



LAMENTATIONS

Read Lamentations 1

Written during the period of Judah's great desolation and the destruction of Jerusalem, the five songs of this book are elegiac masterpieces of deep sorrow and grief. They speak clearly of the loss of city and home and recognize that it is punishment for national sinfulness. Yet hope is never lost; ultimate deliverance is a given in faith.

Reflect: "Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow...." The anguished author sees Jerusalem's ordeal as being unparalleled. The young have gone into captivity; priests and elders have perished. Yet, the Lord's justice will one day reach the captors. Punishment is not only for the vanquished.

Pray: May those sorely afflicted through suffering of whatever type be given courage and the conviction that the Lord remains with them.

Act: Today there is a great need of eucharistic ministers for the homebound and the hospitalized. Might I offer my services?

The Deserted City

- 1 How lonely sits the city
 that once was full of people!
 How like a widow she has become,
 she that was great among the nations!
 She that was a princess among the provinces
 has become a vassal.
- 2 She weeps bitterly in the night,
 with tears on her cheeks;
 among all her lovers
 she has no one to comfort her;
 all her friends have dealt treacherously with her,
 they have become her enemies.
- 3 Judah has gone into exile with suffering
 and hard servitude;
 she lives now among the nations,
 and finds no resting place;
 her pursuers have all overtaken her
 in the midst of her distress.
- 4 The roads to Zion mourn,
 for no one comes to the festivals;
 all her gates are desolate,
 her priests groan;
 her young girls grieve,^a
 and her lot is bitter.
- 5 Her foes have become the masters,
 her enemies prosper,
 because the LORD has made her suffer
 for the multitude of her transgressions;

^a Meaning of Heb uncertain

- her children have gone away,
 captives before the foe.
- ⁶ From daughter Zion has departed
 all her majesty.
Her princes have become like stags
 that find no pasture;
they fled without strength
 before the pursuer.
- ⁷ Jerusalem remembers,
 in the days of her affliction and
 wandering,
all the precious things
 that were hers in days of old.
When her people fell into the hand
 of the foe,
 and there was no one to help her,
the foe looked on mocking
 over her downfall.
- ⁸ Jerusalem sinned grievously,
 so she has become a mockery;
all who honored her despise her,
 for they have seen her nakedness;
she herself groans,
 and turns her face away.
- ⁹ Her uncleanness was in her skirts;
 she took no thought of her future;
her downfall was appalling,
 with none to comfort her.
“O LORD, look at my affliction,
 for the enemy has triumphed!”
- ¹⁰ Enemies have stretched out their hands
 over all her precious things;
she has even seen the nations
 invade her sanctuary,
those whom you forbade
 to enter your congregation.
- ¹¹ All her people groan
 as they search for bread;
they trade their treasures for food
 to revive their strength.
Look, O LORD, and see
 how worthless I have become.
- ¹² Is it nothing to you,^a all you who
 pass by?

- Look and see
if there is any sorrow like my sorrow,
 which was brought upon me,
which the LORD inflicted
 on the day of his fierce anger.
- ¹³ From on high he sent fire;
 it went deep into my bones;
he spread a net for my feet;
 he turned me back;
he has left me stunned,
 faint all day long.
- ¹⁴ My transgressions were bound^a into
 a yoke;
by his hand they were fastened
 together;
they weigh on my neck,
 sapping my strength;
the Lord handed me over
 to those whom I cannot withstand.
- ¹⁵ The LORD has rejected
 all my warriors in the midst of me;
he proclaimed a time against me
 to crush my young men;
the Lord has trodden as in a wine
 press
 the virgin daughter Judah.
- ¹⁶ For these things I weep;
 my eyes flow with tears;
for a comforter is far from me,
 one to revive my courage;
my children are desolate,
 for the enemy has prevailed.
- ¹⁷ Zion stretches out her hands,
 but there is no one to comfort her;
the LORD has commanded against
 Jacob
 that his neighbors should become
 his foes;
Jerusalem has become
 a filthy thing among them.
- ¹⁸ The LORD is in the right,
 for I have rebelled against his word;
but hear, all you peoples,
 and behold my suffering;

