**Lamentations Commentary**

**Lamentations Chapter 1**

Lam 1:1

The probable writer of Lamentations is Jeremiah (see the REV introduction to Lamentations). He was a writing prophet and personally experienced the destruction of Jerusalem and the carrying away of the people to Babylon.

**“How.”** The first word in the Hebrew text, the adverb*ʾekhah* (#0349 אֵיכָה) is usually translated “how,” but it means much more than that in this context. Leslie Allen writes that the word “traditionally belonged to the funeral dirge and introduced a contrast between a grim present and a good past. A chasm that bereavement had created. Here too, it introduces such contrasts. It is a shriek, a scream. Not the kind of scream that comes from fright, but the kind that comes from the deepest grief imaginable. It is a scream that comes when there are no words to express what you feel.”[[1]](#footnote-32627) The word *ʾekhah* opens the verses such as Isaiah 1:21, “How the faithful city [Jerusalem] has become a prostitute!” Also, 2 Samuel 1:19 says, “How the mighty have fallen,” (cf. Jer. 50:23).

Jerusalem had once been the gem of the Middle East, now it was in ruins, with its Temple and palaces burned to the ground and most of its people carried off in exile to a foreign land. It screamed in the pain of loss. So the word “how” is not to be understood forensically, as in the sentence, “How did you get to work today, by car or by bus?” It is to be understood more as a rhetorical question that has no answer and does not really expect one; the “how” is just an unanswerable expression of grief: “How did this tragedy happen? How, how, how!?”

**“How lonely.”** When the Babylonians finished their conquest of Jerusalem and Judah, the vast majority of the people were either dead or had been carried captive to Babylon. Only some of the poorest people were left in the area (2 Kings 25:12). Jeremiah had foretold that Jerusalem, where the Temple had stood, would become like Shiloh, where the Tabernacle had once been placed, which was destroyed and deserted (Jer. 26:6). He had foretold Judah and Jerusalem would become deserted (Jer. 34:22; 36:29).

**“sits the city.”** The “city” is Jerusalem, portrayed as a woman, who has no strength to stand, but, like Nehemiah, sat in grief and mourning (Neh. 1:4). People in deep grief and sadness often have little strength to face life. They sit and weep. In Hebrew, the word “city” is a feminine noun, making the personification of Jerusalem as a woman grammatically easier than it is in English.

**“that was full of people.”** The Hebrew text uses the same word that is translated as “great” in the phrase “great among the nations” later in the verse. Jerusalem was “great” with people. The people of the ancient Middle East lived in a culture that had little recognition of personal space. They crowded together and loved it. We see this at the Last Supper when John was leaning on Jesus as he ate. You would likely hate that. The people of the ancient Near East would have loved Times Square on New Year’s Eve when the crowd is so thick there is hardly room to breathe. But now, at the time of Lamentations, Jerusalem is alone and lonely. To someone used to their crowded culture, the loneliness is unimaginable, paralyzing, almost physically painful. More so if you are a widow with no support, as Jerusalem is being portrayed. God had said that if Judah continued in sin that the people would be carried away and the cities would be deserted (e.g., Jer. 9:11).

**“She has become like a widow.”** To properly grasp the impact of this verse we must remember that being a widow in ancient times was most often a terrible disaster. A widow needed the support of others, preferably a family, to manage life well. Nowadays, women typically have jobs and financial stability independent of their husbands, thanks in part to modern conveniences like cars, stoves, refrigerators, and washing machines that make daily tasks easier, as well as government programs that provide some degree of financial support. It was common in the biblical culture to refer to cities and nations as women (see commentary on Isa. 1:8).

**“great among the nations.”** The “nations” are not Jewish but are Gentile.

**“forced labor.”** Judah and Jerusalem are here portrayed as a slave, no longer in charge of their own life, but being forced to do the will of the master just like any donkey or ox owned by the master, and indeed, that is exactly the situation that most of the population of Judah was in—slaves to the Babylonians. Furthermore, the woman is not doing the normal work that women did in ancient society, but her cruel master has her working in forced labor doing things that women did not normally do.

Lam 1:2

**“She weeps, yes, weeps in the night.”** The Hebrew text contains the figure of speech polyptoton and can be translated as “she weeps, yes, weeps” (see commentary on Gen. 2:16). The word “weeps” is doubled in the Hebrew text for emphasis. The woman’s life is lonely, broken, and bitter.

The verse is also the figure of speech personification, giving human characteristics to inanimate things to communicate both information and emotion. In this case, Jerusalem, and by extension Judah as well, is portrayed as a woman who has been betrayed and conquered, and she is weeping bitterly about it, even though her destruction was caused by her own sin.

A theme that is repeated in Lamentations and almost universally seen in grieving people is the repetition of words and feelings. The emotions of grieving people come in waves and are called “grief waves” by psychologists and caregivers. We see the start of several grief waves here in Lamentations 1:2: weeping and crying; tears, and feelings of abandonment and betrayal. Lamentations 1:2 states that Jerusalem cries in the night, and crying is repeated periodically in Lamentations (e.g., Lam. 1:2, 16; 2:11, 18; 3:48-49). The verse also says that she has no one to comfort her, and this too is repeated (e.g., Lam. 1:2, 9, 16, 17, 21). Some other major themes that are repeated are that enemies laugh and mock (e.g., Lam. 1:7-9, 21; 2:15-16; 3:14, 46, 61-63). There is a recognition of sinning against Yahweh (e.g., Lam. 1:5, 8, 14, 18, 20, 22; 3:40-42; 4:6, 13; 5:16). Another theme is that God is angry with His people (e.g., Lam. 1:12; 2:1-4; 3:1-16; 4:11; 5:22), and against His people (Lam. 1:5, 13-15, 17; 2:1-8, 17, 22; 3:3, 10-13, 43-45). There was a terrible famine causing disaster (e.g., Lam. 1:11, 19; 2:11, 19, 20; 4:3-4, 9-10; 5:4, 6). There was prayer to God (e.g., Lam. 1:17; 2:19; 3:8, 55-57; all of Lam. 5). Also, there are many minor themes in which the subject is repeated two or three times, such as Daughter Zion feeling betrayed and deserted by her friends (e.g., Lam. 1:2, 8); feelings of hopelessness (e.g., Lam. 3:18; 4:18); desiring vengeance on her enemies (e.g., Lam. 1:21-22; 3:64-66; 4:21-22).

People who are deeply grieving often repeat the same or basically the same sentiments over and over. Caregivers know these as “grief waves,” and the grieving person goes through a range of emotions over and over. We see grief waves and repetitions here in Lamentations and we see it in real life around us.

