



Life Setting of Lamentations

Life with God is filled with mile-marker moments in which God grips us with experiences and images that will forever change who we are. Lamentations is such a moment for Jeremiah. The book details Jeremiah's reflections of what he actually saw with his own eyes of the destruction of Jerusalem and surrounding Judah at the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. Jeremiah chapter 52 details what happened. The book of Lamentations brings the experience to life.

What makes the message of the prophets so poignant is that much of what they've received has come to them in visions. They actually see what we can only comprehend from reading or hearing. But, Jeremiah's experience in Lamentations goes even further than the visions he was given. While he did indeed see the destruction of Jerusalem in the form of a vision, he actually saw the vision fulfilled in his lifetime. Jeremiah actually sees and smells the smoldering of the ashes of the temple in Jerusalem. He hears the weeping and whaling of the people as they are carried off to Babylon. He smells the rotten flesh of dead bodies left behind in the wake of Nebuchadnezzar's destruction. It is not a pretty picture and it's one that touches Jeremiah in all the senses. It's all the more sobering to think this is the wages of sin. Jeremiah warned of all of this. His people refused to repent and believe his message. In Lamentations, Jeremiah processes the long and difficult journey that brought him to this painful place.

Lamentations is a reminder that life with God is not always the happy, joyous experience that it's often cracked up to be. Often times the road is paved with loneliness, isolation, devastation, deep despair, and hopelessness. Sin has a way of doing that in our lives. From the beginning of God's commissioning of Jeremiah, he knew this would not be an easy task. *"See, I have set you this day over nations and kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow"* (Jeremiah 1:10) It's a mission that God will repeat at least three different times in the book of Jeremiah alone (18:7, 31:28, 45:40). In Lamentations, however, Jeremiah not only sees the death and destruction of the sin of his people, he also gets a glimpse of the rest of his mission, *"to build and to plant"* (Jeremiah 1:10). Even the future return to the land of Israel is that *"the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled"* (Ezra 1:1).

When viewed from Jeremiah's perspective the book of Lamentations is a call to observe and learn. Those who learn nothing from the past are bound to repeat it in the future. The book of Lamentations is an invitation to stop, look, listen, see, hear, taste, and smell and in the process learn what God is trying to teach us from the experience.

Our challenge as readers is that we don't put Lamentations on the shelf as a piece of ancient history. How should we view our own sin and the cumulative effects multiplied by the masses? What do we see? What do we feel as we gaze deep within us and outwardly to the world around us? If sin and its resulting fallout destroy the good of God, it is God's grace that restores it. It's a reminder that where there is death, there is also resurrection.

Lamentations 1 is Jeremiah's inspection report of what Jerusalem and surrounding Judah looked like after King Nebuchadnezzar's army ravished the land and exiled the people to Babylon. There are few images in the Old Testament as iconic as this one of what it looks like for a people to forsake God and then have to face the consequences of their rebellion.

It's at times like this that we must heed the instruction of Jeremiah in Lamentations 1:12: *"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 the day of his fierce anger."* For Jeremiah, it's not just a journey to inspect the damage in Jerusalem. It's deeply personal as he himself assumes the weight of the sin of his people. In this sense, Lamentations is not only historical, it's theological.

Lamentations is a call to look and see, to process and understand the cost of sin. God calls us through Jeremiah to observe and learn from the graphic picture of sin's fallout. It's a sorrowful picture and it's one that must not be forgotten. The Psalmist warns that *"the sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply"* (Psalm 16:4) and Lamentations illustrates just that. *"Among all her lovers she has none to comfort her"* (1:2). *"Judah has gone into exile, but finds no resting place"* (1:3). *"The roads to Zion mourn"* because her festivals are no more (1:4). *"The Lord has afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions"* (1:5). *"Jerusalem sinned grievously; therefore she became filthy"* (1:8). Lamentations is an illustration of everything that Jeremiah spoke now coming to pass.

Jeremiah reminded his people that God was their master or husband (Jeremiah 3:14), but Judah acted like a treacherous wife seeking a divorce. God was never the guilty party in this divorce. But, now in Lamentations, the picture Jeremiah is shown is not divorce, but death. Israel is a widow (Lamentations 1:1) in need of redemption. Who will her kinsmen redeemer be?

