

A Plea for Restoration

Lamentations 5

- ¹ Remember, O LORD, what has befallen us;
look, and see our disgrace!
- ² Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers,
our homes to aliens.
- ³ We have become orphans, fatherless;
our mothers are like widows.
- ⁴ We must pay for the water we drink;
the wood we get must be bought.
- ⁵ With a yoke on our necks we are hard driven;
we are weary, we are given no rest.
- ⁶ We have made a pact with Egypt and Assyria,
to get enough bread.
- ⁷ Our ancestors sinned; they are no more,
and we bear their iniquities.
- ⁸ Slaves rule over us;
there is no one to deliver us from their hand.
- ⁹ We get our bread at the peril of our lives,
because of the sword in the wilderness.
- ¹⁰ Our skin is black as an oven
from the scorching heat of famine.
- ¹¹ Women are raped in Zion,
virgins in the towns of Judah.
- ¹² Princes are hung up by their hands;
no respect is shown to the elders.

- ¹³ Young men are compelled to grind,
and boys stagger under loads of wood.
- ¹⁴ The old men have left the city gate,
the young men their music.
- ¹⁵ The joy of our hearts has ceased;
our dancing has been turned to mourning.
- ¹⁶ The crown has fallen from our head;
woe to us, for we have sinned!
- ¹⁷ Because of this our hearts are sick,
because of these things our eyes have grown dim:
- ¹⁸ because of Mount Zion, which lies desolate;
jackals prowl over it.
- ¹⁹ But you, O LORD, reign forever;
your throne endures to all generations.
- ²⁰ Why have you forgotten us completely?
Why have you forsaken us these many days?
- ²¹ Restore us to yourself, O LORD,
that we may be restored; renew our days as of old—
- ²² unless you have utterly rejected us,
and are angry with us beyond measure.

Theme Statement

Lamentations 5 recalls the suffering, humiliation, and depravations that befell the survivors in the years after the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. They sincerely pray for restoration and renewal, yet God remains silent.

Exploring the Word

Although the prophet Jeremiah is traditionally credited with the composition of the book of Lamentations, it is completely unlikely that he did so. The tradition can be explained by the notation in 2 Chronicles 35:25 that Jeremiah lamented (but for King Josiah) and the fact that Jeremiah left us six personal laments during the

course of his prophetic ministry (11:18—12:6; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-13; 20:14-18). The style and form of Lamentations further speak against Jeremiah's authorship. The book is anonymous and likely written some decades after the horrific events it describes.

A striking feature of the book of Lamentations is that four of the five poems that comprise its five chapters are in the form of alphabetical acrostics. That is, each line or stanza begins with a successive letter in the twenty-two-letter Hebrew alphabet. Chapter 3 has sixty-six verses, with three verses per stanza, and each stanza follows the Hebrew alphabet in order. Psalm 119 is also an acrostic poem.

Lamentations 5:1-15 A dystopian existence

Even after the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, water and food remained scarce and hard gained (5:4-6, 9). A prolonged encirclement of the city halted agricultural production, especially barley and wheat (4:9). Bread—or at least grain—therefore was imported from abroad (5:6), procured at a cost or at the risk of life itself (5:9). The expression “sword in the wilderness” (5:9) occurs nowhere else in the Hebrew Scriptures. Here, it may refer to nomadic bands of Amalekites or Edomites.

During the siege and afterward, all social norms and standards of decency disappeared. Women were savagely violated in Zion, on Mount Zion where the ruins of the temple stood, and in small towns (5:11). Not only had the Babylonians killed the nation's princes (2 Kings 25:7; Jeremiah 39:6; 52:10), but they heaped shame upon their victims' bodies by publicly hanging them (Deuteronomy 21:22-23; see also 1 Samuel 31:10-12). They demonstrated no respect for elders. They pressed children into hard labor (5:13). The city gate, the locus of trade and legal judgment (Joshua 20:4; Ruth 4:1; Job 29:7-8; Proverbs 31:23; Amos 5:12, 15), as well as of social intercourse (Genesis 19:1; Ruth 4:11; Psalm 69:12), stood empty. Music

ceased, along with the joy of life (see Jeremiah 7:34; 16:9). The cry that “our dancing has been turned to mourning” (Lamentations 5:15) poignantly reverses Psalm 30:11.

