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## A JOURNEY THROUGH THE BIBLE

Reading: Lamentations 1:1-11

### 26. THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

Bart Elliman is supposed to be one of America's leading Bible scholars, and yet he is a non-believer. He used to consider himself "a born again Christian," but as he writes in his book *God's problem*, he came to a point where he felt compelled to leave the Christian faith. He explains,

**The problem of suffering became for me the problem of faith. If God is all powerful then he is able to do whatever he wants and can therefore remove suffering. If he is all loving, then he obviously wants the best for people and therefore does not want them to suffer. And yet people suffer. How can that be explained ?** ( *Adventuring through the Bible*, by Ray Steadman p, 369 )

Is there any other solution to the problem of evil ? Well, I think that Jeremiah in the book of Lamentations shows us another solution. A solution that is rooted in and consistent with, our faith in a loving and powerful God. Now the full name of this book is " *The Lamentations of Jeremiah*." This is one of the saddest books in the Bible, for it contains the prophet's tear stained reflections on the city of Jerusalem following its destruction by

Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew there is a little note which states that Jeremiah uttered these lamentations as he sat on the hillside overlooking the city. My .... as you read this book you can almost see the tears dropping onto the page and making the ink run. Here's a man weeping his heart out. Indeed the Septuagint calls this book " **Tears.**"

The book of Lamentations takes its English title from the Latin Vulgate, which is a Latin version of the Old Testament. Lamentations means a funeral dirge or a funeral song. In the Hebrew Bible it takes its title from the first word of Lamentations. Our English version translates it "*How.* " Do you see it ? "*How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people.*" (1:1)

It's the Hebrew word " *eykah.* " It could be translated " *alas.*" One paraphrase put it this way, " *Oh, oh, oh.*" It is a word of mourning. It is a word of sorrow. It is a word of grief. "*Alas, the city sits desolate that was full of people.*" It is a picture of mourning for the city of Jerusalem which has fallen. The city of Jerusalem has been taken, and now we are going to read a funeral dirge. )Indeed there are about five funeral songs in the book of the Lamentations. Now it's important for us to tie the book of Lamentations with the book of Jeremiah. In Jeremiah, ( Ch 52 ) we have the historical account of the fall of the city of Jerusalem.

This chapter records the facts of history. The book of Lamentations records the feelings of the heart, the emotions involved in seeing this city fall, and seeing its citizens carried away into captivity. As you read this book

you will discover that it is an eye-witness account, someone who actually saw all of these events take place. Now Jeremiah is sitting down and writing a series of these funeral songs. My .... doesn't Jeremiah remind you of Jesus ? Do you recall the question he asked his disciples ? " *Whom do men say that I am the Son of Man am ? And they said, some say that thou art John the Baptist, some Elias, and others Jeremias or one of the prophets.*" ( Matt 16:13-14 ) Jeremiah weeps over the city of Jerusalem. Jesus weeps over the city of Jerusalem. " *And when he was come near, he beheld the city and wept over it.*" ( Lk 19:41 ) Jesus realized that Jerusalem was going to fall in His day. Jeremiah realized that Jerusalem was going to fall in his day as well.

On the north side of Jerusalem is a cave which in Jewish tradition is known as "*Jeremiah 's Grotto*," because they believe that it is where Jeremiah went to pray when he was lonely and hurt and in pain. That grotto is a cave in a hill called Golgotha where we believe that Christ died on the cross. So when you think of Jeremiah think of Jesus. For the Lord Jesus was "*a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief*" ( Is 53:3 ) and those sufferings and sorrows are echoed here in the book of Lamentations.

