

LECTURE 24: LAMENTATIONS

“The God who is righteous & faithful”

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I. Orienting Data

- A. Focus:** Prelude to the anticipatory historical; how to mourn in the midst of divine discipline, all in the light of God’s faithfulness and every-morning mercies
- B. Content:** A series of five laments over the fall of Jerusalem (cf. Pss. 74 and 79 with 89)
- C. Date of composition:** Unknown, probably soon after the fall of Jerusalem (586 B.C.); tradition places Jeremiah as the author, which would likely place the writing between 586–580 B.C.
- D. Canonical placement:** The location of Lamentations at the end of the Former Writings allows the “commentary” portion of the Tanak to begin and end with a book by Jeremiah. Its placement also serves as a bridge back into the exilic context departed from at the end of 2 Kings and picked up again in the narrative of Daniel.
- E. Emphases:** The deep personal suffering and spiritual agony experienced at the fall of Jerusalem; the justice of God in carrying out the overthrow of Zion; hope lies finally in God’s character alone.

II. Literary Features:

A. Acrostic Structure:

1. A series of acrostics, where the 1st letter of each verse starts with a succeeding letter of the 22 letter Hebrew alphabet (cf. Pss. 34, 119; 145; Prov. 31:10–31). The point in utilizing this pattern appears to be to stress the totality or completeness of something. Note these other examples:
 - a. Psalm 34: The total-life nature of God’s protection of the righteous.
 - b. Psalm 119: The full-orbed joy of the psalmist in the Torah.
 - c. Psalm 145: The absolute perfection of Yahweh’s character.
 - d. Prov. 31:10–31: The perfect picture of a woman who fears the Lord.
2. In this context, the five laments in Lamentations appears to express the completeness of the psalmist’s agony and perhaps also the depth of his hope in God.
 - a. *Laments 1 and 2*: 22 stanzas of 3 lines each, the first line of each stanza beginning with a consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet (22 vss each).
 - b. *Lament 3*: 22 stanzas, but in this case all 3 lines in each stanza begin with the same letter (66 vss).
 - c. *Lament 4*: Same pattern as Laments 1 & 2, but with 2 line stanza rather than 3 (22 vss).
 - d. *Lament 5*: 22 lines, but not acrostic (22 vss).

- B. Nature:** Laments in Scripture implicitly encourage HOPE, for they always express or presuppose deep trust in Yahweh (e.g., Pss. 3, 6, 12, 13, 22, 31, 39, 42, 44, 57, 71, 80, 94, 120, 137, 139, 142). Normally, the lament includes six parts, synthesized by the acronym APTRAP.

1. *Address* to God using first and second person with the divine name

2. *Petition* for help
3. *Trouble* described, at times with complaint
4. *Rationale* for why God should answer
5. *Assurance* declared as confidence or trust
6. *Praise* or promise to worship

Lamentations 5		
¹	Remember, O Yahweh, what has befallen us;	Address
^{1, 21}	Look, and see our disgrace! . . . Renew our days as of old.	Petition
^{2, 17}	Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers. . . . We have become orphans, fatherless; our mothers are like widows. . . . Our heart has become sick.	Trouble
²⁰	Why do you forget us forever?	(Complaint)
^{21, 22}	Restore us to yourself, O Yahweh, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old—unless you have utterly rejected us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us.	Rationale
¹⁹	But you, O Yahweh, reign forever.	Assurance

III. Message

A. Three voices in the Laments:

1. Narrator/author: Laments 1–5 (alone in 3)
2. Zion (personified): Laments 1–2
3. The people of Zion: Laments 4–5

B. Overview of the Laments:

1. *Laments 1 and 2*: Narrator and Zion mourn over the fall of Jerusalem, recognizing it happened because of her sins.
2. *Lament 3*: Narrator's voice proclaims the agony of Jerusalem, the single expression of hope, and the meaning of suffering.
3. *Laments 4 and 5*: Narrator and people of Zion agonize for the people in occupied Jerusalem.

C. Key Theological Themes:

1. God justly cursed Judah for her sin.
 - a. Judah deserved her judgment (Lam. 1:5, 8, 14, 18, 20, 22; 3:42–43; 4:6, 13; 5:7, 16).
 - Lam. 1: ⁵Her foes have become the head; her enemies prosper, because Yahweh has afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions; her children have gone away, captives before the foe.... ⁸Jerusalem sinned grievously; therefore she became filthy; all who honored her despise her, for they have seen her nakedness; she herself groans and turns her face away.... ¹⁴My transgressions were bound into a yoke; by his hand they were fastened together; they were set upon my neck; he caused my strength to fail; the Lord gave me into the hands of those whom I cannot withstand.... ¹⁸Yahweh is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word; but hear, all you peoples, and see my suffering; my young women and my young men have gone into captivity.... ²⁰Look, O Yahweh, for I am in distress; my stomach churns; my heart is wrung within me, because I have been very rebellious. In the street the sword bereaves; in the house it is like death.... ²²Let all their evil-doing come before you, and deal with them as you have dealt with me because of all my transgressions; for my groans are many, and my heart is faint.
 - Lam. 3:42–43. We have transgressed and rebelled, and you have not forgiven. ⁴³You have wrapped yourself with anger and pursued us, killing without pity.
 - Lam. 4:6, 13. For the chastisement of the daughter of my people has been greater than the punishment of Sodom, which was overthrown in a moment, and no hands were

wrung for her....¹³This was for the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests, who shed in the midst of her the blood of the righteous.

