

Jeremiah's Lamentations

Intro: Thanks for the opportunity. I hope you will find some helpful things in the outline I shared with you. For this hour, instead of following my outline, I'd like to present a sermon based on the content of Lamentations. It is something I hope to preach at home and I'd appreciate your thoughts and suggestions. In many ways this lesson will be a recapitulation of much of what we have heard the past couple of days.

The Backstory of Jerusalem's Desolation

When the Lord gave the Law to Israel He clearly warned His people of the consequences of violating their covenant with Him. In Leviticus 26 He pronounced these solemn warnings for the priests to teach to the people:

"But if you will not hear me, nor do all my commandments: If you despise my laws, and contemn my judgments so as not to do those things which are appointed by me, and to make void my covenant: I also will do these things to you. (Leviticus 26:14–16)

The Lord then revealed a series of punishments of escalating severity if the people did not repent, all of which would culminate in the severest punishment of all:

"Yet if in spite of this, you do not obey Me, but act with hostility against Me, then I will act with wrathful hostility against you; and I, even I, will punish you seven times for your sins. Further, you shall eat the flesh of your sons and the flesh of your daughters you shall eat. I then will destroy your high places, and cut down your incense altars, and heap your remains on the remains of your idols; for My soul shall abhor you. I will lay waste your cities as well, and will make your sanctuaries desolate; and I will not smell your soothing aromas. And I will make the land desolate so that your enemies who settle in it shall be appalled over it. You, however, I will scatter among the nations and will draw out a sword after you, as your land becomes desolate and your cities become waste." (Leviticus 26:27–33)

Nearly four decades later, in his final address to the Israelites before they entered the land, Moses instituted the reading of the blessing and curses at Mount Ebal and Mt. Gerizim and adds his final words of warning to his people and repeats the horrible consequences of their apostasy:

"The LORD will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, as the eagle swoops down, a nation whose language you shall not understand, a nation of fierce countenance who shall have no respect for the old, nor show favor to the young. Moreover, it shall eat the offspring of your herd and the produce of your ground until you are destroyed, who also leaves you no grain, new wine, or oil, nor the increase of your herd or the young of your flock until they have caused you to perish. And it shall besiege you in all your towns until your high and fortified walls in which you trusted come down throughout your land, and it shall besiege you in all your towns throughout your land

which the LORD your God has given you. Then you shall eat the offspring of your own body, the flesh of your sons and of your daughters whom the LORD your God has given you, during the siege and the distress by which your enemy shall oppress you.”

(Deuteronomy 28:49–53)

Every seven years the priests were to read that Book of the Law to the people lest they forget these solemn warnings. But in time those horrific threats lost their power to incite fear in the hearts of the people. The writer of 2 Chron. describes the unholy conditions of Judah in their latter days:

“...all the officials of the priests and the people were very unfaithful following all the abominations of the nations; and they defiled the house of the LORD which He had sanctified in Jerusalem. And the LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place; but they continually mocked the messengers of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, until there was no remedy.” (2 Chronicles 36:14–16)

2 Kings 25 tells us that in the ninth year of King Zedekiah the Lord did indeed bring upon Judah that long-threatened “nation from afar.” Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, brought his armies to Jerusalem and lay siege against it. For sixteen long months the people of Jerusalem desperately fought off the onslaught, but at last in 587 BC the Babylonian army broke through the wall and the slaughter began:

“Therefore He brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or infirm; He gave them all into his hand.” (2 Chronicles 36:17)

King Zedekiah and his men of war sought to escape; but Zedekiah was captured and the last thing he was allowed to see before being blinded was the execution of his sons.

On the 7th day of the 5th month the Babylonian captain returned to Jerusalem and proceeded to destroy everything—the house of the Lord, the king’s palace, and the houses of Jerusalem. The walls of the city were reduced to rubble and the treasures of the house of the Lord were carried away as spoil. The people who remained, except for poorest of the land, were carried away as exiles to Babylon.

It was a time of unimaginable pain, grief, and despair for those who lived to talk about it. Jeremiah’s Lamentations were written to give voice to that pain and to describe it in four alphabetical acrostic poems and a final prayer.

Now that we’ve look at the backstory, let’s look at...

The Story of Jerusalem’s Desolation

In the Lamentations we hear the horrors of Jerusalem’s Desolation. (6 min)

We are given vivid pictures of the suffering of the invasion.

