

April 25 Lesson 8 (NIV)

THE NATION'S PLEA

DEVOTIONAL READING: Lamentations 3:22–33

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Lamentations 5

LAMENTATIONS 5

- ¹ Remember, LORD, what has happened to us;
look, and see our disgrace.
- ² Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers,
our homes to foreigners.
- ³ We have become fatherless,
our mothers are widows.
- ⁴ We must buy the water we drink;
our wood can be had only at a price.
- ⁵ Those who pursue us are at our heels;
we are weary and find no rest.
- ⁶ We submitted to Egypt and Assyria
to get enough bread.
- ⁷ Our ancestors sinned and are no more,
and we bear their punishment.
- ⁸ Slaves rule over us,
and there is no one to free us from their hands.
- ⁹ We get our bread at the risk of our lives
because of the sword in the desert.
- ¹⁰ Our skin is hot as an oven,
feverish from hunger.
- ¹¹ Women have been violated in Zion,
and virgins in the towns of Judah.
- ¹² Princes have been hung up by their hands;
elders are shown no respect.
- ¹³ Young men toil at the millstones;
boys stagger under loads of wood.
- ¹⁴ The elders are gone from the city gate;
the young men have stopped their music.
- ¹⁵ Joy is gone from our hearts;
our dancing has turned to mourning.

- ¹⁶ The crown has fallen from our head.
Woe to us, for we have sinned!
- ¹⁷ Because of this our hearts are faint,
because of these things our eyes grow dim
- ¹⁸ for Mount Zion, which lies desolate,
with jackals prowling over it.
- ¹⁹ You, LORD, reign forever;
your throne endures from generation to generation.
- ²⁰ Why do you always forget us?
Why do you forsake us so long?
- ²¹ Restore us to yourself, LORD, that we may return;
renew our days as of old
- ²² unless you have utterly rejected us
and are angry with us beyond measure.

KEY VERSE

Restore us to yourself, LORD, that we may return; renew our days as of old. —Lamentations 5:21

PROPHETS FAITHFUL TO GOD'S COVENANT

Unit 2: Prophets of Restoration

LESSONS 5–8

LESSON AIMS

- After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:
1. Describe the historical context of the book of Lamentations.
 2. Summarize the reasons for the people's mourning.
 3. Lament having sinned against God.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. In Memory Of
 - B. Lesson Context
- I. Confrontation (Lamentations 5:1–15)
 - A. Remember! (v. 1)
 - B. Results of "Their" Sins (vv. 2–14)
 - C. Reversal (v. 15)
Words for Mourning

- II. Confession (Lamentations 5:16–22)
 - A. Of “Our” Sins (vv. 16–18)
 - B. Of the Lord’s Reign (v. 19)
 - C. Of Hope and Fear (vv. 20–22)
Has God Forgotten You?

Conclusion

- A. Called to Lament
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Assyria *Uh-sear-ee-uh*.

Babylon *Bab-uh-lun*.

Jebusites *Jeb-yuh-sites*.

Judah *Joo-duh*.

Nebuchadnezzar *Neb-yuh-kud-**nez**-er*.

Zedekiah *Zed-uh-kye-uh*.

Zion *Zi-un*.

Introduction

A. In Memory Of

When is the last time you heard a sermon or lesson from the book of Lamentations? Christians in the Western world have a difficult time with this question. Lamentations has been largely neglected in favor of texts that call us to joyful worship. Even in personal devotional time, Lamentations is often bypassed in favor of almost anything else. We don’t like to dwell on pain, which is what Lamentations does. Think about it: Would you rather watch a cheery movie about the birth of Christ or a solemn movie about his crucifixion?

But remembering tragedy, as important as that is, isn’t the only purpose of Lamentations. The book can also teach us much about our relationship with God—if we let it.

B. Lesson Context

The book of Lamentations reflects the period of about 586–538 BC, the period of Babylonian captivity. Assyria had taken the northern tribes of Israel into exile earlier, in 722 BC (2 Kings 17:1–6). “Only the tribe of Judah was left” (17:18). But despite the warnings of many prophets, Judah

continued in sin (21:10–15). The writer of Lamentations, commonly taken to be Jeremiah (see the Lesson Context of lesson 9), had warned Judah for many years that God’s judgment was coming (Jeremiah 25:2–11).

As instruments of God’s wrath, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC (2 Chronicles 36:15–20). Many who were left alive were carried into exile; the weak and the poor were left behind to contend with foreign settlers (2 Kings 25:1–21).

The five chapters of Lamentations do not shy away from describing that devastation and its aftermath. Lack of food resulted in starvation (Lamentations 2:12; 4:4–5) and cannibalism (2:20; 4:10). Those who did not die by the sword were weak with hunger and disease (4:9).