Now this book has an interesting structure. For there is a specific these funeral songs are put together. You see, Lamentations is written in what we call an acrostic form. What do I mean by that ? Well, some folk on Mother's Day used to teach a song that was an acrostic. They would start off "*M*," is for the million things she gave us. "*O*," means only that she's growing on. So you could go the

whole way down. "*Put them all together and they spell mother.*" It's an acrostic for each one of those lines begin with a particular letter. Now that is what you find in the book of Lamentations. Each chapter has twenty two verses based on the twenty two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, each verse beginning with a letter in the order of the alphabet. Now ( Ch 5 ) also contains twenty two verses but is not written in an acrostic. When you come to the third chapter of the book of Lamentations, you will notice that instead of 22 verses, this chapter has 66 verses.

What you have there is that every letter of the Hebrew alphabet has three verses to it. So the first three verses begin with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the next three verses begin with the second letter of the alphabet, then again, the next three verses begin with the third letter of the alphabet, and so on. So it takes sixty six verses to run through the full twenty two letters. Somebody says, "*Why did the Holy Spirit lead Jeremiah to write these songs in this form ?*" Well, this was an aid to memory. An apt reminder, that God wants His people to hide His Word in their hearts. ( Ps 119:11 ) Also Lamentations is a funeral dirge. It is a series of funeral songs lamenting and mourning and grieving over the fall of Jerusalem.

What you have here is a complete picture of misery and grief and sorrow. This method helps to express Jeremiah's complete grief, his "A to Z," of grief. He is telling a story of grief all the way from the beginning to the end. Lamentations is kind of the like the Wailing Wall of the Bible. It is like an elegy written in a grave yard. It is the saddest book in all of the Bible. I mean can you picture

the scene ? The city of Jerusalem is now in ruins. The stench of death is in the air. Jeremiah begins to walk through the city. Over here he sees little children crying. Over here he hears the piercing wail of women who have been widowed of their husbands. There are piles of dead bodies everywhere. My .... this is the atmosphere as Jeremiah begins his lament. Now remember each chapter contains one of the five songs that are beautifully and carefully put together. Let's look at these songs briefly and notice,

## **(1) THE REALITY OF THEIR SUFFERING**

**Chapter 1.** What we have here is " *the funeral of a city*" The city, temple, palace, houses and walls lies in ruins. God's altars had been thrown down and the holy places desecrated and burned with fire. Jerusalem is compared here to a rich princess or queen who had suddenly been left alone and robbed of all her wealth and beauty. Look at ( 1:1) Once she had been full, now she was empty. Once she was honoured, now she was disgraced. Her joy has been replaced by tears, her great victories are now lost in defeat. Why ? Because instead of loving Jehovah she had courted " *many lovers*," ( 1:2 ) and the false gods of the heathen nations and now those heathen nations had become her enemies. Can you see,

### **(a) JEREMIAH'S SORROW:**

I mean he had seen it coming. He had warned and pleaded with the apostate people whom he had loved dearly. ( Jer 2:17 5:19 6:9-17) His dire predictions had all been

fulfilled. The rulers of Jerusalem had called him a traitor for preaching unconditional surrender to Babylon. He had been persecuted and abused. His written prophecies cut to ribbons and flung in the fire. But they had come true and now Jeremiah weeps his heart out over the desolate city. " *No comforter, no comforter*," he cries again and again. ( 1:2, 9, 16, 17, 21) My .... sin always brings sorrow and tragedy. Some years ago a prison chaplain noticed one of the prisoners sewing a covering on a pair of overalls. Greeting the man cheerfully he said, " *Good morning friend Sewing ?*" " *No Sir*," replied the prisoner with a grim smile, " *Reaping*. " Is this not what Jeremiah is saying ? Look at ( 1:18 ) Jeremiah is saying, " *We are reaping what we have sown*." The awful judgments that came were only what the city and the nation deserved.

