

LAMENTATIONS



FIVE STUDIES FOR GROUPS



AUTHOR

The Hebrew text of Lamentations is anonymous but traditionally it has been thought that Jeremiah wrote the book. He was certainly an eye witness and fellow sufferer of the events behind the book and had a passionate concern for God's people. But in the end we don't have any other evidence about who wrote it.

THE HISTORICAL EVENTS

To understand the feelings expressed in Lamentations we need to understand the horror of the events behind its writing, the suffering and desperation of the people, the radical questions that were raised for them about their relationship with God and whether there was any hope of restoration of that relationship in the future.

The events that gave rise to this writing are the fall of Jerusalem in 587BC, the consequences of the destruction of the city and forced exile of its people. Nebuchadnezzar II King of Babylon sent his army to destroy Jerusalem and carry most of its people into exile. He had earlier laid siege to Jerusalem in 597BC. The city then surrendered to him, its king Jeconiah was taken into exile, the treasures from the temple were taken and Zedekiah was installed as king. In 589-587 Nebuchadnezzar laid siege again to Jerusalem for 30 months. There was extreme famine with the city cut off from food. Lamentations mentions cannibalism that resulted in the city (see 4:4-10). Finally the army broke through the walls and the city was destroyed and burnt. The great temple that Solomon built was looted and destroyed. Zedekiah and his followers attempted to escape but were captured on the plains of Jericho. Zedekiah's followers, including his own sons, were executed. After being forced to watch their executions Zedekiah had his eyes gouged out and was taken captive to Babylon where he remained a prisoner until his death. (See 2 Kings 25:1-7; 2 Chronicles 36:12; Jeremiah 32:4-5; 34:2-3; 39:1-7; 52:4-11.) Archaeological evidence confirms that the city was systematically destroyed by fire. Archaeological evidence also indicates that towns close to the kingdom's western border and small villages in Jerusalem's near vicinity were destroyed.

RESOURCES

A helpful commentary on Lamentations is The Message of Lamentations by Christopher Ash (Bible Speaks Today, IVP)

Shorter introductions are at:

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/commentary/lamentations/>

<https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-lamentations/>

4. KING

God promised that a son of David would sit on his throne forever (2 Samuel 7:12-16). But now they lamented that the king was gone (Lam 2:6, 9; 4:20) What was their expectation of the king (4:20; Psalm 2)?

Isaiah foretells a new king (Isaiah 9:6-7). There was no other king until Jesus came (Matthew 2:2; 16:16; 21:9). How does Jesus fulfil God's promise?

5. COVENANT

God made a covenant with Israel at Sinai sealed with the blood of sacrifice (Exodus 24:8). Israel sinned and broke this covenant (Lam 1:8; 4:13; 5:17, 16). But God promised a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34). This covenant was sealed in Jesus' blood (Luke 22:20; Hebrews 9:15).

Yes some of the Jews did return to Palestine after the exile, they did build a new temple but they were under the rule of the Persians, then the Greeks and finally the Romans until Jerusalem was destroyed again in 70AD. When the Messiah did come they rejected him. The future for Israel is dealt with in Romans 9 to 11. But it is clear that the only way for them to be saved is for them to turn to Jesus (Acts 4:12; 2 Corinthians 1:20).

6. What security do we have if we trust and follow Jesus (Romans 8:1; 38-39; John 5:24)? As you look at all this, what are the things you rejoice in?

7. What do we have to be careful about (Hebrews 2:1-3; 2:12-14; 12:28-29)?

STUDY 5

THE BIG PICTURE

The exile is a time of crisis and a turning point in God's dealings with his people. It is a turning point as we move from the Old Testament to the New. Several key symbols of God's relationship with Israel and his promises to them have been lost in the exile but the prophets point forward to their fulfilment in Jesus. It is important to see the big picture to understand how all God's purposes and blessings find their fulfilment in him.

1. LAND

What was the importance of the land to Israel (Genesis 15:18; Psalm 105:10-11)? Now they had lost their inheritance (Lam 5:2). What would this mean to them?

What is the inheritance we have through Jesus (1 Peter 1:3-4)?

2. JERUSALEM (ZION)

They lament that the LORD has destroyed Zion (Lam 2:8-9a; 5:18). What security did they feel in Jerusalem (Lam 5:12; Psalm 46:1-5)?

