

Why Lamentations?

The book of Lamentations is a written memorial to the most grievous suffering of the OT.
We build memorials to fallen soldiers – “lest we forget.”

Why do we do this?

Because the generation that endures such suffering
wants to communicate to all following generations:
“Never again!”

But of course, such a desire is a forlorn hope.

Sure, we say, “Never again” –

but then there arises a generation that has no understanding of such suffering.

And they fall into all the patterns and practices of the past –
and before you know it – we’re here again.

World War I was called “the war to end all wars.”

The suffering of the soldiers in the trenches
convinced everyone that we should *never* do that again!

That’s why the Germans invented the *Blitzkrieg* – the lightning war –
to make sure that *never again* would there be a devastating trench war!!

The book of Lamentations serves as a memorial for the destruction of the temple in 587 BC.

It stands as a monument – “lest we forget.”

The poetry of Lamentations

“gives voice to those who were rendered voiceless in the vortex of violence.”

“What can I say for you” (verse 13).

The whole book of Lamentations is the answer.

What can I say?

I can pour out my heart and soul and give voice to your grief.

Have you ever felt like you can’t really be honest about your suffering?

Maybe you feel like people will think that you are ‘blaming God.’

Lamentations does that.

Lamentations consists of a “battle-scarred theology in the midst of appalling suffering,
yet doing so in poetry of remarkable verbal power, dramatic dialogue and structural skill”
(Wright, 28).

Lamentations 2 is also an acrostic – like Lamentations 1.

The acrostic form keeps us moving.

As soon as you say “A is for apple, B is for bat”

you know that we are working our way through the alphabet.

“this is a *journey* through grief, not wallowing in it” (Wright, 29)

Here is all our pain, from A to Z.

Another word about the poetry.

Most Hebrew poetry maintains a balanced rhythm with a three stressed syllables per line:

da – DA – da DA – da DA

da -DA – da DA – da DA

But the Qinah meter – used here and in other laments and dirges in Scripture –

uses a three – two meter:

da DA – da DA – da DA

da DA – da DA

“It creates a kind of limping or moaning effect, which matches the mood of the such poetry.” (Wright 31).

There are two main voices in these poems –
there is the shocked and horrified poet,
and there is Lady Zion the desolate and ashamed and bereaved.

One voice is conspicuously absent.
God never speaks in Lamentations.

Heaven is silent.

1. **The Fierce Anger of the Lord against Daughter Zion (v1-8)**

Cast Down

Has Not Remembered

Swallowed Up

Broken Down

Cut Down

Withdrawn

Burned

Bent His Bow

Laid Waste

Scorned

In your bulletin I have done something a little different in the outline.

Rather than provide a “point-by-point” outline,

I have tried to capture the mood of the poem.

In verses 1-8, I have given you a sampling of the *verbs*.

The subject of all of these actions is God.

The name Adonai is used in verses 1, 2, 5, and 7.

The name Yahweh is used in verses 6 and 8.

In Hebrew, a sentence often begins with the verb.

So the first eight verses each begin with a verb

that starts with a consecutive letter of the alphabet,

and those verbs join together with other verbs throughout the passage

to pile up and overload the ears with their relentless barrage:

cast down, has not remembered, swallowed up, broken down, cut down,
withdrawn, burned, bent his bow, laid waste, scorned...

And all of this has been done by God.

*How the Lord in his anger
has set the daughter of Zion under a cloud!
He has cast down from heaven to earth
the splendor of Israel;
he has not remembered his footstool
in the day of his anger.*

The passage opens and closes with an emphasis on Zion as the holy city.

Think about verse 1:

“He has cast down from heaven to earth the splendor of Israel.”
Jerusalem was the place where earth and heaven met!
As we’ve seen in Exodus,
the Holy of Holies was the place where God’s glory dwelt!
As we saw this morning,
the glory of the LORD left Mt. Sinai and filled the Holy Place.
The splendor of Israel was not just an earthly splendor –
but a heavenly glory!!

But because of Israel’s sin,

“he has not remembered his footstool in the day of his anger.”
Heaven is my throne, earth is my footstool.
And particularly, the temple – the ark of the covenant –
was the place where God’s feet had come to rest.

We’ll see this fleshed out in verses 6-8.

But in the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem
God has severed the link between heaven and earth!

And as the temple goes, so goes the rest of the habitations of Jacob.