Rebellion always lead to discipline. " *For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth*." (Heb 12: 6 ) My .... when God chastens us the experience is not an easy one. Sometimes we blame the Lord for whatever happens to us. Our attitude is, " *I do my best and still these things happen. It's not fair and ) since God is in charge of justice then it must be His fault that unfair things happen to me*." But is God unfair ? Paul says, " *God forbid, yea let God be true and every man a liar*." (Rom 3:4 ) It's impossible for God to be wrong and often we are reaping what we sow. As Jeremiah looks out over the ruins of Jerusalem with the tears streaming down his face he realizes that this destruction is a sign that God is right, and His judgment is unerring. There was (a)

### **(b) JERUSALEM'S SORROW:•**

Do you recall that around 1000 B.C. David had established his capital in Jerusalem ? ( 2 Sam 6:1) Thus, for nearly 400 years God had blessed this beloved city. He had allowed the Northern Kingdom to be carried away by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. But Jerusalem had been spared for over another 100 years. But all this mercy, longsuffering and patience had been in vain for Judah continued provoking the Lord through constant sinning. The end had now come. Indeed so critical was Jerusalem's destruction that the facts are recorded in four separate Old Testament chapters. ( 2 Kings 25:1

Jer 39:1-1, 52:1 2 Chron 36:11-21) Do you see how " *the weeping prophet*," puts it in ( 1:17 ) ? My .... their suffering was real. And if God did not hesitate to judge His beloved people ( Deut 32:10 ) what will He do to the nations of the world who reject His Word ? (1)

## **(2) THE REASON FOR THEIR SUFFERING**

**Chapter 2.** Why did God allow His people to be judged by Babylon ? ( 1:5, 12 2:1) Because of their sin. There was,

### **(a) *THE SINFULNESS OF THE PEOPLE:***

Do you recall the sins that marked Jeremiah's age ? Idolatry: ( Jer 3:1 ) Immorality: ( Jer 5:8 ) Injustice: ( Jer 5:26-28) Covetousness: ( Jer 6:13 ) Dishonesty: ( Jer 9:8 ) and Violence. ( Jer 6:7 ) For Israel the law of Moses was the national code and tested by that standard the wall of Judah was crooked and marked for demolition. My .... sin cannot be left unpunished, the nation has to be

purified and purged, and God's judgment fell. ( 2:9 ) My .... do you realize that sin has consequences even for a Christian ? If you grievously sin, God will forgive you, but it's not going to eliminate some of the consequences. You use drugs and get hooked on them, and you ask God to forgive you and He does and saves you. Then your little baby is born a cocaine baby. That is the consequences of sin.

I heard a about young boy who was just constantly disobeying his Dad. His Dad said, " *Son, you just disobey me all the time. I want to show you just how bad your behavior is.*" He went out in the back garden and he said, " *Son, do you see that post there ? Every time you disobey me and do something you shouldn't, I'm going to drive a nail in that post.*" It didn't take long and that post was just full of nails. The father said, " *Son, do you see all those nails ?*" The boy said, " *I do, Dad It breaks my heart.*" The father said, " *tell you what. Every time you do good now, I'm going to pull out one of those nails.*"

) The boy caught on to that. They started pulling out those nails. It wasn't long before all the nails were gone. The father went out there one day and his boy was crying. He said, " *Son, why are you crying ? All the nails are out of the post.*" He said, " *I know, Dad. But the marks are still there.*" That's the way it is with us. God forgives, but the consequences, the scars are still there. And here is Judah and they are experiencing the consequences of their sin.

### **(b) *THE FAITHLESSNESS OF THE PROPHETS***

The spiritual leaders had given the people a false message and they had believed. Look if you will at ( 2:14 4:13 ) My .... for over forty years Jeremiah had openly opposed the false prophets. Do you know what these false prophets preached ? " *Peace, peace when there is no peace.*" ( Jer 6:14 8:11) They preached a popular message that the people wanted to hear ( Jer 5:12 14:13-16 27:8-9 28:1-17 ) while Jeremiah preached the Lord's message and was rejected and persecuted. Do you know what Jeremiah compared the false prophets to ? Deceitful physicians: ( Jer 6:14 8:11) empty wind: ( 5:13 ) peddlers of chaff: ( 23:28 ) and toxic people spreading deadly infection. ( 23:15 ) I need hardly remind you that we have "*false prophets*," with us today. People who want to be popular with the crowd, instead of pleasing to the Lord. Tell me, which concerns you most the praise of man or the praise of God ? (a) (b)

