

# Lamentations

## hk'äyae

### Introductory Matters

Why should you want to study the book of Lamentations? What is a lament anyway? A lament is a “passionate expression of grief or sorrow.” ([dictionary.com](http://dictionary.com))

What benefits are there to engaging in the sorrows of someone who lived long ago in a land far removed from our own?

Other than a couple of verses in chapter 3, vv. 22-24, most people know very little about the book of Lamentations.

Thankfully, we have God’s Word telling us that Lamentations is useful for our growth as Christians:

**ESV 2 Timothy 3:16** All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,

So, even if it is not with great enthusiasm, or even with a bit of skepticism, let’s dig into this brief collection of 5 Laments.

Read Lamentations chapter 1 before going any further.

(It is expected that getting through the Introduction may take several days. With each new day, read through the next chapter in the text itself. Repeat this throughout the time that you are working through this study.)

One of the most important things to get straight in your mind is that Lamentations is not merely a personal lament, at least not primarily. We all have personal sorrows. And we all struggle with deep sadness in one way or another. So, it is natural as we read the Book of Lamentations to connect its expressions of sorrow with our own personal experiences. Of course, there is nothing wrong with this. It may even be that the author is counting on this. Being able to relate to the pain expressed in the laments is essential to benefiting from them. But as you will soon discover, the lament is over the Fall of Jerusalem. This fall occurred in 586BC at the hands of the Babylonians. As such, these 5 laments are over corporate and religious loss. Of course, the corporate and religious loss also means personal loss. But if we fail to find connection to the corporate and religious aspects of the book, we will miss its true benefits.

In fact, the more that I reflect upon the various elements involved in the destruction of Jerusalem, the more I am convinced that there is no other event in all of history that is quite as terrible as this one. One might argue that the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans in 70AD is comparable. But even that misses one important element.

What are the elements that make the Fall of Jerusalem in 586BC so uniquely terrible? [Each of these elements, by themselves, have occurred at other times throughout history. But never have all of them been combined in one time and place.]

1. It was the devastation of personal and family life.

No family remained untouched. Every family lost loved ones. Every individual experienced hunger. The most terrible fears of every person was in some way realized during this time. The personal suffering was truly horrendous. The book of Job is another example of this sort of personal loss and devastation.

2. It was the collapse of an entire society.

3. As you will see in the various images throughout the book, the suffering was not merely mental or spiritual. It was physical and throughout the land. Not only your home, but the homes of everyone around you, were destroyed. Crops were ruined. Loved ones were killed. In fact, there was nothing good and enjoyable that was not removed from them.

Of course, there have been many times throughout history where one nation has destroyed another nation. As Americans, it is difficult to imagine such societal destruction. But it is possible. The fact that it was the collapse of a whole society meant that there was no one near to help; no one to have compassion and lift you out of the devastation of your own trials. Everyone was alone in his own darkness.

**2 Kings 25:1-7** And in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came with all his army against Jerusalem and laid siege to it. And they built siegeworks all around it. <sup>2</sup> So the city was besieged till the eleventh year of King Zedekiah. <sup>3</sup> On the ninth day of the fourth month the famine was so severe in the city that there was no food for the people of the land. <sup>4</sup> Then a breach was made in the city, and all the men of war fled by night by the way of the gate between the two walls, by the king's garden, though the Chaldeans were around the city. And they went in the direction of the Arabah. <sup>5</sup> But the army of the Chaldeans pursued the king and overtook him in the plains of Jericho, and all his army was scattered from him. <sup>6</sup> Then they captured the king and brought him up to the king of Babylon at Riblah, and they passed sentence on him. <sup>7</sup> They slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, and put out the eyes of Zedekiah and bound him in chains and took him to Babylon.

