

The Lamentations of Jeremiah

The Tears of a Prophet

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.--Psalm 137:1

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Jeremiah's experiences were enough to make anyone depressed. He was an unpopular prophet with an unpopular message. He was rejected, opposed, put in an abandoned well, and exiled to Egypt; yet he persisted in delivering a message in which he had no pleasure. Yes, Jeremiah had every reason to be depressed. Hard as it might have been to say, he counseled non-resistance to the impending Babylonian invasion and acceptance of it as punishment from God for their sins.

The book of Jeremiah is not only a written prophetic message. It contains the autobiography of the prophet's life. The book is not altogether forlorn. It narrates a classic tale of sin and its consequences, ensuing chastisements, gracious forgiveness, and ultimate restoration with its rewards. Yet despite the upbeat tone of much of the latter part of the book, Jeremiah is known as the prophet of doom.

While the prophecy that bears his name includes much biographical information, it is in the book of Lamentations that we find his heart and the deep anguish he feels about Israel's captivity. Here the prophet's sorrows interpret the sorrows of the Jews and through them, the sorrows of all mankind.

The Book of Lamentations

The book of Lamentations {FOOTNOTE: This book is not to be confused with the book mentioned in 2 Chronicles 25:35, "And Jeremiah lamented for Josiah: and all the singing men and the singing women spake of Josiah in their lamentations to this day, and made them an ordinance in Israel: and, behold, they are written in the lamentations." Lamentations were frequently composed for the dead and that lament was for Josiah, while this is for the fall of Zedekiah.} is one of the longest and best examples of Hebrew poetry in the Bible. In fact, many commentators consider it to be, not one, but five separate connected poems by the same author (Jeremiah).

A reporter documents things as they are. A commentator seeks to make sense of these realities. A prophet predicts things as they will be. But it takes a poet to speak the language of the heart. As the author of *The Expositor's Bible* expresses it, "Poetry will not fit exact answers to set questions, for poetry is not science; but poetry will open deaf ears and anoint blind eyes to receive the voices and visions that haunt the depths of experience."

The story is told of a young boy who saw an old man sitting on his steps and weeping. The boy went and sat beside the man for a few minutes before returning to his mother. She asked him what he was doing. He replied, "I was just helping him cry." That is exactly what Jeremiah is doing in the Book of Lamentations: he is helping Israel cry.

The book is not philosophic in tone. It does not probe the nature of suffering nor answer the question of why God permits evil. He leaves such theological meditations to others, such one finds in the Book of Job. In Lamentations he shows a sorrowing heart that identifies itself with others so burdened.

The Structure of the Book

Lamentations is an acrostic poem. Each chapter contains twenty-two verses, except for the middle chapter which has sixty-six. Each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet; chapter three consecutively uses each letter three times producing sixty-six verses. The meter of

Hebrew poetry does not consist of rhyming lines containing equal syllables but in couplets of comparable thoughts. The lone exception is the last chapter which seemingly breaks away from the meter and slips into prose.````.

There is a lesson for the Christian in this formal structure. People who undergo great stress and moments of deep grief have a tendency to voice themselves somewhat incoherently and with disconnected thoughts. Their inner pain is too great to compose themselves. Jeremiah, on the contrary, took the time to organize his troubled mind and write rationally. Only those who have control over their own emotions and then, only with the help of earnest prayer, can do likewise.

But the meter of the last chapter breaks down, as if Jeremiah, in his deep grief, is no longer able to contain himself and ends his lament by just pouring out his heart. How well we can all identify with him in our own moments of deep sorrow and depression!

In the original text of the Hebrew Bible, which named books according to the first word they contained, the original name of Lamentations was “How.” This word not only opens the book, but also the other two single-acrostic chapters, two and four.

“How” is a fitting word to begin these words of woe. Consider the difference between these two English expressions used to express sympathy: “That is sad” or “How sad!” The latter expresses an intensification of feeling while the former is a mere statement of fact.

The Setting

“How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people! How is she become as a widow! She that was great among the nations, and princess among the provinces, how is she become tributary! She weepeth sore in the night, and her tears are on her cheeks: among all her lovers she hath none to comfort her: all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they are become her enemies.”—Lamentations 1:1,2

Just outside the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem rises a hill with a small recess, giving it a vague likeness to a human skull. This place has been widely identified as Golgotha, the site of the crucifixion of Jesus. This cave-like recess is popularly known as “Jeremiah’s Grotto.” It is a common tradition that it was here that Jeremiah composed the poem we call Lamentations. While there is no solid archaeological evidence to support this claim, neither is there any evidence to dispute it.

From here he would have had an excellent view of his beloved Jerusalem with its embattled walls, clustered homes and, towering in the distance, the magnificent Temple erected over four centuries earlier by King Solomon. How meaningful it would have been to the prophet to see the thriving capital of Judea which he knew only too well would soon lie in ruins. And how fitting, centuries later near that same spot, for the Christian world to mourn over the death of the Messiah—mourn for his suffering, but at the same time, rejoice over the salvation bought by his death.

The Cause of Israel’s Punishment

“Her adversaries are the chief, her enemies prosper; for the LORD hath afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions: her children are gone into captivity before the enemy.” —Lamentations 1:5

In the opening chapter Jeremiah acknowledges that the tribulations are justified because of the manifold sins of Israel. Jerusalem’s foes could do naught against her without the Lord’s permission. Therefore the prophet rightly assigns the cause of the impending defeat, not to the overwhelming power of the Babylonian forces, but to Jehovah as the chastiser of his people. This he reiterates in verses 8, 9, 14, 17, 18, and 20.