### (c) ***THE TRUTHFULNESS OF THE LORD:***

They were suffering God's judgment because God is faithful to His promises. Look at ( 2:17 ) Now what word was that ? Come back with me to the book of Deuteronomy ( Ch 28 ) Do you know what the Lord is doing here ? He is giving the nation two choices. God says " *If you obey Me, I will bless you.*" ( 28:1-14) But " *If you disobey Me I will curse you.*" ( 28:15-68 ) Look at what God says in ( 28:56-57 ) Isn't this amazing ? For this is exactly what happened in the siege of Jerusalem. ( 4:10 ) You see, the famine was so severe that the mothers even killed and ate their own children. For forty years Jeremiah had warned the people that their sin would

find them out, yet the nation would not listen. How long will it take us to learn that we cannot disobey God's Word and escape ? My .... God is not playing games with us in the Bible. When God tells us to do something we must do it or pay the price. For God is faithful to His Word. You know, some Christians have the notion that God won't do what He says. He won't really judge sin. He won't really hold us accountable. But God will for He is true to His ) Word. (1) (2)

### (3) **THE RESPONSE TO THEIR SUFFERING**

**Chapter 3.** I want you to see how personal this chapter is for the pronouns " *He*, " and " *His*, " referring to God and " *I*," and " *me*, " referring to Jeremiah are predominant in this chapter. Here we are confronted with,

#### (a) ***THE MISERY OF THE PROPHET:***

Think of it. Jeremiah had faithfully proclaimed God's message for forty years and yet the nation had turned a deaf ear. Is it any wonder he suffered ? Did you notice,

1. He is Affected *Spiritually*: he says, " *Also when I cry and shout he shutteth out my prayer.*" ( 3:8, )
2. He is Affected *Physically*: " *My flesh and my skin hath he made old, he hath broken my bones.*" ( 8:4 )
3. He is Affected *Socially*: for he says, " *I was a derision to my people and their song all the day.*" ( 3:14 )
4. He is Affected *Emotionally*: for he says, " *And thou*

*hast removed my soul far off from peace." ( 3:17 )*

Moreover the tears of Jeremiah fell copiously. He says, "*For these things I weep, mine eye, mine eye runneth down with water.*" (1:16) "*Mine eyes do fail with tears, my bowels are troubled.*" ( 2:11) One Bible scholar says, "***Our Western tendency to admire people who don't weep comes from Greek rather than Hebrew thinking. In modern Israel a man can never get to be Prime Minister unless he can weep over the grave of an Israeli soldier.***"

Jeremiah wept because of the sin, the stubbornness, the suffering of his people. Do you recall that Nehemiah was called to build the walls but first he had to weep over the ruins ? ( Neh 1:4 ) I wonder is my ministry marked by tears ? Think of the tears of Nehemiah, the tears of Jeremiah, the tears of Christ, the tears of Paul. Think of the tears of Robert Murray McCheyne for his parish in Dundee. The tears of William Burns as "*the thud of Christless feet on their road to hell broke his heart.*" Does Christless feet on the way to hell break your heart ?

