

LAMENTATIONS

Lamentations is one of those Old Testament writings which has yet to receive its full share of recognition and appreciation by the Christian world.

The reason for the neglect of this little book is not difficult to discover. In the popular view Lamentations is a somber and gloomy record of unrelieved grief as Jeremiah weeps over the ruins of Jerusalem.

The book is much more than a cheerless protest of the inequities of life. It is more than “a cloudburst of grief, a river of tears, a sea of sobs” as one writer has called it. This five-fold poem is really an affirmation of faith in the justice and goodness of God.

In retaliation against the rebellion of his vassal King Zedekiah, Nebuchadnezzar had laid siege of Jerusalem for eighteen months.

Lamentations describes in the most vivid manner the terrible suffering to which the Jews were subjected during the siege. When the city finally was captured, the Chaldean king ordered it completely demolished. To see their beloved city, go up in flames was a shocking experience.

In spite of the incessant preaching of the prophets who warned of this very thing, the Jews were totally unprepared for it. Added to the tremendous burden of their grief over what had befallen their nation was their feeling of having been utterly rejected by God.

The basic theme of the book is a lament over the terrible woes which had befallen sinful Judah and the destruction of the Holy City and the Temple of God.

For the most part the poems contain descriptions of the plight of the people, their land and their sacred city. Here and there are confessions of sin, declarations of penitence, and appeals for divine aid.

The book of Lamentations served a useful purpose in at least three different ways.

1. Psychologically, Lamentations served the purpose of giving expression to the agony of a distraught people. Verbalization of grief and suffering, both physical and spiritual, has therapeutic value.
2. Liturgically, the poems of Lamentations served as the means by which the congregation of Israel could express sorrow over their national loss.
3. Theologically the book served the purpose of helping the people of Judah maintain their faith in God in the midst of overwhelming disaster.

Lamentations expresses the conviction that God has dealt justly with His people.

Chapter 1 A WIDOWED CITY

Chapter one has two major divisions. In verses 1-11 the prophet laments the present condition of Zion.

In verses 12-22 the city itself laments over its condition.

Both units end in prayers which call upon God to take note of the plight of Zion and to execute vengeance upon the enemies of Zion.

Verse 1

Jeremiah's lament over Jerusalem begins with the exclamation "how" or "how sad," a word frequently used to begin a funeral dirge.

Jerusalem is personified as a widowed princess who sits alone in the night weeping over the loss of her husband and children. The loneliness of widowhood is emphasized in this lament. The once populous city is now empty.

Verse 2

Every night the widowed city weeps over her plight but she has no one to wipe the tears from her cheek. Her "lovers" (political allies) and her "friends" (neighboring nations) have deserted her. Those who had once courted her

assistance and who had so willingly offered themselves to her have now become her most bitter enemies.

Verse 3

The children of Zion have been carried away captive by the Chaldeans and now dwell on foreign soil.

Living among Gentiles they find themselves plagued by worry and idolatry, depressed by home sickness, surrounded by idolatry, tormented by the realization that their God has inflicted this great punishment upon them because of their spiritual rebellion.

Verse 4

Jeremiah points to the fact that Zion exists in a widowed state spiritually. The roads leading to Zion are said to weep because pilgrims no longer travel them.

The solemn festivals of the Law of Moses were no longer observed for the city had been destroyed. The city gates, which formerly had thrived with business, now lie desolate.

The priests mourn because they can no longer sing their beautiful hymns or play their instruments in the Temple.

Verse 5

The enemies of Zion now have the upper hand. They mockingly rejoice over the misfortune which Jerusalem experienced. Even little children have suffered at the hands of the cruel oppressor as they have been forced to walk that long weary road to exile.

Jerusalem's troubles are due to the multitude of her transgressions. Zion's God, in righteous indignation has inflicted these penalties upon His people.

Verse 6

The widowed daughter of Zion is ugly, weak and helpless. All her beauty—that which made her the envy of other nations—is gone. The princes of the

nation are so destitute of strength that they are compared to wild deer which can find no pasture.

Unable to withstand the pursuers the princes have fled.

Verse 7

She remembers the “precious things,” the gracious gifts which the Lord had bestowed upon her when she dwelt within her own land. Since Jerusalem had despised both the gifts and the giver she was forced to enter into a period of affliction and wanderings.

Her former friends, having become her foes, gloat over the demise and downfall of Zion. One of the miseries of sin in this world and hell in the next will be the constant recollection of the days when one enjoyed the blessings and graces of God.

Verse 8

The root of Jerusalem’s trouble lay in the fact that she had sinned grievously against her God. Those who once honored Zion now have no respect for her. As God begins to strip Zion of her splendor only filth could be seen, the filth of blatant sins and vices.

