 28 verbs each with God as the subject (Wright, 2015, 60).

*Discuss:* When a disaster happens, do we let God ‘off the hook’? We may dismiss it as random, with God as a bystander unable to intervene. How comfortable are we with this prophetic view of events? We should note that 200 years earlier the prophet Amos had been warning that judgement would fall on Jerusalem. What is God to do in the face of religious unfaithfulness,

moral corruption and political folly? The prophets brought repeated warnings.

What is the response of the poet? Do you think that the poet sees the judgement as excessive? There is shock and pain, angry protest and lament over excessive suffering, especially of the innocent children. Has God gone too far?

The poet has an intense emotional reaction, “My eyes are spent weeping; my stomach churns; my bile is poured out on the ground because of the destruction of my people, because infants and babies faint in the streets of the city. They cried to their mothers, ‘Where is bread and wine?’ As they faint like the wounded in the streets of the city, as their life is poured out on the mother’s bosom.” (2:11-12) Trauma resides in the body and then moves to the emotions. All in response to overwhelming events. The weeping prophet Jeremiah has much in common with the poet. Often there is some ambiguity between whether it is the prophet or God speaking. Perhaps also here. (See Jeremiah 8:21, 9:3).

*Discuss:* Is the agonised place of the prophet appropriate? It is certainly justified.

The poet addresses lady Zion “what can I say for you?” (Verse 13). This is the first time that anyone has spoken to her or even seem to listen to her. She has heard no answer yet, human or divine. We have heard in chapter 1 “there is no one to comfort her” now plus the poet will try. But what can you do? There is some empathy but her suffering is beyond compare. “For vast as the sea is your ruin, who could heal you?” (Verse 13) There was previously false comfort from false prophets, who according to Jeremiah said, “Peace, peace, when there is no peace.” (6:13-14).

There is a rising crescendo of appeals. Finally, Lady Zion opens her mouth and appeals to God, “Look, O Lord and consider! To whom you have you done this?” Surprisingly there is no request for mercy, pardon and restoration. She cannot ask God to heal or forgive or save - just look. This is what she has asked three times in the first chapter but with no reply. There are limits to what she can ask when God is her enemy. The poet encouraged her to pray “lift up your hands to him” (verse 19). All she can do is ask

questions, but what questions. It is not clear that she wants answers, but she wants attention. We can look at the questions:

- Has God transgressed the covenant relationship with Israel? (20a)
- Has God transgressed the boundaries of humanity? (20b)
- Has God transgressed the boundaries of his holiness? (20c)

But like the questions of Job, these questions receive no answer. Not from God. Not from the poet.

We might ask questions about important matters such as the severity of God, human responsibility, and the innocent suffering because of the actions of the wicked.

*Discuss:* What do you think of the CS Lewis quote: “God whispers in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, shouts in our pains”?

### **Week 4 Lamentations Chapter 3**

There is a sharp juxtaposition between the man who gives voice to his suffering and the believer who has hope in God. Perhaps they balance each other? Never should we want to diminish either, for both reflect our experience of reality. Even spiritually. Note the structure with short versus in a triplet format, beginning AAA, BBB, CCC. There is an abrupt staccato effect, surely appropriate to the content of the chapter.

*Discussion:* what consolation is offered in chapter 3?

The man exemplifies Israel’s suffering. Traditionally the man has been identified with Jeremiah the prophet, but this man appears to be representative of the whole people. The chapter opens, “I am one who has seen affliction”. (1a) the Hebrew is literally “I am the man”, compare Pilate’s words “behold the man” (John 19:5). The man has no name, no identifying features.

Suffering is unrelenting, “(God) turns his hand, again and again, all day long” (3). The Hebrew implies that God is slapping him repeatedly. The man’s affliction is portrayed in vivid terms “(God) has made my flesh and my skin waste away, and broken my bones.” (4) The speaker feels trapped, “(God) has walled me about I cannot escape; he has put heavy chains on

me; though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer.” (7-8) Affliction closes in to create a claustrophobic atmosphere. The lament continued. God is not only the enemy but inflicts torment.

