

FPFWC Christian Development



Prophets of Restoration

April 2021

Spring Quarter

April 24, 2021

Lesson #4 – The Nation’s Plea

SCRIPTURE TEXT – Lamentations 5:1-22

Key Verse - Turn thou us unto thee, O LORD, and we shall be turned; renew our days as of old.—Lamentations 5:21

ICE BREAKERS –

1. Why is repentance essential to spiritual life?
2. How would you comfort and guide someone who feels forgotten by God?

LESSON BACKGROUND

The book of Lamentations reflects the period of about 586–538 BC, the period of Babylonian captivity. Assyria had taken the northern tribes of Israel into exile earlier, in 722 BC (2 Kings 17:1–6). “There was none left but the tribe of Judah only” (17:18). But despite the warnings of many prophets, Judah continued in sin (21:10–15). The writer of Lamentations, commonly taken to be Jeremiah (see the Lesson Context of lesson 9), had warned Judah for many years that God’s judgment was coming (Jeremiah 25:2–11).

As instruments of God’s wrath, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC (2 Chronicles 36:15–20). Many who were left alive were carried into exile; the weak and the poor were left behind to contend with foreign settlers (2 Kings 25:1–21).

The five chapters of Lamentations do not shy away from describing that devastation and its aftermath. Lack of food resulted in starvation (Lamentations 2:12; 4:4–5) and cannibalism (2:20; 4:10). Those who did not die by the sword were weak with hunger and disease (4:9).

For all the chaos of the setting, Jeremiah was very intentional in the literary forms he used when writing this book. The first four chapters are all acrostics. This means that each verse begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in consecutive order. In English this would mean beginning the first verse with A, the second with B, etc. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, thus there are 22 verses in each of chapters 1; 2, and 4. Chapter 3 is a bit different with 66 verses because the acrostic format appears there three times.

This tight orderliness was perhaps a way for Jeremiah to organize what he saw. If so, it is a subtle hint that, though on the surface all seems lost, order still exists—or at least *could* exist again.

Lamentations 5 does not have an acrostic pattern. That is not accidental, since it is the same length as chapters 1; 2, and 4. The discontinuance of the careful pattern seems to mimic the ebbing fortunes of the people. For all their cries to God, no help seemed to be forthcoming (compare 3:44).

LESSON COMMENTARY –

The prophet's final lament breaks the earlier pattern in two ways: first, the acrostic pattern is *not* used; and second, it is more of a prayer than a lament. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 close in prayer (1:20–22; 2:20–22; 3:55–66), but no prayer is included in chap. 4. Perhaps chap. 5 functions as the closing prayer for chap. 4, as well as the concluding prayer for the whole book. The remnant, the Jewish people who were faithful to the God of Israel, called on Him to restore both the land and people of Israel, as well as to bring the blessings of the covenant (Dt 30:1–10).

A. The Remnant's Prayer for the Lord to Remember Zion (5:1–18)

5:1. The remnant cried to God to **remember** what they had suffered, **what has befallen**, and look at their **reproach** and disgrace (cf. 3:34–36). The call was not just for God to **see** what had happened (for He sees everything, cf. Pr 15:3). The prayer was for Him to help Jerusalem.

5:2–4. Written in the first person plural (*we, us, our*), Jeremiah's words record the people's description (vv. 2–10) of their suffering under Babylonian occupation (cf. Jr 40:10; 41:3; Ezk 35:10). The land of Israel was the **inheritance** the Lord had given the Jewish people (Ex 15:17; Nm 34:1–2; Dt 25:19; Jr 3:18). Now it had been parceled out to cruel **strangers** and **aliens**. The Jewish people as a whole were oppressed and brought to the social and economic level of **orphans** and **widows** (cf. Lm 1:1), even having to pay for the most basic necessities like **drinking water** and **wood** for cooking and heat. Judah was the vanquished enemy, and Babylon her cruel overlord (cf. Hab 1:6–11).

