Lamentations

Laments are sad songs or poems. The book of Lamentations is a group of such songs about one event—the destruction of the city of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army in 586 BC. This was one of the most terrible events in the history of the Jewish people. Certainly, these five songs are very sad, even upsetting. They ask difficult questions like, “Why would God cause his own people to suffer?” or “Has he abandoned his people after all?”

Each chapter in this book is a new song. In four of the chapters, each verse (or group of verses) begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The songs run through the alphabet four times. The last chapter moves on without the alphabet pattern. The way the author arranged these songs says something important. It means, “This is the A to Z of all my pain and sorrow about the loss of my home.” In this way the author gives full expression to his feelings of loss. Sometimes when people experience such loss, the best thing they can do is to cry out. Only after they express their pain and sorrow will they be able to move on.

Some people think that the Bible should say only good things about God and his people. But as we live, we learn that life is not always good. Hard times cause us to be afraid and have doubts. Is it wrong to express those fears and doubts? No, God is willing to hear our worst thoughts. Lamentations reminds us that we can honestly express whatever we feel to God. He already knows our real thoughts and feelings. So there is no need to hold them inside.

Lamentations is a book of sad songs about…
- Why God destroyed Jerusalem (1:1-22)
- How God destroyed Jerusalem (2:1-22)
- Looking at the destruction (3:1-66)
- Before and after the destruction (4:1-22)
- Living in captivity (5:1-22)

Jerusalem Cries Over Her Destruction

1 Poor Jerusalem! She was once a city full of people, but now the city is so empty. She was one of the greatest cities in the world, but now she is like a poor widow. She was once a princess among cities, but now she has been made a slave.

2 She cries bitterly in the night. Her tears are on her cheeks. She has no one to comfort her. Many nations were friendly to her, but not one of them comforts her now. All her friends have turned their backs on her and have become her enemies.

3 With the other people of Judah, she has suffered abuse and has been taken into captivity. She lives among other nations and has still found no rest. Her enemies chased her to a place with no escape.

4 The roads to Zion are very sad, because no one comes to Zion for the festivals any more. All of Zion’s gates have been destroyed; all her priests groan in sorrow.

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*1:1 She Throughout this poem, Jerusalem is represented as a woman.*
Zion’s young women are upset,† and all this made Zion sad.
Jerusalem’s enemies have won. Her enemies have been successful. This happened because the LORD punished her.
He punished Jerusalem for her many sins.
Her children have gone away. Their enemies captured them and took them away.
Daughter Zion‡ has lost her beauty. Her princes are like starving deer looking for grass. They are too weak to run away from those who chase them.
Now that Jerusalem is suffering and homeless, she remembers all the nice things she had long ago. But her people were captured by the enemy, and there was no one to help her. When her enemies saw her, they laughed, because she had been destroyed.
Jerusalem sinned greatly, so she is like a ruined woman. People who once respected her now hate her, because they have seen her disgraced. Jerusalem can only moan and hide her face in shame.
She made herself unclean. She gave no thought to what would happen to her. Her fall was terrible. She had no one to comfort her. She says, “LORD, look how miserable I am! My enemy has defeated me!”

Her enemies seized all her treasures. She watched as foreigners went inside her Temple—the meeting place you said those people must not enter!
All the people of Jerusalem are groaning. All of her people are looking for food. They are giving away all their nice things for food to stay alive.
Jerusalem says: “Look, LORD. Look at me! See how everyone hates me.”
You people passing by don’t seem to care.
But look at me! Do you see anyone else suffering as much as I am? This is the pain the LORD brought on me when he became so very angry.
The Lord sent fire from above that went down into my bones. He stretched out a net for my feet. He turned me all the way around. He made me into a wasteland.
I am sick all day.
My sins were tied up like a yoke. My sins were tied up in the Lord’s hands. His yoke is on my neck. He has made me weak. He has given me to those who I cannot stand up against.
The Lord turned away all my powerful men who were inside my walls. Then he brought an army against me. He brought them to kill my young soldiers. The Lord has trampled his dearest land like grapes in a winepress.
I cry about all these things.