Even Zion herself moans and turns away in shame as her filthiness comes into public view.

Verse 9

When one begins to gain some insight into the true character of sin, he is shocked and shamed. He cannot stand to face the gaze of others let alone the scrutiny of God.

For a time Zion was able to conceal her filthiness beneath skirts of external prosperity.

She was morally unclean under the Law of Moses. Yet during the period of her prosperity she gave no thought to her latter end, that is, the ultimate consequences of her evil ways.

She lived only for the present and deceived herself into believing that God’s repeated threats of national destruction simply could not come to pass. This is what made her final fall so shocking, so inconceivable, so terrible.

She had no one to comfort her or extend sympathy to her.

Keenly feeling Judah's affliction as his own, Jeremiah cries out in desperation to God. In narrative prayer he summarizes the present plight of Zion. The enemy has become haughty and overbearing.

Verse 10

All of the "precious things," the gracious gifts that God had given Judah, had fallen into the hand of the enemy. Gentiles have even desecrated the sacred precincts of the Temple.

Verse 11

The people of Jerusalem groveled for enough food to keep alive. They were forced to trade their most valuable possessions for their daily bread. Jeremiah calls upon God to take note of the misery of His people and the dismay of His prophet.

Verse 12

Unable to bear any longer the weight of her misery, Zion cries out in desperation to the caravans and travelers who walk the trade routes near Jerusalem, "Is it nothing to you?" Do you not care what has happened to me? Have you no sympathy to offer me?

Zion challenges the passers-by to name one city which they have observed in the wide travels whose sufferings are comparable to that of Jerusalem. After all it is the Lord, Zion's God, who has administered the painful and fatal stroke in the day of His fierce anger.

Verse 13

The Lord has sent the fiery bolts of His wrath upon them from heaven. The very bones of their body seem to burn within them.

The Lord has also spread nets for the feet of Zion causing them to fall into the hands of her enemies. Her sorrow is so great that she is astonished, that is, has entered into a state of stupefaction.

Verse 14

God had taken all of their unforgiven sins and had woven them together in a yoke which was so heavy that the strength of the nation was dissipated in trying to bear it. Weak and weary from trying to bear the yoke of accumulated sins Judah was easy prey for her enemies.

Verse 15

At the appointed time the Lord had convoked a solemn assembly of foreign powers for the purpose of fighting against and destroying Jerusalem. Zion's mighty men as well as the flower of her youth were cast into the winepress of God's wrath.

The once pure and undefiled virgin daughter who had been loved and treated so tenderly in the past now was trampled underfoot by the almighty.

Verse 16

Because of these terrible blows Zion weeps with great sorrow. No one would even attempt to comfort her. Zion's children, her inhabitants, have been thrown into a state of complete shock because the Chaldean enemy has prevailed over them.

Verse 17

Zion turns in desperation to the neighboring nations. She spreads forth her hands in a gesture that is an appeal for help. But no aid is forthcoming from the neighboring peoples, the reason being that the Lord has commanded them to be hostile toward Jacob, that is, Judah. Jerusalem is now regarded by these neighbors as a filthy thing.

Verse 18

Zion acknowledges that she has been justly punished for her sins against God. In prayer-like fashion she calls upon the neighboring peoples to hear her wail and behold her sorrow. The young people of Zion have been carried off into exile.

Verse 19

Zion, lovers—the foreign nations and gods to whom she had turned—had not lived up to expectations. Zion's priests and elders are perishing because they cannot find enough food for themselves. Thus, does Zion earnestly appeal to her neighbors for sympathy and help but there is no answer.

Verses 20-21

Finally, the weeping widow turns her face heavenward and presents a petition before the Lord. In the hearing of God, she reviews her predicament and acknowledges her sin. Zion turns to the Lord with a contrite heart because

she now realizes that there is no one else to whom she can turn. She makes no attempt to excuse her sin. She accepts her punishment as just.

Zion still has confidence in divine justice. One day that enemy will experience a fate similar to that of Jerusalem.

Verse 22

In a morally ordered universe no transgressor can go unpunished forever. The prayer, “Let all their evil come before You” is a recognition of the fact that sin must be punished. The execution of God’s wrath upon the enemies of Zion would in effect be an act of mercy on behalf of suffering Zion.

Chapter 2 A BROKEN PEOPLE

This chapter is also a national lament but the focus here is on the entire nation rather than just on the city of Jerusalem. This chapter again emphasizes the fact that Judah’s punishment came as a result of sin and that the punishment was entirely justified.

Verse 1

Jeremiah almost exhausts the possibilities of human language in describing the burning wrath of a holy God against His apostate people. God did not even spare His own footstool, the Temple, or perhaps the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant.