- Lam. 5:7, 16. Our fathers sinned, and are no more; and we bear their iniquities....

¹⁶The crown has fallen from our head; woe to us, for we have sinned!

b. **Yahweh delivered the judgment in his anger (1:12; 2:1–9, 22; 3:43; 4:11).**

- Lam. 1:12. Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which Yahweh inflicted on the day of his fierce anger.
- Lam. 2:1–9, 22. How the Lord in his anger has set the daughter of Zion under a cloud! He has cast down from heaven to earth the splendor of Israel; he has not remembered his footstool in the day of his anger. ²The Lord has swallowed up without mercy all the habitations of Jacob; in his wrath he has broken down the strongholds of the daughter of Judah; he has brought down to the ground in dishonor the kingdom and its rulers. ³He has cut down in fierce anger all the might of Israel; he has withdrawn from them his right hand in the face of the enemy; he has burned like a flaming fire in Jacob, consuming all around. ⁴He has bent his bow like an enemy, with his right hand set like a foe; and he has killed all who were delightful in our eyes in the tent of the daughter of Zion; he has poured out his fury like fire. ⁵The Lord has become like an enemy; he has swallowed up Israel; he has swallowed up all its palaces; he has laid in ruins its strongholds, and he has multiplied in the daughter of Judah mourning and lamentation. ⁶He has laid waste his booth like a garden, laid in ruins his meeting place; Yahweh has made Zion forget festival and Sabbath, and in his fierce indignation has spurned king and priest. ⁷The Lord has scorned his altar, disowned his sanctuary; he has delivered into the hand of the enemy the walls of her palaces; they raised a clamor in the house of Yahweh as on the day of festival. ⁸Yahweh determined to lay in ruins the wall of the daughter of Zion; he stretched out the measuring line; he did not restrain his hand from destroying; he caused rampart and wall to lament; they languished together. ⁹Her gates have sunk into the ground; he has ruined and broken her bars; her king and princes are among the nations; the law is no more, and her prophets find no vision from Yahweh.... ²²You summoned as if to a festival day my terrors on every side, and on the day of the anger of Yahweh no one escaped or survived; those whom I held and raised my enemy destroyed.
- Lam. 3:43. You have wrapped yourself with anger and pursued us, killing without pity.
- Lam. 4:11. Yahweh gave full vent to his wrath; he poured out his hot anger, and he kindled a fire in Zion that consumed its foundations.

c. **Yahweh delivered the judgment in accordance with his word (1:21; 2:17; 3:37–38; cf. Lev. 26; Deut. 28)!**

- Lam. 1:21. They heard my groaning, yet there is no one to comfort me. All my enemies have heard of my trouble; they are glad that you have done it. You have brought the day you announced; now let them be as I am.
- Lam. 2:17. Yahweh has done what he purposed; he has carried out his word, which he commanded long ago; he has thrown down without pity; he has made the enemy rejoice over you and exalted the might of your foes.
- Lam. 3:37–38. Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? ³⁸Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?

d. **The covenant curse against Judah only compounds the curse on humanity.**

- Rom. 3:19–20. Now we know that whatever the law says it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

- e. Our hope rests only in Christ, who bears the curse for all who believe.
 - Gal. 3:13. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us . . . ¹⁴ so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles.
- 2. The curses were very severe (Lam. 2:11–12, 20–22; 3:1–18, 44; 4:4–11; 5:10–13; cf. 2 Kgs. 25 with Deut. 28).
 - a. Hunger and thirst (2:11–12, 19; 4:4–5, 9)
 - b. Cannibalism (2:20; 4:10)
 - c. Slaughter (2:20–22)
 - d. Affliction, tribulation, hopelessness (3:1–18)
 - e. Divine distance (3:8, 44)
 - f. Lack (4:5)
 - g. Famine and heat (4:7–8; 5:10)
 - h. Rape (1:4; 5:11)
 - i. Humiliation (5:12)
 - j. Forced labor (5:13)

THINK!

Do you understand Jeremiah 19:9, Lamentations 2:20, and Ezekiel 5:9–10 to mean that God, in punishment on Israel, ordained for them to eat their own children? If so, how is this compatible with his love and how is it just to the children? (After wrestling on your own, read “The Eating of Children and God’s Goodness” in A21.1. in the Appendix.)

