

Lesson #32 - Lamentations 2019

Before starting this lesson, read the book of **Lamentations**. You may find it helpful to read the book, go thru the lesson and then read the book once again. Since it is a short book, it will not be difficult to do.

Back in the days of Jeremiah, when people died in the Middle East, special poems were often composed in their honor. Then at their burial or on the anniversary of their death, the poems were read, chanted or sung. Because they were expressing grief, they were called **laments** or **lamentations**. David, as well as most of the prophets wrote laments. Ezekiel said that one of his lamentations would be chanted. Ezek. 32:16

Over the years, these poems were written, not just for people, but also for cities or nations when they were destroyed. So in 586 BC, after Jerusalem is burned and the nation of Judah is taken off the map, laments are written for her.

Our book does not say who wrote them, but the Jews always believed it was Jeremiah.

They explained he was the only logical author because he stayed in Jerusalem after the majority of people were exiled. And he was known for the laments he wrote to honor King Josiah, in 609 BC. 2 Chron. 35:25

A 2nd reason they believed Jeremiah was the author, was the phrases and information found in both of his books.

In **Jeremiah** 9:1, he is weeping for Jerusalem. He says,

Oh that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears.

I would weep day and night for the slain of my people. Jeremiah was known as the weeping prophet.

In **Lamentations**, he uses the same phrases.

1:16, *This is why I weep and my eyes overflow with tears.*

2:11 *My eyes fail from weeping. I am in torment within...*

3:48-49 *Streams of tears flow from my eyes because my people are destroyed.*

My eyes will flow unceasingly, without relief.

Notice the similarity of phrases.

In both books, Jeremiah tells about his experience in the cistern.

Jeremiah 38:6 says,

So they took Jeremiah and put him into the cistern...which was in the courtyard of the guard. They lowered Jeremiah by ropes into the cistern; it had no water in it, only mud and Jeremiah sank down into the mud.

Now in **Lamentations** we have details of what happened next. Chapter 3:52-60

Those who were my enemies without cause hunted me like a bird. They tried to end my life in a pit and threw stones at me; the waters closed over my head and I thought I was about to be cut off. I called on Your name, O Lord, from the depths of the pit. You heard my plea, when I said, Do not close Your ears to my cry for relief. You came near when I called You and You said, Do not fear. O Lord, You took up my case; You redeemed my life.

You have seen, O Lord the wrong done to me. Uphold my cause. You have seen the depth of their vengeance, all their plots against me.

Remember, a cistern is a hole in the ground used to collect and store rain water. In the book of Jeremiah, he said the cistern was empty except for mud at the bottom. But then it rained and that was a different story. The water started to pour over his head. If it continued, he would drown. So Jeremiah prayed, asking God to stop the rain. He survived, because God answered his prayer.

A final evidence of Jeremiah's authorship is the **introduction**.

In our Bibles, chapter one begins, *How deserted lies the city, once so full of people.*

But the Greek translation, the Séptuagint, written in the 200's BC, starts out,

And it came to pass, after Israel was taken captive and Jerusalem made desolate, that Jeremiah sat weeping and lamented with this lamentation over Jerusalem and said, How deserted lies the city, once so full of people.

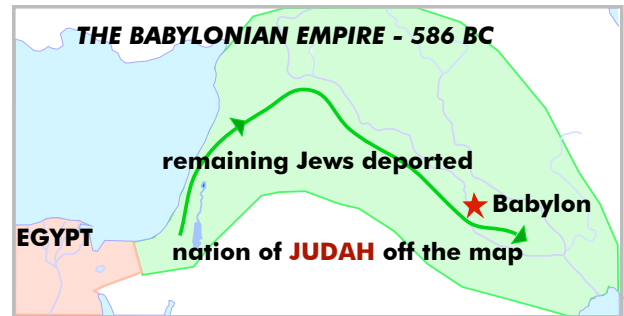
This introduction is found in the Séptuagint, the Jewish Talmud, as well as in the early Aramaic, Syrian and Old Latin versions. Because of this, early church leaders such as Origen and Jerome said Jeremiah was the author.