5:5. Babylon's rule over Judah was severe, **at their necks**. Both in Judah and in Babylon the Jews were **worn out** and found **no rest** from their pursuers (cf. Dt 28:65–67; Ezk 5:2, 12).

5:6–8. Tragically, Judah had **submitted to Egypt and Assyria to get enough bread**. The words translated **submitted to** (*natannu yad*) literally mean "to give the hand to" or "to shake hands," a phrase used of establishing a pact or treaty (cf. 2Kg 10:15). It often referred to one group surrendering or submitting to a more powerful group in a treaty (1Ch 29:24; 2Ch 30:8; Jr 50:15). Judah had pledged her allegiance both to Egypt and Assyria in her history, for the sake of national security (cf. Ezk 16:26–28; 23:12, 21). Judah's past leaders, their **fathers**, had shifted their allegiances between countries instead of trusting in the Lord. Therefore, although they had **sinned** and died and were **no more**, their survivors bore the punishment for the previous generation's **iniquities**. The present generation, however, did not claim to be suffering unjustly (cf. Lm 5:16); they saw their punishment as a logical conclusion to their ancestors' folly. Their forefathers' alliances with godless nations were bearing bitter fruit. The servants of Nebuchadnezzar were the oppressors of Judah (**slaves rule over us**), and **there was no one to deliver** them.

5:9–10. People had to **risk their lives** to survive. Leaving the city meant going to the **wilderness** to buy **bread** (food), where they were attacked by robbers carrying a **sword**. Their **skin** was feverish, **hot as an oven**. High fever and dry skin (**the burning heat of famine**) is a common side effect of starvation (cf. 3:4, 4:8).

5:11–13. Here Jeremiah’s text switches from the first person (“we,” “our”) to the third person (“they,” “their”). Having first identified with the general conditions of the sufferings of the Jewish people (vv. 2–10), he now presents specific groups within society to highlight their condition (vv. 11–12). No element of society escaped the hammer of judgment.

First **the women in Zion** (adults, probably wives) and **the virgins**, (sexually pure, unmarried young women), of the **cities of Judah** suffered the horrors of foreign occupation. They were **ravished**, mercilessly raped by the sadistic soldiers (v. 11). Second, the leadership, young (**princes**) and old (**elders**), were humiliated (**not respected**), tortured (**hung by their hands**), and executed publicly (v. 12). Third, the **young men** (young adults) and **youths** (boys) were enslaved to hard labor. Because of the shortage of domestic animals in Judah (probably because most had been eaten during the 30-month siege), young men and boys were forced to perform work usually done by animals: **at the grinding mill** (as Samson also had been forced to do; cf. Jdg 16:21) and carrying heavy **loads of wood**. Those who were Judah’s hope had been reduced to the status of slaves (Lm 5:13).

5:14–15. Wisdom, justice, and happiness had departed from the city. The **elders** sat at the city **gate** to wisely settle disputes and administer justice (Jos 20:4; Ru 4:1–2, 11). Now they were **gone**. The joyful **music** (cf. Ps 95:1–2) of the **young men** had **ceased**. There was no **joy** in their **hearts**, and their **dancing** was **turned into mourning**, just as Jeremiah had foretold (Jr 25:10–11).

5:16. **The crown**, the glory and majesty of the Davidic line, had **fallen** (1:1, 2:15, cf. Is 28:1, 3; Jr 13:13–19). For Judah, the fall of the Davidic line had more far-reaching implications than it would for other peoples. The messianic hope was anchored in the Davidic covenant (2Sm 7:16). Realizing the seriousness of their transgression, they confessed their guilt: **Woe to us, for we have sinned!**

5:17–18. **Because** of all the judgment, their hearts were **faint**, sick with sorrow (Is 1:5); their **eyes** were **dim** from constant weeping (cf. Lm 2:11; 3:48–49). The focus of their grief was **Mount Zion**, the glory of Israel (2:1), which lay **desolate** (“deserted,” “a horror,” “appalling”). The once regal, thriving city, His appointed meeting place (1:1, 4; 2:6, 15), was a ruin, inhabited by **foxes**.