Lamentations 5:16-18 The collapse of truth as we knew it
With these verses, the poet mourns the death of truth as it had been known. The crown of 5:16 may refer to David’s descendant Zedekiah, whose heirs were slain before he was blinded and led into exile (2 Kings 25:7). It is more likely, however, that the crown here refers to the personified city itself, the crenellated walls of which resembled a crown atop Zion (Isaiah 62:3; Ezekiel 16:11-12). In any case, the hope of the eternal dynasty of David and the inviolability of Zion—promises upon which their national and faith life were founded—were literally turned into an ashy wasteland.

Lamentations 5:19-22 A plea with no answer

The poem, and indeed the entire book of Lamentations, ends with a plea that receives no answer. The poet wonders why the Lord has completely forgotten them (5:20). Nevertheless, the appeal for restoration receives no reply (5:21). There remains only silence and the despairing notion that the Lord has indeed rejected this people utterly (5:22).

The Word Today

Years ago, I happened to be in Jerusalem on Tisha B’av. That solemn day on the Jewish calendar marks the anniversary of the destruction of both the first temple and the second temple. For Jews, the day is one of full fasting from food and drink. People reflect, pray, and read Lamentations. In Israel, theaters and restaurants are closed. Throngs crowd the Western Wall in Jerusalem to weep and pray. Jews have observed Tisha B’av for two thousand years.

It is difficult not to contrast that annual international experience of Jewish mourning with the lack of communal mourning in the context of late spring 2020. Within the last few days, the known US death toll for the COVID-19 virus surpassed 102,000. To put that in perspective, that total is equivalent to the entire population of Davenport, Iowa, or Austin, Texas.

Where is the collective grief for the loss of so many? Are we so inured to mass death that we in the United States can continue as though this abnormal horror is not occurring?

Meanwhile, cities in America are burning in hot protest over the death of a man in Minneapolis police custody: George Floyd, the latest among too many whose names have become a litany. Without condemning law enforcement en masse, I simply note that Dr. King rightly observed in a 1967 speech at Stanford University, “In the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard.”

Where is the grief for those in our society whose voices we have not heard? Where do we mourn for those for whom the promise of justice remains unmet?

I refuse to believe that people of faith are jaded and uncaring. I think it possible, however, that a positivistic religion—a religion characterized by what Martin Luther dubbed a theology of glory—has a difficult time finding words for grief. And yet, lament is in the Bible! Lament is a part of the life of faith. We are summoned to lament, if for no other reason than because when we truly grieve on behalf of others, we are moved to act on their behalf.

Lamentations gives the church language for mourning. The book does not answer the why of grief. The resolution the poets sought will be wrought only by Jesus. But while

we wait for the time and place where “mourning and crying and pain will be no more” (Revelation 21:4), we should mourn, for we have cause to grieve.

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. Listen several times to the brief musical meditation on Psalm 80:3 by Minneapolis-based church musician and songwriter Michael Morris. What does the prayer say to you?

Exploring the Word

1. Chart the complaints included in Lamentations 5. Of that list, what would be the worst if you or a loved one had to endure it?
2. Read Psalms 46, 48, and 132. What made the loss of crown and Zion in 5:16-18 so devastating?
3. Imagine yourself in Sarajevo or Gaza during their times of destruction. What questions might you have for God?
4. How satisfied are you with the ending of Lamentations?

Not at all

Completely

The Word Today

1. Debate this proposition: It is spiritually healthy for Jews to observe Tisha B'av.
2. Scan newspapers and news magazines for issues about which the church might mourn today.
3. What benefits might occur should your congregation incorporate lament into its worship services?

Closing Prayer

Lord, open our eyes and our hearts to truly see and feel the grief that you know surrounds us. Give us the will to mourn with those who mourn and the strength to bring solace and change. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Further Study

Psalms 44; 74; 80

Daily Readings

M. Psalm 111

T. Zechariah 8:18-23

W. Psalm 102:12-22

T. Psalm 79

F. Jeremiah 9:17-22

S. Lamentations 3:22-33

S. Lamentations 5:1-22

Memorization

Lamentations 5:21

Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored;
renew our days as of old.