Extreme violence & death everywhere

*“They ravished the women in Zion, The virgins in the cities of Judah. Princes were hung by their hands; Elders were not respected.” (Lamentations 5:11–12)
In the street the sword slays; In the house it is like death.” (Lamentations 1:20)*

Thousands taken into captivity

*Her little ones have gone away As captives before the adversary.” (Lamentations 1:5)
We have become orphans without a father, Our mothers are like widows.” (Lamentations 5:2–3)*

People so desperate for survival they even resort to cannibalism.

*“The hands of compassionate women Boiled their own children; They became food for them Because of the destruction of the daughter of my people.”
(Lamentations 4:10)*

We are given vivid pictures of the suffering in the aftermath of the invasion.

Israel’s inheritance has become the possession of her enemies

“Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, Our houses to aliens.” (Lam 5:2).

The glory of the city has been taken away.

*“How lonely sits the city That was full of people! She has become like a widow Who was once great among the nations! She who was a princess among the provinces Has become a forced laborer!”
(Lamentations 1:1)*

“And all her majesty Has departed from the daughter of Zion;” (Lamentations 1:6)

The features of a thriving city are no more.

“Elders are gone from the gate, Young men from their music. The joy of our hearts has ceased; Our dancing has been turned into mourning.” (Lamentations 5:14–15)

The temple has been reduced to rubble and the joyous holy festivals have ceased to exist.

*“The adversary has stretched out his hand Over all her precious things, For she has seen the nations enter her sanctuary, The ones whom Thou didst command That they should not enter into Thy congregation.”
(Lamentations 1:10)*

“The roads of Zion are in mourning Because no one comes to the appointed feasts. All her gates are

desolate; Her priests are groaning, Her virgins are afflicted, And she herself is bitter.” (Lamentations 1:4)

The lives of the remaining inhabitants are now considered as worthless.

“The precious sons of Zion, Weighed against fine gold, How they are regarded as earthen jars, The work of a potter’s hands!” (Lamentations 4:2)

They live on the verge of starvation.

Their once-healthy bodies now suffer emaciation from a lack of food.

Their appearance is blacker than soot, They are not recognized in the streets; Their skin is shriveled on their bones, It is withered, it has become like wood.” (Lamentations 4:7–9)

People are forced surrender their valuables for food.

“All her people groan seeking bread; They have given their precious things for food To restore their lives themselves.” (Lamentations 1:11)

They have to pay for basic necessities of life.

“We have to pay for our drinking water, Our wood comes to us at a price.” (Lamentations 5:4)

They must even risk their lives just to get food.

“We get our bread at the risk of our lives Because of the sword in the wilderness.” (Lamentations 5:9)

Mother’s lose their will to live and take care of their children.

“Even jackals offer the breast, They nurse their young; But the daughter of my people has become cruel Like ostriches in the wilderness. The tongue of the infant cleaves To the roof of its mouth because of thirst; The little ones ask for bread, But no one breaks it for them.” (Lamentations 4:3–4)

Innocent children are dying from starvation.

“They say to their mothers, “Where is grain 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.” (Lamentations 2:12)

They live under oppression.

Slaves that once served them and now their lords.

“Slaves rule over us; There is no one to deliver us from their hand.” (Lamentations 5:8)

Young people must do the work of animals or slaves and are burdened beyond their strength.

“Young men worked at the grinding mill; And youths stumbled under loads of wood.” (Lamentations 5:13)

And they must endure the mockery of the enemy.

“All who pass along the way Clap their hands in derision at you; They hiss and shake their heads At the daughter of Jerusalem, “Is this the city of which they said, ‘The perfection of beauty, A joy to all the earth?’” (Lamentations 2:15)

They gloat over their victory.

They hiss and gnash their teeth. They say, “We have swallowed her up! Surely this is the day for which we waited; We have reached it, we have seen it.”

(Lamentations 2:16)

Populations are so reduced that the city becomes the haunt of jackals or foxes.

“Because of Mount Zion which lies desolate, Foxes prowl in it.” (Lamentations 5:18)

In the city there was nothing but bitter tears and pain; and there was “no one to comfort.”

“She weeps bitterly in the night, And her tears are on her cheeks; She has none to comfort her Among all her lovers. All her friends have dealt treacherously with her; They have become her enemies.” (Lamentations 1:2)

And all that they can do at first is cry out for the Lord and those who pass by to see and sympathize.

