

A Cry for Restoration Amid Suffering

Printed Text · Lamentations 5:1-22

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will: EXAMINE why the writer of Lamentations pleaded with God for the restoration of Israel; IDENTIFY the writer's feelings of sadness, anger, and despair over the oppression of his nation; and PRAY for the restoration of broken relationships with God.

In Focus

Karen and Tim stood in shock with their neighbors over the fire eating up their apartment complex. As they stared in disbelief, Karen broke down and began to wail, "I can't believe what has happened. We lost everything, and so many people have been displaced because of someone's negligence."

The fire had spread quickly, taking one whole building and threatening another. The first responders were still putting out the last flames and checking on those who had breathed in too much smoke. Tim wanted to do something to help comfort his neighbors, but he didn't want to leave Karen alone. She was heartbroken over the loss of their home. "It's not just the possessions, Tim. It's our history, our life together, your mother's photo albums, my paintings. And now it's all in ashes," she exclaimed. "How can we rebuild?"

Tim suggested they pray, but Karen was suffering and feeling angry. Overcome with emotion, Karen said, "God, where are You in this? What did we do to deserve this?"

Tim held his wife and consoled her. "We need to believe God, Karen. We must trust His love and promise never to leave us. God promises He will sustain us through this crisis." Tim heard Karen take several slow, calming breaths. "Let's start with figuring out where to stay for the night," Tim added. Karen nodded, "Let's call the pastor and his wife. They'll know someone with a guest room."

How has God's Word given you hope amid suffering or when you were in a crisis?

Keep In Mind

"Turn thou us unto thee, O LORD, and we shall be turned; renew our days as of old" (Lamentations 5:21, KJV).

Words You Should Know

- A. **Reproach** (Lamentations 5:1) kherpah(Heb.) – Shame, scorn, and disgrace
- B. **Deliver** (v. 8) paraq (Heb.) – Redeem

Say It Correctly

Diaspora. dee-AS-pore-ah

Edomite. EE-dum-ite

KJV

- Lamentations 5:1** Remember, O Lord, what is come upon us: consider, and behold our reproach.
2 Our inheritance is turned to strangers, our houses to aliens.
3 We are orphans and fatherless, our mothers are as widows.

4 We have drunken our water for money; our wood is sold unto us.
5 Our necks are under persecution: we labour, and have no rest.
6 We have given the hand to the Egyptians, and to the Assyrians, to be satisfied with bread.
7 Our fathers have sinned, and are not; and we have borne their iniquities.
8 Servants have ruled over us: there is none that doth deliver us out of their hand.
9 We gat our bread with the peril of our lives because of the sword of the wilderness.
10 Our skin was black like an oven because of the terrible famine.
11 They ravished the women in Zion, and the maids in the cities of Judah.
12 Princes are hanged up by their hand: the faces of elders were not honoured.
13 They took the young men to grind, and the children fell under the wood.
14 The elders have ceased from the gate, the young men from their musick.
15 The joy of our heart is ceased; our dance is turned into mourning.
16 The crown is fallen from our head: woe unto us, that we have sinned!
17 For this our heart is faint; for these things our eyes are dim.
18 Because of the mountain of Zion, which is desolate, the foxes walk upon it.
19 Thou, O Lord, remainest for ever; thy throne from generation to generation.
20 Wherefore dost thou forget us for ever, and forsake us so long time?
21 Turn thou us unto thee, O Lord, and we shall be turned; renew our days as of old.
22 But thou hast utterly rejected us; thou art very wroth against us.