In repeating the thoughts and feelings of “Daughter Jerusalem,” the writer reveals the deep grief that the people of the time felt, and also shows us how people today grieve, giving us a better understanding of what to expect from grieving people and also showing us how to be good comforters. Jerusalem’s comforters were far away from her (Lam. 1:16). Often the best comfort someone can give to someone who is grieving is just to be there with the person.

[For more on personification, see commentary on Prov. 1:20.]

“her tears are on her cheeks.”

**“Among all her lovers.”** In this case, Jerusalem’s “lovers” are her former allies in the nations around her, and her lovers are also the pagan gods that she has worshiped instead of Yahweh (cf. Jer. 3:1; 22:20-22). The nations around Judah that had already been conquered by Babylon joined the Babylonians against Judah, and in that way became her enemies (Jer. 34:1).

We must be careful to properly understand “lovers” in this context because this “love” is not the true love of a devoted husband in a committed marriage relationship. The word “lover” is almost being used ironically. This kind of “lover” is more of a “luster,” a person in the relationship for sex and the fulfillment of other personal desires. In this case, the nations that Judah had dealt with only were in the relationship because of what they could get from it. Promises were many but performance was scarce. We all should know that there is no actual personal commitment; no intention of self-sacrifice if the “beloved one” really needs help, which is the situation here.

Sadly, this is not just Hebrew poetry, this is also a teaching about real life. It is foolish to get involved in intimate relationships in which there is no other commitment than the commitment to self-gratification, like Judah with her “lovers.” “Lovers” leave relationships all the time when they don’t get what they want, and then what this verse says at the end often becomes true: the “lover,” once out of the relationship, becomes an enemy.

**“she has no one to comfort her.”** People who have gone through tragedy long for someone to be with them and comfort them—people need that comfort. So it makes sense that early on in Lamentations, comfort is a major theme, occurring in Lamentations 1:2, 9, 16, 17; and 2:13. People who are helpers and caregivers to those who have suffered loss generally recognize that just being there with the person who has suffered loss is in itself sometimes the greatest comfort that one can give, and of course, there are usually other things that can be done to provide comfort. But the value of just being there with the bereaved cannot be overstated.

Also, that the bereaved needs and longs for comfort is just one of the subjects that is repeated several times. As has been pointed out elsewhere in the commentary on Lamentations, the way the book is written gives us a window into how a bereaved person works through their loss. People repeat the loss, their circumstances, and their feelings over and over. The fact that four times in the first chapter it is repeated that Daughter Jerusalem has no one to comfort her is a good example of that.

Lam 1:3

**“Judah has gone into captivity.”** God warned Judah over and over again that they would go into captivity if they did not stop sinning and return to him (e.g. Jer. 7:1-15).

**“under affliction.”** Judah, in captivity to the Babylonians, is now being afflicted and made to serve as a slave. The reading in the REV translation is not the most normal way of reading the Hebrew text, but it is an acceptable way given the context and that Lamentations is Hebrew poetry. Most translations take the verb in its more usual sense of “because” or “away from,” but in the context of the chapter, it seems that does not make sense. The chapter describes Judah in slavery and affliction now, not before the Babylonians came. Although there was injustice in Judah before the captivity, and it was one of the causes of the captivity, it does not seem that she was “under affliction and great servitude” until the Babylonians came.

**“she lives among the nations.”** Judah had defied and disobeyed God, so now she is conquered and scattered among the nations. Although the primary captivity was to Babylon, other nations took advantage of Judah’s defenselessness and swooped in to take captives as slaves. Also, it was common in ancient times for slave traders to take advantage of the situation when a city or a nation was captured and that would have been the case here. Eventually, slaves from Judah ended up all over the Middle East. Deuteronomy said that if Israel disobeyed God they would be scattered among the nations but even there they would find no rest (Deut. 28:64-65), and that prophecy had now come to pass.

**“in the middle of the narrow places.”** The woman was overtaken in a way that she could not escape, and was therefore in distress (many English versions emphasize the distress she was in, but it was from being caught in places from which she could not escape). In their flight, the Judeans, like Zedekiah the king, were caught by the Babylonians. It is not so much that the places were literally narrow, but that the Babylonians were coming upon them from so many directions that they had nowhere to go to escape.

Lam 1:4

**“The roads of Zion mourn.”** This is the figure of speech personification, giving human characteristics to inanimate things in order to communicate both information and emotion more effectively.

[For more on personification, see commentary on Prov. 1:20.]

**“no one comes to the appointed feasts.”** In this case, the “appointed feasts” that people were to come to were Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, and “Tabernacles” (more properly, “the Feast of Booths”), see Exodus 23:14-17. No one came to Jerusalem for those feasts; most of the people were gone and the Temple had been burned to the ground.

**“her virgins are grieving.”** The Hebrew text can also mean “are worried,” or “are afflicted” (but a different Hebrew word for “afflicted” than is used in Lamentations 1:3 and 1:7). Actually, aspects of all three English translations would be included in what the young women were going through. It is impossible to capture all the hardship and emotion with just one word. The young women, who would normally dance and rejoice at the feasts (cf. Jer. 31:13), are sad and scared, like Judah herself.

Lam 1:5

**“her masters.”** The Hebrew text is literally, “her head,” that is, her masters or her rulers. If Judah obeyed God they would be the head, but if not they would be the tail (Deut. 28:13).

**“Her enemies are at ease.”** The war is over and Judah was defeated, so any tension about time, money, and physical loss in war is over.

**“because of the multitude of her transgressions.”** Here for the first time in Lamentations, the writer makes the point that the tragedy that happened to Judah was the result of her sins against God. Lamentations 1:18 says, “Yahweh is righteous, for I have rebelled against his commandment.” There are times when people suffer due to no fault of their own; suffering can be simply what happens in our fallen world. But it is generally more often the case that people suffer because of sin or lack of wisdom and knowledge. That was the case with Judah. Her sin opened the door for demonic attack, and because she had sinned against Yahweh, He could not righteously defend her.

Judah recognizes that her sin was the root cause of her problems, and this is one of the topics that is repeated in Lamentations as “Daughter Jerusalem” works through her emotions and grief and deals with her situation. When people grieve, the same subjects come up again and again, and we see that in Lamentations. There are other verses in Lamentations that point to Judah’s problems as being due to her sin (Lam. 1:5, 8, 14, 18, 20; 2:13-14; 3:42, 59; 4:6, 13, 16, 22; 5:7, 16). By Lamentations 1:20, Jerusalem herself is able to admit that she had greatly sinned. Psychologists and caretakers notice that it often takes a person some time of healing before they can admit that they were at fault or partially at fault for what happened to them.

