

An Attempt To Listen To God

A Survey of Lamentations

Introduction

By

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Introduction

1) In any division of the Old Testament, and in this case the seventeen prophets (Isaiah - Malachi), it is rightly taught that there are five major and twelve minor prophets. This does not mean some are more important than others, nor has it anything to do with size or tenor. The five major prophets are subdivided into three, two written before the Babylonian captivity (Isaiah and Jeremiah); two written with a view to after the captivity (Ezekiel and Daniel); and one written during it and contemplating the ruin of Jerusalem and its inhabitants (Lamentations). Lamentations was written after the fall of Jerusalem under Nebuchadnezzar and cannot be read separate from Jeremiah for Jeremiah 52 gives the historical judgment of God on Jerusalem and the people. They had been put under subjection by the King of Babylon, but Zedekiah rebelled and it resulted in captivity. The chronological order seems to be as follows:

Happening	Year of Zedekiah's reign	Year of Nebuchadnezzar reign	Month	Day	Reference
Zedekiah begins his 11 year reign					Jer. 52:1
Captives	7th	18th			Jer. 52:28
Nebuchadnezzar pitched his army against Jerusalem, which lasted to Zedekiah's 11th year	9th	19th	10	10	Jer. 52:4
All the men of war fled Jerusalem	10th		4	9	Jer. 52:6-7
The Chaldeans / Babylonians pursued and overtook them taking Zedekiah captive, killing his sons before his eyes, and putting out his eyes. He remained in prison until the day of his death.					Jer. 52:8-11
Nebuzar-adan came and burned the house of the Lord and all the houses of the great men, breaking down the walls and taking captives, and taking gold and all that was valuable.			5	10	Jer. 52:12-27
Captives taken		23rd			Jer. 52:30

2) Due to the chronology constantly changing from the year of Zedekiah's reign and that of Nebuchadnezzar, I find it difficult to be precise in the order. The main point is that at the end of Jeremiah Jerusalem is left desolate, and it is then Lamentations was written. It is one thing to hear the threat of discipline, or see it on another, but often we only really believe it when it is personal. This was the situation with the inhabitants of Jerusalem. The Septuagint begins with the words: "It came to pass that, after Israel was taken captive and Jerusalem was made desolate, Jeremiah sat weeping, and lamented with this lamentation over Jerusalem and said: How doth city sit solitary?".

- 3) Jerusalem was taken captive on four occasions:
- a) By Shishak during the reign of Rehoboam (1 Kgs. 14:25; 2 Chron. 12:2)
 - b) By the Philistines and Arabians during the reign of Jehoram (2 Kgs. 8:20-22; 2 Chron. 21:16-17)

- c) By Joash or Jehoash (the same individual) during the reign of Amaziah (2 Kgs. 14:10; 2 Chron. 25:19)
 - d) By Nebuchadnezzar during the reign of Zedekiah (2 Kgs. 24:15-17; 2 Chron. 36:11-21)
- 4) Lamentations is read on the 9th of August, for on that date the nation of Israel remembers the five great calamities on Israel:
- a) The decree from God for their wandering in the wilderness because of their disobedience in not believing God would give them the promised land. (Heb. 4:2)
 - b) The destruction of the first temple by Nebuchadnezzar. (2 Kgs. 25:9)
 - c) The destruction of the second temple by the Romans under Titus. (Matt. 24:2)
 - d) The taking of Bethel by the Romans under Hadrian, and some 580,000 Jews were slain. I am not aware of any Biblical reference for this.
 - e) The ploughing of Zion like a field in the fulfillment of Jer. 26:18.