B. The Remnant’s Prayer for the Lord to Restore Zion (5:19–22)

5:19. After describing her condition (vv. 1–18), Jeremiah recorded how Judah concluded her prayer by calling on God to act (vv. 19–22). She called on God because of His eternal sovereignty: **You, O LORD, rule forever; Your throne is from generation to generation** (cf. Ps 102:12). Zion’s suffering was not because the gods of Babylon were stronger than the God of Israel. The God of Israel was the only true God, and He had caused her calamity (cf. Lm 1:12–17; 2:1–8; 4:11). Yet God, who brought about her destruction, alone had the power to bring about her restoration—if He chose to do so.

5:20. The knowledge of God’s ability to restore the nation prompted the people to ask two questions, parallel in Hebrew poetic form. Why had the Lord forgotten, and why had He forsaken Judah? To **forget** about Judah would be to **forsake** her to her present condition of suffering. Note that **forget** used here is the opposite of “remember” in v. 1. God cannot *forget* anything. This figure of speech means “to

forsake” or “abandon” the people as though He has forgotten them. The people were asking God why He had abandoned them for so long. Significantly, Moses employed the figure of God remembering His covenant if His people would confess their sin (Lv 26:40–42). So the people of Judah were calling on God, asking Him to remember His covenant promise (2 Ch 7:14; Jr 31:17–18).

5:21–22. The prayer implores God, **Restore us to You, O LORD, that we may be restored**; or “Turn us back to Yourself, that we may return to You” (cf. Jr 31:18). The Lord is the initiator of revival and restoration. The people wanted to be restored to the blessings of relationship to the Lord and of God’s covenant, which included being returned to the land of Israel (Lv 26:40–45; Dt 3:1–10). Their ultimate hope for restoration was God’s faithfulness to His covenant promises. In Scripture, the expectation of the restoration of Israel was always eschatological and messianic. In Dt 4:30 the return from dispersion is said to take place “in the latter days.” In the Prophets, Israel’s restoration would begin with their return to the Lord when they would “seek the LORD their God and David their king; and they will come trembling to the LORD and to His goodness in the last days” (Hs 3:5).

After the final note of hope and confidence in future restoration, the closing verse speaks of God potentially rejecting and being **angry** with Israel. This concluding verse was so distressing to ancient rabbis, that in order not to end on this dire phrase, they established the custom to repeat the previous verse (Lm 5:21) at the conclusion of any public reading of Lamentations. Thus, the book would conclude with a statement of confidence and hope: **Restore us to You, O LORD, that we may be restored.**

The troubling phrase is: **Unless** God had **utterly rejected** the nation and seems to indicate that it would be possible for God to reject Israel. However, God vowed never to reject His people (Rm 11:1). No matter what the outward circumstances or depth of the national sin, the Lord will keep His covenants with His chosen people (Lv 26:44; Gn 12:1–2; 2Sm 7:16; Jr 31:31–37; Rm 11:28–29).

Thus, the message of book of Lamentations is of God’s love and faithfulness. Despite severe suffering because of her sin, Judah had not been abandoned as a nation. God was still sovereign, and His covenant with Israel was still operative despite her disobedience. “The Lord’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness” (Lm 3:22). The hope for the nation was that if she would call on God and confess her sin, the Lord would protect her during her captivity (3:21–30) and would ultimately restore her as a nation to covenant blessing under the leadership of King Messiah ruling on David’s throne (v. 19).

LESSON NUGGET – God’s chastening is proof that He loves you and has not forsaken you (Heb.12:5-11). One day, He will take you out of the furnace and give you a new start. You will be a new and better person if you let Him have His way.

Sources: Moody Bible Commentary, Standard Lesson Commentary and The Essential Everyday Bible Commentary