**“*driven* before the enemy.”** That is, the children have been driven into captivity in front of the enemy, herded and driven like cattle under the watchful eye of the enemy. Sheep were led by the shepherds who loved them, but these children are driven like cattle by a harsh enemy. One might well think of Daniel and his friends here, for they were taken captive to Babylon when they were quite young, separated from their family and the world they knew (Dan. 1:3-4).

Lam 1:6

**“Daughter Zion.”** The Hebrew is idiomatic for Zion itself, i.e., Jerusalem (see commentary on Isa. 1:8).

**“they have fled without strength.”** The leaders are like bucks (the word “deer” is masculine) that cannot find pasture and thus nourishment, sustenance, support, and strength, and so they have fled before the enemy.

Lam 1:7

**“In the days of her affliction and her homelessness.”** That is, in the current days that she is in captivity. It is not a reference to the past. Daughter Zion is “homeless” because the city and Temple have been burned.

**“Jerusalem remembers.”** People who suffer tragedy often flash back to memories of better days just like the woman “Jerusalem” (put by personification for the people of Jerusalem) is doing here. This is noteworthy because the book of Lamentations not only gives us historical truth, the way it is written helps us understand the thoughts and emotions of those who go through tragedies. The believer who wants to help others deal with grief needs to be aware that the victim of disaster will have flashbacks to better days, and that is normal and to be expected.

**“her adversaries saw her.”** The Hebrew word translated “saw” is the common word for seeing with the eye, *ra’ah* (#07200 ראה). Judah’s enemies saw her, they looked at her, they likely stared at her. The implication here is expressly stated in the next verse: her enemies saw her nakedness. Here in Lamentations 1:7, we see the woman’s discomfort at being looked at when she was in such a terrible state, and not only being stared at, but being laughed at. Discomfort and shame are being heaped upon her tragedy. Part of the extended range of meaning of the Hebrew word is “to gloat”

**“laughed.”** In derision and contempt, not because it was genuinely funny. For example, Ezekiel 25:1-7 mentions the joyful reaction of the Ammonites when Jerusalem fell.

**“downfall.”** The Hebrew word refers to an end, a cessation, a stopping. Jerusalem’s greatness ceased.

Lam 1:8

**“greatly sinned.”** The Hebrew text is more literally, “sinned a sin,” which means “greatly sinned.” Here, early on in Lamentations and for the second of many times, the text tells us that the destruction that has happened to Judah is not Yahweh’s doing, but is the result of Judah’s sin (see commentary on Lam. 1:5).

**“an unclean thing.”** Here Jerusalem, portrayed as a woman by the figure of speech personification, is said to be “unclean,” and therefore would be unable to enter God’s holy precincts, the Temple, and thus the presence of God. So Jerusalem’s sin has separated her from God.

**“All who honored her hold her in contempt.”** Because of what has happened to Judah, and her “nakedness,” (her destruction, distress, and perceived weakness; but likely also the fact that the women had been raped by their conquerors, cf. Lam. 5:11), those who honored her now hold her in contempt. They speak and act cruelly toward her, laughing, mocking, and “kicking her when she is down.” Sadly, that is common human behavior. People love a winner and tend to look down on losers. It is a mark of Christian maturity that Christians help the downtrodden and defeated.

**“because they have seen her nakedness.”** The phrase “seen her nakedness” (or, “uncovered her nakedness”) is an idiom that usually means “to have sex with” (cf. Lev. 20:17). The Israelites had entered into a covenant with Yahweh that was compared to a marriage covenant, and the people of Judah had committed adultery with other nations both spiritually and physically. Spiritually by spurning Yahweh and engaging in the worship of foreign gods and goddesses, and physically because both the men and women had sexual intercourse with their pagan lovers, sometimes as part of ritual worship and sometimes from pure lust (cf. Num. 25:1-3).

Christopher Wright wrote about the text saying that the nakedness of the woman, Judah, had been publicly exposed and she turned her face away in shame. He writes: “What is going on here? In the surrounding cultures, a woman caught in adultery could be publicly shamed by having her skirt pulled up to expose her genital nakedness in public—before an even worse fate awaited. The horrors of such punishment form part of the searing imagery of Ezekiel 23. The Poet [Jeremiah] here implies in excruciating irony: the lovers of verse 2 [Lam. 1:2], with whom the city-woman has indulged her promiscuity, now humiliate her with mockery as she suffers the exposure inflicted on her as a punishment for her infidelity. So painful is this unbearable public torture that the woman herself cannot even bear to look up, but groans and turns away, shrinking from the agony of her naked shame (Lam. 1:8).”[[2]](#footnote-16116)

Jerusalem had committed adultery with other gods and broken her covenant with Yahweh, and in that figurative sex her “nakedness,” euphemistic for her most private parts, was exposed. But now her nakedness is exposed for a different reason. When one nation conquered another in those ancient times it commonly occurred that the women were stripped naked (and worse) to shame and humiliate them, and that is what is going on here in Lamentations 1:8 (see Isa. 7:20 and commentary on Isa. 7:20).

Lam 1:9

**“Her uncleanness.”** In this context, “her uncleanness,” is euphemistic and refers to her menstrual blood. That a woman would be seen publically with menstrual blood on her clothing would have been a terrible embarrassment. Menstruation made a woman levitically unclean (Lev. 15:19, 25). The NET translates the verse less literally and reads, “Her menstrual flow has soiled her clothing.” The word translated “skirts” refers to the lower part of her clothing, where menstrual blood would appear.

That “Daughter Zion” is seen in public with menstrual blood on her skirts is a revolting mind picture that is designed to grab the attention of the reader and make both a mental and emotional impression. Lamentations uses hyperbolic language and mind pictures to communicate the pain and emotions of what the people of Judah are going through so that the sensitive reader can understand it and empathize with them (see commentary on Lam. 3:4).

**“O Yahweh, see.”** Here “Daughter Zion” speaks, and calls upon Yahweh to “see” her affliction. This is the idiomatic use of “see,” sometimes called the “pregnant use.” It means more than just “see,” of course Yahweh “sees” what Judah is going through. The word “see” is used of seeing the problem and then doing something about it (see commentary on Luke 23:42). This is the first prayer to God in Lamentations. There are a number of times that prayer to God occurs (Lam. 1:9, 11, 17, 20-22; 2:20-22; 3:19, 55-66; 5:1-22).