Verse two starts with the ‘kingdom and its rulers’:

² *The Lord has swallowed up without mercy
all the habitations of Jacob;
in his wrath he has broken down
the strongholds of the daughter of Judah;
he has brought down to the ground in dishonor
the kingdom and its rulers.*

And then verses 3-5 covers the rest of the people:

³ *He has cut down in fierce anger
all the might of Israel;
he has withdrawn from them his right hand
in the face of the enemy;*

*he has burned like a flaming fire in Jacob,
 consuming all around.*
⁴ *He has bent his bow like an enemy,
 with his right hand set like a foe;
 and he has killed all who were delightful in our eyes
 in the tent of the daughter of Zion;
 he has poured out his fury like fire.*
⁵ *The Lord has become like an enemy;
 he has swallowed up Israel;
 he has swallowed up all its palaces;
 he has laid in ruins its strongholds,
 and he has multiplied in the daughter of Judah
 mourning and lamentation.*

Three times in these verses the poet says that the Lord has become “like an enemy” or “like a foe” (v 4-5).

There is a sense here that the poet realizes that God is *not* an enemy – but that realization doesn’t do much good when God is *acting* like an enemy!

Indeed, by the end of the poem, Lady Zion will declare God to *be* the enemy – and yet she prays to him!

My God is against me –
 but I have nowhere else to go!

⁶ *He has laid waste his booth like a garden,
 laid in ruins his meeting place;
 the LORD has made Zion forget
 festival and Sabbath,
 and in his fierce indignation has spurned king and priest.*

⁷ *The Lord has scorned his altar,
 disowned his sanctuary;
 he has delivered into the hand of the enemy
 the walls of her palaces;
 they raised a clamor in the house of the LORD
 as on the day of festival.*

⁸ *The LORD determined to lay in ruins
 the wall of the daughter of Zion;
 he stretched out the measuring line;
 he did not restrain his hand from destroying;
 he caused rampart and wall to lament;
 they languished together.*

Verses 6-8 describe the physical destruction:
 the sanctuary, the altar, the walls, the rampart, and the palaces –
 all are disowned, delivered to enemies, and destroyed.

We should remember the history behind Lamentations.

The last good king, Josiah, reigned from 640-609 BC.

He died in battle against Egypt.

Then his son, Jehoahaz (also called Shallum), reigned for three months in 609 before Pharaoh Necho II took him captive and replaced him with his brother, Jehoiakim (who was more friendly to Egypt).

From this point on, Judah's future hung on how they would respond to Babylon.

Many "orthodox" prophets told Jerusalem to resist Babylon.

After all, they had learned their lesson from Isaiah!

In the days of Isaiah 130 years earlier,

Isaiah had told King Hezekiah to trust in the LORD and *not* fear the Assyrians.

Hezekiah believed God, and the LORD delivered him from Assyria.

So many of the "orthodox" prophets seek to imitate Isaiah.

But the LORD called Jeremiah to preach a different message.

In 605 – the same year that Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Egyptians at the Battle of Carchemish, King Jehoiakim burnt the scroll of the prophet Jeremiah, rejecting the word of the LORD.

Jehoiakim reigned for 11 years (609-598),

vacillating between allegiance to Egypt and allegiance to Babylon.

He died during Nebuchadnezzar's first siege of Jerusalem in 598 BC, and was replaced by his son, Coniah (or Jeconiah or Jehoiachin).

Jeconiah, the son of Jehoiakim, reigned for three months.

Finally, Jeconiah surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar in early 597 BC and he and the elite of Jerusalem were taken into captivity (Ezekiel the prophet was one of the exiles at this time).

Nebuchadnezzar took Jeconiah back to Babylon and installed his uncle Zedekiah, the last remaining son of Josiah, as king in place of his nephew.

For ten years, Zedekiah wavered – tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine – as he sometimes listened to Jeremiah – and sometimes to other prophets.

But finally he rebelled against Babylon.

And Nebuchadnezzar had had enough.

He brought his army against Jerusalem

(archeological evidence suggests that 80% of Judean cities and villages were destroyed or abandoned at this time).

And for eighteen months – in 589-588 BC, Jerusalem was besieged.

The suffering was beyond belief.

Jeremiah declared that anyone who surrendered to the Babylonians would live – and for that he was nearly killed as a traitor!

When the Babylonians broke down the walls,

Zedekiah tried to escape,
but was captured and brought to Nebuchadnezzar,
who had his sons killed in front of him, and then had his eyes plucked out.

The rest of the people who had resisted were then forced to march a thousand miles to Babylon,
leaving only a handful of Jews in the land – those, like Jeremiah,
who were viewed as being “pro-Babylonian.”

(Think about that!

In order to be faithful to your God, you must be viewed as a traitor by your people!)

Then the Babylonians destroyed the city of Jerusalem – tearing down the temple of Solomon
that had stood for 400 years.

“This was unquestionably the most traumatic moment in the whole history of the Old Testament.
Not only was there massive human suffering at every level
of physical and emotional experience
not only the devastating demolition and incineration of their ancient and beautiful city,
there was also the utter humiliation of their national pride
as a small but independent nation that had a history in the land
stretching back to Joshua.