For Christians also, it is not so much the difficulties in which they find themselves as it is the realization that they are to blame for their own tribulations which is why they feel depressed. It is this stage of Jeremiah's lament that he feels at his lowest ebb.

The Totality of the Desolation

In the next chapter, Jeremiah bemoans the totality of the desolation. Zion is spoken of as being cast down from heaven to earth (vs. 1); the temple is spoken of as broken down like a garden hedge (vs. 6, *Amplified*); the feast days and Sabbaths are forgotten (vs. 6); the altar is cut off (vs. 7); the law is no more and the prophet is cut off (vs. 9); and Jerusalem is scorned by all nations (vs. 15).

The contrast between the glory that was Jerusalem and the future that Jeremiah saw lying ahead could not be sharper. Remembering the former days, made the bitterness of what was to come seem so much greater. It is reminiscent of the despair Queen Esther felt when, called by Mordecai to intercede with the king on behalf of Israel, she bemoaned the fact that Ahasuerus had not bidden her for thirty days (Esther 4:11).

Similarly, Christians, when recalling their past closeness with their Lord, feel the pangs of estrangement, and that for their own shortcomings; they find those lost memories doubly depressing.

But, like the good queen, courage must be summoned and the approach of prayer made. Although it be with the hesitancy of Esther, who put on her royal apparel to impress the king, and stood meekly by in the inner court, she found her lord not as foreboding as she feared: "And it was so, when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, that she obtained favor in his sight: and the king held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. So Esther drew near, and touched the top of the scepter. Then said the king unto her, What wilt thou, queen Esther? and what is thy request? it shall be even given thee to the half of the kingdom" (Esther 5:2,3).

The Horrors of War

America's Civil War general, William Tecumseh Sherman, is quoted as saying, "War is hell." Jeremiah foresaw the heinousness of war in his lament over the fate of Jerusalem. He describes the fierceness of the children's hunger: "They that be slain with the sword are better than they that be slain with hunger: for these pine away, stricken through for want of the fruits of the field" (Lamentation 4:9). In the next verse he describes the desperation that caused mothers to eat their own children. Slavery was their lot (5:5,13). Women were raped (5:11). Indeed, as the prophet closes his mournful dirge, "Thou hast utterly rejected us; thou art very wroth against us" (Lamentations 5:22).

With such impending tragedies, it was little wonder that Jeremiah was depressed and in tears.

A Perished Hope Restored

"And I said, My strength and my hope is perished from the LORD: Remembering mine affliction and my misery, the wormwood and the gall. My soul hath them still in remembrance, and is humbled in me. This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope."—Lamentations 3:18-21

It is the middle chapter of Lamentations where we find a favorite verse in this book. The prophet found hope in his time of need, as do Christians in their discouragements and depressions. The forerunner of this hope lies in the fact that the prophet was humbled, not embittered, by the trials ahead of him. What follows are beautiful words of comfort: "It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness. The LORD is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him. The LORD is

good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him. It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the LORD.”—Lamentations 3:22-26.

No matter how bad a situation, it could be worse. The hardest chastisement is better than the loss of everything. Jeremiah threw Israel on the promised compassions of the Almighty. As the psalmist wrote: “Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off” (Psalm 139:2).

Rather than lament what has been taken from us, let us rejoice in what we still have. This was the prophet’s hope, and this is the Christian’s hope. But the father of hope is patience—not just simple patience, but a quiet and uncomplaining wait for relief from the chastisement. As the apostle writes, “Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby” (Hebrews 12:11).

Chastisement Is Good for the Young

“It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. He sitteth alone and keepeth silence, because he hath borne it upon him. He putteth his mouth in the dust; if so be there may be hope. He giveth his cheek to him that smiteth him: he is filled full with reproach.”—Lamentations 3:27-30

Jeremiah probably particularly addresses the youth because they would have been among the most zealous to oppose the invaders. Nevertheless, his advice is sound for all young people. The earlier we learn to deal with discipline and internalize its lessons, the easier it will be for us throughout life. As the wise man put it, “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6).

So strong is Jeremiah’s message that he even advises eating dust, as it were, and accepting the smiter’s rod, if it provides hope of eventual reconciliation. Jeremiah was largely disregarded by his contemporaries because he counseled the ready acceptance of Jerusalem’s punishment for their sins at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar’s invading army.

Correction, Not Punishment

“For the Lord will not cast off for ever: But though he cause grief, yet will he have compassion according to the multitude of his mercies. For he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men. To crush under his feet all the prisoners of the earth, To turn aside the right of a man before the face of the most High, To subvert a man in his cause, the Lord approveth not.”—Lamentations 3:31-36

Jeremiah concluded his soliloquy of hope by expressing his full confidence that the disciplines of the Lord were temporary, that they were intended as corrective measures more than for punitive purposes.

It is not, nor has it ever been, God’s desire to crush man or to deny his right of appeal through prayer. Here is how the Septuagint renders the final verse of this section: “To condemn a man unjustly in his judgment, the Lord has not given commandment.”

Yes, God is wholly just, and his justice is tempered with mercy. Thus, in the deepest of our trials, we can say, “I will neither murmur nor repine, for faith can firmly trust him, come what may.”