Isaiah foretells a new Jerusalem, part of the new heaven and new earth (Isaiah 65:17-19). When will this be fulfilled (Revelation 21:1-4)? Compare Isaiah 65:19 with Revelation 21:4). When will weeping come to an end?

3. TEMPLE—place of priests, sacrifice, worship

They lament the loss of the temple, priests, sacrifice and worship (Lam 2:6-7). What was the significance of these things to them?

Jesus is now God's presence with us (Matthew 1:23; 28:20), he is our High Priest who has offered the perfect sacrifice (Hebrews 9:11; 10:12-14). He replaces the temple (John 2:19-21). True worship is not in a place but through him (John 4:21-24).

PREPARATION

Read the introduction on pages 1 & 2.

If you can, read through the whole book of Lamentations.

Read 2 Kings 25:1-21 to get the historical background.

Watch the Bible Project video: <https://bibleproject.com/videos/lamentations/>

THOUGHTS OR QUESTIONS

Write down any first thoughts or questions you have after doing this reading.

WHAT IS A LAMENT IN THE BIBLE?

Nearly 40% of the Psalms are laments. Psalm 6, 10, 13, 22, 38, 42-43, 38, and 88 are examples.

There are four main movements in these Psalms, though not all follow this pattern.

1. **Turn to God** - Not complaining to other people but to God.
2. **Cry out your complaint** - Name the problem. We aren't required to have a stiff upper lip. Tell him your questions, feelings, pain both physical and emotional, the circumstances, etc. This requires a heart wrenching honesty before God.
3. **Appeal to God to hear and respond** - This is grounded in your understanding of God's word, his character and promises. He alone is our source of comfort, help and hope. There is often nowhere else to turn.
4. **Confess your trust in God** - Your confidence for the future even if there is no sign of things changing in the present. Note that Psalm 88 never gets to this point.

You will see similar themes in the Book of Lamentations.

See full article:

<https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/learning-to-lament-a-guide-to-praying-in-our-hardest-moments/>

THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS—POETIC STRUCTURE (see page 3)

In English you can't see the poetic structure of Lamentations. However it is important to understand this structure to see how carefully it is composed and how it shapes the way we understand its message. The Book of Lamentations is an extended lament. It is all in Hebrew poetry (as the Psalms are) and consists of 5 poems (each chapter being one poem).

- The first 4 poems are acrostic, that is, each stanza begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet which has 22 consonants.
- The 1st, 2nd, and 3rd poems all have 22 three line stanzas. But in the 3rd poem each line begins with the same letter.
- The 4th poem has 22 two line stanzas.
- The 5th poem is not acrostic but has 22 one line stanzas.

So you can see that the book is very carefully composed and structured. The third poem is not only longer but is also the central poem which gives it a significant place in the whole book, and it is very different in tone. So the poem moves to a climax in Chapter 3 and then chapters 4 and 5 are a decrescendo as the structure breaks down.

5. When all appearances of God's goodness have disappeared what confidence is still shown in 4:22; and 5:19-22?
6. What do you make of the way this book ends?
7. Where do you turn in the darkest times of your life? What do you hope for from God?

STUDY 4— Lamentations 4 and 5

Chapter 4 is still acrostic but has only 2 lines per stanza. Chapter 5 is not acrostic and has only one line per stanza. The conclusion to these five poems seems to become more chaotic and emotional. The suffering continues and perhaps some hope fades. We return to words of lament. We have already looked at some of these verses in earlier studies.

READ Lamentations 4:1-22

1. The children were “precious sons of Zion”. They were worth more than gold. How are they now treated?
2. What has happened to the well off, princes, priests and elders?

READ Lamentations 5:1-22

In this poem the poet leads his people in communal lament, a call for the LORD to look and remember them.

3. Community life has been struck from top to bottom. What are the things they have lost? How are they being treated? What is their situation now?
4. What is the point of a lament like this? What does a call to “remember” (5:1) mean?
5. What signs of genuine repentance do you see here? What do they long for (5:21)?

DIAGRAM OF THE STRUCTURE

Each poem is one chapter in our Bibles.

1st & 2nd poem. Both have 22 stanzas of 3 lines = 66 lines

1. A
.....
.....
2. B
.....
.....
3. C
.....
.....
I
22. Z
.....
.....

3rd poem. Has 22 stanzas of 3 lines = 66 lines

1. A
A
A
2. B
B
B
3. C
C
C
etc.

4th poem. 22 stanzas of 2 lines = 44 lines

1. A
.....
2. B
.....
3. C
.....
etc

5th poem. Is not acrostic. Has 22 stanzas of only 1 line = 22 lines

STUDY 1—Lamentations 1:1-22

Make sure you have read page 2 of these studies.