In Lamentations 1, Jeremiah himself carries the sin of his people. In 1:14 Jeremiah declares, *"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; the Lord gave me into the hands of those whom I cannot withstand."* This is no doubt a reference to Jeremiah's persecution by Pashhur in

Jeremiah 20 and the yoke of suffering he endured. Jeremiah's yoke was a prelude to the yoke of slavery his people now face from Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon.

Jeremiah's suffering now has a place of purpose as he contemplates not only the condition of the land of Judah, but his people now exiled in Babylon. *"Let all their evil doing come before you, and deal with them as you have dealt with me because of all my transgression; for my groans are many, and my heart is faint"* (Lamentations 1:22).

Lamentations 2

Jeremiah mourns Israel's loss of splendor or glory in the eyes of the Lord. In God's anger of Israel's sin, a dark cloud now reigns over them. But, even under this cloud, there is hope. Lamentations 2 is a reminder that there is freedom from the chains that bind us. Satan places many strongholds in our lives that are difficult for us to break free. The process is made all the harder by our insistence on clinging to these strongholds as the people of Judah did. While Lamentations describes the outpouring of God's wrath, 2:2 reveals a breakthrough of grace in the powerful phrase, *"he has broken down the strongholds of the daughter of Judah."*

Whatever one would say of the destruction of Jerusalem and surrounding parts of Judah that Jeremiah sees, God has in effect, *"broken down the strongholds of the daughter of Judah."* He does this out of his wrath in response to Judah's idolatry, rebellion and overall sinfulness. But, the end result is that the stronghold is broken. This is a picture of God going to war over our sin. If the daughters of Judah would have accepted the gift of repentance that was offered to them time and again, the book of Lamentations would look a lot different. In fact, there would be no book of Lamentations. But, Jeremiah's people did not accept his message and now they bear the consequences.

God has removed the *"the might of Israel"* (vs.3). He has removed everyone and everything that was once delightful to the daughters of Zion. Again, the word stronghold is used in verse 5. All religious observances polluted by Jeremiah's people are now a thing of the past, including the king and priest (vs.6). Babylon has carried away the altar and sanctuary and destroyed the walls of the temple. What once was a hedge of false security in Jerusalem now lies in ruins. Jeremiah grieves not only for the scene in Jerusalem but worse, for the sin of his people.

"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?" (vs.13). What God warned Solomon of at the beginning of his kingdom in 1 Kings 9:8, has now come to pass in Lamentations 2:16. This does not nullify the purposes of God. It confirms them, *"The Lord has done what he purposed; he has carried out his word"* (vs.17).

It is a judgment poured out, so severe that the lives of children faint for hunger. But, it's not just children who suffer. It also includes young and old, men and women. *"On the day of anger of the Lord no one escaped or survived"* (vs.22).

Lamentations 2 is a picture of God's wrath being poured out on all ungodliness. He does it because he's a covenant-keeping God and we are a covenant-breaking people. Our attachment to sin is broken through the discipling hand of God. That's a recurring theme throughout the book of Jeremiah, continued into the book of Lamentations. The agony of it all does not end for Jeremiah, *"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"* (vs.11).

The Old Testament narrative is a sad and difficult journey of the people of God that highlights man's rebellion against God time and again. But, it is the glimpses of God's grace in passages like Lamentations 2 where God breaks strongholds that make this the greatest story ever told.

Lamentations 3

Jeremiah recalls his experience as a prophet and the difficult toll it's taken on him personally in Lamentations 3:1-18. Jeremiah's *"endurance has perished."* So has his hope in the Lord (vs.18). He cannot escape the weight of this responsibility. His *"soul continually remembers it"* (vs.20). These verses reveal Jeremiah personally suffering the effects of the sin of his people. The Lord has laid this upon Jeremiah.

Everything is stacked against Jeremiah. Beginning in verse 4, there is a litany of things the Lord has inflicted upon Jeremiah. These things are outlined by the phrase, *"He has."* This is a heavy burden to bear, but it's all the heavier due to the sin of Jeremiah's people.

