

The Book of Lamentations

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An Introduction to The Book of Lamentations

I. TITLE OF THE BOOK:

- A. Hebrew: The title to the book in Hebrew is hkya ('Ekah). This is the Hebrew term for "How," "Alas," or "Oh. This word was commonly used in Israelite funerals.
- B. Greek: The title to the book in Greek is qrhnoi (Threnos) meaning "lament."
- C. Latin: The title to the book in the Latin Vulgate was a transliteration for the title "lament" (Threni) which became the basis for our English title "Lamentations."

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

- A. This collection of poems was composed after the fall of the city of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.
- B. Perhaps this time should be identified with Jeremiah 39:1-18. Historical accounts are in 2 Kings 24-- 25 and 2 Chronicles 36.

III. AUTHOR: Probably Jeremiah the Prophet

A. External Evidence:

1. The Greek Septuagint (LXX) ascribes the book to the prophet Jeremiah
2. Jewish tradition ascribed the book of Lamentations to the prophet Jeremiah
3. The Latin Vulgate ascribed the book to Jeremiah
4. The early church fathers understood that Jeremiah was the author of Lamentations

B. Internal Evidence:

1. Jeremiah and Lamentations both convey a similar tone and employ similar vocabulary
2. Some would argue that since its poetic style is different than that of Jeremiah someone else wrote it. But why could not Jeremiah write in a poetic style?

- C. Conclusion: One cannot be dogmatic about the author of the book of Lamentations, but it seems reasonable to follow tradition in this matter and identify its author as probably being Jeremiah the prophet.

IV. CANONICAL PLACEMENT OF THE BOOK

- A. While the King James Bible places Lamentations immediately after Jeremiah, the Hebrew Bible places it in the Writings between Ruth and Ecclesiastes.
- B. The book is read in its entirety every year on the anniversary of the Fall of Jerusalem.

Lamentations Outline

I. Lament One: Jerusalem's Fall (Ch. 1)

The Hebrew text is an acrostic, with each verse starting with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet (22 letters in all). Each verse is also divided into three poetic lines. The general idea in using the entire alphabet is to suggest the completeness of the destruction by the Lord.

Chapter 1 Summary: Jerusalem is personified as a destitute widow in mourning. She has been overcome by her enemies, feels abandoned by her friends, all her treasures have been removed, and there is no one to comfort her. The Lord brought this about because of her sin and rebellion, and she has now become unclean, and an object of scorn among the nations.

A. Jeremiah's observation (1:1-11)

B. Jerusalem's sorrow (1:12-22)

II. Lament Two: The Lord's Wrath (Ch. 2)

Like the first lament, this chapter is an acrostic of 22 verses, with each verse divided into three poetic lines.

Chapter 2 Summary: In Lamentations 2, what has happened to Jerusalem is clearly portrayed as an act of judgement of God against the people of Israel, because of their sin and rebellion. God has removed His protection and allowed her enemies to triumph over her. The surviving citizens of Jerusalem are now in deep mourning and distress, but have no one to comfort them.

A. God's anger (2:1-10)

B. Jeremiah's grief (2:11-22)

III. Lament Three: Jeremiah's Testimony (Ch. 3)

This lament is also an acrostic, but here three consecutive lines start with each Hebrew letter, creating 66 lines, or 22 groups of three lines each.

Jeremiah identifies with what has happened to the Israelites, following the fall of Jerusalem. He declares that he has experienced what it is like to feel abandoned by God and depressed. He knows what it is like to feel as though you are walking in darkness. He knows what it is like to endure the ridicule of others. However, he encourages himself by remembering God's compassion and faithfulness, and His desire to bring restoration. He declares that he will wait upon the Lord, and put his trust in Him.

A. Jeremiah's sorrow (3:1-21)

1. Vs 19 - Jeremiah pleaded with the Lord to remember his miserable condition. Jeremiah wasn't doubting God's knowledge or memory, but rather, was asking the Lord to take notice of his affliction and misery and to actively intervene to help him. Jeremiah's painful ministry during the fall of Jerusalem had sapped his strength. In his intense pain he turned for help to the God Who had brought the catastrophe.