And along with that went the devastating undermining
of all that they had thought was theologically guaranteed –
the Davidic monarchy,
the city of Zion,
and the very temple of their omnipotent God (or was he?).

All gone.

What possible future could there be?

And how could the present even be endured?

It is out of that unspeakable pain that Lamentations speaks,
daring to describe the indescribable and to utter the unutterable –
and to do so in poetry of astonishing beauty and intricacy, though soaked in tears.”
(Wright, 25)

2. The Distress of the City (v9-12)

Her Gates

Her King and Princes

Her Prophets

The Elders and Young Women

My Eyes Weep

as Babies Die

*⁹ Her gates have sunk into the ground;
he has ruined and broken her bars;
her king and princes are among the nations;
the law is no more,
and her prophets find
no vision from the LORD.*

In verse 9 the focus turns from the physical destruction of the city
to the *people* who suffered so greatly.

And he starts with those things that could have *protected* Zion.

Kings and princes might have rescued Zion, but they are exiled among the nations.
Gates might have protected her – but they are in ruins.

The Law – the Torah – is no more,
and her prophets find no vision from the LORD.

¹⁰ *The elders of the daughter of Zion
sit on the ground in silence;
they have thrown dust on their heads
and put on sackcloth;
the young women of Jerusalem
have bowed their heads to the ground.*

Likewise, the elders sit in silence,
and the young women of Jerusalem have bowed their heads to the ground.

But as you go down from the greatest to the least,
it gets worse.

And so verse 11 says:

¹¹ *My eyes are spent with weeping;
my stomach churns;
my bile is poured out to the ground
because of the destruction of the daughter of my people,
because infants and babies faint
in the streets of the city.*

There is nothing that will wring tears from your eyes –
nothing that will make your stomach churn –
like the suffering of innocent children!

The poet is retching with revulsion –
vomiting as he watches what has happened to the little ones.

¹² *They cry to their mothers,
“Where is bread and wine?”
as they faint like a wounded man
in the streets of the city,
as their life is poured out
on their mothers' bosom.*

**3. A Lament for *You*, O Virgin Daughter Zion (v13-19)
What Comfort?
Your Prophets Deceived You
Those Around You Mock and Rail Against You
The LORD Has Done What He Purposed
So Cry Out to the Lord for the Sake of Your Children!**

¹³ *What can I say for you, to what compare you,
O daughter of Jerusalem?
What can I liken to you, that I may comfort you,
O virgin daughter of Zion?
For your ruin is vast as the sea;
who can heal you?*

And so the poet turns to Lady Zion –
this is the first response to her plea at the end of chapter 1.

She had said, “Is there any sorrow like my sorrow?
Her stomach had churned – and she had said repeatedly –
there is no one to comfort me.

Now the poet finally replies to her –
I got nothing!
I have no comfort.
For your wound is vast as the sea; who can heal you?

Jeremiah 30 had spoken of the incurable wound of Zion.
But in Jeremiah 30, the prophet spoke of a coming healing
that would come from the LORD.

Here there is no healing.
There is only a question: “who can heal you?”

¹⁴ *Your prophets have seen for you
false and deceptive visions;
they have not exposed your iniquity
to restore your fortunes,
but have seen for you oracles
that are false and misleading.*

Verse 14 points out that the prophets were those who were *supposed* to restore the fortunes of Zion –
but they have spoken false and deceptive oracles.

¹⁵ *All who pass along the way*

*clap their hands at you;
they hiss and wag their heads
at the daughter of Jerusalem:
“Is this the city that was called
the perfection of beauty,
the joy of all the earth?”*

Verse 15 then quotes from Psalm 48 –
a Psalm that celebrated the beauty and glory of Jerusalem.
But now it is quoted in mockery.

¹⁶ *All your enemies
rail against you;
they hiss, they gnash their teeth,
they cry: “We have swallowed her!
Ah, this is the day we longed for;
now we have it; we see it!”*
¹⁷ *The LORD has done what he purposed;
he has carried out his word,
which he commanded long ago;
he has thrown down without pity;
he has made the enemy rejoice over you
and exalted the might of your foes.*

There are some who have described Lamentations 2 as an accusation against God.

I like how Christopher Wright replies to this view:

“[they] seem not to have read Jeremiah, or Ezekiel, or the story of the late monarchy in Israel and Judah in 2 Kings.

That is, do they take seriously the account of the depth and depravity of the nation’s religious apostasy, social disintegration, economic oppression, judicial corruption, criminal violence and bloodshed, and political factions and folly?” (37)

For that matter, verse 17 points out that the LORD has done *what he purposed; he has carried out his word, which he commanded long ago.*

In other words, Lamentations recognizes that God has only done what he said he would do. He had said that if Israel rebelled, he would overthrow them without pity. He was patient for many generations – but now he has done as he warned that he would do.