What we do and what we allow ourselves to think in these difficult times, reveals what we really believe about our God and what we know to be true from his Word. Our minds are a battlefield. The promises of Lamentations 3:22 and 23 come to Jeremiah in some of the direst of circumstances. They are some of the most beloved words of Lamentations, if not the entire Bible:

"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."

Perhaps the most instructive part of these verses is what Jeremiah says prior in verse 21, *"But this I call to mind and therefore I have hope..."*

When Jeremiah lifts his head toward God, it is God who pulls Jeremiah out of his pit of despair. The remainder of the chapter is focused on God's goodness, his faithfulness, not just to Jeremiah, but also to his people who are now in exile. The only thing left for Jeremiah in his ministry is to *"wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord."* As God called Jeremiah in his youth,

Jeremiah now confesses this was a good thing (vs.27). As his life has been a painful journey he at least has hope in his final years.

Such a focus causes Jeremiah *“to test and examine our ways, and return to the Lord”* (vs.40). It also leads to confession, repentance, and faith in a providential God who is faithful as the remainder of the chapter describes.

Jeremiah is confident in the promises of God that this will not last forever, *“but though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love”* (vs.32).

Jeremiah is committed to bearing this grief *“until the Lord from heaven looks down and sees”* (vs.50). As Jeremiah calls to the Lord, the Lord answers him. In God’s hands is the justice due Jeremiah’s people.

Lamentations 4

Jeremiah recalls the holy stones of Israel that now lie scattered. Specifically, Jeremiah is referring to the ruins of the temple in verse one. However, in verse two the precious stones are the *“sons of Zion.”* Perhaps this is where we get the expression *“worth their weight in gold”* because that is how God views his children in verse 2. They are more valuable than the gold that graced the temple that now lies in ruins.

Not only does the temple lie in ruins, so are the children of Zion. Now *“they are regarded as earthen pots, the work of a potter’s hands”* (vs.2). This is no doubt a reference back to Jeremiah 18. God has indeed done with Israel as the potter has done, *“like clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel”* (Jeremiah 18:6). The sons of Zion are the broken flask of Jeremiah 19 at the Potsherd Gate.

This is the result of their sin and Jeremiah gives a detailed account of it in the remainder of this chapter. It’s a reminder not to take the judgments of the Lord for granted. They are heavy because the burden of sin they address is heavier. Throughout Jeremiah’s ministry, Jeremiah’s people either ignored Jeremiah’s warnings or felt they could work their way around them, possibly avoiding them all together. But, Jeremiah 4 is a reminder that sin requires justice and it’s a heavy price to pay. It’s also inescapable as Jeremiah now witnesses firsthand.

Lamentations 5

Jeremiah preached an unpopular message that his people should accept the discipline of the Lord and head to Babylon. In addition to this message being unpopular, it was even harder to understand. Among Jeremiah’s people was the expectation that God would not abandon the city of Jerusalem and most notably the temple building. Yet Jeremiah warned that those who

would stay in Jerusalem would suffer the most. Lamentations 5 details the horrible conditions of people living in Jerusalem after the fall of the city into the hands of Babylon.

Chapter 5 is a cry for restoration, but first, it's an acknowledgment of present conditions that are the result of Judah's sin, rebellion, and refusal to repent. In summary, Jerusalem is a "disgrace" (vs.1). The inheritance of God's people has been handed over to Babylon and the people of Judah are orphaned. Those left behind are in a daily struggle for survival. There is a cumulative effect to all of this that Jeremiah has warned about and now he's seeing first hand. *"Our fathers sinned, and are no more; and we bear their iniquities"* (vs.7).

And so the book of Lamentations comes to an end with a cry for the Lord to remember his people's present condition. To ask God to remember is to acknowledge that he never forgets. A plea for God to remember requires faith in his everlasting promises and an acknowledgment of sin. Jeremiah places his trust not in his present conditions, but in the hands of God. As far as the Biblical record is concerned, Lamentations 5 is the end of the prophetic ministry of Jeremiah, the weeping prophet. Now the children of Zion wait, in a foreign land, for the Lord's restoration and eventual return to their land:

"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" (Lamentations 5:19 – 22).

Pastor Craig Stimpert
Charis Community Church
March 2023