Look and see if there is any pain like my pain Which was severely dealt out to me” (Lamentations 1:12)

All these verses give a word-portrait of unimaginable anguish and pain. It describes the horrors of Jerusalem’s Desolation. But why did the people of the Lord have to suffer so?

In the Lamentations we hear the causes of Jerusalem’s desolation.

All this devastation results from Jerusalem’s persistent unfaithfulness and sin. The narrator of the opening Lamentation writes:

“Her adversaries have become her masters, Her enemies prosper; For the LORD has caused her grief Because of the multitude of her transgressions;” (Lamentations 1:5)

How bad was it? The prophet answers:

“For the iniquity of the daughter of my people Is greater than the sin of Sodom, Which was overthrown as in a moment, And no hands were turned toward her.” (Lamentations 4:6)

Israel had enjoyed the unique place of being the bride of the Lord. In Jeremiah we read how He “took her by the hand” and how He “was a husband to her.” (Jer. 31). But bride of the Lord cheated on Him and committed adultery with foreign gods.

“Her uncleanness was in her skirts; She did not consider her future; Therefore she has fallen astonishingly; She has no comforter.” (Lamentations 1:9)

Consequently suffering Jerusalem can only confess her guilt:
My heart is overturned within me, For I have been very rebellious. (Lam. 1:20)

She must admit He did nothing to cause this; she must confess:
“The LORD is righteous; For I have rebelled against His command; (Lamentations 1:18)

But the Lamentations are even more specific in describing the causes of Jerusalem’s unfaithfulness.

She listened to the wrong teachers.

“Your prophets have seen for you False and foolish visions; And they have not exposed your iniquity So as to restore you from captivity, But they have seen for you false and misleading oracles.” (Lamentations 2:14)

Their falsity could have been known by their wicked fruit. Judgment came...

“Because of the sins of her prophets And the iniquities of her priests, Who have shed in her midst The blood of the righteous,” (Lamentations 4:13)

Even though prophets like Jeremiah had warned her, she lived in denial.

“The kings of the earth did not believe, Nor did any of the inhabitants of the world, That the adversary and the enemy Could enter the gates of Jerusalem.”

(Lamentations 4:12)

She relied upon the wrong people.

They trusted in her human king rather than her divine king to protect and deliver them.

“The breath of our nostrils, the LORD’s anointed, Was captured in their pits, Of whom we had said, “Under his shadow We shall live among the nations.”

(Lamentations 4:20)

They trusted in her alliances with foreign nation, her friends.

“She weeps bitterly in the night, And her tears are on her cheeks; She has none to comfort her Among all her lovers. All her friends have dealt treacherously with her; They have become her enemies.” (Lamentations 1:2)

But now she recognizes that all of this is not merely the misfortune of being at the wrong place at the wrong time. It is the Lord’s doing; it is His punishment for her sin!

“The LORD has accomplished His wrath, He has poured out His fierce anger; And He has kindled a fire in Zion Which has consumed its foundations.” (Lamentations 4:11)

“Is it nothing to all you who pass this way? Look and see if there is any pain like my pain Which was severely dealt out to me, Which the LORD inflicted on the day of His fierce anger.

“From on high He sent fire into my bones, And it prevailed over them; He has spread a net for my feet; He has turned me back; He has made me desolate, Faint all day long. “The yoke of my transgressions is bound; By His hand they are knit together; They have come upon my neck; He has made my strength fail; The Lord has given me into the hands Of those against whom I am not able to stand. “The Lord has rejected all my strong men In my midst; He has called an appointed time against me To crush my young men; The Lord has trodden as in a wine press The virgin daughter of Judah.”

(Lamentations 1:12–15)

And all of it is the fulfillment of the words the Lord had spoken long ago. They had been fairly warned!

Consequently she can only ask the Lord to look upon with compassion at what she considers to be unprecedented suffering, and suffering that was scandalous and shocking.

“See, O LORD, and look! With whom hast Thou dealt thus? Should women eat their offspring, The little ones who were born healthy? Should priest and prophet be slain In the sanctuary of the Lord?” (Lamentations 2:20)

And her only consolation at first is only the thought that these enemies will at last get what is coming to them.

“Oh, that Thou wouldst bring the day which Thou hast proclaimed, That they may become like me.” (Lamentations 1:21)

So we might ask, “if this punishment was so deserved, was there any hope for the suffering city? Was this the end of it all? What could one learn from horrid experience?”