For all the chaos of the setting, Jeremiah was very intentional in the literary forms he used when writing this book. The first four chapters are all acrostics. This means that each verse begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in consecutive order. In English this would mean beginning the first verse with A, the second with B, etc. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, thus there are 22 verses in each of chapters 1; 2, and 4. Chapter 3 is a bit different with 66 verses because the acrostic format appears there three times.

This tight orderliness was perhaps a way for Jeremiah to organize what he saw. If so, it is a subtle hint that, though on the surface all seems lost, order still exists—or at least *could* exist again.

Lamentations 5 does not have an acrostic pattern. That is not accidental, since it is the same length as chapters 1; 2, and 4. The discontinuance of the careful pattern seems to mimic the ebbing fortunes of the people. For all their cries to God, no help seemed to be forthcoming (compare 3:44).

I. Confrontation

(LAMENTATIONS 5:1–15)

A. Remember! (v. 1)

1. Remember, LORD, what has happened to us; look, and see our disgrace.

Though the acrostic pattern disappears in this chapter (see Lesson Context), Jeremiah continued to use characteristic Hebrew repetition. Piling on synonyms was a way Hebrew poetry emphasized a point. This characteristic is evident throughout the lesson text. The effect is to give a full account of the pain of the people, who speak as one here.

Asking God to *remember* is not primarily a plea for him to recall information, but for him to act. *Look* and *see* both echo *remember*. Putting these three verbs together conveys a sense of urgency for God to see what is happening to his people and to act without delay.

The phrase *What has happened to us* suggests that the people saw themselves as passive recipients of the tragedy that had befallen them; the phrase *our disgrace* is parallel (compare Psalm 44:13–16). But the people’s circumstances were because of their sins, not mere twists of fate. Lamentations 1:5; 2:14; and 3:42 reveal the whole story.

B. Results of “Their” Sins (vv. 2–14)

2. Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, our homes to foreigners.

The *inheritance* (and its poetic parallel, *our homes*) in the promised land was of great importance to Israel. It was a sign of God's faithful promise to Abraham (Genesis 15:18; 17:8) and continuing faithfulness to Abraham's descendants. Laws governed inheritance to ensure that no one in Israel would lose the family's land permanently (see Leviticus 25:13–16, 23–34; Numbers 36:7–9). Imagine, then, how devastating it was for that inheritance—with all its God-ordained safeguards—to be lost *to strangers* and *foreigners* (compare Job 19:15, where the underlying Hebrew words also are parallel to one another). The land's falling into the hands of people who were outside of God's covenant jeopardized Judah's ever receiving it back.

3. We have become fatherless, our mothers are widows.

Orphans (*fatherless* children, not necessarily motherless) and *widows* were protected people under God's covenant (example: Deuteronomy 10:18). They were to be taken under the wing of the community so that they could thrive in less than ideal conditions (24:19–21). In a horrible reversal of fortunes, God's judgment has created widows and orphans in Judah, just as he warned (Exodus 22:24; Jeremiah 15:8; 18:21).

4. We must buy the water we drink; our wood can be had only at a price.

Both *the water* and the *wood* (along with all other resources) in the promised land had been given to the Israelites for their use. Having to *buy* these from the invaders from Babylon emphasizes that the land was no longer controlled by Judah; this suggested to the mourners that God had abandoned the covenant (see Deuteronomy 28:15–68).

5. Those who pursue us are at our heels; we are weary and find no rest.

This verse recalls the persecution and endless labor that Israel had experienced in Egypt (example: Exodus 5:1–18). After the Lord had delivered Israel from that slavery, he had revealed his laws to them, laws that included the command to *rest* on the Sabbath (20:8–11). Being forced to break that command by those chosen to carry out God's judgment was seemingly more evidence of God's distance and abandonment.

6. We submitted to Egypt and Assyria to get enough bread.

The people of *Assyria* were foes more recent than those from *Egypt* (see 2 Kings 18:17–37). The fact that the Judeans asked these two antagonistic nations for help further indicates the desperate consequences of the Babylonian conquest (compare Jeremiah 2:36; Hosea 7:11; 9:3).

Bread was a basic food staple. It was something that the people had been able to make for themselves when their fields were their own to sow and harvest. Reference to bread can also imply food in general (see Lamentations 5:9, below). The need to appeal to Assyria and Egypt for aid could have resulted from the fields having been devastated by the invading Babylonian army.