- 3. In accordance with his word (e.g., Gen. 12:3; Jer. 25:15–38), God must punish Judah’s enemies, who are equally deserving of judgment (Lam. 1:21–22; 3:61–66; 4:21–22; cf. Deut. 30:7).
 - Gen. 12:3. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse.
 - Jer. 25:15–16. Thus the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: “Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. ¹⁶ They shall drink and stagger and be crazed because of the sword that I am sending among them.”
 - Lam. 1:21–22. They heard my groaning, yet there is no one to comfort me. All my enemies have heard of my trouble; they are glad that you have done it. You have brought the day you announced; now let them be as I am. ²²Let all their evildoing come before you, and deal with them as you have dealt with me because of all my transgressions; for my groans are many, and my heart is faint.”
 - Lam. 3:61–66. You have heard their taunts, O Yahweh, all their plots against me. ⁶²The lips and thoughts of my assailants are against me all the day long. ⁶³Behold their sitting and their rising; I am the object of their taunts. ⁶⁴You will repay them, O Yahweh, according to the work of their hands. ⁶⁵You will give them dullness of heart; your curse will be on them. ⁶⁶You will pursue them in anger and destroy them from under your heavens, O Yahweh.
 - Lam. 4:21–22. Rejoice and be glad, O daughter of Edom, you who dwell in the land of Uz; but to you also the cup shall pass; you shall become drunk and strip yourself bare. ²²The punishment of your iniquity, O daughter of Zion, is accomplished; he will keep you in exile no longer; but your iniquity, O daughter of Edom, he will punish; he will uncover your sins.
 - Deut. 30:7. And the LORD your God will put all these curses on your foes and enemies who persecuted you.

Rom. 9:17–24. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” ¹⁸ So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. ¹⁹ You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?” ²⁰ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why

have you made me like this?”²¹ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?²² What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,²³ in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—²⁴ even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?

4. The purpose of suffering is to highlight the worth and character of God (e.g., his mercy, grace, steadfast love, and faithfulness) and to stress that hope is found in him alone.

a. God is full of love and faithfulness (Lam. 3:19–25 with 26–38; cf. Exod. 34:5–7).

- Exod. 34:5–7. Yahweh descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of Yahweh. ⁶Yahweh passed before him and proclaimed, “Yahweh, Yahweh, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”
- Lam. 3:19–25. Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! ²⁰My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me. ²¹But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: ²²The steadfast love of Yahweh never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; ²³they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ²⁴“Yahweh is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.” ²⁵Yahweh is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him.
- Lam. 3:26–38. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of Yahweh. ²⁷It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. ²⁸Let him sit alone in silence when it is laid on him; ²⁹let him put his mouth in the dust— there may yet be hope; ³⁰let him give his cheek to the one who strikes, and let him be filled with insults. ³¹For the Lord will not cast off forever, ³²but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; ³³for he does not willingly afflict [lit., afflict from his heart] or grieve the children of men. ³⁴To crush underfoot all the prisoners of the earth, ³⁵to deny a man justice in the presence of the Most High, ³⁶to subvert a man in his lawsuit, the Lord does not approve. ³⁷Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? ³⁸Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?

Heb. 12:5–11. “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. ⁶For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.” ⁷It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. ¹¹For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

b. God reigns and will ultimately redeem his people (3:31–32; 4:22; 5:19–22)!

- Lam. 3:31–32. For the Lord will not cast off forever, ³²but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love.
- Lam. 4:22. The punishment of your iniquity, O daughter of Zion, is accomplished; he will keep you in exile no longer; but your iniquity, O daughter of Edom, he will punish; he will uncover your sins.
- Lam. 5:19–22. But you, O Yahweh, reign forever; your throne endures to all generations. ²⁰Why do you forget us forever, why do you forsake us for so many days?

²¹Restore us to yourself, O Yahweh, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old—²²unless you have utterly rejected us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us.

IV. Guided Reading of Lamentations:

A. Key Chapter: 3

B. Questions:

1. While Lamentations is anonymous, who is the most likely candidate for the book's composition?
2. What is unique about Lamentations from any other OT book with respect to its makeup? What poetic features are common among the five laments in Lamentations? What are they lamenting?
3. According to Lam 1:5, 8–9; 4:13; 5:7, 16, why did God punish his people and destroy Jerusalem?
4. Lamentations 3:21–26 provides the “apex” of Lamentations’ theology? Summarize the message of hope in your own words, and come to class with Lamentations 3:22–23 memorized in the ESV.
5. “The steadfast love of Yahweh never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ‘Yahweh is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him.’” In what chapter are these words found?
6. ESSAY: Do you understand Jeremiah 19:9, Lamentations 2:20, and Ezekiel 5:9–10 to mean that God, in punishment on Israel, ordained for them to eat their own children? If so, how is this compatible with his love and how is it just to the children? (After wrestling on your own, read “The Eating of Children and God’s Goodness” in A21.1. in the Appendix.)