Key Words

- a) Daughter:
 - i) Daughter of my people. Used once in Isaiah (ch. 22:4); 10 times in Jeremiah; and 5 times in Lamentations (ch. 2:11; 3:48; 4:3, 6, 10)
 - ii) Daughter of Zion. Used in 8 verses, more than any other book.
 - iii) Virgin daughter of Zion. Only in ch. 2:13
 - iv) Daughter of Jerusalem. Used twice in Lamentations. (ch. 2:13, 15; 2 Kgs. 19:21; Isa. 37:22; Mic. 4:8; Zeph. 3:14; Zech. 9:9)
 - v) Daughter of Edom. Used twice and only in Lamentations. (ch. 4:21, 22)
- b) Hope:
 - i) Found in five verses. (ch. 3:18, 21, 24, 26, 29)
- c) Anger:
 - i) Found in 10 verses. (ch. 1:12, 2:1, 3, 6, 21, 22; 3:43, 66; 4:16)

Key Verses

- a) "I will hasten my word to perform it" (ch. 1:12)
- b) "Hast thou not procured this unto thyself, in that thou hast forsaken the Lord thy God (ch. 2:17)
- c) "How shall I put thee among the children" (ch. 3:19)
- d) "Return ye backsliding children and I will heal your backslidings" (ch. 3:22)

Author

To a person as spiritual as Jeremiah, the fall of Jerusalem was much more than the destruction of the city. It signified the judgment of God on the city and the people, who despite professing spirituality, were idolators (Ezek. 7:20; 20:27-32). This was the city of which God had said: "I have chosen Jerusalem, that my name might be there" (2 Chron. 6:6). These were the people which God called: "A peculiar treasure unto me above all people" (Ex. 19:5). Jeremiah had warned of God's judgment but they would not listen. He had earnestly preached in the streets of Jerusalem, but now the judgment had fallen. This lovely man did not smugly say, "I warned you" rather He was totally distraught.

Jeremiah the prophet did compose a lament on at least one occasion (2 Chron 35:25). While this verse does not refer to the book of Lamentations, it does connect Jeremiah with the lamentation-type of literature. This all demonstrates the depth of the man's spirituality. There was nothing of cold ridicule or holier than thou condescending comments, but he wept. There is a place outside the city wall of Jerusalem which is called: "Jeremiah's Grotto". It is believed to be the place where the prophet sat, and looking over the ruined city, wept, and wrote this book. Years later our Lord was to again look over the city, not in its ruin, but upon a city of people far from God, who knew the day of their visitation and wept (Matt. 23:37; Lk. 13:34).

Jeremiah not only saw the sorrow of desolation, but more than that, he felt the grief of being disciplined by God due to sins and the ruination of the place that had once been a place where the glory of God had been manifested. It is a stark reminder of so many churches, empty, and dead formality. We can discuss our devastating weakness, but fail to see that saints who know the truth and have departed, have been taken captive. They dabbled in the sin of disobedience and then made captives. Jeremiah spoke representing the city as a spiritual idealist feeling the tragedy of that which had happened.

It must be recognized that because of two serious matters, the judgment of God in continuing and ever declining weakness and death is coming, or has come into many churches. The two matters are:

- a) There is unresolved, unrepentant, persistent sin, even sins from years ago, which were never dealt with and now it is too late.
- b) And when applied to ourselves. the statements: “we are the last bastion of truth”, or “we only practice New Testament principles”, we are duped into failing to see the spiritual weakness and declining in many places as a judgment of God.

The Manifestation of Divine Persons

God

In this book several bodily parts of God are spoken about. Mention is made of His “ear(s)” (ch. 3:56); “face” (ch. 2:19; 3:35); “hand(s)” (ch. 1:14; 2:8; 3:3); and His “right hand” (ch. 2:3, 4).

Lamentations is much more than the expression of grief of a man for that which had happened. It is a manifestation of the heart of God when because of his peoples sins, He must discipline them and bring them into sorrow and weeping. When taunted by the captors to sing, their response was: “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” (Psa. 137:4).