Lam 1:10

**“has stretched out his hands upon all her pleasant things.”** That is, he has taken her valuable things. The word “hands” is singular in Hebrew, but we would say “hands” in English. The word translated “stretched out” is more literally, “spread out,” but we would say “stretched out” in English. The text clearly says “his hands,” so there is an undertone that it is a more powerful brutish man who is taking advantage of the weaker woman, Zion. “His hands” take “her pleasant things.” Jeremiah foretold this (Jer. 20:5).

Lam 1:11

**“All her people groan while they search for bread.”** During the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem there was a severe famine; some people literally starved to death (e.g., Lam. 1:11, 19; 2:11, 19, 20; 3:16; 4:3-4, 9-10; 5:4, 6). The famine is also mentioned in Jeremiah (e.g., Jer. 16:1-4; 19:9; 21:7-9; 23:10; 29:17, 18; 32:24; 37:21; 38:2), and in Ezekiel (Ezek. 6:12).

**“in order to stay alive.”** The Hebrew is an idiom, more literally, “to refresh soul,” and it occurs three times in Lamentations (Lam. 1:11, 16, 19).

**“Look, Yahweh.”** Here for the first time in Lamentations, Jerusalem (or Judah) herself speaks, calling out to Yahweh about her miserable condition. This was historically true of the people of Judah, who no doubt cried out to Yahweh just as Jeremiah did. Here in Lamentations, Jerusalem’s crying out to God and pointing out that she has sinned, that she is now despicable, and that the enemy should get what they deserve just like she has, takes up ten verses (Lam. 1:11-20).

However, as a universal lesson to us all, crying out to God like this is also true of people who go through tragedy; there is weeping and grieving, but at some point, people almost always cry out to God either in anger, or out of confusion about their circumstances, or asking Him for mercy and intervention. In Lamentations 1:17, Zion (Jerusalem) spreads out her hands to God, a posture of asking—pleading—for help and mercy. Daughter Jerusalem then goes on to tell her story and express her feelings. This, too, is universal grieving behavior. People who grieve typically look for someone they can tell their stories to.

**“despicable.”** The Hebrew word is *zolelah* (#02151 זוֹלֵלָֽה), and it has multiple meanings and nuances as can be seen from the many English translations. For example, “a thing of shame” (BBE); “vile” (KJV); “worthless” (NET, NRSV;); “scorned” (NKJV); “demeaned” (NAB); “lightly esteemed” (YLT); “despised” (CEB, CJB, CSB, ESV, NASB, NIV, RSV); “despicable” (NICOT; Leslie C. Allen[[3]](#footnote-16097)). All of these translations contain some truth, but it takes more than one to get the full meaning of the Hebrew word.

Lam 1:12

**“Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow.”** In Lamentations 1:12 the speaker shifts from the narrator, Jeremiah, to “Daughter Zion” herself speaking. The pronouns switch from “she” and “her” to “my.”

Lam 1:13

**“From on high he has sent fire into my bones and it overcame them.”** The Hebrew is very difficult and the English versions vary greatly. Furthermore, the Septuagint interprets the Hebrew text differently, and instead of “overcome” (prevail, rule), the reading becomes “go down” (descend). A Jewish targum understands the “bones” to be the fortified cities of Judah, which were the “bones” of Judah, the strength of Judah. Also, the last phrase is technically, “and it overcame it,” not “and it overcame them.” In that case, the “it” could refer especially to the city of Jerusalem. Babylon burned the cities of Judah. Lamentations 1:13 is Jerusalem speaking.

**“he has turned me back.”** The image is of an army going out that is not supported by God but instead, God causes it to retreat in defeat.

**“faint all day long.”** The Hebrew word means “faint,” “sick,” and it is a word for menstruating, with the idea that menstruation would sap a woman’s strength. “Faint” is the most likely connotation here.

Lam 1:14

**“it has made my strength fail.”** The Hebrew can read “it” or “he.” In this context, the “it” makes good sense. “And the yoke was so heavy that it sapped the animal’s energy.”[[4]](#footnote-12071) Most English versions go with “he,” referring to God, but there is nothing in the context that demands that. Jerusalem sinned and her sins became a yoke that weighed her down and sapped her strength.

**“The Lord has given me into the hands of those whom I am not able to stand against.”** In Lamentations 1:14-15, “Daughter Jerusalem” laments what has happened to her and not only openly shares her feelings, but as she is expressing them she becomes more intense in her conclusions and spirals downward in what she considers God to have done. In these two verses, Daughter Jerusalem does not use God’s name, Yahweh, but refers to Him as “the Lord,” that is, her master, seeing herself as under his control. Thus, in Lamentations 1:14, she says that “the Lord” has put her into an impossible situation, He has given her into the hands of people she cannot stand against. Then, in Lamentations 1:15 she starts out the verse by intensifying her accusation against God and saying that “the Lord” has “tossed aside” all her strong men who were there to defend her and actually called together an army to crush her “young men,” her soldiers. But then she intensifies even more and states that the Lord Himself has trampled her like grapes in a winepress.

Lam 1:15

**“The Lord in my midst, has tossed aside all my mighty men.”** Although most English versions put the phrase “in my midst” with the word “men,” the Hebrew text puts it at the end of the sentence, best going with “the Lord.” This seems ironic at first, but the idea of Yahweh being in the midst of Israel but being against them is not a new concept in Scripture. John Goldingay writes: “the Lord acting in the midst of the city should surely be good news Psalm 46:5[6]; Isa. 12:6; Joel 2:27), but references to God in the midst of the city often carry some irony or threat (Jer. 14:9; Amos 5:17; Mic. 3:11). …The middle line thus has Yahweh tossing the warriors aside by summoning an assembly….”[[5]](#footnote-11572)

Christopher Wright writes: “… how had the God who was supposed to be *inside* Jerusalem defending it become the God *outside* the city leading the triumphant pagan armies into it for their orgy of rampage, rape, and desecration? The irony of that is somewhat hidden by the English translation of verse 15a: ‘The LORD has rejected all the warriors in my midst.’ Actually, the words ‘in my midst’ go with ‘the Lord,’ not the warriors. The subject comes at the end of the sentence. In Hebrew the line reads: ‘he has rejected (i.e., he despises as worthless, hardly worth fighting) all my warriors, the Lord in the midst of me.’ The last phrase clearly echoes the great affirmation of Psalm 46:5, ‘God is in the midst of her, she shall not fall’ (my translation). That Psalm celebrates the security of the city of God that was one of the songs of Zion they would not be singing by the rivers of Babylon, then (Psalm 137). God the defender had become God the attacker.”[[6]](#footnote-14760)

R. B. Salters writes: “the entire verse, therefore, turns Israel’s traditional language upside down. Yahweh might have been expected to act for Jerusalem, but he appears here to be on the side of the enemy.”[[7]](#footnote-18042)

Lamentations 1:15 is one of the many verses in the Bible that makes the point that when people sin and defy God, he cannot protect them from the attacks of the Devil. Sadly, some people do not put the revelation of the Old Testament together with the revelation in the New Testament, so they conclude that God is the enemy, when actually God was working for their good (Rom. 8:28 REV, NIV), but their own sin was allowing the Devil’s attacks.