It is possible that the phrases “daughter of Zion,” “glory of Israel,” and “His footstool” are to be regarded as progressive phrases designating the nation as a whole, the city of Jerusalem and the Temple or alternatively, Jerusalem, the Temple and the ark of the covenant.

Verse 2

The Lord has consumed the dwelling places and destroyed the strongholds of His people. He has caused the princes of the land to be profaned, that is, captured, mutilated, and slain by ungodly forces.

Verse 3

He has cut off the horn (power) of Israel by withdrawing His powerful right hand of defense as the enemy approached. He has caused the territory of Jacob to be put to the torch.

Verse 4

Through the instrumentality of Nebuchadnezzar's soldiers, the divine archer drew His bow against Jerusalem and slew "all that were pleasant to the eye" that is, the finest young men of the Judean army. Even in the tent of the daughter of Zion (the Temple) he poured out His fiery wrath.

Verse 5

It is none other than the Lord who has caused all the destruction and death and resulting lamentation in the land.

Verse 6

He has not hesitated in destroying His tabernacle, His meeting place, any more than a gardener might destroy a watchmen's booth when the harvest season was over.

The mockery of Judah's festivals and Sabbaths He has brought to an abrupt halt.

Even the kings and priests, normally spared the indignities of war, have felt the blast of divine indignation and judgment.

Verses 7-8

How can the Lord allow the sacred city to be so humiliated? Because the Lord has scorned His altar and disowned His sanctuary.

The Lord has turned the city over to the enemies of Judah. A shout has been heard in the precincts of the Temple—not the shout of joyous worshipers but of looting enemy soldiers.

The destruction of Jerusalem was no afterthought; it had been predetermined by God. The Lord had marked off the city for destruction with a measuring line. The outer defenses of the city, the rampart and wall, had fallen to the enemy after incessant bombardment.

Verse 9

The heavy gates of the city and the powerful beams which secured them during siege have been battered to the ground. Zion's kings and princes are in exile among the heathen who know not the law of God.

The prophets are without vision.

Verse 10

The sagacious elders of Jerusalem have no advice or counsel to offer. They sit silently with sackcloth about their loins and dust upon their head as a sign of bitter mourning. The bright young maidens of Judah hang their heads in remorse.

Verse 11

This verse begins to describe what the prophet felt as he looked upon the pathetic plight of his kinsmen. His eyes shed tears till they could shed no more. His inward parts, that is, bowels, and heart, that is liver, were overwhelmed by anguish. The tender-hearted prophet is particularly upset as he recalls the agonizing death of starvation to which the innocent babes and infants were subjected.

Verse 12

He hears their pitiful cry for food which had to remain unanswered. He sees them dying, some in the streets where they have been abandoned by their despairing mothers, others clutching to the breasts of their mothers who are helpless to do anything to preserve the young life.

Verse 13

The prophet tries desperately to think of a word of instruction, edification or comfort which he can bring to those people who had to live through the horrible days of Jerusalem's fall.

Search as he may he cannot find any tragedy equaling the description of the daughter of Zion. Her ruin is as unlimited and unfathomable as the ocean itself. The lament of the prophet reaches a climax with the question asked, "Who shall heal you?"

Verse 14

The prophets are certainly not able to help for they have never been able to correctly assess the situation in Zion. For a number of years, they have actually encouraged the national hypocrisy and wickedness of their false and foolish visions. They have made no effort to expose iniquity or encourage repentance which would permit God to reverse the miserable condition of Zion. Their false and misleading oracles, that is, their whitewash job, could not heal the wound of Zion.

Verse 15

The caravans and travelers who passed along the busy highways could do nothing to aid Zion. They have actually joined in the mockery of the fallen city by contemptuously clapping their hands, hissing and wagging their heads.

Having looked upon the city which had been renowned for its beauty they jeer, "Is this the city which was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of all the earth?"

Verse 16

Still less would neighboring nations be able to heal the broken nation of Judah. They had actually been looking forward to the day when Jerusalem would fall and they would be able to swallow up the territory she once possessed. Who then can heal the wound of Zion?

Verse 17

In preparing to answer his own question, "Who can heal you," the prophet reminds the people of a basic fact. The destruction of Zion was not due to the power and cunning of Zion's enemies but was in fact the fulfillment of threats made centuries earlier.

By disobeying the commandments of God the people had violated the terms of the covenant and had thus incurred the penalties for disobedience. This is the reason Israel had been brought so low and the "horn" or strength of their enemies had been exalted.

Verse 18

Because the Lord is responsible for the destruction of Zion He alone can restore her fortunes.

The prophet calls upon the broken wall of Jerusalem to cry unto the Lord in supplication day and night. Without respite those walls should continue their pleadings with the Lord for reconstruction.