This is why I teach that Jeremiah is the author – it is logical; there are similarities between the books and the introduction in the early versions says he wrote it.

Jeremiah knows the loss of Jerusalem and the nation of Judah will be remembered by Jews every year on the anniversary. The people will use his laments for the occasion. So instead of adding these poems to his first book, he puts them in a separate scroll. It will be easier to use and read. Even to this day, usually in late July, the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple *is* remembered. The scroll of Jeremiah's laments is read as liturgy in all synagogue services thruout the world.

To not only understand this book, but also to appreciate Jeremiah's emotions, we have to know the context.

Jeremiah has lived thru 2 years of siege, with the Babylonian army surrounding Jerusalem. By the second year, there had been such famine and hunger that some of the Jews resorted to cannibalism. When children or older people died, instead of burying them, they used them for food. Finally in late July, 586 BC, the Jews surrendered. The Babylonian troops broke down the walls of Jerusalem, burned the temple and city and leveled all the buildings. They killed all Jews who resisted. The rest they had taken to Babylon to live as exiles. Only the poorest were allowed to stay along with Jeremiah. A Jewish man was put in charge (Gedaliah). Nebuchadnezzar and his troops finally left the area.



It is now 2-3 weeks later. Jeremiah is overcome with all that has happened. He goes to sit on a hillside looking down on Jerusalem. Pictures keep going thru his mind - the famine and desperation in that second year – the brutality of the Babylonian soldiers once they took over the city, the long lines of Jewish people leaving the city, walking alongside their carts loaded with their personal possessions.

Jerusalem was known as the *city of David, the city of God*. But now God's city is in ruins.

The beautiful **temple** built by Solomon is nothing but rubble.

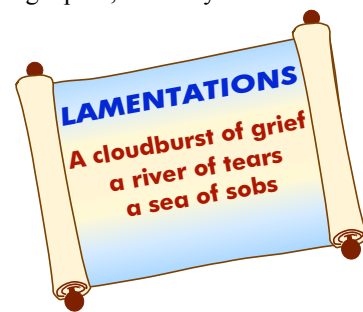
For Jeremiah, it is like being at his nation's graveside, mourning the loss. Being a poet, it is only natural he would write laments to express all this grief.

Some have called this book, *A hymn of sorrow*.

J. Sidlow Baxter, a British Bible scholar, now deceased,
describes this book as...

Others have said, *Every letter was written with a tear
and every word with the sound of a broken heart.*

It is an elegy written in a graveyard.



Much of our Western poetry has rhyme and rhythm. Jewish poetry does not use rhyme at all. Usually it does not use rhythm.

But their laments have what is called a **funeral meter**. Each line is divided into two parts.

The **first** part sounds like the writer is going to wax eloquent with beautiful picture language.

But then, as tho overcome with emotion, the **second** part ends abruptly.

The Revised Standard and New International Bibles have managed to keep some of this style, when it is read aloud.

Her princes are like deer - that find no pasture;

In weakness they have fled - before the pursuer.

Poems of sorrow and lament always use this funeral meter – a longer first part, with the second part dropping off and ending abruptly.

However Jeremiah does something more. Besides using funeral meter, he also writes the laments as an **alphabetic acrostic**. This means the first letter of each verse begins with a consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The first word of verse 1 begins with *A*, verse 2 with *B*, etc.

There are **22** letters in the Hebrew alphabet.

Notice that chapters 1, 2, 4 and 5 all have **22** verses - the same number as the letters in the alphabet.

Chapter 3 has **66** verses. This means that every **3** verses begin with a consecutive letter in the Hebrew alphabet.

The first word in verses 1, 2 and 3 all begin with the Hebrew letter *A*; verses 4, 5 and 6 begin with *B* and so on.