^a Meaning of Heb uncertain

- my young women and young men
have gone into captivity.
- 19** I called to my lovers
but they deceived me;
my priests and elders
perished in the city
while seeking food
to revive their strength.
- 20** See, O LORD, how distressed I am;
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.
- 21** They heard how I was groaning,
with no one to comfort me.
All my enemies heard of my trouble;
they are glad that you have done it.
Bring on the day you have
announced,
and let them be as I am.
- 22** Let 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.

Read Lamentations 2

The second lamentation spells out in detail the suffering Jerusalem and the country have endured. Feast and sabbath are forgotten; altar and sanctuary are disowned; the wall of Zion is marked for destruction. Passersby hiss and wag their head. The young and old have fallen in the streets. The cry to the Lord is stark: "Look, O LORD, and consider! To whom have you done this?"

Reflect: Desolation comes today in many forms from many quarters. It is hard to see it all as punishment for sin, especially when it takes a toll on the poorest and neediest. But at times it is more clearly self-inflicted: when lethal weapons are so easily available, when sexual promiscuity is at an all-time high, when respect for others has little or no value, we should not be surprised when we are held to pay for our wantonness.

Pray: May there be a greater sense of civility in our society, a return to respect for human values. May our personal dealings be marked by justice and charity.

Act: I will make a personal act to amend for a single unkindness in my life.

God's Warnings Fulfilled

- 2** How the Lord in his anger
has humiliated^a daughter Zion!
He has thrown down from heaven to earth
the splendor of Israel;
he has not remembered his footstool
in the day of his anger.
- 2** The Lord has destroyed without mercy
all the dwellings of Jacob;
in his wrath he has broken down
the strongholds of daughter Judah;
he has brought down to the ground in dishonor
the kingdom and its rulers.
- 3** He has cut down in fierce anger
all the might of Israel;
he has withdrawn his right hand from them
in the face of the enemy;
he has burned like a flaming fire in Jacob,
consuming all around.
- 4** He has bent his bow like an enemy,
with his right hand set like a foe;
he has killed all in whom we took pride
in the tent of daughter Zion;
he has poured out his fury like fire.
- 5** The Lord has become like an enemy;
he has destroyed Israel.
He has destroyed all its palaces,
laid in ruins its strongholds,
and multiplied in daughter Judah
mourning and lamentation.
- 6** He has broken down his booth like a garden,
he has destroyed his tabernacle;

^a Meaning of Heb uncertain

- the LORD has abolished in Zion
 festival and sabbath,
 and in his fierce indignation has
 spurned
 king and priest.
- 7 The Lord has scorned his altar,
 disowned his sanctuary;
 he has delivered into the hand of the
 enemy
 the walls of her palaces;
 a clamor was raised in the house of
 the LORD
 as on a day of festival.
- 8 The LORD determined to lay in ruins
 the wall of daughter Zion;
 he stretched the line;
 he did not withhold his hand from
 destroying;
 he caused rampart and wall to lament;
 they languish together.
- 9 Her gates have sunk into the ground;
 he has ruined and broken her bars;
 her king and princes are among the
 nations;
 guidance is no more,
 and her prophets obtain
 no vision from the LORD.
- 10 The elders of daughter Zion
 sit on the ground in silence;
 they have thrown dust on their heads
 and put on sackcloth;
 the young girls of Jerusalem
 have bowed their heads to the
 ground.
- 11 My eyes are spent with weeping;
 my stomach churns;
 my bile is poured out on the ground
 because of the destruction of my
 people,
 because infants and babes faint
 in the streets of the city.
- 12 They cry to their mothers,
 "Where is bread and wine?"
 as they faint like the wounded
 in the streets of the city,
- as their life is poured out
 on their mothers' bosom.
- 13 What can I say for you, to what
 compare you,
 O daughter Jerusalem?
 To what can I liken you, that I may
 comfort you,
 O virgin daughter Zion?
 For vast as the sea is your ruin;
 who can heal you?
- 14 Your prophets have seen for you
 false and deceptive visions;
 they have not exposed your iniquity
 to restore your fortunes,
 but have seen oracles for you
 that are false and misleading.
- 15 All who pass along the way
 clap their hands at you;
 they hiss and wag their heads
 at daughter Jerusalem;
 "Is this the city that was called
 the perfection of beauty,
 the joy of all the earth?"
- 16 All your enemies
 open their mouths against you;
 they hiss, they gnash their teeth,
 they cry: "We have devoured her!
 Ah, this is the day we longed for;
 at last we have seen it!"
- 17 The LORD has done what he purposed,
 he has carried out his threat;
 as he ordained long ago,
 he has demolished without pity;
 he has made the enemy rejoice over
 you,
 and exalted the might of your foes.
- 18 Cry aloud^a to the Lord!
 O wall of daughter Zion!
 Let tears stream down like a torrent
 day and night!
 Give yourself no rest,
 your eyes no respite!
- 19 Arise, cry out in the night,
 at the beginning of the watches!