NLT

Lamentations 5:1 Lord, remember what has happened to us. See how we have been disgraced!
2 Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, our homes to foreigners.
3 We are orphaned and fatherless. Our mothers are widowed.
4 We have to pay for water to drink, and even firewood is expensive.
5 Those who pursue us are at our heels; we are exhausted but are given no rest.
6 We submitted to Egypt and Assyria to get enough food to survive.
7 Our ancestors sinned, but they have died—and we are suffering the punishment they deserved!
8 Slaves have now become our masters; there is no one left to rescue us.
9 We hunt for food at the risk of our lives, for violence rules the countryside.
10 The famine has blackened our skin as though baked in an oven.
11 Our enemies rape the women in Jerusalem and the young girls in all the towns of Judah.
12 Our princes are being hanged by their thumbs, and our elders are treated with contempt.
13 Young men are led away to work at millstones, and boys stagger under heavy loads of wood.
14 The elders no longer sit in the city gates; the young men no longer dance and sing.
15 Joy has left our hearts; our dancing has turned to mourning.
16 The garlands have fallen from our heads. Weep for us because we have sinned.
17 Our hearts are sick and weary, and our eyes grow dim with tears.
18 For Jerusalem[c] is empty and desolate, a place haunted by jackals.
19 But Lord, you remain the same forever! Your throne continues from generation to generation.
20 Why do you continue to forget us? Why have you abandoned us for so long?
21 Restore us, O Lord, and bring us back to you again! Give us back the joys we once had!
22 Or have you utterly rejected us? Are you angry with us still?

The People, Places, and Times

The Exile. Israel and Judah were told that God would lead them away into exile if they became unfaithful to the covenant He made with them through Moses (Deuteronomy 28:36–37, 64; 29:28). When they did break that covenant, Israel and Judah underwent periods of exile and were removed from the Promised Land. Consequently, the Jews were scattered throughout the land, where they became known as the Diaspora, which is the Greek word for “scattering.” The Northern Kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BC. Judah was also defeated three times by the

Babylonians. In 605, King Nebuchadnezzar took the royal court and the ablest men of Judah into Babylon. He returned in 597 BC. During the final fall of Jerusalem to Babylonia in 586 BC, the city was burned, and the remaining people of Judah were deported, from which only a remnant returned 70 years later. The phrase “the Exile” is most often associated with the 70-year Babylonian captivity of Judah. The lasting effects of the Exile were profound. Aside from the stress of being removed from their homes and loved ones, while in captivity they had the status of slaves, were unfamiliar with the language, and were sometimes required to worship idols (Daniel 3:4–7).

Background

While some scholars question the authorship of Lamentations, it is traditionally attributed to the prophet Jeremiah as an appendix to his book of prophesy. Jeremiah was known as the “weeping prophet” who spent over forty years calling out Israel’s displeasing ways and pleading with them to repent and avert the promised doom for disobedience. After years of predicted warnings of destruction to their homeland, the worst had come to pass. Jerusalem and Judah had been destroyed, and the Israelites were overtaken by enemies on every side until they were dispossessed from their land and taken into captivity. The major theme of Lamentations 1–4 expresses personal and community cries to God for their affliction. However, right in the middle of those cries, Jeremiah digs deep and pivots to place his hope in the God of his salvation (Jeremiah 3:21–26). Jeremiah provides a voice to their overwhelming grief: repentance and hope in God’s love and mercy because of His covenant. The book of Lamentations continues to serve as a significant part of Jewish life. The entire book is read publicly as a part of an annual solemn observance to remember the Temple’s destruction in 587 BC (Jeremiah 52:12–13).

How are Negro spirituals, hymns, or music from the Civil Rights Movement connecting points between past and current struggles?

At-A-Glance

1. A Plea For Consideration (Lamentations 5:1–6)
2. A Plea For Sins (vv. 7–16)
3. A Plea For Mercy (vv. 17–22)

In Depth

1. A Plea for Consideration (Lamentations 5:1–6)

Jeremiah, as an eyewitness to the calamity, paints the scenes of the devastation through these laments. The people of Israel were enduring great horror and punishment. Such disgrace included loss of their inheritance. Those God commanded them to protect and provide for (widows and orphans) were unprotected as a result of their sins rooted in idolatry and apostasy. The prophet’s petition was for the Lord God to intently look upon the reproach and suffering of His covenant people. In essence, all the curses for disobedience God proclaimed through Moses were realized (Deuteronomy 28:15–68). God’s commands are sure, and yet He provided Israel with opportunity after opportunity through the voice of His prophets to repent, turn from their wicked ways, and return to Him. Israel suffered consequences for no longer depending on God as the source of their life, provision, safety, and identity.