Since Jeremiah writes it in Hebrew and we have different letters in our alphabet, it is impossible to see the acrostic in our English translations. But to give you an idea of what the original was like, I have redone chapter 3, verses 1-6 as an **acrostic** along with the **funeral meter**.

Chapter 3:1-6

As a man, I have seen affliction - by the rod of His justice.

Along the way of darkness He has driven me - without any light.

Against me only He repeatedly turns His hand - all the day long.

By reason of Him my flesh and skin wastes away - He has broken my bones.

Building up siege mounds He has surrounded me - with bitterness and tribulation.

Because of Him, I dwell in darkness, like those long dead.

In the original Hebrew, the rest of the chapter continues, following the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

Chapters 1- 4 use the alphabetic **acrostic**.

Chapter 5 has 22 verses and uses the **funeral meter**, but it does not use the alphabet.

Because it is a prayer, Jeremiah wants to express his thoughts without any limitations.

But that raises the question - since he is expressing such deep emotion, why limit himself with this style in any of the chapters? There are several reasons.

First of all, **the acrostic style has symbolic meaning**. One German scholar has said,

*When you repeat the alphabet, you embrace **all** the possibilities of words.*

In English, we talk about going from A-Z, meaning *totality* or *completeness*. From the book of Jeremiah we know the people of Judah were guilty of **sins** from A-Z. Name a sin; they had done it. Now there needs to be **confession** from A-Z. It is put in this acrostic form, using all the letters of the alphabet,

to illustrate **complete confession** as well as a **complete statement of grief**.

A 2nd reason for the acrostic style is to make it **easier to memorize**. These poems commemorate the destruction of Jerusalem and will eventually be recited in Jewish liturgy. The alphabetic order makes it easier to remember.

A 3rd reason is to **help the author control his words and emotions**

Sometimes emotions get people talking and they go on and on. They do not know how to **stop**.

Other times emotions leave people at a complete loss for words and they do not have any idea how to **start**.

Using the alphabet helps Jeremiah start his words and then know how to stop.

We believe the Bible comes from God, using human authors. The Holy Spirit guides them in the content.

Sometimes we forget the Holy Spirit also gives them artistic ability so their poetry is pleasing to the eyes and the ears.

Lamentations, in the original Hebrew, is an exceptional work of art, using **3 different art forms**.

The **funeral meter** unites the words in each **verse**.

The **alphabet acrostic** unites the verses in each **poem**.

The style of **mirror image** unites the 5 chapters of the **book**.

The **subject** of Jeremiah's grief is the city of **Jerusalem**. Chapters 1 and 5

So he **begins** with Jerusalem's complaint - *look at our condition*.

He **ends** with Jerusalem's prayer - *God, renew and restore us*.

The **middle** poem is about Jeremiah's grief. Chapter 3

It is in the middle because that is the **central focus** of laments - **grief**.

The **reason** for Jeremiah's grief is **God's Judgment**. Chapters 2 and 4

He writes one poem of **how** God judged them and another **why** He judged them

Jerusalem's Complaint
God's Judgment
Jeremiah's Grief
God's Judgment
Jerusalem's Prayer

With this background, we can now study the verses.

JERUSALEM'S COMPLAINT

Chapter 1 *Lord, look at our condition*

Verses 1-11 describe the condition of the city

The enemy came

The people were sent into exile

The city was left in ruins.

Jeremiah is writing **about** the city.

Verses 12 to end of chapter suddenly change with the use of **I, me and my**

Jeremiah is not talking of himself.

This is **Jerusalem** expressing her thoughts and feelings as tho she were a person. It is called **personification**.

Jerusalem laments her destruction and what she has just been thru. She tells of her pain, her tears, groaning and fear. For example, in 1:12 the city is speaking.

Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look around and see. Is any suffering like my suffering that was inflicted on me, that the LORD brought on me in the day of His judgment?

Jeremiah wants us to **feel** the devastation of the city. His first lament is - **Jerusalem's complaint**.

GOD'S JUDGMENT

Chapter 2

Jeremiah now shifts from feeling to fact; from emotion to reason. He turns the focus to **God**.