^a Cn: Heb Their heart cried

- Pour out your heart like water
before the presence of the Lord!
Lift your hands to him
for the lives of your children,
who faint for hunger
at the head of every street.
- 20** Look, O LORD, and consider!
To whom have you done this?
Should women eat their offspring,
the children they have borne?
Should priest and prophet be killed
in the sanctuary of the Lord?
- 21** The young and the old are lying
on the ground in the streets;

my young women and my young men
have fallen by the sword;
in the day of your anger you have killed them,
slaughtering without mercy.

22 You invited my enemies from all around
as if for a day of festival;
and on the day of the anger of the LORD
no one escaped or survived;
those whom I bore and reared
my enemy has destroyed.

Read Lamentations 3

The prophet views his own suffering against the background of the suffering of the people. He has been left desolate, like the helpless prey of wild beasts. Yet his pain is compounded when he considers the sad lot of his people. His eyes are an endless flow of tears, so great is their punishment. Still the confidence of the prophet remains. God addresses him: "Do not fear." The enemy will be pursued and destroyed.

Reflect: Few of us have seen the real horrors of war. And, in the news of war, we hear far more about the number of our own dead than those of the opposition, military or civilian. Yet we all share a common humanity, and we suffer with those who suffer. Do we see our own suffering as part of that larger picture?

Pray: May we overcome the results of war—death, hunger, disease, and homelessness—and may the leaders of this world see the folly of war.

Act: Let us raise our voices as citizens to decry war in any form.

God's Steadfast Love Endures

- 3** I am one who has seen affliction
under the rod of God's^a wrath;
- 2** he has driven and brought me
into darkness without any light;
- 3** against me alone he turns his hand,
again and again, all day long.
- 4** He has made my flesh and my skin waste away,
and broken my bones;
- 5** he has besieged and enveloped me
with bitterness and tribulation;
- 6** he has made me sit in darkness
like the dead of long ago.
- 7** He has walled me about so that I cannot escape;
he has put heavy chains on me;
- 8** though I call and cry for help,
he shuts out my prayer;
- 9** he has blocked my ways with hewn stones,
he has made my paths crooked.
- 10** He is a bear lying in wait for me,
a lion in hiding;
- 11** he led me off my way and tore me to pieces;
he has made me desolate;
- 12** he bent his bow and set me
as a mark for his arrow.
- 13** He shot into my vitals
the arrows of his quiver;
- 14** I have become the laughingstock of all my people,
the object of their taunt-songs all day long.
- 15** He has filled me with bitterness,
he has sated me with wormwood.