How can we look at troubling times through the lens of God’s Word and realize what went wrong?

2. A Plea For Sins (vv. 7–16)

In his distress, Jeremiah calls out that his generation's suffering was a direct result of the sins from past generations. When God formed Israel as a nation, He warned them that iniquity would follow them through generations (Exodus 20:4–5, 34:6–7). But note that God is not temperamental and would later refute the Israelites' idea that the suffering experienced in the current generation was a result of their ancestors (Jeremiah 31:29–30, Ezekiel 18:1–5).

The prophet's lament in these stanzas shares how the basis of their community life had been uprooted and was in peril. The elders were not esteemed or in their rightful place to execute justice in their land. The women were sexually assaulted. There was no one to protect them because the young men were burdened from survival. On behalf of the community, Jeremiah woefully cries out that there is no joy in living, and the glory of Israel is gone as past and present sins are taking their toll.

How can we accept responsibility before God and others for our sins and turn around to do what pleases Him?

3. A Plea For Mercy (vv. 17–22)

Jeremiah expresses how he and his people are heartsick over what they have experienced, and are at the end of themselves because the home in which they placed so much of their identity as a people is destroyed. He ends this last stanza of the lament by transitioning his hope to God. He reminds himself of God's power and authority in that His throne remains forever. God's heavenly throne continues even after God's earthly throne in Jerusalem is gone. As any human would amid the depth and length of this suffering, Jeremiah questions why God continues to allow their suffering. Although he feels forsaken by God, he still unshakably believes that God is eternal and almighty. He pleads in true penitence for God to show mercy by restoring and renewing His people and their land. Jeremiah strikes a balance between owning the nation's sins, remembering God's love and mercy, and—with human limitations—still questioning if God will reject his pleas.

In what ways has God made His love and mercy known to us?

Search the Scriptures

1. How does Jeremiah open his prayer for God's attention to their suffering (Lamentations 5:1–6)?
2. Where does Jeremiah shift his lament to reflect on God's power (v. 19)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Does Jeremiah's reflection of his people's suffering capture the pain felt by all of the Jews? Is he effective?
2. How does remembering God's sovereignty shift the pleas in this lament to hope in His mercy?

Liberating Lesson

As a community, we have our part for action and inaction as it relates to the status of socioeconomic conditions where we live. We are empowered to make our communities safer and more economically sound by working cooperatively, and as in the past, the Church must lead the way. As a people, we have survived the atrocities of slavery, segregation, and systemic injustice with God as our source and strength. As a resilient people, we have to continue to pass down the heritage of how to strategically fight and pray—working across the generations—to realize the true transformation and

restoration God promises when we look to Him.

Application For Activation

Life gets discouraging, and lamenting on the ills of our world is a common natural response. But after acknowledging the pain, we must turn that complaint to action. There are so many ways for us to get involved individually and collectively to make a social impact. Get to know legislators at every level of government and keep them accountable to their campaign platforms. Develop faith-based programs that share the Gospel or join existing programs that serve the common good. As we engage in social media platforms, focus on solutions and help shift the conversation from the negative to how to make life better.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Lamentations 5

Lamentations is a Hebrew acrostic poem expressing the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC by the Babylonians. Jeremiah, the prophet, is believed to be the author. The book is entirely poetical, consisting of five poems where the verses are arranged in Hebrew alphabetical order, each verse starting with the next letter of the alphabet. Only Lamentations 5 is not presented in alphabetical acrostic as in the other chapters; instead, it is a prayer that was offered by the lamenting remnant.

1 Remember, O LORD, what is come upon us: consider, and behold our reproach.

The prayer begins by the prophet drawing God's attention to the misfortunes that have come upon Judah. The poet, believed to be Jeremiah, is pleading with the Lord to remember the things they have endured during Jerusalem's fall to the Babylonians. He also makes an appeal to God to observe sorrows resulting from what they have suffered. The word "reproach" (Heb. kherpah, kher-PAW) refers to shame, scorn, and disgrace. This is the same word Nehemiah uses to describe the state of the Jerusalem walls (Nehemiah 2:17). The destruction of the city's infrastructure is just part of what is causing shame for the Lord's people, however.