In Lamentations we hear the lessons of Jerusalem’s desolation (5 min)

In the third Lamentation the speaker, apparently Jeremiah, speaks personally about the suffering. He too had suffered so much prior to the invasion at the hand of his brethren; and in addition, he suffered the grief of seeing his predictions fulfilled. Some think he stands here as a representative of all the Lord’s people.

He writes:

“I AM the man who has seen affliction Because of the rod of His wrath.” (Lamentations 3:1)

Jeremiah describes his desperate conditions:

Walking constantly in the darkness (3:2)
Experiencing constant blows from the Lord (3:3)
Himself besieged and surrounded with bitterness and hardship (3:6)
Living what could only be called a living death (3:6)
He feels trapped with no way of escape (3:7,9)
Unable to get an answer from the Lord (3:8)
Like the victim of the lion or bear waiting to kill its prey (3:10-11)
Like the target of a warrior who has shot arrows deep into his body (3:12-13)
Mocked and laughed at by others (3:14)
Living on a diet of bitterness (3:15)
Breaking his teeth on gravel and lying in the dust (3:16)
He is so laden with burdens that he falls under their weight crying out:
My strength has perished and so has my hope from the Lord.” (3:18)

Yet amazingly in the midst of his suffering, the prophet had found a pathway to hope, a path that he now shares with his suffering fellow-Jews.

It is a hope that is based on spiritual remembrance (3:21) Jeremiah found hope in the character of God. He found hope...

In the lovingkindness of God
The Lord’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease (Lam. 3:22)

The Hebrew *hesed* conveys the idea of the Lord’s covenantal loyalty and faithfulness to His people.

In the compassion of God

For His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; (Lamentations 3:22-23)

The Hebrew *raham* conveys his willingness to show mercy instead of punish.

In the faithfulness of God

Great is Thy faithfulness. (Lam. 3:23)

From the Hebrew *’emunah* referring to the trustworthiness of God.

In the provision of God

“The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “Therefore I have hope in Him.” (Lamentations 3:24)

The idea is that the prophet found in the Lord all that he needed. It had been a special promise to the priests.

From those experiences he revealed a way of thinking in suffering that would ameliorate the pain and through which one may even profit from the experience.

He affirmed that there was still “goodness” in the world. In the “tet” section, the prophet begins his sentence with the same word, “tov” or “good.”

First he affirms that the Lord is good.

The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the person who seeks Him.

Second it is good to wait patiently for the Lord’s deliverance.

It is good that he waits silently for the salvation of the Lord. (Lam. 3:25-26)

Third he affirms that even suffering can be “good.”

It is good for a man that he should bear the yoke in his youth.

Thus he urges his readers to face suffering with patient acceptance.

Let him sit alone and be silent since He has laid it on him. Let him put his mouth in the dust, perhaps there is hope. Let him give his cheek to the smiter; Let him be filled with reproach. (Lamentations 3:27-30)

He urges his readers to understand that it is not the primary nature of God to punish; and that their sufferings need not be permanent.

“For the Lord will not reject forever, For if He causes grief, Then He will have compassion According to His abundant lovingkindness. For He does not afflict willingly, Or grieve the sons of men. To crush under His feet All the prisoners of the land, To deprive a man of justice In the presence of the Most High, To defraud a man in his lawsuit— Of these things the Lord does not approve.” (Lamentations 3:31–36)

And finally urges them to see that it is all under God’s ultimate control.

“Who is there who speaks and it comes to pass, Unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High That both good and ill go forth?”

(Lamentations 3:37–38)

So then Jeremiah offers his experience as an example for the whole nation. He offers them a path out of that devastation and the way to restoration.

And so we could say that the lessons of Jerusalem’s desolation give hope for a solution.

In Lamentations we hear the solution to Jerusalem’s desolation.

Jeremiah now on the basis of what he knows about the Lord and about suffering makes an appeal to his fellow-Jews to apply these principles to their situation.

He encourages them to realize that they have no basis to complain in view of their sins (3:39). Instead he exhorts them:

“Let us examine and probe our ways, And let us return to the LORD.” (Lamentations 3:40)

He leads them in the confession of sin and a petition for divine help in view of the magnitude of their sufferings.

“We lift up our heart and hands Toward God in heaven; We have transgressed and rebelled, Thou hast not pardoned. Thou hast covered Thyself with anger And pursued us; Thou hast slain and hast not spared.” (Lamentations 3:41–43)

Finally he once more in identification with the suffering of the people expresses his pain and pleads the cause of those who like him have suffered so much. And he expresses the confidence that the Lord will answer that prayer bring judgment upon the enemies!