Another possible meaning of the verb besides “tossed aside” can be “trampled.” The verb can be taken as coming from different root words.

**“assembly.”** This can be an assembly like an army, but it is also the word used for what happens at a religious feast. That could well be an implication here, that Yahweh has called for a religious feast, but it is the enemy army attacking Jerusalem. As Salters said, the vocabulary turns tradition upside down.

**“Virgin Daughter Judah.”** The Hebrew is literally, “the virgin daughter of Judah,” but the phrase is idiomatic for Judah itself (see commentary on Isa. 1:8). This is an expansion of the context because she is referred to as “Daughter Zion” in Lamentations 1:6, and “Jerusalem” in Lamentations 1:7-8. But the expansion to “Daughter Judah” is warranted because the Babylonians have indeed trampled Judah, not just Jerusalem. The ungodliness among God’s people is not just in Jerusalem but in all of Judah.

Lam 1:16

**“the comforter.”** This is a reference to God.

**“keeps me alive.”** The Hebrew is an idiom, more literally, “to refresh soul.” The idiom is in Lamentations 1:11, 16, and 1:19.

Lam 1:17

**“Zion stretches out her hands.”** There are a couple of important things to notice here. The first is the change in speaker. In Lamentations, the first speaker had been a narrator, assumably Jeremiah (Lam. 1:1-11.) Then starting in verse 12, Daughter Zion (Daughter Jerusalem) had been the speaker until here, Lamentations 1:17, when Jeremiah speaks again for this one verse. Then Daughter Zion begins speaking again in the next verse (Lam. 1:18).

Another thing to notice is that Jerusalem is now stretching out her hands in a plea for help and mercy. However, it is not clear in the text who she is asking for help. It is possible that she is pleading to both God and people around—anyone who will listen and can help. One wonders if here in Lamentations 1:17, Daughter Zion is taking a cue from Solomon’s prayer in 1 Kings 8:37-38. In that prayer, Solomon mentioned enemy attack and famine, both of which Jerusalem was experiencing, and Solomon said that if a person “spreads out his hands” toward the Temple, that God would hear the prayer. But at this point, there is no help from people or from God, but neither was there a sign that Judah was genuinely repentant. She was sad and troubled because of what she was going through, surely, but there is no sign she was genuinely repentant. Later, in Lamentations 2:18-22, Judah prays to the Lord, but even then she appeals more on the basis of her hurt rather than showing signs of repentance and simply asking God for mercy in a straightforward manner.

An important lesson that people who want God’s help must learn is that God usually does not respond to human misery alone, especially because, as we see here in Lamentations, many times people have brought that misery upon themselves by their disobedience. The world is a hard and cruel place, and human misery abounds. Many people in miserable circumstances call out to God for help and then blame God if He does not answer, but most of the time God needs people to be repentant and obedient, and also do what they can to help themselves by acting wisely (see commentary on Prov. 4:7). Furthermore, if a person leads an evil and ungodly lifestyle, God tells us openly that He does not usually answer the prayers of such people (cf. James 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5; see commentary on Amos 5:22).

[For more on personification, see commentary on Prov. 1:20.]

**“Jacob.”** Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, is here put for the nation of Judah. The switch from Judah and Jerusalem being portrayed as a woman to suddenly being portrayed as “Jacob” is likely because, by this time in the history of Judah, people from all of the tribes had moved to Judah and lived there. So in reality it was not just Judeans who were being afflicted, but people from all over Israel who were being afflicted.

**“those who are around him are to be his adversaries.”** The “those who are around him” refer to the enemy nations that surround Judah.

**“Jerusalem is like a menstruous woman.”** The Hebrew word translated as “menstruous” is *niddah* (#05079 נִדָּה), and it can refer to many things that are impure or filthy. But it is also used to refer to a woman’s menstrual flow and her being unclean and set apart as a result (Lev. 15:19, 25), and that seems to be the context here (cf. DRA, KJV, GNV, NJB, Rotherham). Also, the Latin Vulgate translated it as referring to being defiled by menstruation. Although some versions translate it as simply “unclean” or even as “garbage,” the context seems more specific than that. Because Judah is like a menstruous woman, she is separate and no one wants to touch her.

Lam 1:18

**“Yahweh is righteous.”** In this context, the word “righteous” is used to mean “just.” Yahweh’s judgment on Judah is just because Judah rebelled against His commands. Judah was in a covenant relationship with Yahweh and yet rebelled against Him, so the consequences that came upon her were just and part of God’s justice.

[For more on Judah’s disaster being her own fault, see commentary on Lam. 1:8.]

Lam 1:19

**“I called for my lovers.”** These are not lovers in the godly sense of the word, see commentary on Lamentations 1:2.

**“died.”** The Hebrew verb is *gava* (#01478 גָּוַע) and it refers to dying and is fundamentally synonymous with the verb “die,” *muth* (#04191 מָוֹת), although *gava* can imply a violent death (see commentary on Gen. 25:8, “breathed his last”). In this context, the people starved to death, a slow death. Other translations are “breathed their last” or “passed away.”

**“in order to stay alive.”** The Hebrew is an idiom, more literally, “to refresh soul.” The idiom is in Lamentations 1:11, 16, and 1:19.

Lam 1:20

**“My bowels are troubled.”** This could be literal, or it could be more metaphorical for guts in general: my guts are churning; my stomach is upset, etc.

**“my heart is pounding within me.”** The literal is that the heart is turned upside down.

**“I have rebelled, yes, rebelled.”** The Hebrew text is a polyptoton (for the form of the translation see Gen. 2:16), Jerusalem is now to a point where she can admit that what happened to her was at least partly her fault. Many times when there is a tragedy it takes a person some time to heal before they can admit that they were partly or totally at fault for what happened. The root of Judah’s disaster was a spiritual problem caused by her rebellion against God. Leslie Allen writes about the path to recovery for Judah: “Their path to a brighter future lies via their taking responsibility for the nation’s guilt and appealing directly to God. No good can come from their engaging in loud denials of their guilt.”[[8]](#footnote-32103)

**“the sword makes women childless.”** That is, the sword kills people. The language is close to Deuteronomy 32:25. So what happened to Judah is closely tied to the curse that God said in Deuteronomy would fall upon Israel if they abandoned Him.