7. Our ancestors sinned and are no more, and we bear their punishment.

In many places, the Bible affirms that each person suffers for his or her own wrongdoing (examples: Genesis 18:16–33; Ezekiel 18:2–4; John 9:1–3). However, biblical precedent exists for a generation to suffer for the sins of its *ancestors*. The curses that God included in the covenant as potential discipline clearly expressed that people who were not the original guilty parties would suffer (example: Deuteronomy 5:9). Part of the reason for this generational suffering was

the ripple-effect inheriting of sinful behaviors and habits, which required God's attention (compare Jeremiah 14:20; 16:12).

Those who lifted their voices in this lament certainly felt the shock waves of the sins of previous generations. But throughout those generations, God had warned about judgment (see Lesson Context). Even more, God had promised to relent from punishment when the people repented (example: Jeremiah 18:7–8; compare Jonah 3:4–10).

The Babylonian exile, shocking in its scope, marked the end of God's patience. The book of Lamentations is witness to how horrifying that judgment was. Jeremiah did not refrain from asking whether this punishment fit the crime (Lamentations 2:20–22). Indeed, God acknowledged that the Babylonians had overstepped their role in carrying out his decreed judgment; they would be punished for that (Isaiah 47; Habakkuk 2:2–20).

8. Slaves rule over us, and there is no one to free us from their hands.

Judah lost its kings when one surrendered to the besiegers (2 Kings 24:10–16) and his replacement rebelled (24:17–25:21). The people taken to Babylon were ruled by Babylonian *slaves* there, while those left in Judah had to obey similar servants (25:22). Those who remained behind suffered the shame of being governed by foreigners within the borders of the promised land.

9. We get our bread at the risk of our lives because of the sword in the desert.

There may not have been much more to eat than *bread* in the land (contrast Lamentations 5:6, above). *The sword* represents all the violence the people still feared and experienced. Its appearance in *the desert* probably refers to the special dangers of trying to harvest any food.

10. Our skin is hot as an oven, feverish from hunger.

The reference to *an oven* may be a way of referring to a raging fever; the literal translation *our skin is hot* calls to mind food that has been burned (compare Job 30:30). The great *hunger* that the famine created has opened the door to all kinds of ailments (compare Lamentations 4:8–9).

11. Women have been violated in Zion, and virgins in the towns of Judah.

Women and *virgins* are terms that refer to adult females. Whether they were married or not, they suffered sexual violation throughout *Zion* and *the towns of Judah*—also parallel terms. God's laws established punishment for sexual violence (examples: Deuteronomy 22:25–29). But to the invaders, this means nothing.

12a. Princes have been hung up by their hands;

The *princes*, representing the monarchy and advisers, perhaps had expected treatment in accordance with their positions. Being executed in a public way such as implied here was a grave indignity. The spectacle of their deaths was meant to remind the people of their powerlessness.

12b. elders are shown no respect.

The *elders* were due reverence based on their wisdom gained with age. Given the parallelism of the two lines of this verse, it seems likely that the dishonor afforded them was also public execution. The fate of King Zedekiah comes to mind: the last thing he saw before his eyes were gouged out was the slaughter of his sons and all his officials. Then the king was bound and taken to a Babylonian prison where he died (Jeremiah 52:10–11).

13. Young men toil at the millstones; boys stagger under loads of wood.

Typically it was female slaves who were the ones to grind grain. But this task has fallen to *young men* who would be better suited to different tasks. In contrast, *boys* are given work much

too difficult for them. The image is that of falling under their burden of sin—the weight of its punishment.

14. The elders are gone from the city gate; the young men have stopped their music.

In gated cities like Jerusalem, *elders* congregated at a main *gate* to decide legal cases, to reach business agreements, etc. (see Ruth 4:1–12). The absence of the elders from their usual place speaks to the complete upheaval of the government. The lack of *music* further reveals the cultural upheaval that is evident throughout this book. The *young men* are grinding grain (Lamentations 5:13, above) rather than engaging in the expected artistic pursuits.

C. Reversal (v. 15)

15. Joy is gone from our hearts; our dancing has turned to mourning.

In Psalm 30:1–3, the psalmist rejoiced in God’s deliverance from enemies and sickness. The opposite is seen here: the conquered people suffered from both, with *joy* turning to *mourning* (contrast Psalm 30:11). How utterly hopeless their current situation seemed!

WORDS FOR MOURNING

It was one of the darkest days I experienced as president of a Christian university: a precious little girl lost her life in a tragic accident on our campus. The next day, hundreds of mourners gathered in the college chapel. We were almost too brokenhearted to pray.

Yet in those dark days, prayer was our greatest resource. Amid intense grief, it was heartfelt prayers and laments that knit our campus together and helped us care for the family who had lost their child.

Faith comes easily when the music of your life is joyful. But what will you say and how will you pray when your joy turns to mourning?