We must never lose sight that even when the people of God are under His discipline or are away from Him, His heart still yearns over them. When they were in Egypt, and despite their idolatry, He heard their cries (Ezek. 20; Ex. 3:7). When those who stayed in Babylon after opportunity was given to return to Jerusalem and were in danger of being slaughtered, He overruled and had Esther in the palace to intercede (Est. 7:3). He was caring for His own. Lamentations is God revealing His heart through Jeremiah. Because of His holiness, in love He must smite those he loves. The discipline of God is not that of some cold despotic being, void of compassion smiting, it is a heart sorrowing over that which He must do.

The ruination of Jerusalem and captivity of its people was not the results of a superior army. It was God’s own discipling activity and Babylon was simply the channel He used. This was the truth Joseph understood when he said to his brethren: “Ye thought evil against me” (Gen. 50:20), or Paul, when writing to the Ephesians, declared himself not as a prisoner of Rome but of the Lord (Eph. 4:1).

It was God who made His altar desolate, abhorred His sanctuary, and hated their feasts (Ezra 6:4; Lam. 2:7). His respect for that which He had ordained was obnoxious to Him. It is solemn beyond words when the patience and endurance of God comes to its end as it was when:

- a). God destroyed the earth and the inhabitants which He had created by the flood. (Gen. 6:17)
- b) He destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. (Gen. 19:24-25)
- c) He disciplined by the confusion caused by multi languages. (Gen. 11:7-8)

Christ

As a prefigure of Christ:

- a) Several times during the life of our Lord He was connected to Jeremiah.
 - i) Both of these men warned of coming judgment. (Jer. 2:15-18; Matt. 24:2-29)
 - ii) With both men innocency of blood is spoken of:
 1. With Christ it was Judas who betrayed Him. (Matt. 27:4)
 2. With Jeremiah he spoke of himself as being such. (Jer. 26:15)

- iii) Both wept over Jerusalem because of their sins:
 - 1. "But if ye will not hear it, my soul shall weep in secret places for your pride; and mine eye shall weep sore, and run down with tears, because the Lord's flock is carried away captive." (Jer 13:17)
 - 2. Christ: "And when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it." (Lk. 19:41)
- iv) Both were accused of being mad:
 - 1. "The Lord hath made thee priest in the stead of Jehoiada the priest, that ye should be officers in the house of the Lord, for every man that is mad, and maketh himself a prophet, that thou shouldst put him in prison, and in the stocks." (Jer 29:26)
 - 2. Christ, his brethren: "And many of them said, He hath a devil, and is mad; why hear ye him?" (Jn. 10:20)
- v) Both were accused of being false prophets
 - 1. Jeremiah:
 - (a) "So why have you not reprimanded Jeremiah from Anathoth, who poses as a prophet among you?" (Jer. 29:27)
 - 2. Christ:
 - (a) "Art thou also of Galilee? Search, and look: for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet." (Jn. 7:52)
 - (b) "Art thou greater than our father Abraham, which is dead? and the prophets are dead: whom makest thou thyself?" (Jn. 8:53)
- vi) Both were dealt with treacherously
 - 1. Jeremiah:
 - (a) "Even they have dealt treacherously with thee." (Jer. 12:6)
 - 2. Christ:
 - (a) "Yea, mine own familiar friend . . . hath lifted up his heel against me". (Psa. 41:9)
- vii) Both were likened to a lamb led to the slaughter:
 - 1. Jeremiah:
 - (a) "I was like a lamb . . . that is brought to the slaughter" (Jer. 11:19)
 - 2. Christ:
 - (a) "He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter" (Isa. 53:7)
 - (b) "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter" (Acts 8:32)
- viii) Both spoke the words of God:
 - 1. Jeremiah:
 - (a) "Behold, I have put My words in thy mouth" (Jer. 1:5, 9)
 - 2. Christ:
 - (a) "He whom God hath sent speaketh the words of God" (Jn. 3:34)
- ix) Both were put to death:
 - 1. Jeremiah by his enemies desire:
 - (a) "But I was like a lamb or an ox that is brought to the slaughter; and I knew not that they had devised devices against me, saying, Let us destroy the tree with the fruit thereof, and let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name may be no more remembered." (Jer. 11:19)
 - 2. Christ literally:
 - (a) "He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken." (Isa. 53:8)