Verse 19

The people must continue to pray right on through the night. The beginning of the three-night watches, sunset, should find them still pouring out their hearts like water before the Lord and lifting up their hands toward heaven in expectation of receiving divine blessing.

If they become weary in the work of prayer they should remember the little children who are suffering immeasurably on every street of the ruined city. Jeremiah makes no promises but his exhortation implies that God will hear the agonizing cry of His penitent people just as he heard their cry when they suffered during the Egyptian bondage.

Verse 20

The prophet prays the prayer he has been urging the nation to pray and in so doing teaches them how to properly approach the throne of God.

The prophet boldly presents all the cogent arguments of which he can think in his effort to influence God to aid the people of Judah.

First, he asks God to consider that it is His own people who are suffering. Divine judgment has caused the people of Judah to sink into the lowest kind of human behavior--cannibalism. Surely God will intervene when men are driven to the point of consuming one another!

Priests and prophets who have been anointed to the service of the Lord are being slain in the sacred precincts of the Temple.

Verse 21

Surely God will intervene when religious massacre is taking place! Young and old, male and female, lie dead on the streets of Jerusalem, slain by the sword of the divinely appointed enemy of Zion.

Verse 22

Surely God will intervene when outrage is committed in public without regard to sex or age.

In that day of the Lord's anger none escaped or survived. The enemy has even consumed the babes in arms. So, the prayer ends as it began, with a reference to the slaughter of the innocents.

Chapter 3 A SUFFERING PROPHET

In relationship to the suffering prophet one can see in this chapter his cry of desperation, his confession of faith, his appeal for repentance, his personal suffering and his prayer for deliverance.

Verse 1

Jeremiah identifies himself as an individual who has experienced in his own life what the nation has experienced. “I am the man who has seen affliction” is a general statement of his misery. “By the rod of His wrath” can refer only to God although God is not specifically mentioned until verse 18.

Verse 2

Jeremiah compares his experience to a terrifying walk in Stygian (hellish) darkness. Darkness is probably symbolic here of the inability to comprehend the judgment which God has brought upon the nation.

Verse 3

Jeremiah compares his affliction to being smitten by the hand of God. No matter what the poet tried to do it seemed that God’s hand was against him. Surely the prophet here is speaking as a representative of his people.

Verse 4

Jeremiah compares his troubles to old age with its wrinkled skin and fragile bones. Broken bones are one of the curses of old age for they do not heal easily.

Verse 5

Jeremiah compares his trials to the siege of a city. He has been surrounded and bombarded by bitterness and anguish. There is no escape. It is a struggle to merely survive.

Verses 6-7

Jeremiah compares his situation to that of a lost dead man. Such a one is described as dwelling in dark places.

The figure changes now to that of a prison. The poet feels hedged in by an insurmountable wall and weighed down by heavy and unbreakable chains of brass.

Verse 8

Although Jeremiah cries out in anguish, there is no answer to his cry for God shuts out his prayers. The poet contends that a block has been thrown up across the path of his life.

Verse 9

God has placed a wall of carefully prepared and closely fitting hewn stone to blockade his way. Since the straight and easy road to his life's goals was blocked he had to look for alternative routes.

Walking the uncharted by-paths, Jeremiah found himself in a maze of crooked paths most of which turned out to be blind alleys.

Verses 10-11

Still in another figure Jeremiah depicts God as a lion or bear lying in wait for the prey. Suddenly, unexpectedly the Lord has seized him and torn him to pieces.

Verses 12-13

Jeremiah feels that he has become the target for the divine archer. The arrow of tribulation and persecution has found its mark in the vital parts, that is the kidneys, and thus the poet is doomed to suffer a slow and painful death.

Verse 14

Jeremiah briefly drops the metaphors to complain as the representative of the believing individual that he is mocked and ridiculed by his people. All day long they made him the object of their taunt songs. Pleasure-mad throngs cannot stand those who rebuke and warn of judgment.

Verses 15-16

Jeremiah compares his sorrow and anguish to food and drink. His food was bitterness which he was forced to eat until he was filled to the brim, that is, sated, nauseated, his drink was wormwood, a bitter substance usually associated with gall. As a sign of his disgrace and mourning the poet has heaped ashes upon himself and in so doing has gotten grit in his mouth.

Verse 17

Jeremiah was overwhelmed by the catastrophic destruction of Jerusalem. In his great suffering he has lost all inner peace. He cannot even remember what it means to enjoy the blessings of life. He is in the depths of despair.

His strength, physical and spiritual, has perished. The confidence which he had previously placed in the Lord has been shaken and, in fact, has disappeared.

Verse 18

Yet all is not lost. The moment he announces that he has lost his confidence in the Lord he has done something very significant. He has pronounced the precious name of God. The mention of the name of the Lord in this moment of deepest misery and despair helps Jeremiah to find solid footing for his faith.