Lam 1:21

**“and they are glad that you have done it.”** That God’s enemies rejoice when something bad happens to God’s people is one of the themes that gets repeated in Lamentations (cf. Lam. 2:17 and 4:21; and see commentary on Lam. 4:21)

**“May you bring the day that you have proclaimed, so that they will be like me.”** Yahweh had foretold the eventual destruction of the enemies of Judah and Israel, so now Judah, destroyed by Babylon and desolate, cries out to God and longs for the day when the enemy will be desolate like she is (and in that day Judah will be restored). Isaiah had foretold the destruction of Babylon many years before Babylon conquered Judah (Isa. 13:1-14:11; the rabbis teach that Isaiah prophesied from 740-686 BC. Babylon first subjugated Judah and brought captives from Judah to Babylon in 605 BC). Also, Isaiah told King Hezekiah that Babylon, which at that time was an ally to Judah, would become an enemy (2 Kings 20:17). So the destruction of Babylon had been foretold, but that destruction did not occur until long after it was foretold and after Babylon had destroyed Judah.

That Judah’s enemies would also be punished by God is one of the repeated themes in Lamentations (e.g. Lam. 1:21-22; 3:64-66; 4:21-22). There are many repeated themes in Lamentations (see commentary on Lam. 1:2).

Lam 1:22

**“Do to them as you have done to me.”** Judah has admitted that what happened to her was due to her sin (Lam. 1:14, 18, 20), but also the enemy that destroyed her has sinned. They crossed the line of cruelty and greed concerning what should be done to a conquered enemy. For example, they did not just take captive the people of Judah, they entered Yahweh’s Temple and took whatever they wanted, and then burned the Temple to the ground. Daughter Jerusalem recognized Babylon’s transgression and asks that what happened to her be done to her enemy, and it did. Isaiah foretold that disaster would come upon Babylon almost 200 years before it did (Isa. 47), and that disaster came when the Persians conquered Babylon (Dan. 5:30-31).

Lamentations 1:22 reveals a truth that is not clearly articulated but needs to be understood. The enemy’s attack on Judah and the tragedy they experienced was due to Judah’s own sin; in a very real sense Judah “deserved” some of what happened to them (see commentary on Lam. 1:5). But in this case the cruelty of the Babylonian enemy went too far; the torture, rape, destruction, and killing went beyond the judgment that was merited. In one sense we could say that the enemy was pagan, ungodly, and idol worshipers, and so we should expect that they would not have any human decency or kindness. But on the other hand, we know that at a fundamental level, humans know good from evil (Gen. 3:22) and so they inherently know the basics of human decency. The laws of pagan nations consistently reveal that fact. But sadly, throughout human history, demonic forces and demonic ideas have infiltrated tribes, nations, and people groups, and they ignore what their hearts would otherwise tell them, and things such as torture and rape become commonplace. However, that does not excuse them in the sight of God and in His courtroom. People are God’s creation, not the Devil’s creation or their own creation, and God expects His creation to follow His ways. God says, “Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil” (Isa. 5:20). In this case, the Babylonians were overly cruel, and so they themselves “deserved” divine retribution, which they got at a national level at the hands of the Persians when the Persians conquered Babylon. However, on an individual level, the Lake of Fire is the destiny of those who ignore or defy God and follow their own selfish desires (Rev. 20:11-15), so it behooves people who want to have a wonderful future to learn about God and follow His ways.

It is human nature that when someone is treated unjustly they desire vengeance upon those who have hurt them, and that comes up several times in Lamentations (Lam. 1:22; 3:64-66; 4:21-22).

**Lamentations Chapter 2**

Lam 2:1

**“How.”** This is to be understood more like “Alas!” (see commentary on Lam. 1:1).

**“the Lord.”** In Lamentations chapter 2 the speaker changes. As chapter 1 closes, the speaker is Daughter Zion herself, lamenting her situation and expressing her desires. Now Jeremiah takes up the lament, repeating much of what has been said in chapter 1 and adding intensity, detail, and even his own experience (Lam. 2:11-13). Jeremiah addresses Judah and Jerusalem as “you” and “your” in every verse in Lamentations 2:13-22.

**“has darkened Daughter Zion with a cloud in his anger!”** The Hebrew text is short, and the word “cloud” is not separately in the text, but is implied in the verb, which could also be something like, “made dark with a cloud.” Here in Lamentations 2:1-9, Jeremiah (the assumed writer) repeats in essence what he has already portrayed Daughter Jerusalem saying in the first person in Lamentations 1:12-15, that the anger of Yahweh is upon Jerusalem. There are different details and more intensity, but the basic idea is the same: Yahweh was angry with Daughter Jerusalem (aka “Daughter Zion”) and brought disaster upon her. There are other things in chapter 1 that are repeated in chapter 2, and in fact, repetition of thoughts and subjects is a theme throughout Lamentations.

Repetition of one’s feelings and the reason for them is common in grief. The broken person repeats over and over things like, “I can’t believe this has happened,” “Why Lord?” “I can’t believe (person’s name) is dead,” and “I feel so alone” (or “lost,” “broken,” “defeated”). So the repetition of the facts and feelings here in Lamentations 2 would have been true for Jeremiah, and it is true for people today who have suffered great loss. Leslie Allen writes, “Grief is demonstrated largely through flashbacks that tell the story again but also by giving way to waves of emotion that the flashbacks stir up.”[[9]](#footnote-20815)

In helping people who have gone through loss, it is important for the helper to know that the Bible never gives any time period that grief should last. Each person and each situation is different. Although it is true that getting “stuck” in grief is not healthy, neither is prematurely cutting off grief. The Bible counsels us to “cry with those who are crying” (see commentary on Rom. 12:15).

**“Daughter Zion.”** The Hebrew is idiomatic for Zion itself, i.e., Jerusalem (see commentary on Isa. 1:8).

**“cast down the glory of Israel.”** Here is a multi-level flashback. Although we cannot be exactly sure of what the writer had in mind, the glory of the United Kingdom of Israel died long ago, soon after the death of Solomon, and the glory of “Israel,” the Northern Kingdom of Israel, had disappeared with the Assyrian invasion over a hundred years earlier. Many Israelites had fled into Judah during those times, so perhaps the writer is lamenting that now, at the Babylonian Captivity, the glory of Israel is indeed gone.

