

SESSION #44

LAMENTATIONS

1. Setting

The author of this book is uncertain but is generally thought to be Jeremiah. As in many cases with Bible books, the name of this one reveals much about the contents. It is an outpouring of grief over the destruction of Jerusalem and is, of course, written after the fall of the city and the deportation of Judah to Babylon. Because his beloved city has been destroyed, the author looks back on that event with mourning, lamenting, and weeping.

Consequently, this book has sometimes been called “*A Sea of Sobs*”. Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, would certainly be a suitable author for such a book.

You may remember from our last session that Jeremiah’s prophecy was mostly written before the fall of Jerusalem, warning the people over and over that this terrible event was coming and pleading with them to get ready, repent! Having now come past that tragic time there is no point in further warnings; there is only tremendous sorrow. A mourning over Jerusalem’s judgment for sin. Then a confession of his own sin and on behalf of his people. And, as we have seen so many times in the OT, this author includes a ray of hope even in the “sea of sobs”.

2. Structure

This book is the most highly structured book in the entire Bible. The author gives us five poems in the form of elegies – sad, melancholic themes. Lamentations is, therefore, more a book of poetry than a book of prophecy. The deep grief that permeates these poems has led some to call this book the “*Pentateuch of Pain*.” The five chapters here parallel the five books of Moses in this sense.

Each poem is a chapter in the book. And right away you’ll notice something unusual: each chapter is 22 verses long except chapter 3 which is three times longer, 66 verses. Obviously, the author has structured this book with extreme care and precision.

Not only that, but each of the first four chapters is an acrostic in the Hebrew alphabet which consists of 22 letters. So in chapters 1, 2 and 4, the shorter chapters, each verse begins with a word whose first letter is successively one of 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. In chapter three, the alphabet acrostic is picked up in every third verse.

Chapter 5 is slightly different and is not a Hebrew acrostic because the content is a special prayer.

Some scholars describe the poetic meter as a limping meter, with three beats in the first line trailing away in a mourning two-beat line. So when Lamentations was read out loud, the chanting of the Hebrew text in this limping meter would have reflected the sorrowful mood of the words.

Chapter 1, or elegy 1: Jerusalem's Plight. Here the author takes the voice of the city of Jerusalem and expresses the deep grief which Jerusalem itself is feeling.

Chapter 2 (Elegy 2): Jehovah's Anger. This poem describes the cause of this tragedy: God's judgment has fallen in anger on this beloved city because of the sin of the people of Judah.

Chapter 3 (Elegy 3): Jeremiah's grief. This long poem describes how the author himself feels. His heart is broken and his eyes are weeping. Nevertheless, in the middle of this grief, there is a wonderful expression of hope.

In spite of so much sorrow and pain, in the heart of the heart of these five elegies is this amazing statement, which you have probably heard at some time or other perhaps without even knowing this comes in the book of Lamentations. 3:21 – 24 –

“This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. (Why?) Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. ‘The LORD is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘Therefore I hope in Him!’” The well-known Christian hymn, *“Great is Thy Faithfulness”* comes from this verse.

In the midst of all this weeping, and lamenting, sorrow and grief over what has happened, there can be a wonderful sense of hope in the midst of the grief because God is ultimately the Faithful One. Surely that is absolutely true. Jeremiah recognizes that

God is punishing them now, but He is still a God of love and mercy and faithfulness. And that truth provides us too with a reason to hope in the midst of our own times of grief.

Chapter 4 (Elegy 4): Jehovah's anger defended. This parallels Elegy #2 where Jehovah's anger was described. Sin is a just cause of punishment and God is right in bringing judgment on His sinful people.

Chapter 5 (Elegy 5): Jerusalem's Prayer. Jeremiah voices a prayer on behalf of Jerusalem. Here again there is a parallel with Elegy #1. This prayer pleads with God to have mercy on His people.

This unusual book, with its honest outpouring of grief, can help us learn how best to deal with our own grief in the hard times of life. Jeremiah doesn't bottle up his sorrow; he expresses it fully to God.

At the same time, he avoids drowning in 'the sea of sobs' by recalling the reason for hope: God is utterly faithful. It's a timeless truth, just as valuable for us as it was for Jeremiah.

Our next session deals with a brave, practical theologian with boundless energy, the prophet Ezekiel.