^a Heb his

- 16 He has made my teeth grind on gravel,
and made me cower in ashes;
- 17 my soul is bereft of peace;
I have forgotten what happiness is;
- 18 so I say, "Gone is my glory,
and all that I had hoped for from the LORD."
- 19 The thought of my affliction and my homelessness
is wormwood and gall!
- 20 My soul continually thinks of it
and is bowed down within me.
- 21 But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
- 22 The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,^a
his mercies never come to an end;
- 23 they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
- 24 "The LORD is my portion," says my soul,
"therefore I will hope in him."
- 25 The LORD is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul that seeks him.
- 26 It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the LORD.
- 27 It is good for one to bear the yoke in youth,
- 28 to sit alone in silence
when the Lord has imposed it,
- 29 to put one's mouth to the dust
(there may yet be hope),
- 30 to give one's cheek to the smiter,
and be filled with insults.
- 31 For the Lord will not reject forever.
- 32 Although he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love;
- 33 for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone.

- 34 When all the prisoners of the land are crushed under foot,
- 35 when human rights are perverted in the presence of the Most High,
- 36 when one's case is subverted —does the Lord not see it?
- 37 Who can command and have it done, if the Lord has not ordained it?
- 38 Is it not from the mouth of the Most High
that good and bad come?
- 39 Why should any who draw breath complain about the punishment of their sins?
- 40 Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the LORD.
- 41 Let us lift up our hearts as well as our hands to God in heaven.
- 42 We have transgressed and rebelled, and you have not forgiven.
- 43 You have wrapped yourself with anger and pursued us, killing without pity;
- 44 you have wrapped yourself with a cloud
so that no prayer can pass through.
- 45 You have made us filth and rubbish among the peoples.
- 46 All our enemies have opened their mouths against us;
- 47 panic and pitfall have come upon us, devastation and destruction.
- 48 My eyes flow with rivers of tears because of the destruction of my people.
- 49 My eyes will flow without ceasing, without respite,
- 50 until the LORD from heaven looks down and sees.
- 51 My eyes cause me grief at the fate of all the young women in my city.

^a Syr Tg; Heb LORD, we are not cut off

- 52 Those who were my enemies without cause have hunted me like a bird;
 53 they flung me alive into a pit and hurled stones on me;
 54 water closed over my head; I said, "I am lost."
 55 I called on your name, O LORD, from the depths of the pit;
 56 you heard my plea, "Do not close your ear to my cry for help, but give me relief!"
 57 You came near when I called on you; you said, "Do not fear!"
 58 You have taken up my cause, O Lord, you have redeemed my life.

- 59 You have seen the wrong done to me, O LORD; judge my cause.
 60 You have seen all their malice, all their plots against me.
 61 You have heard their taunts, O LORD, all their plots against me.
 62 The whispers and murmurs of my assailants are against me all day long.
 63 Whether they sit or rise—see, I am the object of their taunt-songs.
 64 Pay them back for their deeds, O LORD, according to the work of their hands!
 65 Give them anguish of heart; your curse be on them!
 66 Pursue them in anger and destroy them from under the LORD's heavens.

The Punishment of Zion

4

- How the gold has grown dim,
 how the pure gold is changed!
 The sacred stones lie scattered at the head of every street.
- 2 The precious children of Zion, worth their weight in fine gold— how they are reckoned as earthen pots, the work of a potter's hands!
- 3 Even the jackals offer the breast and nurse their young, but my people has become cruel, like the ostriches in the wilderness.
- 4 The tongue of the infant sticks to the roof of its mouth for thirst; the children beg for food, but no one gives them anything.
- 5 Those who feasted on delicacies perish in the streets; those who were brought up in purple cling to ash heaps.
- 6 For the chastisement^a of my people has been greater than the punishment^b of Sodom, which was overthrown in a moment, though no hand was laid on it.^c

^a Or *iniquity*

^b Or *sin*

^c Meaning of Heb uncertain

Read Lamentations 4

Jerusalem's desolation is overwhelming. The noble have fallen; babies cry for food, but there is none. It is far better to die by the sword than to continue in anguish. Kings of the earth once believed that no force could enter the gates of Jerusalem. But now the citizenry is harassed and taunted throughout the city. The king has been vanquished. "Your iniquity, O daughter Edom, he will punish, he will uncover your sins," now that the punishment of Zion has been completed.