*Discuss:* Can suffering be redemptive?

But there is a surprising shift. The man at the depth of his suffering finds a capacity to praise God, “The steadfast the love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end, they are new every morning, great is your faithfulness.” (22-23) Do these words sound familiar?

There are powerful affirmations of faith, “The Lord is my portion, says my soul, therefore I will hope in him. The Lord is good to those who wait for him, for the soul that seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.” (24-26) the man, by an act of will, remembers his faith in God and the truth about who God is. His emotional reality is still suffering in despair, but he remembers - against all the odds - that God is faithful. How does he say, after all he has been through, “the Lord is good”? (25).

The man calls upon his fellow Jews to repent, “Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the Lord. Let us lift up our hearts as well as our hands to God in heaven.” (40-41)

This is followed by a second lament (48-54). There is a prayer which shows confidence that God will save (55-66) and a call to the Lord to punish their enemies (58-66).

*Discuss:* Can a Christian pray the prayer versus 61-66? Why not?

We can compare Jesus with the suffering man in Lamentations. Jesus is not the exclusive, but the ultimate fulfilment of Lamentations archetype and of Isaiah’s suffering servant. Near the end of his ordeal he was offered bitter gall (as in Lamentations 3:15), Jesus asked why God had forsaken him (Lamentations 3:8). For a time he was laid to rest with the dead (as in Lamentations 3:6).

*Discuss:* Are we uncomfortable with the intensity of anguish expressed in this chapter? If so, what do we avoid? Does this affect our pastoral care?

Note that faith does not act as an analgesic or a painkiller - they stand aside each other. The question for us as Christians is which reality will ultimately triumph?

## **Week 5 Lamentations Chapters 4-5**

The misery continues. In chapter 4 we see ‘riches to rags’. In chapter 2 we saw the levelling of structures, here we see the levelling of the people. The terrible effects of a long-term siege and then the devastation of the city of Jerusalem.

*Reflect:* Read chapter 4 identify ‘riches to rags’. Do you think the poet is expressing more than grief? What other emotions? Do you think this chapter should be read aloud in church?

“How the gold has grown dim, how the pure gold is changed! The sacred stones lie scattered at the head of every street. The precious children of Zion, worth their weight in gold - how they are reckoned as earthen pots, the work of a potter’s hands!” (4:1-2) Their gold is taken by the soldiers, who also took the precious stones from the sanctuary. But the children are the most precious possession. They are treated as worthless pots.

Vivid images cascade, “Happier were those pierced by the sword than those pierced by hunger, whose life drains away, deprived of the produce of the field.” (4:9) This is more than poverty, it is the inevitability of death following destruction by an army. Jerusalem fell after a siege, eventually there was no food. The horrors of starvation, is reminiscent of Palestinian people in our times.

Who is to blame? The poet identifies the spiritual leadership, “It was for the sins of the prophets and the iniquities of her priests” (4:13a). This is interesting because 1&2 Kings evaluate every generation of Israelites by the behaviour of its kings. The spiritual leadership is judged and condemned (4:14-20). Who do we blame? Usually it is our politicians.

“The Lord’s anointed, the breath of life, was taken in their pits” (4:20) probably refers to the end of the Davidic dynasty. It seems doubtful that it was the King of the time.

*Discussion:* Do you think our hold on dignity, prestige, sacred roles is tenuous? How dependent is it on God's favour?

The end has come. There is no salvation (4:17): no escape (4:18-19) and no hope (4:20).

In this context it is surprisingly that the poet said, "rejoice and be glad," (4:21). Then we realise it is ironic, and a call to the enemies of the people of God - Edom. The tone is: Enjoy our suffering while you can, but your time is coming.

There is a note of hope in the final verse, "The punishment of your iniquity O daughter Zion is accomplished, he will keep you in exile no longer; but your iniquity, O daughter Edom, he will punish you, he will uncover your sins." (4:22) God's plan for the people has not ended, there will be a return from exile as history was to prove.