**“has not remembered.”** The meaning here is “has not cared for” or “has not protected.” God “remembered” the Temple but He did not protect it from being destroyed. The word “remember” is used in the Semitic language in both a straightforward sense (cf. Gen. 40:23) and an idiomatic sense as is the case here and in Luke 23:42.

[Many words are used in an idiomatic sense in the Bible including, “remember,” “know,” “foreknow,” “look,” and “watch.” For more on these idiomatic uses, see commentary on Luke 23:42.]

**“his footstool.”** It is more commonly remembered that God’s enemies will be a footstool because it is in the New Testament as well as the old (cf. Ps. 110:1; Luke 20:43; Acts 2:35), or that the earth is God’s footstool (Isa. 66:1; Matt. 5:35; Acts 7:49). However, the Temple was also called the footstool of God. David first called it that before the Temple was even built, and then Psalms calls it that also (1 Chron. 28:2; Psalm 99:5; 132:7). Now Jeremiah laments that God has not “remembered” (i.e., cared for and protected) “his footstool” the Temple in the day of His anger. The Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians.

Lam 2:2

**“and has not had mercy.”** The truth is that even in His wrath God has mercy and covenant faithfulness. If He didn’t Judah, (yes, and likely us too) would be totally destroyed. But when disaster after disaster comes down on us as it did here on Judah, we do recognize God’s mercy even when it seems as if He has none.

**“he has destroyed the strongholds of Daughter Judah.”** The Babylonian army destroyed the fortified cities in Judah, the most fortified of which was Jerusalem itself, whose walls the Babylonians knocked down (2 Kings 25:10; 2 Chron. 36:19).

**“Daughter Judah.”** The Hebrew is literally “the daughter of Judah,” but the phrase is idiomatic for Judah itself (see commentary on Isa. 1:8).

**“he has defiled the kingdom.”** That is, the Kingdom of Judah.

Lam 2:3

**“he cut off every horn of Israel.”** Biblically a “horn” usually referred to power, strength, or even pride. Thus, “I have thrust my horn into the dust” (Job 16:15) refers to Job saying his power and strength were gone, and he felt defeated in life rather than on top of life. When Hannah, Samuel’s mother, finally gave birth after being barren for years, she exclaimed, “my horn is lifted high in Yahweh” because her strength, attitude, and position in life had been lifted up (1 Sam. 2:1). A horn can also represent a ruler or kingdom (cf. Dan. 8:5-9, 20-23; Rev. 17:12).

In this context in Lamentations 2:3, the “horn” refers to the ability of Israel to fight and defend itself, just as animals with horns such as bulls and rams use them to fight. The phrase “every horn” is likely not referring to one thing, such as the fighting men of Judah, but rather it is a more general reference to God defeating (“cutting off”) every way that Judah could fight or defend itself. The use of “horn” here in Lamentations 2:3 is a little different from the use of “horn” in Lamentations 2:17. In Lamentations 2:3, the “horn” refers to the ability to fight, and because of Judah’s sin, the enemy has been empowered and has conquered Judah. In Lamentations 2:17 however, the horn would imply more than just military might, it would include pride and national pride, and a sense of jubilation. As the verse says, Yahweh “has caused the enemy to rejoice over you; he has exalted the horn of your adversaries.” So rejoicing at their victory over Judah is part of the “exalting” of the horn (strength, power) of the enemy.

**“he has drawn back his right hand from before the enemy.”** This is an idiomatic way of saying that God has stopped fighting against the enemy so it was then free to attack and destroy Judah and Jerusalem.

**“devouring all around.”** The Hebrew is literally, “eating all around.” Instead of being against Judah’s enemies, Yahweh is in their midst eating [the people] all around.

Lam 2:4

**“bent his bow like an enemy.”** The bow is “like an enemy” because it is pointed at Judah, not Judah’s enemies.

**“he is standing.”** The “he” is ambiguous in the Hebrew text. It can refer to Yahweh or the right hand. The REV prefers that it refers to Yahweh because Yahweh is the subject elsewhere in the verse (cf. ASV, JPS, KJV).

**“Daughter Zion.”** The Hebrew is idiomatic for Zion itself, i.e., Jerusalem (see commentary on Isa. 1:8).

**“In the tent of Daughter Zion he has poured out his wrath like fire.”** The use of “tent” here makes Yahweh’s attack intimate and personal. Yahweh, now an enemy, has invaded Daughter Zion’s private space. The word “tent” and the word “fire” also in a way refer to the Temple, which has been burned to the ground. Using the word “tent” brings to mind the Tabernacle, the Law of Moses, the covenant that Israel made with God to obey Him, and the curses that God said would come upon Israel if they ignored and disobeyed Him (Deut. 28:15-68).

Lam 2:5

**“its palaces...its strongholds.”** The literal Hebrew text is “her palaces” and “his strongholds,” and the change between “her” and “his” is because when the writer thought of palaces, he thought of Jerusalem, which was often presented as a “she,” while when he thought of the “strongholds,” they were normally thought of as being throughout the country, and thus were places for the people of Israel, thus “his strongholds.” Perhaps not a walled city, but a fortified place inside a city.

**“multiplied.”** The Hebrew is literally, “more and more,” so “increased” would be an acceptable translation as well.

**“mourning and lamentation.”** This is the figure of speech paronomasia, “rhyming words.” The two Hebrew words are from the same root and thus catch one’s attention by the rhyme. The English “mourning and moaning” catch our attention by rhyming, even though they are not from the same English root word. The same Hebrew words are in Isaiah 29:2.

**“Daughter Judah.”** The Hebrew is literally “the daughter of Judah,” but the phrase is idiomatic for Judah itself (see commentary on Isa. 1:8).

Lam 2:6

**“booth.”** The word “booth” refers to the Temple in Jerusalem. The Hebrew text of the first phrase is difficult, and the way it is translated in the different English versions varies greatly. The word translated as “tabernacle” or “temple” in some English versions is literally more like “booth,” as the REV has. The “booth” is a reference to the temporary structures found in gardens that watchmen and caretakers used for protection from the sun and dew, especially as harvest approached. The idea behind the whole verse in its context is that God’s people disobeyed and deserted Him, so He treated His dwelling like a booth in a garden after harvest. He let it be destroyed. At the time the Temple was destroyed by Babylon, it was a magnificent edifice but in God’s eyes it was no less temporary than a booth in a garden; without God’s presence, it was just another building.