Reflect: Cultures vanish today by erosion rather than by destruction. There were periods in history when the arts and letters were widely esteemed and promoted. Scholarship was at one time not geared solely to the practical. University professors enjoyed prestige for their dedication to scholarship. As we recognize our gains, we should also lament our losses.

Pray: Christianity has a long history of appreciation for and promotion of human culture. We pray that it will not be lost today.

Act: Set some time aside for good reading or some cultural pursuit.

- 7 Her princes were purer than snow,
whiter than milk;
their bodies were more ruddy than coral,
their hair^a like sapphire.^b
- 8 Now their visage is blacker than soot;
they are not recognized in the streets.
Their skin has shriveled on their bones;
it has become as dry as wood.
- 9 Happier were those pierced by the sword
than those pierced by hunger,
whose life drains away, deprived
of the produce of the field.
- 10 The hands of compassionate women
have boiled their own children;
they became their food
in the destruction of my people.
- 11 The LORD gave full vent to his wrath;
he poured out his hot anger,
and kindled a fire in Zion
that consumed its foundations.
- 12 The kings of the earth did not believe,
nor did any of the inhabitants of the world,
that foe or enemy could enter
the gates of Jerusalem.
- 13 It was for the sins of her prophets
and the iniquities of her priests,
who shed the blood of the righteous
in the midst of her.
- 14 Blindly they wandered through the streets,
so defiled with blood
that no one was able
to touch their garments.
- 15 "Away! Unclean!" people shouted at them;
"Away! Away! Do not touch!"
So they became fugitives and wanderers;
it was said among the nations,
"They shall stay here no longer."
- 16 The LORD himself has scattered them,
he will regard them no more;
no honor was shown to the priests,
no favor to the elders.
- 17 Our eyes failed, ever watching
vainly for help;
we were watching eagerly
for a nation that could not save.

^a Meaning of Heb uncertain

^b Or *lapis lazuli*

- 18 They dogged our steps
so that we could not walk in our
streets;
our end drew near; our days were
numbered;
for our end had come.
- 19 Our pursuers were swifter
than the eagles in the heavens;
they chased us on the mountains,
they lay in wait for us in the
wilderness.
- 20 The LORD's anointed, the breath of
our life,
was taken in their pits—

the one of whom we said, “Under his
shadow
we shall live among the nations.”

- 21 Rejoice and be glad, O daughter Edom,
you that live in the land of Uz;
but to you also the cup shall pass;
you shall become drunk and strip
yourself bare.
- 22 The punishment of your iniquity,
O daughter Zion, is accomplished,
he will keep you in exile no longer;
but your iniquity, O daughter Edom,
he will punish,
he will uncover your sins.

Read Lamentations 5

Profound grief is expressed in this final lament. The people are orphaned and fatherless, children of widowed mothers. Wives and maidens have been ravished; young men bound in servitude. The devastation is total.

Reflect: This book of the Old Testament is truly a sad one. How far have we come from the words of the psalmist: “The LORD has punished me severely, but he did not give me over to death. Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD” (Ps 118:18–19). The courts are no more. The people are dispersed. A nation singled out by God and shown such favor has fallen to incredible depths. The message is well worth heeding. God’s favor is inexhaustible, but it is not cheap grace. God not only gives; he also asks.

Pray: Let us pray for the willingness to listen and respond, and for the election of leaders with a true moral compass.

Act: In elections, let us see moral principle as an important standard.

A Plea for Mercy

- 5** 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^a on our necks we are hard driven;
we are weary, we are given no rest.
 - 6 We have made a pact with^b 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!

^a Symmachus: Heb lacks *With a yoke*

^b Heb have given the hand to

- 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.