2 Our inheritance is turned to strangers, our houses to aliens.

Now the poet starts to list everything that has befallen the nation of Israel. Their inheritance of foremost importance is the greatest loss. This inheritance was land given to them by God as an everlasting possession. Now this land has been turned over to and has become the property of other nations. Foreign troops occupied the land, like some Edomites who penetrated Southern

Judah and settled in south of Hebron, and were later followed by other Edomite and Arab groups. The loss of the land was a concrete sign of the nation's relation to their God. It also generated a crisis of faith that constitutes the central theme of Lamentations. The Israelites' own homes would no longer belong to them. The foreigners, in this case, have the good homes, and God's people have become like settlers in their land.

Hospitality and kindness to strangers is a staple of many ancient Near Eastern value systems. The Israelites were commanded many times to be kind to foreigners, remembering their own time in Egypt (Exodus 23:9; Leviticus 19:34; Deuteronomy 10:19). The stranger who wishes to live among God's people for a long time and might be interested in adopting some of their customs. The strangers that Jeremiah calls out here, though, are not the same as those protected by God's law. The Israelites' inheritance has gone to "strangers" (Heb. zur, ZOOR), a word that also describes prostitutes or unholy sacrifices. Their houses are turned over to "aliens" (Heb. nokri, noke-REE), people who are from far off lands and know nothing of the Israelites' ways.

3 We are orphans and fatherless, our mothers are as widows. 4 We have drunken our water for money; our wood is sold unto us.

Many men were killed in the battles and sieges, leaving fatherless orphans and widows. Many were involved in war and were, at any rate, the foremost target during battles. The men were faced with death or captivity. Some of them had been spared by the sword, but are far away in captivity. The loss of the paternal leaders of homes will naturally lead to a lack of protection of the more vulnerable segments of society, children, and women. If the Law's protection for widows and orphans were still in place, this would not be such a desperate situation; however, the foreign government does not follow God's law about how to treat the poor and destitute.

The resources of the land were no more owned by the remnant. They have to access them by fulfilling conditions imposed upon them by their new masters. Water and firewood were to be secured by money. They are not even seeking water for irrigating vineyards or timbers for building fine houses. The Jewish remnant simply wants water to drink and wood for a cooking fire.

Jewish law states that foreigners living in the land have to carry water and firewood for the Israelites. Now foreigners dictate to the remnants of Judah what to do with their natural resources. This is a symbol of a nation under domination by foreign forces. This is a further explanation of the difficult socio-economic conditions of the remnant. Life has simply become harder for them.

5 Our necks are under persecution: we labour, and have no rest. 6 We have given the hand to the Egyptians, and to the Assyrians, to be satisfied with bread.

The image of a neck being under persecution is a possible allusion to the ancient practice of a victor placing his foot on the neck of a prostrate enemy to symbolize complete subjugation (Joshua 10:24; Isaiah 51:23). Verse 6 describes the critical condition of the remnant under Gedaliah (the governor appointed by the king of Babylon upon Judah after the conquest, cf. Jeremiah 40:5), which had worsened to such an extent that they were eager to cooperate with either Egypt or Assyria for survival. The expression "to give the hand to someone" (v. 6) may have two meanings: to make a pact with each other as equals, or to surrender. The context of this verse justifies the use of "submitted" by NLT. To make sure they had enough to eat, they needed to bargain with Egypt and Assyria.

7 Our fathers have sinned, and are not; and we have borne their iniquities.

The poet seems to complain about the retribution of sin. The punishment of the ancestors' sin was visited upon the children. The guilty ones did not even live long enough to face the judgment they

deserved. This is the way it seems to Jeremiah. This view of retribution of sin is based on Exodus 20:5 where the succeeding generation could bear the consequences of their forefathers' sins up to the third or even fourth generations. In the Mosaic Law, God was dealing with Israel as a corporate body. The covenant was with the people as a body and therefore the retribution of sin was also executed in a corporative way. This explains why the sins of the forefathers can be visited on the succeeding generation.