†1:4 are upset The ancient Greek version has “have been taken away”.
‡1:6 Daughter Zion The city of Jerusalem pictured as a young woman. Also in 2:1. In chapters 1 and 2, Jerusalem is referred to as “she” and “her”. See Zion in the Word List.
¶1:15 dearest land Literally, “virgin daughter Judah”.

In chapters 1 and 2, Jerusalem is referred to as “she” and “her”. See Zion in the Word List.
Tears are flowing down my cheeks. There is no one near to comfort me. There is no one who can make me feel better. My children are like a wasteland, because the enemy has won.

17 Jerusalem reaches out her hands for help, but there is no one to comfort her. The LORD has given orders for Israel’s neighbours to become enemies of the city. Jerusalem is now like a dirty rag to them, like something unclean.

18 The LORD is right to do this because I refused to listen to him. So listen, all you people! Look at my pain! My young women and men have gone into captivity.

19 I called out to my lovers, but they tricked me. My priests and my leaders have died in the city. They were looking for food for themselves. They wanted to keep themselves alive.

20 Look at me, LORD. I am in distress! I am upset, as if my heart turned upside down inside of me. I feel this way because I have been so stubborn. Outside the walls, I lost my children in battle. Inside, it is like death.

21 Listen to me, I am groaning. I have no one to comfort me. All my enemies have heard of my trouble. They are happy that you did this to me.

You said there would be a time of punishment. You said you would punish my enemies. Now do what you promised. Let my enemies be like I am now. 22 Look how evil my enemies are! Punish them the way you punished me because of all my sins. See, I cannot stop groaning. I am sick with sorrow.

The Lord Destroyed Jerusalem

2 Poor Jerusalem! Look how the Lord has covered Daughter Zion with the cloud of his anger. He has thrown her, the glory of Israel, from the sky to the ground. In his anger he showed no care even for the Temple where he rests his feet. 2:1

2:1 Temple … feet Literally, “the footstool of his feet”, meaning the place God lived among his people.


2:2 The Lord destroyed the houses of Jacob’s people without mercy. In his anger he tore down the strong walls of Judah. *2:2*

He threw that kingdom and its rulers down to the ground in shame.

3 He was so angry that he took away all the strength of Israel. He refused to help them when the enemy came. He came against the people of Jacob like a flaming fire that burns everything around it. 4 He bent his bow like an enemy. With his right hand he pulled back the arrow. He killed all our finest young men. He poured out his anger like fire on the tents of Zion. 5 Like an enemy the Lord has swallowed up Israel.
He has destroyed her palaces and strong cities.
He has caused great sadness and crying for the dead in Judah.

6 He tore up the place where he lived†† like someone ploughing up a garden. He ruined the place where the people came together to worship him.

The LORD has made people forget the festivals and special days of rest‡‡ in Zion.
He rejected the king and the priests. He was angry and rejected them.

7 He rejected his altar, and he left his holy place of worship. He let the enemy pull down the walls of the palaces of Jerusalem.

The enemy shouted with joy in the LORD’s Temple.

They made noise as though it were a festival.

8 The LORD planned to destroy the walls of Jerusalem.
He marked them with a measuring line and destroyed everything he marked. He made all the walls cry out in sadness. Together they wasted away.

9 Jerusalem’s gates have sunk into the ground.
The bars on her gates are completely destroyed.
Her king and princes have been taken to other nations.
The teaching of the law has stopped. And her prophets no longer receive visions from the LORD.

10 Zion’s leaders sit on the ground. They sit on the ground and are quiet. They throw dirt on their heads.
They put on rags.
The young women of Jerusalem bow their heads to the ground in sorrow.

11 My eyes are worn out with tears, and my insides are upset.
My heart feels like it has been poured on the ground, because of the destruction of my people.
Children and babies are fainting in the public squares of the city.