Verses 19-21

The mention of the name of the Lord served to jog the memory of a grief-stricken prophet. His thoughts are turned from self to the Savior.

Verse 22

Jeremiah first brings to mind the boundless mercy and compassion of God. If it were not for God's lovingkindness all men would be instantly consumed.

Verse 23

God's mercies or compassions—sympathetic love especially toward the helpless and suffering--never fail. The expressions of God's love and mercy are new every morning. Life, breath, opportunities, food, raiment—how often they are taken for granted; how seldom is thanks offered for them.

As Jeremiah meditates upon the ceaselessness of God's mercy he breaks forth in a triumphant strain: Great is your faithfulness!

Verse 24

The knowledge that he possessed God and God possessed him was the foundation for the hope of Jeremiah.

Verse 25

To those souls who put their trust in Him, God is good. God never forsakes His own! Growing out of Jeremiah's reflections about God the poet makes several observations, some practical and some philosophical, about human suffering.

Verse 26

Patience and hope open the channels of salvation and deliverance.

Verse 27

Self-discipline during one's youth has positive benefits. If a young person can learn to bear the yoke of suffering he will not easily despair when he is old.

Verse 28

Such a one however must learn to suffer in solitude and silence. He should not grumble against the God who sent the tribulation nor should he yield to the temptation to appeal for the sympathy of others by discussing with them his aches and pains.

Verse 29

He must bite the dust in self-abasement humbly to hope that there is hope.

Verse 30

He should willingly submit himself to whatever injustices life has to offer. Even though he may be filled with reproach he should not put it forth upon his antagonist.

Verses 31-32

Affliction sent by God is measured and purposeful. Present affliction does not mean that God has ultimately rejected His people for the Lord does not reject forever. Even in periods of chastisement He remains the God of mercy.

Verse 33

God does not permit one trial or temptation beyond what a man can endure. God takes no delight in seeing men suffer.

Verse 34

Nevertheless, God permits men to suffer and sometimes administers the stroke against them in order to accomplish His own sovereign purposes in their lives. God does not approve of punishment which is not just or purposeful.

Verses 35-39

Political atrocities, injustice in legal proceedings or, in fact any social inequities arouse His displeasure and demand His punishment. The phrase "before the face of the Most High" points to the fact that human judges are viewed as representatives of God.

Nothing is done in this world without God's permission. No one is able to make plans about the future and carry out those plans without the permission of the Lord.

God has clearly set forth in His word the conditions and blessing and the consequences of disobedience. A man is not forced to choose wrong with its

resultant punishment. On what basis then does a man complain when he is punished for his sin?

Verse 40

Rather than complain about suffering, Jeremiah urges the people to repent of the sins which have brought about the suffering. Repentance begins with self-examination and human analysis of their situation. Jeremiah is urging upon his hearers a complete and whole-hearted return to God.

Self-examination should be followed by sincere prayer. The uplifted hands to heaven seems to have been one of the popular postures for prayer in Old Testament times. But Jeremiah urges his hearers to lift up their heart as well as their hands to the Lord.

Verse 41

Proper posture does not always mean proper prayer! In genuine prayer inward submission always accompanies outward acts of supplication.

Verse 42

Jeremiah speaks the words which people ought to use in their prayer of repentance. The prayer begins with a confession of sin: "We have transgressed and rebelled!" From this forthright confession of sin the prayer moves to a description of the consequences of sin.

1. Sin cuts off the mercies of God. God had not pardoned nor could He pardon until the nation manifested some sign of genuine repentance.

Verse 43

2. Sin stirs up divine wrath. The punishment against sin is swift, thorough, and relentless.

Verse 44

3. Sin cuts the communication lines to heaven. God wraps Himself in a cloud through which no prayer can pass.

Verse 45

Only when men turn from sin can God hear their prayers.

(Psalms 66:18)

4. Sin ultimately brings humiliation. Judah became like dung and refuse among the nations of the world because of sin.

Verse 46

Judah's enemies railed against her with impunity.

Verse 47

5. Sin results in panic and ruin. In the day of Judgment one calamity after another, befalls the sinner until he is finally destroyed.

Verse 48

As Jeremiah contemplates the judgment which has befallen his people he bursts into tears anew.

Verse 49

Without a moment's pause, he continues his sorrowful intercession.

Verse 50

Jeremiah is determined to pray until the Lord looks in tender compassion upon the affliction of His people.

Verse 51

Jeremiah continues to be disturbed by the sight of the shameful defilement of the young maidens of Jerusalem.

Verse 52

Without justification the national leaders considered Jeremiah as a traitor to his nation. They hunted him down like a fowler hunts his prey.