Yet, like our Lord, He is the object of their derision and the rejection of him and the message. He was being pulled in multiple ways:

- a) He knew how precious these people were to God.
- b) He understood the reason for the severity of God's judgment.
- c) He also felt for the people who had brought this upon themselves.

At this point a truth in the New Testament comes to the fore. Discipline is beneficial to them that are exercised thereby, that is, they learn why it has come and the need to rectify life, to have it brought into alignment with God. The nation was to learn lessons about the character of God in the affliction. He disciplines but never crushes to destruction, He humbles but never humiliates. What a comfort and consolation this is. It is not then to be surprised at when in the middle section of the book, literally and spiritually, there is a celebration of the mercies of God that renew every morning (Lam. 3:23, 32). He rejoices in the truths that God remainest, and is faithful, and emphases "Hope" five times. How very gracious of God. He smites but in pardoning grace and mercy He seeks to comfort.

What were the horrors which accompanied the Babylonian siege?

- a) A devastation and slaughter of Kings, princes, elders, priests, prophets and commoners. (ch.1:6, 19; 2:6, 9, 10-12, 20)
- b) Mothers reduced by starvation and surviving by cannibalism. (ch. 2:20)
- c) The virgins and young men were taken in exile. (ch. 1:18)
- d) The Temple destroyed and all ceremonial ritual came to an end. (ch. 2:6-7)

Why was this so necessary?

- a) To teach the people again the lesson they ought to have learnt when they came into the land, namely, the original inhabitants were being removed because of their corruption which, if the children of Israel did, they would also be punished. God could easily have removed the inhabitants and given the children of Israel the land, but in using them to punish the people, He made them aware of the consequences of such behaviors.
- b) To bring the hearers to repentance. (ch. 4:20)
- c) To recognize the mercies of God. (ch. 3:21-24)
- d) To give us pre-pictures of the sufferings of the Lord. (ch. 1:12-13)

There is a series of similarities between Deuteronomy and Lamentations as the following table shows.

Deuteronomy 28	Lamentations
"Among these nations thou shalt find no ease, neither shall the sole of thy foot have rest" (v. 65)	"She dwelleth among the heathen, she findeth no rest" (ch. 1:3; 5:5)
"He shall be the head, and thou shalt be the tail" (v. 44)	"Her adversaries are the chief, her enemies prosper" (ch. 1:5)
"Thy sons and thy daughters shalt be given to another people" (v. 32)	"Her children are gone into captivity before the enemy" (ch. 1:5)
"Thou shalt beget sons and daughters, but thou shalt not enjoy them; for they shall go into captivity" (v. 41)	"My virgins and my young men are gone into captivity" (ch. 1:18)
"Thou shalt become an astonishment, a proverb, and a byword, among all the nations whither the Lord shall lead thee" (v. 37)	"All that pass by clap their hands at thee, they hiss and wag their head at the daughter of Jerusalem" (ch. 2:15)
"Thou shalt eat the fruit of thine own body" (v.53)	"Shall the women eat their fruit, and children of a span long?" (ch. 2:20)

Deuteronomy 28	Lamentations
“Thou shalt build a house, and thou shalt not dwell therein” (v. 30)	“Our inheritance is turned to strangers, our houses to aliens” (ch. 5:2)
“A nation of fierce countenance, which shall not regard the person of the old” (v. 50)	“Princes are hanged up by their hand: the faces of elders were not honoured” (Lam. 5:12)

A truth already mentioned but which needs to be emphasized is God’s punishment on those who so afflicted His people. The Babylonians were the rod in the hand of the Lord but they had a hatred for Israel. God used that hatred as an instrument, but now they themselves must be punished for their gloating and destruction of Israel. Israel’s punishment is over but not that of the Edomites. Israel has repented and confessed, the just punishment for that which she had done (ch. 4:11; 18-20). Fellowship has been restored but the judgment on Edom has yet to fall. (Obad. 1:1-2)

All is confessed before Jehovah who is faithful to His people, so that he can call on God to consider the affliction in order that He may remember His suffering people according to the greatness of His compassions. Jehovah changes not (ch. 5:19-21).