**2 Kings 25:8-13** <sup>8</sup> In the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month - that was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon - Nebuzaradan, the captain of the bodyguard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. <sup>9</sup> And he burned the house of the LORD and the king's house and all the houses of Jerusalem; every great house he burned down. <sup>10</sup> And all the army of the Chaldeans, who were with the captain of the guard, broke down the walls around Jerusalem. <sup>11</sup> And the rest of the people who were left in the city and the deserters who had deserted to the king of Babylon, together with the rest of the multitude, Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried into exile. <sup>12</sup> But the captain of the guard left some of the poorest of the land to be vinedressers and plowmen. <sup>13</sup> And the pillars of bronze that were in the house of the LORD, and the stands and the bronze sea that were in the house of the LORD, the Chaldeans broke in pieces and carried the bronze to Babylon.

4. It marked the loss of freedom and independence.

As Americans, we cherish freedom, both as individuals and as a society. The thought of being ruled over by another nation and forced into harsh servitude evokes terrible emotions within us. For more than 1,000 years, Judah was an independent nation. She may not have been large or powerful in the standards of the world. But she was free. Her people had the freedom to worship and live as they pleased. It is at this point that the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD does not quite rise to the level as the destruction of 586BC. In 70AD, Israel was not truly an independent nation. They had been ruled by the Romans for some time. Citizens may have had some freedom, but it was not the freedom of an independent nation. But in 586BC, the Israelites went from being free to being conquered, and enslaved.

5. It was a religious collapse.

The Christian faith is not tied to a place. It is not dependent upon external rites. But the Jewish faith of that time was joined to the worship of the temple. Without the Temple, the Jewish faith could not be lived out. Without the priests to offer the sacrifices the worshipper could not experience the cleansing necessary to draw near to God. The temple was the place that God had designated on earth to meet with his people. Now that temple was trampled down by pagans. Maybe, we would argue that the

Jewish faith would learn to adapt over time. But that would occur over many years. At this point, there is only the grappling with the loss of everything that religion meant.

6. It was the threat of the end of Covenant Promises.

Part of what made the destruction so terrible in the hearts of the Israelites is that it went directly against the promises that God had given to them as his people.

**Genesis 12:1-3** Now the LORD said<sup>1</sup> to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup> And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."<sup>1</sup>

**Genesis 15:5-7** <sup>5</sup> And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." <sup>6</sup> And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness. <sup>7</sup> And he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess."

**Genesis 17:4-8** <sup>4</sup> "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. <sup>5</sup> No longer shall your name be called Abram,<sup>1</sup> but your name shall be Abraham,<sup>2</sup> for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. <sup>6</sup> I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. <sup>7</sup> And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. <sup>8</sup> And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God."

**2 Samuel 7:16** <sup>16</sup> And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me.<sup>1</sup> Your throne shall be established forever."

In one terrible moment, all of these promises were coming to an end. The Israelites no longer possessed the Land. They watched their leaders carried into captivity. And they knew through the ministry of the prophets that all of this happened because God was angry with them for their many sins.

To the Israelite of this time, God's covenant promises had failed. No longer was their God saving them. He was actively working for their destruction.

And their enemies made sure that they were reminded of this fact. They were mocked and ridiculed by their conquerors, and even by surrounding nations.

All of these elements together made the suffering of this time unique. As you go through the laments, you will be encouraged to feel the various pains individually. But also, take the time to piece them all together in one collage of suffering.

Background Issues:

Who wrote Lamentations?

Short answer: Jeremiah

Why do we think it was Jeremiah?

1. We know that Jeremiah composed laments.

**2 Chronicles 35:25** <sup>25</sup> 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.

2. The Septuagint (LXX – The Greek Translation of the Old Testament).

Lamentations 1:1

“And it came to pass after Israel had gone into captivity, and Jerusalem was laid waste, that Jeremiah sat weeping and composed this lament over Jerusalem and said...”

Obviously, this is an editorial addition. The Hebrew is anonymous. But, when it is considered that Jesus made good use of the Septuagint and never brought this into question is a powerful argument that this comment was indeed accurate.

3. The traditional view of the Church is that Jeremiah wrote Lamentations and there is no compelling reason to think they were wrong.

Our English Bibles reflect the traditional view. The Hebrew Bible does not place the book of Lamentations after Jeremiah. Instead, Lamentations is placed within the section called *The Writings* (Ketubim).

[It should be noted that many modern commentators are unconvinced that Jeremiah is the author, although they cannot rule it out. Most of their support comes from the differences between Lamentations and the book of Jeremiah.]

