

Lamentations - A lament

Too often in recent years we have seen a picture of a weeping woman sitting in the ruins of her house, her possessions destroyed and her husband and children dead. Behind are blackened timbers and piles of rubble. We cannot help but weep with her in her distress.

That is exactly the story behind Lamentations. The prophet Jeremiah sits in the smoking ruins of Jerusalem and relives the horrors of the Babylonian siege. It had been a desperate eighteen months. As the enemy armies approached, people from the countryside had flocked into Jerusalem for safety, bringing their families and possessions. Soon the city was bursting at the seams. Every house was overflowing, and tents and shelters filled the streets.

There was enough water from the Gihon spring, but soon there was no wood left to light fires to cook the dwindling supplies of grain. Like Ezekiel in Babylon lying on his side, imitating the conditions in Jerusalem, they had to cook with dried dung, and ration every handful of wheat and pulse. Sewage could no longer be taken outside the city through the dung gate. Unwashed and hungry, disease broke out, and dysentery, smallpox and typhoid spread quickly. The dead bodies accumulated, adding to those killed by arrows and slingstones. Weakened by starvation, the soldiers could no longer fight off the well-fed Babylonians. Eventually the city wall was breached. The wretched people were cut down by the sword, the women raped, and their children marched off as slaves. The walls were thrown down into the Kidron valley, and the gates and houses burnt with fire.

Jeremiah had lived all through that horror. Protected by the Lord in the king's prison, he had been fed with bread by the king's command, but when the end came, he saw the blood run and the city in flames.

A Lament is usually a poem to commemorate the death of a public hero. We are familiar with David's lament over Saul and Jonathan, and we know Jeremiah composed a lament at the death of King Josiah. The book called Lamentations is a lament for Jerusalem.

A Striking Poem

The poem is much more striking in Hebrew than when it has been translated into English. It is constructed like a pyramid. Chapter one is from the point of view of Jerusalem, represented as a woman. Chapter two is God's point of view as the righteous judge. Chapter three expresses the feelings of the poet. Chapter four is God's view again, and chapter five is the final prayer of the people of Jerusalem.

So, the structure is A B C B A, with a peak in the middle. But it is also an acrostic, that is to say, each verse in chapter one starts with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet – Aleph, Beth, Gimel, Daleth etc. Each verse has three separate statements, all related. As there are 22 letters, there are 22 verses. Chapter two is the same, with an odd twist – letters 16 and 17 are transposed, to make you feel uneasy, as if there is something drastically wrong. In chapter three, the rhythm changes. Each verse has only one statement, but there are three verses for each letter of the alphabet, as the prophet's agony reaches a peak of intensity. Then in chapter four he returns to the acrostic with a twist in it, but with

only two statements in each verse, as his emotion becomes spent. Finally, chapter five has no acrostic, just 22 verses. He has reached a point of resolution. Nothing will ever be the same again, but God is still there, and life must go on. Sometimes, as in Lamentations 1:1-11a, the poet is a commentator, seeing and reporting. Sometimes, as in 1:11b-16 he writes in the first person, as the daughter of Jerusalem. And in chapter three he writes as himself, Jeremiah the prophet, thus:, verse 1 – *“I am the man ...”* Modern translations sometimes mark these changes of person.

See the brilliant similes Jeremiah uses to convey his pain. In Lamentations 1:1, 2 - the city is a young widow. Her husband has died. She weeps in the night. When everyone else is asleep she is wide awake, unable to come to terms with her loss. Those of you who have lost close family will know this feeling of despair.

Verse 6 pictures the princes as harts chased by hunters, panting, trembling, too weak to continue.

In verses 10-12 enemy soldiers have penetrated and destroyed the Temple itself. The people trade their jewels and gold for a morsel of food. “Is there any sorrow like mine?” Jerusalem cries.

In verse 15, in another figure of speech, the Lord has trodden the grapes in the winepress – the virgin daughter of Jerusalem is the grapes. She admits, verse 18, that she deserved what had happened. She does not blame the Babylonians. God is bringing the troubles upon his rebellious people. But her sorrow is too much to bear.