2. Vs 20 - The experience was so dreadful that Jeremiah couldn't get it out of his mind. He did not look on as others suffered but shared the horrible experience himself. Though he had not joined in Judah's rebellion against God, Jeremiah shared in the judgment the Lord brought.

3. Vs 21 - But somehow, remembering the painful destruction of his homeland helped Jeremiah find hope for the future. Jeremiah had to see beyond his pain to reach the source of hope, for his hope did not spring from his situation or his feelings. Instead, his hope came from contemplating Who God is and what He is like. Although his circumstances and emotions seemed dark, by faith, Jeremiah could catch sight of a faint ray of light. By faith Jeremiah hoped against hope and found strength to keep going on.

B. Jeremiah's hope (3:22-42)

1. Verse 22, 23a – Hope cannot rest on human achievements, for people are bound to fail. Hope must be built on what is permanent and perfect—the character of God. God is compassionate; He loves people and continually reaches out to minister to them "His compassions fail not". His compassions never grow stale or cold. They are continually new, vibrant and available (v. 23). Just as each day starts out as a new creation from God's good hand, so His compassion is ever fresh. Every morning should be an object lesson to us of the Lord's love to us.

2. Verse 23b – God's compassion is constant because His faithfulness is great. Judah had been unfaithful to Him and had broken His laws, worshipped other gods and rejected His authority. Judah was disobedient in her actions because she was unfaithful in her character. Similarly, the Lord does what He does because He is what He is. He reaches out with compassion, for in His character He is faithful. He is not hot and cold, like people. He is always the same—just, holy, true to His promises and His purposes.

3. Verse 24 – Even as Jerusalem was being demolished and the people deported from their homeland, Jeremiah stated confidently that the Lord was his portion. The term he used spoke of God's gracious provision for His people. He had given the land of Canaan to Israel, but Jeremiah had something better than land. His hope was not in what the Lord had given, but in the Lord Himself. To find hope in the face of hopelessness required Jeremiah to look beyond his immediate circumstances. All he could see was defeat, disaster, and despair. Jeremiah must have felt afraid, abandoned, and powerless. However, Jeremiah chose to focus on the Lord rather than on the situation or on himself.

4. Verse 25 – The key word in this section is "good," a term that appears three times. Jeremiah wrote that the Lord is good to them who "wait for him." Waiting on the Lord requires that a person place his confidence in the Lord, trusting Him to do what's best in His time and in His way. Waiting on the Lord is the opposite of rushing Him or trying to tell Him what is best. It means being content with what God is doing and when He is doing it. At the same time, the person who trusts the Lord seeks Him. Faith is not just a passive resignation to whatever happens, but an active search for God and His will. Faith reaches out to grasp what the Lord gives us, rather than just effortlessly floating through life. Faith involves putting our whole lives and energy at God's disposal.

5. Verse 26 – Jeremiah also wrote that it is good for "a man to both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord." The people of Judah needed to remember that God's ultimate salvation and restoration of His people was certain. God would be faithful on His part; they needed to patiently trust him. Jeremiah learned from his experience that it is "good" to trust the Lord's timing. He knows what He is doing and can be trusted to do what is right at the right time and in the right way. Our part is not to question Him, but to trust Him.

6. Verse 27 – It is also good for people to "bear the yoke" in their youth. Youth is the time to prepare for life's challenges. Endurance comes as we face greater and greater challenges. Just as an athlete must train over a long period of time, so we train for the great struggles in life by working through lesser trials. In this context, "bearing the yoke" refers to submission to God's plan, particularly suffering. We usually try to avoid suffering, but suffering teaches us many things. It teaches us to submit to God's will, to rely on His strength, and to trust in His plan for our lives.

