

THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS – INTRODUCTION AND CHAPTERS ONE AND TWO

Lamentations is not the most popular book in the Bible! When was the last time you heard a sermon from Lamentations? It is a book which regrets sin and its consequence, not a popular subject. It is set in the time of the Jews' captivity in Babylon between 586BC when Nebuchadnezzar finally removed the entire population of Jerusalem to Babylon,(II Chron.36:15-21) and 538BC when the Jews began to return after the decree of Cyrus that they could go back and build their temple again.(II Chron.36:22,23) It is read once a year by the Jews of today to remind them of what went wrong and why.

There is no indication who the writer was but undoubtedly the author was God,(II Tim.3:16) and the central figure was Jesus Christ.(Luke 24:27,44) It is written as a series of poems, presumably so that it could be sung and so remembered. Chapters 1,2,4 and 5 each have 22 verses, the same as the Hebrew alphabet. The central chapter 3, has 66 verses so there are in all 7 X 22 verses intended perhaps to convey a sense of completeness. The whole story of our sin had been told and there are no excuses. Each chapter has a different point of view and image.

HOW SIN LOOKS TO OUR SOCIETY.

Chapter one looks sadly at the city of Jerusalem and calls the city 'she'.(v.1) She was once a princess but is now a widow condemned to manual labour. The causes of her fall were her many lovers, the other gods to whom she gave herself instead of the one true God.(v.2) The result is her lonely desolation.(v.3) She is defeated and bitter about what has happened as we often complain about the consequences of our sin.(v.4) She looks back in grief to the good times when she was admired and regrets the way she is now ridiculed.(v.5-7) She is beginning to turn to God again for help.(v.8,9) All she had of value has been taken away by the invaders.(v.10) Her people are desperate and she is starting to hope that somehow the Lord will help them.(v.11) She is assuming that her pain is God's doing,(v.12-15) a view with which Job would strongly have disagreed. When we turn our backs on God He may allow us to suffer simply because we have chosen not to have His care and protection. Her tragic loss causes her to weep in deep grief and to long for a comforter.(v.16) Jesus tells us that there is only one Comforter, (Jn.14:16) who will come to live in us after His death and resurrection. The great obstacle to the Lord being able to comfort us is our uncleanness, our sin.(v.17,18) To be made clean we need to acknowledge that we have rebelled against Him in taking our 'lovers' who were supposed to lead us to Christ but were only concerned for themselves.(v.19) In our pain as we suffer the consequence of our rebellion we long for God's judgement on those who laugh at the mess we are in.(v.20-22)

QUESTIONS OF INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP DISCUSSION ON CHAPTER ONE

1. Why is this first chapter addressed to the whole city of Jerusalem? Isn't sin just a personal issue? How can a whole community be led down the wrong path? What as a city was their sin? How do our communities have similar issues?
2. How had the whole city been changed by their shared sin? How does the writer describe how it was before and how it is now? What was their main sin? Why had it had such a life-changing effect? How is the same sequence followed in our world today with equally devastating consequences?

3. What part did the people of Jerusalem think the Lord had had in the adversity they had been going through as a nation? Were their assumptions about God correct? How do we also go through a process of seeing God's role differently in our hard times? When others who are suffering are thinking like this, how and when can we help them?
4. What kind of comfort did the Jews of those days look for? What does the real Comforter do? What has to change in our lives for the Comforter to be able to work in us?
5. About what did Jerusalem groan? What did they have to face up to before God could help them? Who should have led them in this process? How does spiritual leadership often fail today also?

HOW OUR SIN LOOKS TO GOD

Chapter two still centres on the condition of Jerusalem but this time it looks at what has happened from God's point of view. Every now and then there is a response from His people. There were many times in the Old Testament when the Lord appeared to Israel in a cloud.(Exod.13:21,22; 14:19,24; 33:9,10; Num.9:15-23; 14:14; Deut.1:33) It represented His presence, His power and His willingness to instruct and guide them. But sadly the people of Jerusalem had chosen to ignore the wonderful privilege the Lord had offered them so He had every reason to be angry and withdraw the cloud.(v.1) The result of the visible presence of the Lord being withdrawn would be that they would lose His protection so that they would be defeated by their enemies, on this occasion the Babylonians, with tragic consequences.(v.2-5) Their most important loss was of the temple which would remove the sense of God being with them to teach them. It was also the only place where they could offer sacrifice which looked forward to the death of Christ for their sin.(v.6,7) As by their own choice the Lord has left them on their own, they are without His word and those who were to teach them and so give them the means to deal with everyday problems, which would normally be determined by the elders meeting at the city gates.(v.8-10) The one who grieves most concerning the effect of our sin is the Lord Himself.(Lk.19:41) He sees particularly the suffering of children.(v.11-13) Their bad choices began with bad teaching. The state of their city is evidence of this.(v,14,15) Their enemies are celebrating their success but the truth is that God has caused this.(v.16,17) Finally they are crying out to God for help in deep grief for themselves and their children.(v.18,19) Terrible things are happening to babies and spiritual leaders. Dead bodies lie everywhere. Is this the work of God punishing them or are these the actions of their godless enemies?(v.20-22)