The poet uses different voices in these poems. In 1:1-11b an observer describes the suffering of Jerusalem (Zion). In 1:11c-22 the city herself “Lady Zion” speaks of her pain.

1. How do you find listening to someone who is going through intense suffering? Do you think we are good at really listening? What mistakes do people make? Discuss.

READ Lamentations 1:1-11c. Listen to what they are going through.

2. The city is portrayed as a widow (1:1). List the things she has suffered.
3. List the things she feels as a result.
4. What does she long for, from God or from others?

READ Lamentations 1:11c-22.

5. “Lady Zion” speaks. What has she suffered?

5. How does this help you to know what God is like? What does this mean to you?
6. God was faithful to the covenant curses (Deuteronomy 28:15-16, 49-57). But he will also be faithful to the covenant blessings (Deuteronomy 30:1-10). How can those who trust Jesus have even greater assurance (see John 3:16; 5:24; Romans 5:8; Ephesians 2:4-8; 1 John 1:8-9)?

READ Lamentations 3:25-66

7. What advice does “the Man” give to the people (3:25-30)?
8. What confidence does he offer them (3:31-42)? What is the significance of 3:33?
9. “The Man” then leads his people in prayer expressing trust in God (3:43-66). How is this lament different to those in chapters 1 & 2?

STUDY 3— Lamentations 3:1-66

The voice changes again in this poem. The poet introduces himself as “the Man”(3:1), one who has experienced this suffering himself.

READ Lamentations 3:1-21

1. Look back at the structure of the book (see pages 2 & 3). Why do you think the poet uses an acrostic form? How does he put the spotlight on this third poem?
2. “I am the man ...” (3:1) How does the poet express his own experience of this suffering (3:1-20)? What images does he use and what do they mean?
3. What is his mood in 3:18 & 20? What has he ceased to hope for? How does it feel to have no hope? What changes in 3:21?

READ Lamentations 3:22-24

4. The content of what he calls to mind is given in 3:22-23. He remembers what has been revealed of God’s character. Read Exodus 34:5-7. This is after a time before when Israel had broken God’s covenant at the golden calf. How is God’s character described? What is the meaning of the words used?

6. List the things she feels as a result.
7. How does she interpret the events? Who does she blame for the events?
8. How does she now see her relationship with God?
9. What does she long for, from God or from others? What do people need when going through times of trauma?

STUDY 2—Lamentations 2:1-22

Lady Zion falls silent but the poet continues to describe the suffering of his people. He describes his personal reaction in 2:11-17. Although it was Babylon that destroyed the city he emphasises that it was the LORD who acted, “He did this... He did that...”

READ Lamentations 2:1-22

1. What are the things the LORD has done to them?
2. Which of these things are central to their relationship to God and his promises to them (2:6-9; 4:20)? What would they conclude when they saw that God had done this?
3. He speaks about God’s “wrath” (2:2, 4; 3:1, 4:11) and God’s “anger” (1:12; 2:1, 3, 6, 21, 22; 3:43, 66; 4:11). What is your reaction to this? Does this fit with the New Testament picture of God (Matthew 25:30; Hebrews 12:28-29, etc)?
4. Would God treat Christians like this? We need to understand that God related to Israel as a nation collectively. He relates to us as individuals when we put our faith in Jesus. The promises to them were physical, temporal and conditional. The new covenant promises are spiritual, eternal and unconditional. What difference would these things make?

5. God may discipline those who follow Jesus (Hebrews 12:5-7). But if they are faithful he will not bring them into judgment (John 5:24; Romans 5:8; 8:1, 31-39; Ephesians 2:4-8; 1 John 1:8-9). What can we conclude from the New Testament?
6. From Lamentations we see how terrible God’s judgment is in history. What does this indicate about his eternal judgment? What should be our response?
7. 2:17 says God had planned this, he has fulfilled his word. See Deuteronomy 28:15-16, 49-57. Also the prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah had warned the people. Who had the people been listening to (2:14; see Jeremiah 6:13-15; 18:11)? What lessons can we learn from this?
8. In 2:18 the people cry out to the Lord. In 2:19-22 the poet calls the people to continue to pour out their hearts to him. How do these words illustrate the nature of a lament (see page 2)?