

Route 66

Lamentations: Poems of Grief

Part 25 – November 29, 2009

Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet because he wrote the saddest book in the Bible: Lamentations. In it, he says:

I have cried until the tears no longer come; my heart is broken. - *Lamentations 2:11a NIV*

No author is mentioned in Lamentations, but scholars agree with ancient Jewish tradition that Jeremiah has to be the author. He was an eyewitness to the destruction depicted. It matches his unique style of vocabulary.

And he was a skilled author of poetic laments.



Last week we talked about how Josiah (the last good king of Judah) was killed in a battle against the Egyptians.

Jeremiah composed laments for Josiah, and to this day all the men and women singers commemorate Josiah in the laments. These became a tradition in Israel and are written in the Laments. - *2 Chronicles 35:25 NIV*

A “lament” is a passionate expression of grief or regret. It’s from the Latin, “lamenta”, for “weeping”. The book of Lamentations is a collection of five *poetic* “weepings”.



Many of you are familiar with the Western Wall in Jerusalem. It’s the holiest site for Jews because it’s *all* that remains of the second temple (*built after the return from exile*). It’s actually a retaining wall that holds up a hillside where the temple once stood.



It’s commonly referred to as the Wailing Wall because of the weeping that takes place here. In *French* it’s called the Wall of Lamentations (Mur des Lamentations). Each week, many Jews read the book of Lamentations at the wall, because it laments the fall of Jerusalem and the temple.

It was written about 587^{BC}, immediately after Nebuchadnezzar had plundered everything of value in Jerusalem, burned the city, leveled the walls, and exiled the survivors.



It's only five chapters. Each chapter is only 22 verses (except chapter three which is 66: 3 x 22). That's because the Hebrew alphabet had 22 letters. The first four chapters are acrostics (each sentence begins with a consecutive letter), and the 5th is an alphabetical variation.

It's a way of saying that his people have suffered everything from "A" to "Z", several times over.

When the Babylonians finally left, and the dust settled, Jeremiah finds the shattered city annihilated and the temple obliterated. Picture Jeremiah staggering along in shock among the mutilated bodies lying in the wreckage and rubble that fills the streets, their faces distorted with the twisted expressions of suffering.

The Hebrew title for Lamentations is simply, "How?!"

How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations! She who was queen among the provinces has now become a slave. Bitterly she weeps at night, tears are upon her cheeks. Among all her lovers there is none to comfort her. All her friends have betrayed her ... - *Lamentations 1:1-2a NIV*

His thoughts are dark and angry as his sandaled feet stir up the soft ash in the eerie quite of the smoldering ruins.

The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to her appointed feasts. All her gateways are desolate ... - *Lamentations 1:4a NIV*

He kicks at a charred Asherah [uh-SHEE-ruh] statuette. Thousands of tiny pagan idols that once filled the home and workplace shrines have taken their rightful place among the worthless debris.

Jerusalem has sinned greatly and so has become unclean. All who honored her despise her, for they have seen her nakedness ... - *Lamentations 1:8a NIV*

He warned them again and again, but they would not listen.

Her filthiness clung to her skirts; she did not consider her future. Her fall was astounding ... - *Lamentations 1:9a NIV*

He sees the corpses of young men stretched out with the fallen soldiers, some barely old enough to be called warriors, barley big enough to wear the armor.

The Lord has rejected all the warriors in my midst; he has summoned an army against me to crush my young men. - *Lamentations 1:15 NIV*

War orphans sit in shocked silence. Some approach, begging for food, their stomachs distended from starvation.

Because of thirst the infant's tongue sticks to the roof of its mouth; the children beg for bread, but no one gives it to them. - *Lamentations 4:4 NIV*

The horrors of starvation among the survivors surround him and overwhelm him, people resorting to cannibalizing the dead.

With their own hands compassionate women have cooked their own children, who became their food ... - *Lamentations 4:10 NIV*

He sees the degradation of human dignity as it descends from God's design - becoming animalistic as the divine spark is replaced with the depravity of human nature.

This is why I weep and my eyes overflow with tears. No one is near to comfort me, no one to restore my spirit. My children are destitute because the enemy has prevailed. - *Lamentations 1:16 NIV*

Well, that pretty much sums up chapters one, four, and five. The point is: This is the true destination of all sin. This is where the enemy wants to take you, however he can. Sin lures us with the promise of lasting joy and satisfaction outside of God's will, but left unchecked, its final result is inevitably bondage, devastation, grief, and separation from God. Sin ALWAYS fails to deliver on its promise!

We've all allowed ourselves to enjoy the short-lived pleasures of sin. We push from our minds the reality of the long-term effects, and the fact that one sin inescapably leads to another. One of the reasons God preserved Lamentations was to graphically illustrate the consequences of unchecked rebellion against Him.

Have you ever had an artist draw a caricature of yourself? See if you can guess who these caricatures represent (without looking at their names).



Simon Cowell



Bill Murray



Conan O'Brien



Will Smith



Tom Cruise



Jay Leno

You know how to make a caricature? You exaggerate the prominent features and deemphasize the rest. Here's a sobering truth: We often worship a caricature of God. We can over-emphasize his merciful, compassionate characteristics in contrast to deemphasizing His justice, holiness, and wrath. And this allows us to remain comfortable in our mini-rebellion.



The kings of the earth did not believe, nor did any of the world's people, that enemies and foes could enter the gates of Jerusalem. But it happened because of the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests ... - *Lamentations 4:12-13 NIV*

They had the temple of God! They made sacrifices to Him! But He had made it clear that He will not be mocked by false pretenses.

Know what's really strange about Lamentations? Nowhere does the author mention Babylon or King Nebuchadnezzar. They may have been the human agents, but Chapter two focuses on the fact that it was God who orchestrated their demise.

... [God] has poured out his wrath like fire ... in his fierce anger he has spurned both king and priest. ... Young and old lie together in the dust of the streets; my young men and maidens have fallen by the sword. You have slain them in the day of your anger ... - *Lamentations 2:4b;6b;21a NIV*

So, does God really get angry? Yes. He gets very, very angry! Emotions and passions aren't inherently evil. But it *would* be evil to be in the presence of evil and not be angered by it. Only evil could remain unaffected as an innocent is brutalized. To love the good, by definition, is to hate the evil.

God's anger is never unreasonable, or unexplainable. Instead, it's a firm expression of displeasure with wickedness and sin. God's anger isn't a ruling force or passion; it's an instrument of His will that He handles with deftness, precision, and care. And unlike our anger, it is never selfish or self-centered. Lamentations emphasizes God's white-hot anger toward sin.

His wrath is simply the force of His goodness turned against and experience by that which is evil. God cannot *not* be good.

Jeremiah realizes that however God may use his anger to punish, correct, or teach, His compassion within it will never cease. And this is the message in chapter three.

Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. - *Lamentations 3:21-23 NIV*

Recognize that? We sang it last week in our worship. Look at: "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed". The fact that God didn't annihilate the Jews (when that's really what they deserved) was all the proof that Jeremiah needed to have hope for their redemption. And the fact that God doesn't snuff *us* out when we sin, should be all the proof we need of His incredible, ongoing love for us!

This is where the theology of Lamentations reaches its peak. In the midst of the sufferings brought on by our own sin, once we've repented, we must choose to focus on God's "great love", His "compassion" and His "faithfulness". And all of these found their final expression in Jesus Christ! He died for our sins to satisfy God's wrath, and He rose again to demonstrate His authority over death, so that we might be forgiven and rise with Him someday to eternal restoration!