But Wright also warns us not to take the ‘they deserved it’ line too strongly!

Because while it is true – in one sense – we must always remember the lesson of Job.

“saying that the destruction of Jerusalem is a punishment for sin is an inadequate theodicy, even if it is true.”

For what possible purpose does God permit a mother to eat her own children?

And so the poet urges Zion to cry out to the Lord:

¹⁸ *Their heart cried to the Lord.*

*O wall of the daughter of Zion,
let tears stream down like a torrent
day and night!*

*Give yourself no rest,
your eyes no respite!*

¹⁹ *“Arise, cry out in the night,
at the beginning of the night watches!*

*Pour out your heart like water
before the presence of the Lord!*

*Lift your hands to him
for the lives of your children,
who faint for hunger
at the head of every street.”*

Wait!

The first part of our passage made it very clear that *God* is the one who has done this!
He is the one who has brought this destruction –
and yet you are going to plead with *him*?!

Exactly.

If you will not pour out your heart for yourself –
at least pour out your heart for your poor helpless children!

Those who are fainting for hunger in the streets!

To whom shall we go?

You alone have the words of eternal life!

And what do we hear from Lady Zion?

How does she respond?

She – who had acknowledged in chapter 1 that she had sinned grievously!

4. A Plea from Zion for Her Children (v20-22)

²⁰ *Look, O LORD, and see!*

With whom have you dealt thus?

*Should women eat the fruit of their womb,
the children of their tender care?*

*Should priest and prophet be killed
in the sanctuary of the Lord?*

There is no confession of sin –

no acknowledgement of God’s justice.

There is rather a question:

Who are you treating like this?

This is your own people – your bride – Lady Zion!

Yes, we confess that God is just.

Yes, we confess that God will make everything right – in the end!

But sometimes, *in the middle*, we simply do not see it!

What could possibly justify the Babylonians doing such horrible things to us?

²¹ *In the dust of the streets
lie the young and the old;
my young women and my young men
have fallen by the sword;
you have killed them in the day of your anger,
slaughtering without pity.*

If only it was *just* the Babylonians!

But *you* have killed them in the day of your anger, slaughtering without pity!

You see here all the horror of war.

War is hell on earth.

Mothers even eat their own children!

How can this be?!

Where is God when everything is turned upside down?

²² *You summoned as if to a festival day
my terrors on every side,
and on the day of the anger of the LORD
no one escaped or survived;
those whom I held and raised
my enemy destroyed.*

Verse 22 concludes with a challenge:

I held and raised my children.

You destroyed them.

The last line of the poem even suggests that *God* is my enemy.

After all, *God* was the one who slaughtered without pity in verse 21.

Lamentations 2 ends – as indeed, the whole book of Lamentations ends –
without resolving the question.

The tears of Lamentations are the tears that flow in the middle of history.

We are a guilty people in the midst of a guilty world.

We are a grief-stricken people in the midst of a grief-stricken world.
Lamentations provides a voice for those who have experienced the horrors
of a world run amok with violence and pain.

We noted at the beginning that God is silent in this book.

But the silence of God is an inspired silence!

We do not hear in Lamentations merely the misery of humans
who don't know what to make of the awful things that are happening.

As we listen to the misery of these poems,

God himself speaks to us *in these voices*.

“God not only allows, but ensures, that this torrential outpouring of human words
with all their pain, anger, grief, and questioning,
should be included within the scrolls of his own word.” (Wright, 43)

If you want to learn how to lament –

how to wail and grieve for the pain and agony of this age –

God assures you that there is a proper way to do this!

My guess is that none of you mothers have ever eaten your own children.

Only a few of you have even seen a war zone in person.

There are times when God hides himself from us –

and all we see is his hand looming against us.

And we dare not say “it only appears that way.”

Because sometimes the innocent suffer!

We know this most emphatically because Jesus suffered and died.

So often we *want* our suffering to be unique.

We don't like it when people say, “everyone is going through this.”

But why do we want our suffering to be unique?

So that we can create a little bubble – a place where we can be alone in our suffering.

Where we can stew in our misery.

We like to think that *we* are the center of the universe –

so when we hear that our problems are not unique,

it irks us – it feels like we are not being taken seriously.,

But Lamentations 2 takes you seriously.

By identifying *God* as my enemy – by recognizing that my *problem* is *God* –

Lamentations 2 sets up a problem whose only solution is found in the cry,

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Only when your suffering is taken up into the cry of our Lord Jesus –

only when your suffering is taken up into the cry of Lady Zion –

only then do you see yourself aright.