When we take Scripture as a whole, we see that although the remnants' ancestors sinned and rightly deserved the judgment, their offspring also did not turn away from the sinful ways of their forefathers and therefore fell under judgment. In Ezekiel 18, God states through the prophets that consequences of sin will not be doled out based on succeeding generations' crimes but each generation will bear the consequences of its own sin. God emphasizes the individualistic nature of retribution (Ezekiel 18:4, Jeremiah 31:30), paving the way to the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31).

8 Servants have ruled over us: there is none that doth deliver us out of their hand. 9 We gat our bread with the peril of our lives because of the sword of the wilderness. 10 Our skin was black like an oven because of the terrible famine.

The word "servants" (Heb. 'ebed, EH-bed, slave) refers to minor Babylonian officials who could act with disdain and cruelty (cf. 2 Kings 25:24). They are themselves slaves, or servants, to the Babylonian king, but he has set them up to rule over the Jews. Gedaliah urges the remnants not to fear the servants of the Chaldeans who will not harm them. It recalls Proverbs 30:21–22, which depicts the conditions of the rule of a slave. There were no noble or brave people left to "deliver" (Heb. paraq, paw-ROCK) or redeem them from danger. After the conquest, the Babylonian army chief left only the poorest of the land to look after the vineyards (2 Kings 25:12). The king ordered his army to bring to Babylon some of the noble young men of royal lineage (Daniel 1:3). It was a common ancient policy to exterminate or take away to captivity all those who were noble and brave in the vanquished land to prevent them from reorganizing themselves to fight back. Even daily livelihood was secured at the expense of one's own life. One has to face many dangers to get his daily substance. Bedouin marauders from the desert make harvesting crops a dangerous and perilous venture. In the process of gathering enough food to cook, they are baked in the hot drought that has caused a famine. Ovens of the time were large pots set on the wood cooking fire. This would get the pot covered with soot, turning it black. The Israelites feel cooked until they are as black as their pots.

11 They ravished the women in Zion, and the maids in the cities of Judah. 12 Princes are hanged up by their hand: the faces of elders were not honoured. 13 They took the young men to grind, and the children fell under the wood.

Jeremiah also presents how the various segments of society from the vulnerable to the strong are suffering under the rule of the enemies. The women are without protection and prey to the enemy. Lawlessness has reached its climax and has become prevalent under the rule of the enemies, not just in the enemy's stronghold, but across the country. Sometimes during war, people will use rape as a weapon against the enemy. Even in some contemporary conflicts, belligerents use this kind of horrific strategy. The aim is to humiliate further the vanquished.

As the women are humiliated by rape, the men are humiliated in their own ways. The "princes" who are the rulers or leaders of Jerusalem with civil authority are being put to death in a shameful, torturous way. The old men in the city, who deserved respect, are now despised by the enemies. The young men were taken captive and used "to grind," that is, to work as slaves at a millstone. These young men are humiliated by grinding grain into flour, performing work usually done by an animal. Children are forced into hard labor. Formerly, according to Deuteronomy, foreigners had to carry firewood for the Israelites; now children of the Judean remnant have to carry on this task for the

enemies of Judah. They stumble and fall under the heavy load.

14 The elders have ceased from the gate, the young men from their musick. 15 The joy of our heart is ceased; our dance is turned into mourning. 16 The crown is fallen from our head: woe unto us, that we have sinned!

The usual activities of the city are no longer carried on. The old men are convening at the city gate to discuss matters of the city and make useful decisions for the city life. They are no longer ruling the city. They are treated with contempt and they are not consulted. The young men were the expression of the vitality of the city. They were once carrying on with exuberance and joyful life, making music and dancing. This life of music and dance has come to an end. They can rejoice no more either because they are being mistreated or they are mourning due to a lot of misfortunes. There is no expression of joy in the land. Only mourning has replaced the once vibrant and joyful life of the city. The symbols of honors they were crowned with have disappeared (cf. Isaiah 28:1–4).