7. Verse 28, 29 – Waiting quietly for the salvation of the Lord means accepting His yoke without complaint. Suffering people frequently misunderstand what God is doing in their lives. They may follow their instincts and try to flee the pain or even fight back. But the faithful Christian waits quietly, humbly, and submissively before the Lord, waiting for Him to make things right in His own time and way. In the ancient world, the sign of extreme repentance or sorrow was to sit in sackcloth and ashes. Jeremiah used this custom to picture humble speech (v. 29). During times of trial, we must not stubbornly insist on our rights, but quietly listen to God. We may not know whether relief is ahead or not, but we must remain humble to God.

8. Verse 30 – In Matthew 5:39, Jesus instructed His followers to turn the other cheek to those who mistreat them. Jeremiah used a similar expression to describe how God's children should respond to suffering. A slap in the face is humiliating. The natural impulse is to strike back, to get even. But it is better to swallow our pride, accept the humiliation, and hand the problem over to God. The godly person does not need to defend himself from God's disciplining hand. Instead, he must humbly submit to the suffering, trust God to take care of him, and anticipate with hope that He is in control.

9. Verse 31 – For Jeremiah, God's character was a firm foundation for comfort during suffering. Because the Lord is faithful, He will not cast off His people forever. In His justice the Lord had to punish His sinful people. But that is not the end of the story, for the punishment was part of God's larger plan. In that plan, the Lord determined to bring blessing after the judgment was completed. Suffering—whether due to personal sin, as in the case of Judah, or when unrelated to personal sin—is only temporary. God is accomplishing His eternal purpose, which goes well beyond the pain of the moment.

10. Verse 32, 33 - God's plan may well include an element of grief, but His actions are always governed by His compassion and mercy. What He does always grows out of Who He is, and He is ever the compassionate, merciful Lord. In fact, God doesn't want to cause His people pain and suffering. He finds no joy in inflicting judgment on sinners. When we suffer, it may seem as though the suffering will never end. We are tempted to give up, for we can't see an end to the pain. However, we must remember that God cares deeply for us. In the most hopeless times, He provides hope for His people.

C. Jeremiah's plea (3:43-66). Vs. 51 is a good verse.

IV. Lament Four: Israel's State (Ch. 4)

Another acrostic with each verse starting with a Hebrew letter, this time the verses are divided into two poetic lines each. The idea is that the prophet's grief is starting to lessen, so he writes shorter verses, and again injects hope at the end.

Chapter 4 Summary: Lamentations 4 records the horrors which have come upon the people of Jerusalem. They were considered rich and of value, but are now destitute. They are starving to the point where some have become cannibalistic. Her princes and rulers are no longer recognizable. Her prophets and priests are defiled, and like blind men. Edom too will be punished. Despite all these calamities, there is hope, and there will be an end to the suffering being experienced by the Israelites.

- A. Condition (4:1-10)
- B. Cause (4:11-16)
- C. Complaint (4:17-20)
- D. Confidence (4:21-22)

V. Lament Five: Israel's Complaint (Ch. 5)

While still 22 verses long, this is not an acrostic. The verses, while still divided into two poetic lines each, are considerably shorter, suggesting the prophet's sorrow has diminished to a whisper. Verses 19-20 in Hebrew are a "mini-acrostic," with the lines in verse 19 starting with the first and eleventh letters of the alphabet, and the lines in verse 20 starting with the twelfth and twenty-second letters of the alphabet. The closing prayer (v. 19-22) is a fitting summary and conclusion for the entire book.

Chapter 5 Summary: Lamentations 5 summarizes what has happened to the Israelites as a consequence of their sins. Their inheritance has been given over to foreigners, and they have become like orphans. They are like slaves, and the barest necessities of life are difficult to obtain. Their women have been abused, and their leaders humbled. They have lost their joy, and their dancing has turned to mourning. The Book of Lamentations finishes with a prayer asking God to restore the Israelites to Himself.

- A. Pitiful observations (5:1-18)
- B. Prayerful considerations (5:19-22)