12 They ask their mothers, “Don’t we have something to eat or drink?”
They get weaker and weaker, like a soldier wounded in the street, and they finally die in their mother’s arms.

13 My dear Jerusalem, what can I say about you?
What can I compare you to?
What can I say you are like?
How can I comfort you, city of Zion?
You have been hurt much too badly for anyone to heal.

14 Your prophets saw visions for you, but their visions were only worthless lies. They didn’t speak against your sins.
They didn’t try to make things better. They spoke messages for you, but they were false messages that fooled you.

15 Those who pass by on the road clap their hands and laugh at you. They make fun of Jerusalem, shaking their heads at the sight of her.
They ask, “Is this the city that people called ‘The Most Beautiful City’ and ‘The Joy of all the Earth’?”

16 Your enemies shout insults at you. In anger they snarl and show their teeth, saying, “We have swallowed them up! This is the day we were waiting for. We have finally seen it happen!”

††2:6 the place where he lived Literally, “his own tent”, meaning the Temple in Jerusalem.
‡‡2:6 special days of rest Or “Sabbaths”. This might mean Saturday (see Sabbath in the Word List) or all the special days when the people were not supposed to work.
The LORD did what he planned, exactly as he promised long ago. He destroyed you without pity. He made your enemies strong and let them celebrate your defeat.

Cry out with all your heart to the Lord! Jerusalem, let tears roll down your walls. Let your tears flow like a river all day and all night. Don’t look for rest or let your tears stop.

Get up throughout the night and cry for help. Let your sorrow pour out before the Lord like water. Lift up your hands in prayer to him. Ask him to let your children live. They are starving to death on every street corner.

LORD, look and think about what you see! Have you ever treated anyone else so badly? Is it right for women to eat their own babies, the children they have cared for? Should priests and prophets be killed in the Temple of the Lord?

Young men and old men lie on the ground in the streets of the city. My young women and young men have been killed by the sword. You killed them on the day of your anger. You killed them without mercy!

You invited my enemies to come from all around to terrify me. You invited them like guests to a festival. And no one escaped on that day of the LORD’s anger. My enemy killed all the children I once cared for and raised.

The Meaning of Suffering

I am a man who has seen much trouble. God beat us with a stick, and I saw it happen.

He led and brought me into darkness, not light. He turned his hand against me. He did this again and again, all day.

He wore out my flesh and skin. He broke my bones. He built up bitterness and trouble against me. He surrounded me with bitterness and trouble.

He put me in the dark, like someone who died long ago. He shut me in, so I could not get out. He put heavy chains on me. Even when I cry out and ask for help, he does not listen to my prayer.

He has blocked up my path with stones. He has made my path crooked. He is like a bear about to attack me, like a lion that is in a hiding place. He led me off my path.

He tore me to pieces and ruined me. He made me the target for his arrows. He shot me in the stomach with his arrows. I have become a joke to all my people. All day long they sing songs about me and make fun of me.

He gave me this poison to drink. He filled me with this bitter drink. He pushed my teeth into rocky ground. He pushed me into the dirt.