*The Writings* include these books:

Song of Songs  
Ruth  
Lamentations  
Ecclesiastes  
Esther

Some Jewish traditions connect these books with the festivals of the Jewish calendar.

Passover = Song of Songs  
Pentecost (Weeks) = Ruth  
Destruction of Jerusalem (Ninth of Ab) = Lamentations  
Tabernacles = Ecclesiastes  
Purim = Esther

Understanding that the book of Lamentations has been used over many generations in the Jewish calendar is very helpful for several reasons:

- The public and corporate expression of grief is healthy.
- Even though the emphasis for Christians who have the victory of the resurrection should be one of joy, there are times when lament is truly appropriate in the Christian expression of faith.
- Even though our lives may not be as completely devastated as those of that generation of Jews, we can certainly learn from those who have gone through darker hours than our own.
- As a scriptural lament, these chapters were certainly at some point, in the mind and on the lips of our Lord Jesus Christ. He was the one who endured the darkest of all hours. Maybe, by taking

the time to study this book we will find insight into the sorrows of his soul – The Man of Sorrows.

What sort of literature are we reading when we read Lamentations?

Lamentations is Hebrew poetry.

Hebrew poetry does not depend upon “rhyming”. But there are some very distinct poetic characteristics that are noticeable.

#### 1. Poetic parallelism

Poetic parallelism occurs when the first and second lines are roughly parallel with one another. The first line makes a statement. And the second line makes a related statement, yet is not precisely the same. The second line carries the thought of the first line forward. The overall effect is to enable the reader to linger on the thought being communicated.

Here are three clear examples of poetic parallelism.

#### **Lamentations 5:2-4**

<sup>2</sup> Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers,  
our homes to foreigners.

<sup>3</sup> We have become orphans, fatherless;  
our mothers are like widows.

<sup>4</sup> We must pay for the water we drink;  
the wood we get must be bought.

#### 2. The use of acrostic.

The five chapters of Lamentations are five distinct poems (laments). Each lament has its own structure. And the five laments together form an overall structure.

There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. (consonants)

If you will look at the number of verses in each of the chapters, you will find the following:

- Chapter 1 = 22 verses
- Chapter 2 = 22 verses
- Chapter 3 = 66 verses
- Chapter 4 = 22 verses
- Chapter 5 = 22 verses

What you cannot see in English, but is clear in the Hebrew, is that the author begins each verse with a subsequent letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Psalm 119 also follows this pattern.

The first letter of verse 1 = A **a**

The first letter of verse 2 = B **B**

The first letter of verse 3 = C **G**

Chapter 1 follows the acrostic precisely.  
Chapters 2-4 have a few peculiarities.

Each of these chapters reverse two letters of the Hebrew Alphabet (P and [). In English, it would be like switching O and P to become P and O.

We do not know the reason why this was done. In chapter 2 the verses involved are 16 and 17. In chapter 3, the verses involved are 46 to 54. And in chapter 4 the verses involved are again 16 and 17. So, you can do your own study on this if it interests you.

This brings us to another peculiarity of chapter 3.

Instead of 22 verses, chapter 3 has 66 verses. This whole chapter is in triplets. Verses 1-3 all begin with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Verses 4-6 all begin with the second letter, and so on.

The effect of this is to make chapter 3 the center of the emphasis in the entire book. You might think in terms of intensity or climax. It is difficult to think of anything in the lament as climactic, but chapter 3 is certainly intended to catch our attention.

And, when you take into consideration the flipping of the two Hebrew letters in these chapters you can make some fascinating observations. The verses in chapter 3 that come immediately after the reversal of letters give us some of the only positive statements in the entire book of laments:

**Lamentations 3:55-58** <sup>55</sup> "I called on your name, O LORD, from the depths of the pit; <sup>56</sup> you heard my plea, 'Do not close your ear to my cry for help!' <sup>57</sup> You came near when I called on you; you said, 'Do not fear!' <sup>58</sup> "You have taken up my cause, O Lord; you have redeemed my life.