Lamentations chapter 5 continues as poetry, but it is not acrostic. It is a prayer, "Remember O Lord, what has befallen us; look, and see our disgrace!" (5:1). The appeal to God is to remind him of the Exodus when God responded to the suffering of his people. This is followed by a long list of losses, reflecting social chaos. There is a note of irony. One of the ways that the people had ignored the covenant was a chronic neglect of widows, orphans and foreigners. So the destruction of Jerusalem was, in part, the judgement of God for collective social sin, "Now, having failed to care for the oppressed, they have joined the ranks of the oppressed themselves." (Wright page 134) Interestingly, there is very little acknowledgement of why judgement came upon them. "Our ancestors sinned; they are no more, and we bear their iniquities." (5:7) This is not an excuse, nor any claim of innocence, but an acknowledgement that their sin continues to the present generation.

Perhaps it is surprising that "Slaves rule over us; there is no one to deliver us from their hand." (5:8) Slaves often managed estates and it may be that the Israelites were even lower on the social scale. It has been suggested that the acrostic form is usually instructional, so it might not be appropriate to give a set of instructions to God.

There is a brief verse which summarises what has happened, “because of Mount Zion, which lies desolate; jackals prowl over it.” (18)

There is an affirmation of who God is, “But you, O Lord, reign forever; your throne endures to all generations.” (19) The Babylonians did not destroy the temple, God did. There is a note of hope that God still rules on the earth even without a temple. And the appeal, “Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored; renew our days as of old - unless you have utterly rejected us, and are angry with us beyond measure.” (21-22) Any restoration of the relationship must come from God. This is implied in the Hebrew verb cause us...

Lamentations has a bleak conclusion. It was not pious in the sense of pray to God and you will be restored. The focus is on the suffering of the people of God as a whole. There is a recognition of a repeated pattern exile, persecution, and suffering. Therefore, it ends with an open question: if and when God will do something to resolve this?

*Discuss:* If you were in spiritual anguish, do you think this is the right prayer? That the appeal should be to restore our relationship with God?

What is the difference between pain and suffering?

Lamentations is not a fairytale with a happy ending. It is utterly realistic. Kathleen O'Connor made the point, “It is wonderful because it is truthful, because it does not force hope prematurely, because it expresses what many in words of trauma and destruction know to be true.” It expresses the truth about reality, including emotional and spiritual reality, but not everything about God’s relationship to us. There is a sense of which Lamentations is like Holy Saturday, Good Friday has done its worst, but Easter’s resurrection is inevitable.

*Discuss:* Do you think the message of Lamentations deserves to be neglected?

Rev Dr Bruce Stevens is supply minister at Wesley 2024-2026.

**he** (h)

"jubilation" • /h/

**dalet** (d)

"door" • /d/

**gimel** (g)

"camel" • /g/

**bet/vet** (b/v)

"house" • /b, v/

**alef** (.)

"ox" • /ʔ/

**yod** (y/i)

"arm" • /j/

**tet** (t)

"snake" • /t/

**chet** (kh)

"enclosure" • /x/

**zayin** (z)

"manacle" • /z/

**vav** (v)

"cane" • /v/

**mem final**

**mem** (m)

"water" • /m/

**lamed** (l)

"study" • /l/

**kaf/chaf final**

**kaf/chaf** (k)

"hand" • /k, x/

**pe/fe** (p/f)

"mouth" • /p, f/

**ayin** (ʿ)

"eye" • /ʔ/

**samech** (s)

"prop" • /s/

**nun final**

**nun** (n)

"fish" • /n/

**resh** (r)

"head" • /ʁ/

**kof** (q)

"monkey" • /k/

**tzadi final**

**tzadi** (ts)

"righteous" • /ts/

**pe/fe final**

# Hebrew Alphabet

BENCROWDER.NET

**tav** (t)

"good" • /t/

**shin/sin** (sh/s)

"tooth" • /ʃ, s/

## **Reading**

Christopher J H Wright, *The message of Lamentations* (London: IVP, 2015).

Duane Garrett and Calvin F. Pearson, *will* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Ministries, 2022)