Samuel Hadley was a great soul winner in New York City. One night he was overheard as he prayed, "*Oh God the sin of this city is breaking my heart.*"

**Let me look at the crowd as my Saviour did  
Till me eyes with tears grow dim  
Let me look till I pity the wandering sheep  
And love them for love of Him**

Jeremiah was burdened for his people but in his

brokenness there shines a ray of light for he turned from contemplating his misery to,

### **(b) THE MERCY OF THE LORD:**

And this give him hope. Jeremiah realized that God could have wiped out all the people in His anger, but instead He had sent them to Babylon. So they were still alive and the nation was still a nation. And Jeremiah believed that it was because of God's mercy that they had not been entirely consumed. He says, "*It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning, great is thy faithfulness.*" ( 3:22-23 ) Somehow, in the midst of his hopelessness Jeremiah finds a thread of hope. Somewhere, in the midst of being ready to give up, Jeremiah finds a reason to look up.

**He has looked out, and become distressed.  
He has looked in, and become depressed.  
But, he looks up, and becomes blessed**

,My .... do you need to look up this .... ? To a good God, a compassionate God, a faithful God. The faithfulness of God. Have you ever thought about the things the Bible says that God is faithful to do ? God is faithful to **Chasten:** The Psalmist says, "*I know, O Lord, that thy judgments are right, and that thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me.*" (Ps 119:75 ) God is faithful to **Forgive:** John says, "*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" ( 1 Jn 1:9 ) God is faithful to

**Sympathize:** " Wherefore, in all things, it behoved him to be made like his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted. " ( Heb 2:17-18 ) God is faithful to **Deliver:** " There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able."

( 1 Cor 10:13 ) Peter says, " Wherefore, let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well-doing, as unto a faithful

Creator. " ( 1 Pet 4:19 ) Isn't it good to know we live in a world where we have a faithful God who is good ? ( 3:25 ) No matter what the enemy may say to us we need to remind ourselves that the Lord is good and He is never closer to us than when He chastens us. (a) (b)

### (c) ***THE MESSAGE FOR THE PEOPLE:***

For did you notice Jeremiah's counsel ? "*Let us search and try our ways and turn again to the Lord.* " ( 3:40-42 ) You see, while faithfulness marked God, unfaithfulness marked the people. Therefore there needs to be,

1. **A Reviewing of our Lives:** " *Let us search .....*,"
2. **A Recognition of our Failures:** "*And turn again.*"
3. **A Retracing of our Steps:** " *To the Lord* "

David failed Morally: Can you see him ? He stands on his palatial palace, healthy, handsome and hawk-like in his

gaze. He can have anything he wants. He wants Bathsheba. We all know the outcome. He failed morally and so did Judah. ( Jer 5:8 )

Elijah failed Spiritually: He had taken his eyes of the Lord and cried, " *0 Lord take away my life for I am not better than my fathers.*" ( 1 Kings 19:4 ) He failed spiritually and so did Judah. ( Jer 3:1 )

Jonah failed Vocationally: For there are only two roads in the Christian life. One leads to Nineveh, the other to Tarshish. The way to Nineveh is the way to revival, the way to Tarshish is the way to ruin. Jonah failed Vocationally and so did Judah. ( 2 Kings 23:29 ) Like Judah do you need to review your life ? Have you failed the Lord morally, spiritually or vocationally ? Do you need to turn again to the Lord ? (1) (2) (3)

### (4) **THE RECOLLECTION IN THEIR SUFFERING**

**Chapter 4.** Here we see,

#### (a) ***THE CONTRAST BETWEEN TWO PERIODS:***

The former glory of Israel is contrasted with her present misery. Jeremiah is in the acrostic mode again. Each of these twenty two verses starts with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Do you see how it begins ? "*How,* " it's the same word again "*Alas is the gold become dim, how is the most fine gold changed.*" ( 4:1) Jeremiah is talking about gold and jewels and these stand for the people of

Israel. The tribes of Israel were represented as jewels set in gold on the breastplate of the high priest and also on his shoulders. ( Ex 28:6-30 39:1-21 ) But their sins had cheapened them and they had lost their beauty. Take a young high school girl. Her eyes just sparkle. Her smile fills the room. Then some boy gets hold of her and robs her of her purity. All of a sudden the sparkle is gone from her eyes. All of a sudden there is not that glow on her life anymore. She's like a piece of tarnished gold. She's like a piece of stone that's been thrown out into the street, soiled, and greatly reduced in value. I mean look at Israel now.