QUESTIONS OF INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP DISCUSSION ON CHAPTER TWO

1. How had the Lord used the idea of a cloud to teach the nature of the relationship the people of Israel could have with Him? How does this image compare to the New Testament relationship Jesus offers us?
2. How is God's view of our sin different from our own point of view? How had God acted because of the continuing unfaithfulness of Israel? How does He respond today if we reject His love?
3. What responsibility did spiritual leaders have for the condition of Israel as captives in Babylon? To what extent today do church leaders contribute to the condition of our societies?

4. What conclusion did other nations reach in those days about professed believers from the behaviour of the people of Judah? How do those we meet in the present day form their view of God from how well or poorly Christians live?
5. Who did Jewish people in Babylon think had caused the atrocities which had been committed against women and children? When horrible things happen to young children what assumptions do people make today about God's existence and judgement? How can we change the wrong view people have of God's justice and mercy?

LET'S TALK WITH GOD ABOUT THE PROBLEM OF OUR SIN

Chapter three begins with a bitter complaint about God's treatment of the writer. God has left us in the dark.(v.1,2) He has rejected us and beaten us.(v.3-5) He has treated us like we are dead already.(v.6,7) He does not answer our prayer.(v.8,9) He attacks us like He is a wild animal.(v.10,11) He has made us a target for attack and ridicule.(v.12-14) He has hurt us deeply.(v.15,16) He has taken away our peace, happiness and hope.(v.17,18)

In the next section of this chapter the writer allows himself to be reminded in prayer of all God is and has promised so hope begins to be restored.(v.19-21) He remembers the Lord's lovingkindness, compassion and faithfulness and his hope grows a little stronger.(v.22-24) He realises afresh how we need to wait patiently, silently and humbly for Him to answer in His time and way, and so hope becomes stronger still.(v.25-29) As we are badly treated we know it is not for ever and it is only a matter of time before we experience His compassion.(v.30-32) Affliction, grief, oppression, injustice and fraud do not come from God.(v.33-36) In the end all events are under His control both good and bad.(v.37,38)

In the final part of chapter three the writer begins a serious dialogue with God about his condition. In view of our sin what do we have to complain about when things go wrong? We need first to return in repentance to God.(v.39-42) God has every justification for punishing us because sin has separated us from Him.(v.43,44) If we have behaved like rubbish is it any surprise that our enemies have treated us as such?(v.45-47) We weep tears at the consequence of our sin until we realise that the Lord sees the condition of our hearts.(v.48-51) By contrast our enemies are merciless in their persecution.(v.52-54) In our deepest despair we call on Him and He answers us, reassuring us that we have nothing to fear.(v.55-57) As we really listen to Him again we realise that the Lord has redeemed us, paid for our sin and taken on our case.(v.58,59) He is fully aware of the attitude of our enemies and what they plan and say against us.(v.60-63) He will judge them and deal with their behaviour. It is not our responsibility. What a relief!(v.64-66)

QUESTIONS OF INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP DISCUSSION ON CHAPTER THREE

1. How in this first section of chapter three does the writer feel God has treated him? How do we also react in anger at what we think God is doing to us in hard times? Where else in the Bible do men of God react in similar ways? How does God answer them and with what result?
2. How in the second section does the writer start to have a conversation with God rather than talking at Him? What does he discover as he does so? How can the same change happen as far as we are concerned? Why is it so important that we listen more than talk when we pray?

3. How by the third section has the writer's view of adversity changed completely? How has his attitude to God also undergone a revolution? Why is it so important that such changes happen in our prayer times also?
4. What does the writer come to realise God has done about his sin and situation? What now is the writer's confidence about who God is and what he can expect from Him?
5. How will the journey the writer makes during this chapter alter his ability to cope with difficult times in future? How did Job go through a similar transformation? How will we respond in future when disaster strikes us?