Some 30 times in the chapter he says, *the Lord, He, Him* or *You*.

Because God's people refused to obey Him, God had to bring the consequences or **judgment**.

Chapter 2 is the **how** of it. He destroyed their city and nation. For example,

Her gates have sunk into the ground; their bars He (God) has broken and destroyed.

Her king and her princes are exiled among the nations,

The law is no more and her prophets no longer find visions from the LORD. 2:9

All who pass your way clap their hands at you; they scoff and shake their heads at the Daughter of Jerusalem:

Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of the whole earth? 2:15

Jeremiah's 2nd lament - **God's Judgment** and **how** He did it.

JEREMIAH'S GRIEF

Chapter 3

Being Jewish, Jeremiah divides his thoughts into topics.

He starts with the **disobedience** of the people.

As a result, God has let them suffer the **consequences** – exile in Babylon.

Therefore they must **accept** these consequences and learn from them.

If they turn back to God, they can have **certainty** - God will change the discipline into blessing.

These 4 topics are continually woven thruout chapter 3. Let's see an example of each.

Disobedience 3:39-42

Why should any living person complain when punished for his sin? Let us examine our ways and test them and let us return to the Lord. Let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven and say, we have sinned and rebelled and You have not forgiven. God had not forgiven because they had not repented. The continued, willful disobedience of God's people brought consequences.

Consequences 3:46-47

All our enemies have opened their mouths wide against us.

We have suffered terror and pitfalls, ruin and destruction.

Even tho Jeremiah himself has not rebelled against God, because this is national judgment, he also has to suffer. The godly have to suffer along with the ungodly.

Acceptance

As God's people are going thru these consequences, they should not become bitter or think God is unfair.

It is God's discipline; they need to **accept** it.

It is good for a person to bear the yoke while he is young. Let him sit alone in silence for the Lord has laid it or brought it on him. 3:27-28

Certainty

Acceptance involves thinking about what **they** have done and what **God** has done. This can lead to despair about themselves. Or it can lead to certainty about God. They can be certain that God is good.

Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, or made extinct, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. I say to myself, The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for - I will be sure about Him. The Lord is good to those whose certainty is in Him – to the one who seeks Him. 3:22-25

For people are not cast off by the Lord forever. Tho He brings grief, He will show compassion; so great is His unfailling love. For He does not willingly bring affliction or grief to His people. 3:31-33.

The Hebrew in this last phrase means, *He does not browbeat - He does not lash out to hurt His people.*

God's people can also be **certain** God will punish their enemies. So Jeremiah ends the chapter with a prayer.
Pay them back what they deserve, O Lord, for what their hands have done. Put a veil over their hearts and may Your curse be on them. Pursue them in anger and destroy them from under the heavens of the Lord.
3:64-66

Remember - this is **Jewish** writing - extreme words for non-extreme meanings.

Put a veil over their hearts means, *do not let the Babylonians get answers or spiritual insight from their pagan gods.*

May Your curse be on them, means, *bring judgment on them in this life.*

Jeremiah is asking for God's **justice**.

He then describes the **kind** of justice he wants.

Pursue them in anger means, *pursue them in judgment and destroy them.*

When people or nations **persist** in evil, God would not be fair to let them get away with it. God's justice **requires** that He bring punishment.

The nation of **Judah** had persisted in evil so God used Babylon to destroy her as a nation.

But God was also holding Babylon accountable for her actions.

When Babylon conquered Jerusalem, she was far more cruel than she needed to be. Because it was war, of course she killed Jewish solders; she killed civilians who resisted them. But then she began to torture women and children for entertainment's sake. Babylonian solders had raped Jewish women.

So Jeremiah ends his lament with **certainty** - God *will* intervene and eventually punish Babylon for all **her** cruelty.

If we had been writing, we would have used the **next** chapter to remind God about every detail of that cruelty.

But Jeremiah uses the chapter to lament once again about **Judah** and what she had done.