Verse 53

They planned to get rid of the prophetic pest permanently by casting him into a dungeon and then covering the mouth of that pit with a stone.

Verse 54

Jeremiah sank into the mire of that empty cistern and the waters of death, as it were, flowed over his head. In the midst of his despair he cried out unto the Lord: "I am cut off," that is, "I am as good as dead."

Verses 55-56

This section is a prayer for deliverance which is filled with expressions of confidence that his prayer will be answered.

As the prophet recalls the cistern experience and how God delivered him from that certain death his faith begins to grow. Just as God heard his cry from

the dark dungeon of death. Jeremiah asks God not to ignore his present pleas for help.

Verse 57

In the past God had answered his payers by drawing near and whispering “Be not afraid!”

Verse 58

God had intervened on behalf of His servant, had taken up his cause, and had reformed his very life.

Verses 59-62

On the basis of God’s past response to his petition Jeremiah again calls upon God to hear and answer his prayer. He is praying as an intercessor. He is praying for his nation and as part of his nation. The enemies for whose destruction he prays must then be the Chaldean conquerors of Jerusalem.

The petitioner realizes that God already knows the desperate flight of Judah, the wrongs which have been suffered, the vicious and vengeful plots, the taunting and ridicule of the enemy.

Verse 63

All day long the Jews were subject to the Chaldean taunt-songs. Therefore, Jeremiah calls upon the Lord to judge his cause, that is, judge those who have committed wrongs against the Jews.

Verse 64

Jeremiah asks God to repay these enemies in accordance with the deeds they have done.

Verse 65

He then prays that these opponents might experience blindness of heart, that is, intellectual confusion, and that God’s curse might rest upon them.

Verse 66

He asks God to destroy these enemies from off the face of the earth.

Verses 64-66 are best regarded not as a prayer for vengeance, but as a plea for justice.

If a holy and just God rules this world then wrong must be punished and inequities must be eliminated.

Jeremiah was confident that God was just and therefore did not hesitate to call for God to act in accordance with His justice. In praying for the destruction of the Babylonians he prays that God will fulfill the threats already made against the conquerors of Jerusalem.

Chapter 4 A RUINED KINGDOM

This chapter emphasizes the suffering of the people of Jerusalem during and following the Chaldean siege.

This poem falls into three parts.

1. Jeremiah first gives an eyewitness account of the horrors which accompanied and followed the siege of Jerusalem.
2. Then Jeremiah offers an explanation for this overwhelming calamity.
3. Finally, Jeremiah offers a ray of hope for his people, placing in contrast the future of Edom and the future of Israel.

Verse 1

Jeremiah begins his lament by contrasting the former brightness of Judah with the present dark days. The Golden Temple ornamentation which formerly glistened in the sunlight now is blackened and tarnished.

The stones of the Temple lie scattered about at the head of the very street leading from the Temple area.

Verse 2

The youth of Zion, the most valuable asset of the nation, lie dead and scattered about like broken bits of pottery.

Verse 3

The remaining portion of Jeremiah's description of the judgment on Jerusalem focuses on their famine which the city experienced while under Babylonian siege.

He vividly describes the effects of hunger on four classes of the populace.

1. The children have suffered above all. The tortured and tormented mothers of Judah treat their babies worse than the wild animals treat their young.

Wild and roving jackals (not sea monsters as in KJV) do not forget their offspring. But the famine has made the mothers of Jerusalem cruel like the ostrich.

Verse 4

The ostrich was regarded by the ancients as the symbol of maternal neglect and cruelty (Job 39:13-17). The babes of Jerusalem have no breasts to suckle and hence die from lack of nourishment. Young children ask for bread but no one takes note of their need.

Verse 5

2. The wealthy also suffer in the famine. What a pitiful sight it must have been to see those who were accustomed to the finest foods and garments perishing in the streets with the poor or scavenging in the city dumps.

Verse 6

The lingering agony of the starving city causes Jeremiah to make a painful comparison.

Jerusalem has experienced a more severe fate than ancient Sodom. Sodom's fall was sudden but Jerusalem's agony and suffering was prolonged over a period of several months.

Verse 7

3. The nobles of the land (or perhaps the Nazarites) also suffered greatly from the famine. Once they were the picture of health—rosy cheeks, fair complexion, stately appearance.

Verse 8

But as a result of the pangs of hunger these nobles have been reduced to skin and bones. Their fair skin is now black and leathery. No one can even recognize these once famous personages on the streets of the city.

Verse 9

How much better off were those who had died suddenly by the sword in battle than those who wasted away day by day.

Verse 10

4. Most pitiful of all are the women of Judah. Once tender-hearted and loving mothers, these women have been so crazed by hunger that they have forgotten their maternal affection. In order to preserve their own they were boiling and eating their own children!