I do not think that this is accidental. As readers, we are to see that the book is more than an expression of grief. It does not give trite answers to the destitute heart, but it also does not leave the true believer without any hope.

It is also striking that in the middle of chapter 3 are some of the most wonderful words of hope in all of Scripture. This is probably why they are more memorable than any other verses in the book of Lamentations:

**Lamentations 3:18-26** <sup>18</sup> so I say, "My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the LORD." <sup>19</sup> Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! <sup>20</sup> My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me. <sup>21</sup> But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: <sup>22</sup> The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;<sup>1</sup> his mercies never come to an end; <sup>23</sup> they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. <sup>24</sup> "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." <sup>25</sup> The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. <sup>26</sup> It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.

Chapter 4 follows the acrostic pattern of chapter 2.

But chapter 5 does not follow the acrostic pattern at all. There are clearly 22 verses. But the A B C structure is not followed.

Again, commentators are not certain as to why this is. One theory that seems to have some merit is that it reflects the attitude of the author:

- Even though he is able to grasp hope from the character of God, his condition is unchanged. And because of this, he continues to linger in grief and sorrow. The promises of God are still unfulfilled. He finds no order, no rest, YET in his life.

The reason why it is important for us today to see these structural elements is so we can better grasp that the writer was very purposeful. He was not haphazard. And, knowing how meticulous he was in putting the laments together should encourage us to make efforts ourselves to investigate the details of the book.

Poetry requires reflection. Meanings are not always precise or on the surface noticeable. But after reflection and investigation they often explode with more meaning than mere prose could ever do. Also, poetry is intended to strike the cords of deep emotions. The writer certainly felt those emotions in writing the poem. It takes effort to enter into his emotions and then find pathways to our own emotions. But when we do, we the poem comes alive to our hearts.

Let me give one illustration of this:

I hope you are familiar with the song by Billy Joel, The Piano Man. Certainly, the tune of this song draws us in at the start. But what I find interesting is that most of us have little in common with the actual experience of Mr. Joel. Who of us has ever played piano at a night club? But as we work through the verses over time, we begin to see that the feelings that are universal throughout are those of loneliness, and lack of purpose and meaning, and that sense that life is passing us by. Even though we may not be able to precisely identify with any specific example in the song, we can still understand these feelings and the need to somehow find reason to keep going.

The lyrics of the song are given for you to help you understand how poetry works; not because Mr. Joel compares with biblical poetry.

It's nine o'clock on a Saturday  
The regular crowd shuffles in  
There's an old man sitting next to me  
Making love to his tonic and gin

He says, "Son can you play me a memory  
I'm not really sure how it goes  
But it's sad and it's sweet  
And I knew it complete  
When I wore a younger man's clothes."

Sing us a song you're the piano man  
Sing us a song tonight  
Well we're all in the mood for a melody  
And you've got us feeling alright

Now John at the bar is a friend of mine  
He gets me my drinks for free  
And he's quick with a joke or to light up your smoke  
But there's someplace that he'd rather be

He says, "Bill, I believe this is killing me."  
As a smile ran away from his face  
"Well, I'm sure that I could be a movie star  
If I could get out of this place."

Now Paul is a real estate novelist  
Who never had time for a wife  
And he's talking with Davy, who's still in the Navy  
And probably will be for life

And the waitress is practicing politics  
As the businessmen slowly get stoned  
Yes they're sharing a drink they call "Loneliness"  
But it's better than drinking alone

Sing us a song you're the piano man  
Sing us a song tonight  
Well we're all in the mood for a melody  
And you've got us feeling alright

It's a pretty good crowd for a Saturday  
And the manager gives me a smile  
'Cause he knows that it's me they've been coming to see  
To forget about life for a while

And the piano it sounds like a carnival  
And the microphone smells like a beer  
And they sit at the bar and put bread in my jar  
And say, "Man, what are you doing here?"

Sing us a song you're the piano man  
Sing us a song tonight  
Well we're all in the mood for a melody  
And you've got us feeling alright

Hebrew poetry may take more work to begin resonating with its chords. But, if you will take the time and make the effort, these songs of lament, have the ability to help you through the darkest of hours.