GOD'S JUDGMENT

Chapter 4

*The kings of the earth did not believe, nor did any of the world's people, that enemies and foes could enter the gates of Jerusalem. But it happened **because** of the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests, who shed within her the blood of the righteous. 4:12-13*

Notice, it is the **spiritual leaders** who are singled out. From Jeremiah's first book, we know the Jewish people were guilty of every sin in the book. But God is holding the spiritual leaders more responsible because they had more knowledge.

God had called the **Jewish priests** to the privilege of representing Him. But they had betrayed their calling and ministry by becoming priests for all the pagan gods of the area - Baal, Molech, and Ashteroth as well as the sun, moon and stars.

Prophets had not taught God's laws to the people.

Both **priests** and **prophets** had broken God's laws in their own lives.

They killed many of the Jews who were following God and supporting Jeremiah's message.

In fact, they were the ones who put Jeremiah in the cistern and tried to kill him several times.

Be assured, this is **not** talking about the prophets and priests whose books we are studying. They followed God completely, but they were always in the minority. The majority of spiritual leaders were only in it for the money, power, prestige or popularity – for what they could get out of it.

Chapter 4 is a lament of **God's judgment** on Judah and **why** He did it.

Jeremiah is not **complaining against God**, **why** did You do this?

He is **explaining** - **this is why** the nation deserved it.

God had said if His people continued to disobey, He would punish them by taking them **out** of the land.
 But He would never make them extinct. They would never be wiped out as a people.
 There would always be a Jewish remnant who would love and obey Him.
 God also promised that in each generation, He would soften their attitudes (turn their hearts to Him).
 If they responded with **all** their heart, He would bring them back **into** the land.

So the book ends with a statement of faith in these promises.

In our culture, we express faith by saying, *God, I believe You will do this **based** on Your promise.*

Jewish culture expressed their faith in reverse. *God, I believe You will do this **unless** You do **not** keep Your promise.*

Notice 5:21-22

*Restore us to Yourself, O Lord, that we may return; renew our days as of old **unless** You have utterly rejected us and are judging us beyond measure.*

*Jeremiah is saying, I believe You **will** renew and restore unless You do **not** keep Your promise. But I know that is impossible. You could **never** go back on Your word. You could never deny Yourself.*

There is yet another contrast about God's promises

We, in the West, claim God's promises on the basis of **what He says**.

Jeremiah is claiming them on the basis of **who God is** – on God's character of justice and faithfulness.

God's people had been, were and would be unfaithful. But God would **always** be faithful.

Even in his grief, Jeremiah ends his book with certainty of God's faithfulness to His people.

Jeremiah writes 5 lamentations over the destruction of Jerusalem. But God also uses him to give a deeper meaning. Many of the verses take us from the life of Jeremiah to the life of Jesus.

◆ Both Jeremiah and Jesus **wept over Jerusalem**.

Jeremiah wept because the nation in his day, rejected God.

As a result, Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC. The nation was off the map for 70 years.

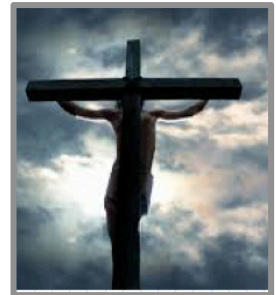
In the gospel of Luke, we are told **Jesus** wept over Jerusalem.

He wept because the Jewish religious leaders of His day, knew who He was and still rejected Him.

As a result, Jerusalem was destroyed again by the Romans in 70 AD.

Again the nation was taken from the map, this time for almost 2000 years.

God did not put her back on the map until 1948.



◆ Both Jeremiah and Jesus were **known as men of sorrow**.

Jeremiah was known as *the weeping prophet*.

Jesus was called a man of sorrows; acquainted with grief. (Isa. 53:3)

◆ Both Jeremiah and Jesus **lamented while experiencing God the Father's judgment**.

Jeremiah experienced it while **sitting** on a hillside overlooking Jerusalem.

Six hundred years later, this hillside was called Mt. Calvary.