I thought I would never have peace again. I forgot about good things. I said to myself, “I no longer have any hope that the LORD will help me.”
19 Remember, I am very sad, and I have no home.
Remember the bitter poison that you gave me.
20 I remember well all my troubles, and I am very sad.
21 But then I think about this, and I have hope:
22 The LORD’s faithful love never ends;* his acts of mercy never stop.
23 He shows us his love in new ways every morning!
He is completely faithful!
24 I say to myself, “The LORD is everything to me.
I put all my hope in him.”
25 The LORD is good to those who trust him.
He is good to those who look to him for help.
26 It is good if we wait quietly for the LORD to save us.
27 It is good if we learn to be patient while we are young.
28 He should sit alone and be quiet when the Lord puts his yoke on him.
29 He should bow down to the Lord.
Maybe there is still hope.
30 He should turn his cheek to the one who hits him;
he should let people insult him.
31 He should remember that the Lord does not reject people forever.
32 When he punishes, he also has mercy.
He has mercy because of his great love and kindness.
33 He does not enjoy causing people pain.
He does not like to make anyone unhappy.
34 He does not like any prisoner on earth to be trampled down.
35 He does not like anyone to be unfair to another person.
Some people will do such things right in front of God Most High.
36 The Lord does not like anyone to cheat another person.
He does not like any of these things.
37 No one can say something and make it happen, unless the Lord orders it.
38 God Most High commands both good and bad things to happen.
39 No one alive can complain when he punishes them for their sins.
40 We should examine the way we are living and turn back to the LORD.
41 Let us offer our hearts to God in heaven.
Let us lift up our hands in prayer to him and say,
42 “We have sinned and refused to listen to you.
So you have not forgiven us.
43 Filled with anger, you chased us and killed us without mercy!
44 You have hidden yourself in a cloud that keeps our prayers from reaching you.
45 You have made us seem like filthy rubbish to the rest of the world.
46 “Our enemies shout insults against us.
47 We are filled with fear, like we have fallen into a pit.
We have been broken and are lying here in ruins.”
48 Tears stream from my eyes as I see my people destroyed.
49 I cannot stop the tears.
They will keep on flowing until the LORD looks down from heaven.

*3:22 The LORD’s ... ends This follows the ancient Aramaic and Syriac versions and one Hebrew copy. The traditional Hebrew text has “[Because of] the LORD’s faithful love, we are not cut off.”
and sees our suffering.
51 When I see what happened to the women of my city, it makes my heart ache.
52 For no reason, my enemies hunted me like a bird.
53 They threw me alive into a pit and then threw stones at me.
54 Water came up over my head. I said to myself, “I am finished.”
55 LORD, I call your name from the bottom of the pit.
56 Hear my voice. Don’t close your ears; don’t refuse to rescue me.
57 Be near me on the day that I call out to you. Tell me, “Don’t be afraid.”
58 Defend me and save my life.
59 LORD, see my trouble. Now judge my case for me.
60 See how my enemies have hurt me and made evil plans against me.
61 Hear their insults, LORD, and all their harmful plans.
62 The words and the thoughts of my enemies are against me all the time—
63 when they sit down and when they stand up.
Look how they make fun of me!
64 Give them back what they deserve, LORD.
Pay them back for what they have done.
65 Make them stubborn and then curse them.
66 Chase them in anger and destroy them.
Wipe them off the face of the earth, LORD!

The Horrors of the Attack on Jerusalem

4 Poor Jerusalem! See how the gold has lost its shine, how the pure gold has changed. The city’s holy jewels are scattered in the streets.
2 These precious people of Zion were once worth more than gold. But now they are treated like something worthless, like the cheap clay jars a potter makes.
3 Even a wild dog feeds her babies. Even the jackal lets her pups suck at her breast. But my people§§ neglect their young, like ostriches in the desert.
4 Babies are so thirsty their tongues stick to the roofs of their mouths. Young children ask for bread, but no one gives them any.
5 Those who ate rich food are now dying in the streets. Those who grew up wearing nice red clothes now pick through rubbish piles.
6 The punishment of my people was very great—greater than that of Sodom. Sodom was destroyed suddenly, but not by any human hand.  
7 Some of the men of Judah were dedicated to God in a special way. They were purer than snow, whiter than milk. Their skin glowed with colour like coral, and they sparkled like blue gems.
8 But now their faces are as dark and gloomy as night. No one recognizes them in the streets.