Jeremiah Has No Ill Feelings

You could expect that Jeremiah might shrug his shoulders at the fate of the princes. These men had persecuted him, refused to listen to his warnings, and

continued their evil ways unrepentant to the end. He could have written to the unresponsive people “I told you so!” But like David in his Lament for Saul, he is magnanimous. He loves his nation. He loves the city where he had lived so long. He is without fault himself, yet he shoulders the sins of his people as if he were one with them. He feels in himself the disgrace of seeing the Temple of Solomon in ruins, and the streets empty and silent. In verse 20-22 he speaks from his heart. That generosity of spirit we see too in Jesus as he prays for his persecutors - *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!”*

Chapter Three

Let us turn to chapter three, the peak of the pyramid. Here we have Jeremiah the prophet speaking of his own sufferings. Look carefully, and you can see this chapter is based on the time he spent in the cistern underneath the city, lowered there by his enemies to die in the mud. See Jeremiah 38:6. Compare this with Lamentations 3:1-9, which has him shut away in darkness, surrounded by stone walls. Verses 52-55 relives those nightmare hours when he sank slowly into the mud, and however loud he cried, nobody heard. Verse 8 shows how he prayed, but God did not hear. Notice how he attributes his sufferings to God, not to the princes. God has allowed it to happen to him.

The irony is, that God had promised him that he would preserve his life – see Jeremiah 15:20, 21. But now he had fallen into his enemies’ hands, and his life was ebbing away. There is a difference between the daughter of Jerusalem in chapters 1 and 2, and Jeremiah in chapter 3. She deserved her punishment. But he was guiltless. He had done his duty to God without fault, and now he was dying for his faith.

Now look again at your margin in Lamentations 3, if you have one. See how many times Jeremiah is quoting from Job – verses 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 12, 13 – at least ten allusions. As the hours passed slowly in the darkness, Jeremiah was reciting to himself the words of Job. Job, too, had had the same experience. He was made to endure suffering, when he had done nothing wrong.

Now look again, and you will see the Lord Jesus in this chapter, too. Verse 1 speaks of the rod that smote him. Verse 5 refers to the bitter gall they gave him to drink. Verse 14 has him derided by his enemies. Verse 28 has his silence before his tormentors, and verse 30 has his cheek given to the smiters.

A Pattern

Here we have a pattern. Jerusalem, Jeremiah, Job, Jesus – all suffering, all crying to God to be delivered, and seemingly getting no answer. “*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*” they shout, and their life ebbs away.

Here we see an inspired Jeremiah, gazing at the broken heart of Jerusalem, and sharing with Job and Jesus in the same feelings of despair. He is creating a principle out of suffering. We all have to endure it, he is saying, because it tests our faith in God. When the faithful in Jerusalem saw the Temple destroyed and the throne of David empty, it made them question everything. Why did God allow it to happen? Did he not swear to David there would always be a king upon his throne? Were (perish the thought) the gods of Babylon too strong for the God of Israel? When Job had his friends taunt him that he must be a truly evil man to suffer such calamities, why did God not speak up for him? When Jeremiah cried out in his inky black dungeon or Jesus in the darkness of the Garden of

Gethsemane, why did God not reply? The answer is, he wants us to believe in him, even when everything seems to be going wrong.

Remember, the book is shaped like a pyramid. Chapter three is the pinnacle. But the actual summit must lie in the centre of chapter three, which has 66 verses. Somewhere between verse 22 and verse 44 we must have the keystone of the arch. And what do we find? What is the message the prophet wants us to learn from the experience of suffering?

Lamentation 3:22,23 speaks of the mercies of God, new every morning. Every day is a new beginning. However bad yesterday was, Jeremiah says, we must look forward, not back. We are still alive. We are not consumed. There is still an opportunity to stretch out our hands to God, and press on. Verses 25, 26 enshrine a true pearl of advice. We must be patient. God cannot be rushed. He acts at his own pace, which seems slow when we are impatient.

Job found his sufferings ended very suddenly, and his three friends were proved wrong. Jeremiah heard a scratching noise overhead, then saw a chink of light, and a head silhouetted against the sun, and a familiar voice calling to him. God had sent Ebed Melech as a deliverer. He was not going to die.

The people of Jerusalem woke one morning to see a poster on the walls of Babylon to say they could go home. For Jesus, the dawn of the third day brought light and the sound of birds, and freedom from pain. So it is with us all, as verse 32, 33 reveals. God afflicts us. But only for a while. And out of those tears will come a joy that knows no ending.

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