THE PERSONAL AND SOCIAL CONSEQUENCE OF SIN

Chapter four describes in vivid terms the effect of sin on the individual, the family and the whole community. It could well be picturing the scenes we have often seen on TV in recent times of the Middle East. Precious lives are regarded as no longer of value and fit only to be smashed like broken pots.(v.1,2) The first to suffer are the babies and young children whom no-one feeds.(v.3,4) Even the privileged struggle to survive. Natural disaster at Sodom in Gen.19 made no distinction between rich and poor.(v.5,6) Following religious customs, once admired, offers no protection.(v.7,8) Sudden death in battle would look more attractive than slow starvation and the child abuse to which the desperate seem driven.(v.9,10) The assumption people make is that this is God's judgement on sinners who many assumed were safe because of their religion. The spiritual leaders whose teaching should have protected the community bear the greatest responsibility.(v.11-13) The leaders who were blind to truth and had the blood of their neglected communities on their hands would come to be regarded as lepers whom no-one wanted anymore because God had withdrawn His calling from them.(v.14-16) In desperation people look for help from any direction except to God and are disappointed.(v.17-19) Looking ahead in time to the New Testament even the Lord's anointed, the Christ, would become a victim of God's enemies.(v.20) The forces of evil who think they have won will themselves eventually be those who are judged.(v.21,22)

QUESTIONS OF INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP DISCUSSION ON CHAPTER FOUR

1. In what way does human life come to be undervalued in hard times? What examples have you seen in modern times? What would it have taken in the time of Lamentations for the old value of life to be restored? What steps could we take today to accomplish the same thing?
2. What is described as happening to children as a result of adversity? Why may parents lose their normal instinctive love and protection for their children? How does the same tragedy come in our society? How according to the Bible could we respond to adversity in a way which would be much more effective than what we usually do now?
3. What advantage do the privileged expect to have when a community goes through tough times? Why may this advantage be lost in times of disaster?
4. In what way were spiritual leaders failing according to the writer of this book? What effect does their failure have on their society? In what ways do we see a similar failure and effect in our society? What response is needed for this to change? How can we begin such a restoration of genuine spiritual leadership?
5. How do people see God's role in times of oppression according to the writer? What mistakes do they make in their expectations of God? How did leaders and ordinary people

see Jesus' relation with His Father when He suffered in the New Testament? How can this passage help us to have a true view of God when our society suffers?

SIN ROBBS US OF ALL WE VALUE SO WE MAKE - A FINAL NERVOUS PLEA TO GOD FOR HELP

In the last chapter, the writer comes before God and asks Him to remember His people who have endured so much under Babylonian rule. (V.1) They have lost their inheritance in their land and homes. They are like orphans and widows because they no longer have a relationship with their Heavenly Father.(v.2,3) They no longer own even their water supply or forest. They feel under constant threat from their powerful neighbours.(v.4-6) They have suffered because of the sins of the previous generation. They are governed by former slaves. Even their food supply has to be fought for. They are desperately hungry.(v.7-10) Every part of society has been ill-treated beginning with the women and the leaders. Even young men have not escaped. Life is no fun for them anymore.(v.11-15) Because of their sin they have lost their independence, their confidence, their vision and their special place for meeting with God.(v.16-18)

The book ends with a final prayer to the Lord who rules for ever but who seems to have forgotten and deserted His people. Please Lord, can we again have a relationship with You and a new hope? Unless in Your anger we are rejected forever?(v.19-22)

QUESTIONS OF INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP DISCUSSION ON CHAPTER FIVE

1. What does this final chapter add to the picture of a defeated, demoralised society? What modern examples have there been of such a hopeless nation?
2. To what extent have the people of Judah come to understand by the end of this book why they have suffered so much? What would you have pointed out to them about the real cause of their predicament? Where was Jesus Christ in this book?
3. What source of hope are they beginning to glimpse? What did their spiritual leaders need to teach them? How did Ezra, Nehemiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Haggai and Zechariah all help to start that process?
4. In what way does the final prayer provide a starting point for a new life? Why is the writer so lacking in confidence about whether his prayer will be answered? How can we help people who struggle to begin a real prayer relationship with God? What is missing in the understanding of such people?
5. How would a clear Christian message have transformed the Jews in those days? What can we do to help desperate people today with little or no understanding of who and where God is when horrible things happen? How will studying Lamentations change our approach to our sin and that of those around us?