—D. F.

II. Confession

(LAMENTATIONS 5:16–22)

A. Of “Our” Sins (vv. 16–18)

16a. The crown has fallen from our head.

This verse summarizes the societal and governmental upheaval that the people have experienced. Though *the crown* represented the monarchy, the monarchy itself represented Judah.

16b. Woe to us, for we have sinned!

These mourners had claimed that they suffered for previous generations’ sins (Lamentations 5:7, above). Here they take responsibility for their own sin. The word *woe* expresses their grief.

17–18. Because of this our hearts are faint, because of these things our eyes grow dim for Mount Zion, which lies desolate, with jackals prowling over it.

Weakness of *hearts* and *eyes* resulted from the fate of *Mount Zion*. This place had great significance, first as the stronghold of the Jebusites that David defeated (Joshua 15:63; 2 Samuel 5:6–7). David’s palace had been built there (2 Samuel 5:9–11) as had the temple (1 Kings 6:1; 7:51).

We need not assume Jeremiah had only one of these specific ideas in mind. After all, the people mourned for the fate of the city, the monarchy, and the temple. The presence of *jackals* in the heart of the capital city marks the profound desolation of Jerusalem.

B. Of the Lord’s Reign (v. 19)

19. You, LORD, reign forever; your throne endures from generation to generation.

Although the *Lord* has been addressed throughout the chapter, he has not been called out since verse 1. This absence emphasizes the feelings of distance that the people felt. The call on him now is a brief moment of praise.

To speak of God’s eternal *throne* emphasizes his role as King. It is he who has the power and authority to decide and impose punishment. Having existed *from generation to generation*, he knows how unfaithful those generations have been (see Lamentations 5:7, 16, above). Yet knowing that God’s presence can be counted on can be a source of comfort, even if in the current moment he seems far off.

C. Of Hope and Fear (vv. 20–22)

20. Why do you always forget us? Why do you forsake us so long?

The Lord does not *forget* as people do, as though his memory were faulty. Yet knowing that God is indeed “from generation to generation” (previous verse) makes the question of his forgetting or forsaking all the more painful. Though Jeremiah had offered words of encouragement previously (see Lamentations 3:22–33), those seem to be a drop in the bucket in light of the overwhelming pain that continued.

21a. Restore us to yourself, LORD, that we may return;

Language of turning speaks of repentance. The people did not trust themselves to *return* to the *Lord* as they should (compare Jeremiah 31:18–19). Certainly their history proved that they struggled to turn to God on their own. For this reason, they asked that God would give his grace to them by turning them himself.

God would honor this prayer by giving hearts of flesh in place of stone (Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26). The ultimate answer to the plea of the half-verse before us is found in the church, where we are “transformed by the renewing of [our] mind” (Romans 12:2; compare Hebrews 8:10).

21b. renew our days as of old

Though the *days as of old* were full of disobedience, they were days when God showered his people with blessings in the land he had given them (Deuteronomy 28:1–13). The desire was not simply to *renew* those days, but for transformation by the repentance of the people.

22. unless you have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure.

After fleeting expressions of hope, the people turned once again to what they feared was true.

Could God be so very *angry* with them that he would *utterly* reject them forever (compare Malachi 4:6)?

The book ends here on this issue. God does not answer. Jeremiah offered no further words of hope (contrast Psalm 22). The people were not consoled; the wound was not healed (Jeremiah 30:12–15). This reality emphasized the depth and breadth of God’s anger.

Conclusion

A. Called to Lament

In the midst of our suffering, we know that God is still trustworthy and faithful. However, there are times when we do not *feel* that he is still trustworthy or faithful. We do not know where God is when we confess and repent of our sins but do not experience mercy in the consequences. We find that worship and praise lag behind the mourning and lament. Like those left in a destroyed Jerusalem, all we can see is devastation; the only thing we want is to make sure God sees and knows what we are experiencing.

Lamentations helps us find language to tell God the very deep, very real pain that we remember or still experience. The book serves as an invitation to take those things to God. As Paul wrote, “Neither death, nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38–39). Though the inclusion of Lamentations in the Bible may seem odd, it gives evidence of the truth of Paul’s assertion. No siege, no famine, no cannibalism, no destruction, no forced labor, no exile could separate God’s people from his love.

God demonstrated this love in Jesus Christ, making a way for all people to turn to the Lord and experience his blessings. Through Jesus’ great suffering, we have been added to those people who will be freed from all suffering (Revelation 21:4).

B. Prayer

Father, strengthen us to be willing to turn our hearts to you! Help us to be honest with you as Jeremiah and Jesus were honest with you in their suffering. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Let sorrow draw you closer to God.¹

¹