Jesus lamented as He experienced God the Father's judgment, **dying** on Mt. Calvary.

Many of the words in Lamentations can be seen as the words of Jesus as He hung on the cross.

For example, notice how 1:12 applies not only to the city of Jerusalem, but also to Jesus.

Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look around and see. Is there any suffering like My suffering that was inflicted on Me, that God the Father brought on Me in the day of His justice ?

The answer to that question is **no** - there never has been and never will be any suffering like Jesus experienced.

This is not talking about His **physical** suffering when He was beaten by the Romans.
It is describing His **spiritual** suffering when all the sin of the world for all time, was dumped on Jesus as He hung on the cross. The Father had to turn His back and for 3 hours Jesus was separated from God the Father. At this time, He was making the payment for our sin. **He** was separated from the Father, so we do not have to be, if we accept His payment.

There is another example in 2:15-16. It applied to Jerusalem, but if we change the pronouns, it clearly applies to Jesus as well. How perfectly it expresses the thoughts of Jesus during His 3 hours of separation.

All who pass My way clap their hands at Me. They scoff and shake their heads at Me. Is this the One that was called the perfection of Beauty, the Joy of the whole earth? All My enemies open their mouths wide against Me. They scoff and gnash their teeth and say, we have swallowed Him up. This is the day we have waited for. We have lived to see it.

I became the laughingstock of all My people; they mock Me in song all day long. He, God the Father, has filled Me with bitter herbs and sated Me with gall.... 3:14

These are the things that Jesus felt and thought when He accepted our punishment –
when our sins were put on Him.

◆ Both Jeremiah and Jesus **experienced God the Father's response** 3:58

Jeremiah said, *Oh Lord, You took up my case; You redeemed my life*
when he was about to die in the cistern and God saved his life.

Jesus said, *Oh Lord, You took up My case; You redeemed My life,*
after He physically died and God the Father raised Him from the dead.

Jeremiah, is writing about Jerusalem. But the Holy Spirit guided his words so they would also give a picture of Jesus. They reveal some of the things Jesus would later experience and say. Only the Holy Spirit could do this.

Jeremiah wrote the book of Lamentations in 586 BC.

PURPOSE

To lament the destruction of Jerusalem.
To teach God's people the right attitude towards discipline.
To instruct those going thru discipline

Jeremiah's teaching and instruction were not only for his day, but for us as well. God still uses suffering as discipline.

However, first I need to emphasize - **not all suffering is because of disobedience.**

When we experience suffering, we should not automatically assume we have done something wrong.

We need to look honestly at our life and ask the Holy Spirit to show us specifically, if there is anything wrong.

If He does not reveal anything specific, we should not feel guilty, thinking *I must have done something*.

It means God has allowed the suffering for some other reason.

We need to ask Him for insight so we can understand His purpose and learn from it.

But when we knowingly, deliberately disobey God, there will be consequences that bring some kind of suffering.

When the Holy Spirit brings it to our attention - an attitude, something we have done or something we have failed to do - we need to admit it and ask God's forgiveness.

If we are guilty of serious disobedience, then even after forgiveness, God will still bring consequences.

Serious disobedience is when we know our actions or attitudes are wrong, but we deliberately and willfully continue. We are unwilling to give it up or stop.

God is not trying to make us miserable or put us down. He wants to stop our destructive ways.

In justice, there must be consequences for our deliberate wrong choices.

Jeremiah tells us we need to accept God's discipline so we can be restored.

The purpose of His discipline is:

To show us the seriousness of our disobedience.
To give us a desire to correct our disobedience
To help us learn, so we do not keep repeating it or take it lightly.

If we accept the consequences and once again obey, we can be certain that...

In the discipline God will not abandon us – He will never stop loving us.

The discipline is never meant to destroy us.

God will give us wisdom to deal with everything in the situation.

The discipline will bring blessing as we begin to make wise choices.

Even when we are unfaithful, *God is always faithful.* ***Great is His faithfulness!***