*The children's tongues stick to the roof of their mouth for thirst: ( 4:4 )*

*The rich and pampered were in the streets begging for bread: ( 4:5 )*

*The women had cooked and eaten their own children: ( 4:10 )*

*The false prophets and priests were staggering through the streets covered with blood: ( 4:14 )*

*The king ( Zedekiah ) had been captured and blinded and carried off to captivity: ( 4:20 )* What a contrast all this was to Israel in her former glory. Do you see how low sin can bring you ? (a)

#### **(b) THE CONTRAST BETWEEN TWO PARTIES:**

For the Edomites, the descendants of Esau, rejoiced at the destruction of Jerusalem ( Gen 25:19-34, 27 ) and encouraged the Babylonians may have even assisted them in their work. ( Ps 83:1-4 137:7 Ezek 25:12-14 Obadiah )

Israel had drunk the bitter cup of God's wrath, but one day the cup would be handed to Edom and there time of judgment would come. ( Jer 25:15 49:7,22 ) Now that brings us to the last chapter.

#### **(5)THE REQUEST FROM THEIR SUFFERING**

**Chapter 5.** Now this chapter, has twenty two verses also but it's not an acrostic. Here the prophet is praying for himself and the suffering remnant that had survived the invasion. His prayer contained four elements,

##### **(a) THE ELEMENT OF REMEMBRANCE:**

He asked the Lord to "*Remember, consider and behold.*" (5:1) Now Jeremiah knew that the Babylonian captivity would not end for seventy years ( 25:1-14 ) but he asked the Lord to be merciful to the poor people in the land and the exiles in Babylon.

##### **(b) THE ELEMENT OF REPENTANCE:**

Do you see it in ( 5:16 ) ? "*The crown is fallen from our head woe unto us that we have sinned.*" What was the cause of all this trouble, loss and pain ? The Babylonian army, the wrath of God ? No, the sins of His people. But bless God, the book does not end there. For though the throne of Judah was destroyed, Jeremiah saw the living and unchanging God on His throne in heaven and that gave him courage. There was,

##### **(c) THE ELEMENT OF RECOGNITION:**

In ( 5:19 ) and,

**(d) *THE ELEMENT OF RENEWAL:***

In ( 5:21) Yes, they felt forsaken and forgotten  
( 5:20 ) but they knew God would return to them if they  
returned to Him. ( Deut 30:1-0 ) Indeed the final prayer of  
this funeral dirge will yet be fulfilled, "*Renew our days as  
of old,*" ( 5:21) and Israel will be supreme among the  
nations, and then will their troubles be over for ever.

Like Jeremiah, does your life seem to be falling apart at  
the seams ? Does your ministry seem to be a failure ? My  
.... will you look up this .... to the God who is faithful, ( 3:23 )  
the God who is good, ( 3:25 ) and the God who is  
unchanging. ( 5:19) To put it very simply, you can count  
on the Lord.

**When from my life the old time joys have vanished  
Treasures, once mine, I may no longer claim  
This truth, may feed my hungry heart and famished  
Lord, Thou remainest, Thou art still the same**

**When streams have dried those streams of glad  
refreshing  
Friendships so blest, so pure, so rich so free  
When sun kissed skies give place to clouds depressing  
Lord, Thou remainest, still my heart hath Thee**

***When strength hath failed, and feet, newborn and weary  
On gladsome errands may no longer go  
Why should I sigh, or let the days be dreary  
Lord, Thou remainest, couldst Thou more bestow***

***Thus through life's days who'er or what may fail me  
Friends, friendships, joy in small or great degree  
Songs may be mine, no sadness need assail me  
Since Thou remainest, and y heart hath Thee***

***James Danson Smith***