The prophet admits that the people know the cause of all this devastation: They have sinned. They have disobeyed God and are now reaping the covenant curses, just as they gained the covenant blessings when they properly obeyed the Lord.

17 For this our heart is faint; for these things our eyes are dim. 18 Because of the mountain of Zion, which is desolate, the foxes walk upon it.

The whole situation leads them to uneasiness. The sicknesses of a weakened heart and dimming eyes are physical but also figurative. They have no more strength to fight their oppressors. Their vision about the prospect of the future is not clear. It is a feeling of being hopeless, discouraged, and defeated. This feeling is the result of the desolation of Jerusalem, the city God consecrated for His glory among the nation. Mount Zion is the hill on which the Temple stood. Here it refers to the location of the Temple and Jerusalem as a whole. The consequence of the desolation is the occupation of the site by unclean animals that usually only live in the wilderness (cf. Isaiah 13:19–22, for the desolation of Babylon).

19 Thou, O LORD, remainest for ever; thy throne from generation to generation. 20 Wherefore dost thou forget us for ever, and forsake us so long time? 21 Turn thou us unto thee, O LORD, and we shall be turned; renew our days as of old.

In spite of all the circumstances described in the preceding verses, God remains the same forever. Though Judah has lost his former status, God's reign and His sovereignty remain untouched. Foxes wander the place where God was once worshiped, but God is not His Temple. Humankind's fortunes or misfortunes do not influence or affect any change in the character of God. He remains the same forever (cf. Hebrews 13:8). Circumstances may change; God remains the same. Even in our generation where evil seems to be so prevalent, God is unchangeable. We can abide by Him, and be assured that even in misfortune, He remains our hope.

The poet pleads for God to remember His people and hasten deliverance. Even though God is eternal, His creations are not. The poet feels the passage of time acutely. He is afraid that God's forgetfulness will last indefinitely, so in the agony of his lament he pursues two parallel questions: "Why did You forget us?" and "Why did You forsake us?" These questions are a way of invoking God's mercy and grace for all they have endured and the poet has listed above. It is a suggestion to God that they have had enough of the suffering and to ask whether God could intervene promptly.

He pleads with God to turn their hearts to Him once again. He asks God to turn them Himself, rather than asking that they be given strength to turn themselves. The poet knows that if God does it, it will happen, but if they try to change their hearts, they will fail. We cannot turn to God by our will and

strength. God must call us to Himself. We cannot force ourselves to commit to a changed lifestyle. God must guide us to keep us from falling back to our old ways. The unchanging God can bring restoration and bring them their former status. It is a prayer or request that acknowledges the separation between God and His people due to their sin.

22 But thou hast utterly rejected us; thou art very wroth against us.

If God does not respond to the previous questions (v. 21), it may imply that He has completely rejected His people. It may also mean that He is still angry with them. During Jewish liturgical reading of this book, verse 21 is usually repeated after verse 22. This ends the reading with a hopeful plea and keeps it from ending with the pessimistic nature of verse 22.

God promised not to forget nor forsake His people (Deuteronomy 31:6; cf. Hebrews 13:5). Tough and trying times may come our way, but we should remember that God works everything for our good (Romans 8:28) in His own time. God's faithfulness is continually renewed (Lamentations 3:22). Even God's punishment is an expression of His profound love for us (Hebrews 12:5). In the meantime, while we may not understand the reason or the purpose of the trying time, we are free to pour our hearts before Him as Hannah did and as Job did. We cannot grasp His ways and doings (Ecclesiastes 11:5), but He will never forget us and never stop loving us. He will come to us with deliverance and song of joy (Psalms 34:5–7).

Daily Bible Readings

Monday

Psalm 111

Tuesday

Zechariah 8:18-23

Wednesday

Psalm 102:12-22

Thursday

Psalm 106:40-48

Friday

Jeremiah 9:17-22

Saturday

Lamentations 3:22-33

Sunday

Lamentations 5