Verse 11

Jeremiah begins to explain the horrendous calamity which has befallen Judah. The ultimate cause of Zion's downfall was the burning wrath of the Lord.

Verse 12

The leaders of the city, and in fact all inhabitants of the world, believed that Jerusalem was invulnerable. The idea that the Lord would not destroy His special abode probably was based upon the miraculous last-minute deliverance of Jerusalem from the armies of the Assyrian Sennacherib in the days of king Hezekiah. (Isaiah 37)

Verse 13

Jeremiah points out two reasons God's anger was stirred up against the inhabitants of Judah.

1. He mentions the sins of the prophets and priests.
Not only were these leaders guilty of perverting the word of the Lord, they were also guilty of murder, perhaps not directly, but indirectly.

Verse 14

Because of their counsel and encouragement many innocent people had been executed by the government.

When Jerusalem came under the Chaldean siege and the city eventually fell, these leaders who had confidently predicted divine deliverance were thrown into confusion.

They were so defiled by blood that men could not touch them.

Verse 15

Their countrymen treated them as though they were unclean lepers.

People who met them in the way applied to them the warning cry which lepers were to use if anyone approached them.

Shunned by their own countrymen these discredited religious leaders fled to foreign lands. But even there these priests and prophets were not wanted. They were forced to become vagabonds wandering from one land to another.

Verse 16

It is the “face of the Lord,” that is, His anger, which scattered these worthless leaders. Because they are not worthy of their office the Lord no longer regards them as prophets, priests, and elders nor do the people show to these leaders the respect and favor which the dignity of their office would normally evoke.

Verse 17

2. The poet points to the stubborn and stupid resistance of the inhabitants of Jerusalem as the second explanation of the severity of Jerusalem’s judgment.

Having committed the fundamental error of disobedience to the word of God the people of Judah stumbled on through those last days trusting confidently in false theological premises and human ingenuity.

Jeremiah points out four specific ways in which the nation had been deluded and deceived.

1. To the bitter end they had put their trust in foreign allies, particularly Egypt.

Verse 18

On one occasion Pharaoh had made an attempt to come to the aid of Jerusalem but his forces were driven off by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar.

2. The nation had been led to believe that they could successfully resist the might of Babylon. But with each passing day it became ever more obvious that the end had come.

Missiles hurled into the city from Chaldean siege towers made any public assembly within the city hazardous. It was stupid to continue to resist.

Verse 19

3. The inhabitants of Jerusalem also mistakenly thought they could flee the falling city. But flight was in vain. The enemy like eagles swooping down upon the prey pounced upon any who tried to escape the siege.

Verse 20

4. The inhabitants of Jerusalem were deceived in believing that they could find protection by adhering to Zedekiah, the king of Judah.

The people were supremely confident that God would never allow the house of David to be completely overthrown.

But Zedekiah was captured by the Chaldeans and deported to Babylon, a blind and broken man. The people had been misled by their leaders into thinking that Jerusalem was inviolable and the dynasty of David unconquerable. They had placed their trust in man and had persistently refused to heed the word of God.

They have no one but themselves to blame for the severity of Jerusalem's sufferings.

Verse 21

The nations of Edom and Judah were traditional enemies. When Jerusalem was going through her death throes, Edom had acted in a most hostile and haughty way.

Edom's sin began with indifference. She showed no concern over what was befalling her neighbor. From indifference Edom went on to rejoice over the destruction of the people of God.

At some point, Edom actually entered the weakened and helpless city of Jerusalem. They had reveled and caroused in the Temple mount.

They even helped the Chaldeans capture poor fugitives who tried to escape the calamity of their nation. (Obadiah 10-16)

This ancient enemy, Edom, is ironically urged to rejoice and sing, that is, to enjoy their moment of triumph. But their joy will be short-lived! The cup of divine wrath is about to pass to Edom.

Edom is reminded that she must drink the dreaded cup till she becomes intoxicated and experience shame, confusion, sorrow, and destruction. She will be stripped of all her power and glory.

Verse 22

Judah has been severally punished but her punishment is over. A ray of hope illuminates the darkness of Judah's present situation. For her a better day is dawning.

Once she has returned from exile she will never again be carried away captive as a nation.

The deliverance here predicted finds its fulfillment in the Messianic age when God granted salvation to His people, the New Israel, the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Edom's future on the other hand, is not so bright. Her sin is about to be punished. The last remnant of Edom perished during the revolt against Rome in the early years of the Christian era, A.D. 70-71.

Chapter 5 A PENITENT NATION

Chapter 5 is a prayer and not a dirge. While the poem does contain a recital of the miseries recently suffered by the people, the purpose of Jeremiah here is to appeal to the compassion of God so as to gain His help.

The poem describes the present reproach of Zion and requests the restoration or renewal of Zion.

