

Old Testament Survey—Lamentations

We live in a society that loves to feel good, to celebrate, to be happy, to experience pleasure... If we offer a seminar on *How to be Happy*, many would be interested. But what a seminar on *How to Lament and Mourn*? That's not typically something we're interested in. But that's a subject we need to know about, for if we live long enough we'll all have occasion to grieve and mourn.

There are ways to grieve that please God and ways that don't please Him. God wants us to know how to lament in ways that please Him. He actually gave us a book in His Word on that topic. We call it *Lamentations*.

Discuss: What do you know about the book of Lamentations?

The Name of the Book:

--Hebrew: '*eka* ("How!"); Chapters 1, 2, 4 begin with this characteristic word of lament.

--LXX and Vulgate: "Wailings" or "Dirges" (Latin *Threni*)

--"Lamentations" comes from the Vulgate subtitle (*Id est Lamentationes Jeremiae Prophetae*)

Who wrote the book?

--Anonymous (the text itself does not say)

--Jeremiah (acc. to tradition and the LXX)

L.H.B. says if it was not Jeremiah, Judah was fortunate to have another man of such remarkable gifts to help deal with the losses (p. 618)

When was the book written?

--Time Period: 586-530 B.C.

Sinful Judah has fallen, and the feared Babylonian oppression has arrived. Yahweh has finally judged His disobedient people.

Why was the book written?

Q: What word picture is used to describe the condition of the Jewish people? 1:1 A lonely widow who once was a queen but now is a slave.

Q: What words would you use to describe the tone of the book? Look at ch 1.

Deserted. Weeps. Tears. Betrayed. Distress. Groan. Grieve. Bitter. Anguish.

Lamentations is a picture of a people who are suffering because they have violated God's covenant requirements. We are not sure if the book was written by someone living in Babylon or by a person who was left behind by the Babylonians. You'll recall that Jeremiah stayed in the land of Israel, and was later kidnapped by rebels who killed the governor the Babylonians set up, and was taken to Egypt (many Israelites moved elsewhere in the world during this time).

The book fulfills two functions:

1. *Mourning*--the writer is guiding the Jews to pull together and mourn together for the judgment which the Lord had rightfully sent them. The book was used publicly to help the people lament corporately. God gave His people a book to help them know how to respond in their suffering, even suffering which was the result of their own sin.

Discuss: What can we learn from this?

2. *Confession*--the book shows the people what they must do since they have violated the stipulations in the covenant. They must confess their sin, and call upon God for deliverance.

Note: Spiritual leaders, like Jeremiah, identify with the fate of the nation by confessing sins, though they may not have been personally guilty (e.g. Daniel, Jeremiah).

Discuss: Does confession mean God cancels the penalty? What about today? What's the faulty way to use 1 John 1:9? Even when forgiveness comes, the consequences of sin may not be completely removed. After Israel returned from exile, she was not able to turn back the clock to life before the exile.

In Lamentations, the author calls on God's people to confess sin, and to accept the punishment as just and deserving in light of God's holy character. But the book doesn't stop there. It affirms hope beyond the judgment. God is not done with His people.

Observation: L.H.B. (622) "In Lamentations the three great strands of Israel's literature and faith are woven together: the prophets' insights into the judgment and grace of the covenant Lord; the priests' liturgical expressions of contrition and hope; the wise men's wrestlings with the mysteries of suffering."

What is the outline of the book?

Acrostic Form:

In the Hebrew text, the book uses a series of acrostic psalms. Chapters 1 & 2 have 22 verses (for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet) with three lines of poetry per letter. Chapter 3 is a triple acrostic with 66 verses. Chapter 4 has 22 verses with two lines per letter. In chapter 5 there is no acrostic, yet it too has 22 verses, each verse with one line.

Discuss: Why the acrostic?

1. To aid memorization

2. To comfort the people. How so? The nature of the acrostic is that it communicates a limiting factor. The people felt like sheer chaos was all around them. Meaningless, endless judgment and misery. Not so. The acrostic helped them get a handle on the subject of their sin and God's judgment. The acrostic says, "There is a limit to all

this." The acrostic says, "Here's everything you want to know about a subject, from A to Z, in this case about the subject of judgment and mourning."

Outline: (adapted from David Kennedy)

I. Zion 's Pain (ch 1)

- A. The poet describes Zion 's suffering because of sin (1-11).
- B. Zion cries out for compassion (12-22).

II. Yahweh's Destruction of Zion (ch 2)

- A. The poet laments that Yahweh destroyed Zion (1-17).
- B. Zion heeds the poet's appeal and cries out to Yahweh (18-22).

III. A Sufferer's Faith (ch 3)

- A. An individual sufferer works through the suffering to find faith in Yahweh (1-39).
- B. The sufferer calls on the people to repent and turn to Yahweh (40-41).
- C. The people offer lamentation and supplication to Yahweh (42-66).

IV. A Survivor's Account of Zion 's Fall (ch 4)

- A. The poet recounts the fall of Zion (1-11).
- B. The poet recounts reasons for Zion 's fall (12-20).
- C. The poet announces that Zion will be vindicated (21-22).

V. Prayer for Restoration (ch 5)

- A. The people call out in lament to Yahweh (1-18).
- B. The people praise Yahweh and appeal to Him for help (19-22).

What is the message of the book in one sentence?

Lamentations describes how a godly person responded to suffering when God judged His people.

What contribution does the book make to biblical theology (that is, how does this book relate to the rest of the Bible)?

(some of the following taken from a handout by David Kennedy)

1. *God will judge His people for defiant sin, for His reputation is on the line.*

See: 2:1, 5

2. *God holds leaders responsible to call their people to live righteously, both by encouraging right living and by confronting sin.*

See: 3:40-41

3. *God is sovereign and is the effective cause of judgment. Though He may use the wicked as secondary causes to accomplish His purposes, He is in control.*

Q: What was the cause of the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.? Was it the Babylon army? Yes, but it was a secondary cause. God was the effective cause.

Discuss: What are the implications of this truth for responding to tragedy?

4. *God is not unfeeling, but cares deeply for His people (even for those whom He must judge). He is faithful to His character and to His promises even in the midst of judgment.*

See: 3:22-23

5. *The innocent often suffer along with the guilty. For them, the painful suffering can accomplish the good goal of strengthening their faith.*

See: 3:24-30

6. *The king of Israel represented the hopes of the people. This ultimately laid the foundation for later desires for The Anointed One, the Messiah.*

Note: In 4:20, Zedekiah is called the "people's anointed one." Why is that a striking description? He was an evil and foolish king, yet the people looked to the king as anointed one no matter what he did.

We don't have that concept in 20th century American democracy, do we? In the Old Testament theocracy, there was a great identification between the people and the king.

Discuss: What lessons can we learn from Lamentations about responding to suffering?