§§4:3 my people Literally, “the daughter of my people”.
* 4:6 not by any human hand The Hebrew text is not clear.
The skin on their bones has shrivelled up;  
it’s as dry as wood.  
9 It was better for those who were killed by the sword than for those who died of hunger.  
Those starving people were sad and hurt.  
They died because they got no food from the field.  
10 Then even nice women cooked their own children.  
The children were food for their mothers.  
This happened when my people were destroyed.  
11 The LORD used all his anger.  
He poured out all his anger.  
He made a fire in Zion that burned it down to the foundations.  
12 The kings of the earth and the people of the world could not believe what had happened.  
They could not believe that enemies would be able to come through the city gates of Jerusalem.  
13 This happened because the prophets of Jerusalem sinned.  
This happened because the priests of Jerusalem did evil things.  
They were shedding the blood of good people in the city of Jerusalem.  
14 The prophets and priests walked around like blind men in the streets.  
They had become dirty with blood.  
No one could even touch their clothes because they were dirty.  
15 People shouted, “Go away! Go away! Don’t touch us.”  
They wandered around and had no home.  
People in other nations said, “We don’t want them to live with us.”  
16 The LORD himself scattered them.  
He didn’t care for them any more.  
He didn’t respect the priests.  
He didn’t care about the leaders of Judah.  
17 We have worn out our eyes looking for help, but no help comes.  
We kept on looking for a nation to save us.  
We kept watch from our watchtower, but no nation came to us.  
18 Our enemies hunted us all the time.  
We could not even go out into the streets.  
Our end came near; our time was up.  
Our end has come!  
19 The men who chased us were faster than eagles in the sky.  
They chased us into the mountains.  
They hid in the desert to catch us.  
20 The king was very important to us.  
He was like the breath we breathe, but he was trapped by them.  
The LORD himself chose the king, and we said this about the king, “We will live in his shadow. He protects us from the nations.”  
21 Be happy, people of Edom.  
Be happy, you who live in the land of Uz.  
But remember, the cup of the Lord’s anger will come around to you too.  
When you drink from that cup, you will get drunk and strip off all your clothes.  
22 Your punishment is complete, Zion.  
You will not go into captivity again.  
But the Lord will punish your sins, people of Edom.  
He will uncover your sins.  

**A Prayer to the Lord**

5 Remember, LORD, what happened to us.  
Look and see our shame.  
2 Our land has been turned over to strangers.
Our houses have been given to foreigners.  
3 We have become orphans with no father.  
Our mothers have become like widows.  
4 We have to buy the water that we drink.  
We have to pay for the wood that we use.  
5 We are forced to wear a yoke on our necks.†  
We get tired, and we have no rest.  
6 We made an agreement with Egypt.  
We also made an agreement with Assyria to get enough bread.  
7 Our ancestors sinned, and now they are dead.  
And we are suffering because of their sins.  
8 Slaves have become our rulers.  
No one can save us from them.  
9 We risk our lives to get food.  
There are men in the desert with swords.  
10 Our skin is hot like an oven.  
We have a high fever because of our hunger.  
11 The enemy raped the women of Zion and the girls in the cities of Judah.  
12 The enemy hanged our princes.  
They didn’t honour our leaders.  
13 The enemy made our young men grind grain at the mill.  
Our young men stumbled under loads of wood.  
14 The leaders no longer sit at the gates of the city.  
The young men no longer make music.  
15 We have no more joy in our hearts.  
Our dancing has changed to crying for the dead.  
16 The crown has fallen from our head.  
Things have gone badly for us because we sinned.  
17 For this reason our hearts have become sick, and our eyes cannot see clearly.  
18 Mount Zion is a wasteland.  
Foxes run around on Mount Zion.  
19 But you rule forever, LORD.  
Your throne lasts for ever and ever.  
20 Why have you forgotten us?  
You seem to have left us alone for such a long time.  
21 Bring us back to you, LORD.  
We will gladly come back to you.  
Make our lives as they were before.  
22 You were very angry with us.  
Have you completely rejected us?

†5:5 We are forced ... necks This follows one ancient Greek translation (Symmachus). The traditional Hebrew text reads “Upon our neck we are pursued.” This seems to mean, “Those chasing us are about to strike our neck!”