

Bible Studies in Lamentations

Study 1: The Lonely City

Laugh, and world laughs with you;
Weep, and you weep alone:
For this sad old earth must borrow its Mirth,
But it has trouble enough of its own.
—Ella Wheeler Wilcox

Discuss: Does anything good every come out of suffering?

Background information

Lamentations was written in response to the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. After a long siege, the Babylonian army of king Nebuchadnezzar broke through the city's walls, ransacked the city, tore down the temple, tortured and blinded King Zedekiah and carried him and many of his citizens off to captivity in Babylon.

The fall of Jerusalem didn't come out of the blue. The prophet Jeremiah had been warning the people of Judah¹ for some time that the Babylonians were coming. They were coming not just to carry out their own evil plans, but to serve the righteous justice of God. It was because Judah had turned away from him that God was turning his back on them and allowing this to happen to them. So the fall of Jerusalem was not just a *political* tragedy, but a *spiritual* tragedy. It was the ultimate expression of the breakdown of the relationship between God and his people.

Lamentations is not an historical account of the fall of Jerusalem, in the sense of who did what and when. For that, read 2 Kings 24-25. Lamentations is an expression of the emotional response to what has happened.

READ Lamentations chapter 1

1. Is there anything that strikes or puzzles you? Comment and discuss ...
2. Is this written as prose or poetry? What is the difference? Why might the author² have written in this way?
3. In the first half of the poem (verses 1-11) an observer speaks about Jerusalem.
 - a. Jerusalem is personified as a woman. What two kinds of women is she likened to in verse 1, and what does that communicate about her plight? What other images throughout the poem reinforce this?
 - b. What is she weeping over in verse 2? What has happened to her? Who are these friends and lovers? [see 1 Kings 15:16-20; 2 Kings 16:5-7; Hosea 2:7; 7:11; 8:9-10; Jeremiah 3:1; 22:20-22]
4. In the second half of the poem, from verse 12 onwards, Jerusalem herself speaks of her sorrow.
 - a. Who does she hold responsible for what has happened to her?
 - b. Does she think her treatment has been unfair?
 - c. What is her biggest complaint?
 - d. What does she appeal to God to do?

¹ Judah is the name of the southern part of the once-great nation of Israel. After the reigns of David and Solomon, when Solomon's son Rehoboam came to the throne around 930 BC, the country split into two kingdoms: Israel in the north (with its capital in Samaria) and Judah (retaining Jerusalem as its capital) in the south. In 722 BC, the northern kingdom of Israel was defeated by the Assyrians, leaving Judah in the south standing alone as the remnant of what had been David's great kingdom.

² Traditionally, the author of Lamentations is believed to be Jeremiah the prophet. You will notice that the two books are side-by-side in your Bible. However, we have no concrete evidence to support that belief.

5. What can we learn from this? What is the value of Lamentations to us?
- a. What value is there for us in having such expressions of pain and grief in the Bible (and Lamentations is not alone – there are also several Psalms of lament, and similar poems are also found in places like Job)? Is there a time and a place for lament?
 - b. Lamentations is something of a memorial to Jerusalem’s grief. What is the importance and value of memorials (such as war memorials, or headstones in a graveyard, or memorial plaques on walls)? What lessons can we learn from Lamentations?
 - c. If Lamentations stood alone, or was the end of the story, then that would indeed be depressing. But that’s not the case. This is just one small part of a bigger story. God’s dealings with Jerusalem are not over. Ultimately, God himself comes to Jerusalem and its temple³ in the person of Jesus.
 - i. What do we learn from the following ...
 1. Luke 2:41-52?
 2. John 2:13-22?
 3. Luke 19:41-44?
 4. Revelations 21:1-4?
 - ii. Jesus doesn’t just weep over Jerusalem, he shares her suffering. What light do the following passages shed on Jesus’ suffering on the cross ...
 1. Mark 15:34 (which is quoting from Psalm 22)?
 2. Isaiah 53?

³ After the fall of Babylon to the Assyrians in 539 BC, the Jewish exiles were allowed to return and rebuild Jerusalem (see Ezra and Nehemiah). The process of rebuilding went on for several centuries. The “second temple” (the rebuilding of the temple that had been destroyed), begun in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah was extended and refurbished under Herod the Great (74-4 BC), and that is the temple that Jesus knew and visited.