“Thou wilt recompense them, O LORD, According to the work of their hands. Thou wilt give them hardness of heart, Thy curse will be on them. Thou wilt pursue them in anger and destroy them From under the heavens of the LORD!” (Lamentations 3:64–66)

Of course the suffering was not over; but Jeremiah had offered an answer. After continuing to express their grief in the fourth lamentation, we hear the anguished pleas of the people to the Lord in the final prayer of Lamentations 5.

Though Israel had forgotten the somber warnings of punishment contained in the Law, perhaps at last they remembered the final words from Moses’ discourse in Deuteronomy.

“SO it shall be when all of these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind in all nations where the LORD your God has banished you, and you return to the LORD your God and obey Him with all your heart and soul according to all that I command you today, you and your sons, then the LORD your God will restore you from captivity, and have compassion on you, and will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you.” (Deuteronomy 30:1–3)

And in that remembrance and with the prophet’s encouragement, they can at least hope that this is not the end of it all.

They affirm that God still rules.

“Thou, O LORD, dost rule forever; Thy throne is from generation to generation.” (Lamentations 5:19)

They anticipate the end of his wrath. They ask...

“Why dost Thou forget us forever; Why dost Thou forsake us so long?” (Lamentations 5:20)

They plead with the Lord.

“REMEMBER, O LORD, what has befallen us; Look, and see our reproach!” (Lamentations 5:1)

“Restore us to Thee, O LORD, that we may be restored; Renew our days as of old,” (Lamentations 5:21)

Responding to the Story of Jerusalem’s Desolation

The message of Lamentations speaks powerfully to the modern reader and offers valuable insights to those who listen faithfully to its message.

It makes us powerfully aware of the wrath of the Lord.

People in our world have fallen in love with “half a God.” They like the God of grace, mercy, and compassion, but refuse to acknowledge the God of wrath.

Of course, as Jeremiah points out, wrath is not the primary display of God’s nature; yet it would be a serious mistake to ignore it. Those in covenant with God need to seriously reflect upon the warnings of the NT about that. Just read the book of Hebrews and see the consequences of breaking covenant with God.

“For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, “VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY.” And again, “THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE.” It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (Hebrews 10:26–31)

It reminds us that sin has consequences.

As J. Sidow Baxter well said, “High calling, flaunted by low living, inevitably issues in deep suffering.”

I’m amazed at those who cannot conceive of a God who would punish people in Gehenna. How can one read of the horrific suffering described in the book of Lamentations and not acknowledge the possibility that the pain and suffering of Gehenna are real? In fact, it might be seen as a preview of that place which Jesus described as a place of “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

It reminds us that we have a God who seeks to restore us to Him when we fall.

He is a God of patience, goodness, faithfulness, compassion, and lovingkindness to His people.

Even when the Lord punishes, it is evidence that He cares about His people. He is committed to their salvation; and thus there is hope for the fallen.

And the Lord’s commitment manifested itself by placing the greatest of sufferings upon His own innocent Son for our sakes. (There were often times in reading the suffering of the wicked Jews in

Lamentations, that I heard echoes of those standing around the cross. Of course their sufferings were deserved; His were vicarious. Indeed as Isaiah said:

“Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed.” (Isaiah 53:4–5)

The Hebrew writer portrays him as a pleading priest praying with loud crying and tears to the Lord, not to save Himself, but to save those for whom he was dying:

“In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety. Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation,” (Hebrews 5:7–9)

Conclusion:

May our study of Lamentations give us insight into the Lord in our moments of pain. May we not lose faith in the lovingkindness, faithfulness, goodness, and compassion of the Lord of Lamentations. He is our Lord too! Let us face our sins with humility and contrition, openly confessing them to the Lord in real repentance and seeking restoration to Him. Let us show others the path from suffering to salvation, from despair to hope.

There’s not much that Calvin has written that I would want to quote, but his prayer based on Lamentations is insightful: “Grant, Almighty God, that though you chastise us as we deserve, we may yet never have the light of truth extinguished among us, but may ever see, even in darkness, at least some sparks, which may enable us to behold your paternal goodness and mercy, so that we may be especially humbled under your mighty hand, and that being really prostrate through a deep feeling of repentance, we may raise our hopes to Heaven, and never doubt that you will at length be reconciled to us when we seek you in your only-begotten Son.” (Altered from an old English translation, jdf)