Verse 1

"Remember, O LORD, what has come upon us!" There is a sense of desperation and urgency in these words.

Of course, God has not forgotten His people. He is not oblivious of their suffering. But when God hesitates to deliver one from reproach and difficulty it often seems to the sufferer that He has forgotten.

The words of this verse reflect the hope and faith of Jeremiah. He stands as a petitioner before a judge to present his case.

He is sure that if he can present a convincing picture of the desperation and repentance of Israel that the Judge of all the earth will intervene on their behalf.

Verse 2

The condition of Israel was truly pitiable. Their reproach was great. They had lost everything. Their “inheritance” (land) and their houses had been given to strangers probably as payment for aiding in the Chaldean conquest of Jerusalem.

Verse 3

With the male population practically decimated, those who remained were virtually widows and orphans.

Verse 4

Such essential items as water and wood were so scarce that they had to be purchased from the captors.

Verses 5-6

They were cruelly oppressed. The Chaldean troops which occupied the land gave the people no rest. They were “breathing down their neck” all the time.

The Jewish remnant was constantly forced to give their hand in solemn pledge of surrender and servitude to Egyptian and Assyrian traders who passed through the land.

Verse 7

This verse is not a complaint but a confession. It is an acknowledgement of the principle that sin often has consequences which extend from one generation to another.

If the children continue to walk in the footsteps of their wicked fathers and even surpass their fathers in wickedness they may expect to be punished with ever increasing severity. The consequences of sin are cumulative. The passing of time gives more opportunity for hearing and obeying the word of God.

Therefore, the generation of Jeremiah was even more guilty than previous generations because they had neglected more opportunities, more warnings, and ignored more judgments than their fathers.

This was not an excuse for the people but an explanation of the severity of their suffering.

Verse 8

Jeremiah continues to picture the severity of God's judgment on Judah. Babylonian mercenaries, some of whom had been former slaves of the Jews, now ruled over the land.

Verse 9

With no stable government to restrain them, marauding Bedouin tribes who lived on the fringes of the desert raided the valley farms. Only at great risk of life could the harvest be brought in.

Verse 10

A virtual famine continued to exist in the land and the people suffered greatly because of it.

Verse 11

The women of Judah had been raped. It was unsafe for a maiden to walk the streets of Jerusalem.

Verse 12

The princes of the land had been impaled and left to die a slow and shameful death. The cruel enemy had no respect for the older people of the land.

Verse 13

What few young men survived the siege and capture of Jerusalem were forced to grind grain which was usually the work of women or slaves. Even the

younger boys were compelled to serve the enemy by carrying huge loads of fire wood.

Verse 14

Elders no longer assembled to conduct their business in the gates of the city. Young men could no longer get together to make merry.

Verse 15

The once joyous people were now experiencing only bitter sorrow.

Verse 16

This verse begins to reach the climax as Jeremiah acknowledges the justice of the present sufferings.

Like a crown toppling from the head of a deposed monarch, so the glory of Judah has suddenly and completely been removed. The nation experiences misery and woe because “we have sinned” against God.

Verse 17

The heart of the people is sick with sorrow, their eyes darkened by tears because of the national loss.

Verse 18

The sacred hill of Mount Zion where once proudly stood the Temple of Solomon is now desolate. Jackals have made their home in the ruins of God’s Temple. Sin always pays off in wages of death and destruction.

Verse 19

Having presented his case before the Divine Judge, Jeremiah enters his appeal. The appeal is first anchored securely in a basic theological truth: “You, O LORD, are enthroned forever.”

Verse 20

Jeremiah has described at length the destruction and loss of all the temporal blessings which God had given His people. Earthly things may pass away but God remains.

His Temple on earth may be destroyed but His heavenly throne cannot be overthrown. When the disillusioned and down-trodden recapture this basic truth they have laid the foundation upon which hope can be reconstructed and petition presented before God.

The appeal to God takes the form of a question: “Why have You forgotten us forever?”

Verse 21

To those who had recently come through the siege of Jerusalem the prospects of fifty more years of servitude to Babylon seemed like eternity. It seemed to them that God had forgotten and forsaken them forever.

In desperation and complete submission, they call upon God to help and aid them to properly repent.

The people realize that restoration and renewal are dependent upon complete return to God and they are most anxious that their repentance meet with divine approval. They ask God to restore Judah to its former state unless He has utterly rejected them.

Verse 22

An utter and complete rejection would not be in harmony with the promises which God had already made about the future of Israel.

If God still rules, if the people are willing to submit to Him, if He has not utterly rejected them, then God must intervene on behalf of His people.

Thus, the sad book of Lamentation closes with a fervent appeal for God’s aid and a confident expectation that He would indeed intervene on behalf of His people.