The Spirit of God

In Lamentations we are also given a manifestation of the outliving of the Holy Spirit by those under His influence. If they are in deep fellowship with the Spirit they will feel for the people of God and lament over the desolation brought upon them. Casual discussion or non emotional reaction to the ruination of a church is a marked characteristic of one of whom the Spirit of God is not in control. When, due to unrepentant sin, God must set aside that which he has planted, and ordinances He has ordained, such as “The Lord’s Supper”. That will cause the Holy Spirit to grieve. He had been grieved and quenched by the behavior and attitudes of the Israelites or of those in the local assembly. Consequently, since they are dishonoring His name, He has no alternative but to remove the candlestick. It is what He threatened to do with Ephesus (Rev. 2:5). Would God take delight in removing that which honors Christ? Yet, it must be done.

Can there ever be revival in such situations? Yes says Lamentations for: “His mercies are new every morning” (ch. 3:23). But, there must be the recognition as why the judgment fell, the acknowledging that God was righteous, and it is only due to His mercy there will be a reviving. This is the work of the Holy Spirit.

When the city was captured, the Chaldean king ordered it demolished. To stand and watch the temple plundered and the city go up in flames was a numbing experience. In spite of the incessant preaching of the prophets who warned of this very thing, they did not believe it would ever come to this. God had spared Jerusalem before in the days of King Hezekiah and they were lulled by false prophets into thinking that Jerusalem would never be taken, God would not permit that again. They learnt that God’s honour was more important to Him than their spiritual deadness. Faced with the grief over that which had befallen their nation was their feeling of having been utterly rejected by God. What a truth for many churches to learn. Many close, not by happenstance, but by the hand of God in discipline, yet this is not recognized nor acknowledged.

Outlines

No. 1

Lamentations can be divided into two sections:

- a) Four lamentations (chs. 1-4)
- b) A prayer (ch. 5)

No. 2

Description	Theme	Reference
A weeping widowed city	The destruction of Jerusalem	ch. 1:1-22
A veiled and broken woman	The righteous anger of God	ch. 2:1-22
The suffering weeping prophet trusting God	The personal grief and worship of God	ch 3:1-66
The devalued ruined city	The city under siege	ch. 4:1-22
The penitent suppliant	The prayer for restoration	ch. 5:1-22

The Wonder of God's Abilities

God has a wonderful way of being able to take the worst of situations and make them a blessing. The question may be asked: "What good came out of the Babylonish captivity?" J. B. Tidwell summarizes the benefits of the captivity for the Jewish people (Introducing the Old Testament, p. 178).

- a) The Jews became a separate people who did not want to become like their neighbors ever again. The Pharisees came from this era of Jewish history.
- b) They became pure monotheistic, giving up idolatry completely.
- c) They developed theological literature and renewed interest in the Law of Moses.
- d) They repented of their sins against Yahweh.
- e) The synagogues were established as a place of worship centered on God's Word, prayer, praise and study.
- f) Judaism became personal rather than a formal ritualism.
- g) They became a missionary people to all the nations.
- h) During this time God placed a longing for the coming of the Messiah in their hearts. The Pharisees were especially instrumental in keeping the Messianic hope before the eyes of the people.

**May God grant us good understanding as He, by His Holy Spirit, deigns to guide us into all truth.
John 16:13**

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