**“as if it were *a booth in* a garden.”** The word “garden” refers to an enclosed area. Farmers and even homeowners would own enclosures of land in which they grew vegetables and crops to feed themselves and even sell the produce. These were not “hobby gardens,” but neither were they “farms.” They were small areas for serious planting for food. Temporary booths in people’s “gardens” that gave shade for watchmen during the harvest were common, and that seems clearly to be the analogy the writer is drawing here. R. B. Salters writes: “The situation is not so corrupt as is sometimes claimed. …If we read the phrase not ‘as a garden’ but ‘as in a garden,’ then the entire statement can be rendered ‘he has torn down his booth as in a garden’, meaning ‘he has torn down his booth as one tears down a booth in a garden.’”[[10]](#footnote-28238) The next phrase, “he has destroyed the place of assembly,” amplifies Yahweh’s wrecking His “booth,” i.e., His Temple.

[For more information on the temporary booths, see commentary on Isa. 1:8.]

**“he has spurned the king and the priest.”** Lamentations 2:6 refers to the Temple and the feasts associated with it. In that particular context, both the king and the priests had specific roles they played, but with the destruction of the Temple, those roles vanished. This is an important unspoken message, that God has a role for people to play and jobs for them to do, but if they are not going to do them as God designed them, He will not support a sham system, but will destroy it.

Lam 2:7

**“The Lord has rejected his altar.”** This “altar” would be the great altar of sacrifice in the courtyard of the Temple.

**“he has abandoned his sanctuary.”** The Hebrew may also be a little stronger, like, “renounced” or “rejected” the sanctuary.

Lam 2:8

**“Daughter Zion.”** The Hebrew is idiomatic for Zion itself, i.e., Jerusalem (see commentary on Isa. 1:8).

**“he has stretched out the line.”** Jeremiah pictures Yahweh as having a measuring line and has measured what has been and/or will be destroyed, generally with the idea that something else will be built there, but that may not be implied in this poetic section of Scripture.

**“he has not withdrawn his hand from destroying.”** The Hebrew word translated “destroying” is literally, “swallowing” or “swallowing [her] up.”

**“he has made the rampart and wall to mourn; they languish together.”** The wall and the rampart were part of the defensive system that was vital for the protection of Jerusalem, and they failed miserably, so they mourn and waste away. They are joined in the context (Lam. 2:9) by the gates and bars, which also failed. The failure is given emotional power by the figure personification, by which the walls and ramparts are said to “mourn.” Also, that personification is carried over to include the gates in verse 9, which are said to sink into the earth, ostensibly to hide themselves due to the shame they feel because of their failure. Actually, historically, the gates did not sink into the ground but were broken down and likely also burned by the Babylonian army. Failure is generally emotionally difficult, and we see that here with Daughter Zion and the things that were to protect her.

The Hebrew word translated “rampart” seems to be a technical term for part of a defensive wall system. It could be the top part, or the outer part, or an outer wall. In English, the “rampart” was the flat top of an outer wall or wall system with a walkway, but the Hebrew word may not mean that.

Lam 2:9

**“broken her bars.”** The “bars” were strong wooden beams that were placed behind the doors of the gate so they could not be opened and could withstand pounding from the outside without giving way. Those bars were the origin of the shout “Bar the doors!” when an enemy would approach. If the bar is broken, the gate cannot be kept shut and cannot withstand an enemy attack.

**“her king and her officials are among the nations.”** “Among the nations,” i.e., “among the [hated] Gentiles.” The king of Judah and his officials had been taken captive to Babylon. Jehoiakim was captured but died in Jerusalem as a prisoner before he could be taken to Babylon (2 Chron. 36:6; Jer. 22:19); Jehoiachin was carried captive to Babylon but later restored as king but kept in Babylon (2 Chron. 36:10; 2 Kings 25:27-30). Zedekiah was captured and carried captive to Babylon, where he died (2 Kings 25:5-7).

**“the Law is no more.”** The “Law” existed, but it could no longer be completely obeyed. The Temple was destroyed and the priests were in captivity in Babylon. The feasts could no longer be celebrated, the Day of Atonement could no longer be obeyed as commanded, and there were many more parts of the Law that could no longer be followed as written. It was due to these things that the Babylonian Captivity was the impetus for the development of synagogues and the focus on local gatherings and worship, and it also caused the development of many traditions that did not require the Temple. Furthermore, that trend was exacerbated by the fact that when the Persians allowed the Jews to return to Judah, many Jews had made where they lived their home, and so more Jews stayed in Babylon/Persia than returned to Judah.

**“receive.”** Literally “find,” but the meaning in this context is “receive.” The prophets were false prophets and ungodly men. Jeremiah had a lot to say about the false prophets (cf. Jer. 2:8, 26; 5:13, 31; 14:14; 23:14-15, 25-31; 26:8, 11, 16; 27:15-16; 29:8).

Lam 2:10

**“Daughter Zion.”** The Hebrew is idiomatic for Zion itself, i.e., Jerusalem (see commentary on Isa. 1:8).

**“The elders of Daughter Zion sit on the ground.”** Lamentations 2:10 is the perfect picture of mourning. The elders of Jerusalem are sitting on the ground. Sitting on the ground (sometimes portrayed as sitting in the dust, e.g., Isa. 47:1), being silent, putting dust on one’s head, and wearing sackcloth were all done when mourning. Mourning is universal to every culture, so cultures have mourning customs. In modern times, people, especially women, wear black to show they are in mourning.

Sadly, today it is becoming less customary and acceptable to grieve and mourn, especially publicly. Instead of funerals, we have “celebrations of life.” The title can be okay as long as people realize that it is healthy to mourn and grieve and deal with one’s feelings of loss in an honest way. Suppressing or ignoring feelings of loss can cause both mental and physical problems later. Note that in Lamentations, people who have experienced tragedy express their feelings of grief both verbally and physically. The feelings are expressed, not suppressed, and that is a godly model for us. Life is painful, and it is not honest or helpful to deny that.

**“they keep silent.”** The elders were like Job’s friends who kept silent while mourning with Job (Job 2:13). In situations of deep grief there is often no helpful thing to say. Any words just seem tripe, inappropriate, and insufficient. Being together in silence is often the most healing thing a person can do.

**“dust on their heads.”** A common custom when mourning or to show repentance was to put dust on one’s head (Josh. 7:6; Job 2:12; Ezek. 27:30; Rev. 18:19).

**“clothed themselves with sackcloth.”** Wearing sackcloth, which was roughly woven cloth that was just for sacks (basically equivalent to burlap), was a common way of expressing grief or repentance. It was very uncomfortable to wear, and was a demonstration to God and others that one was truly grieved about the situation (c.g., Gen. 37:31; 2 Sam. 3:31; 1 Kings 21:27; 2 Kings 6:30; 19:1; Esther 4:1-3; Isa. 37:1; Jer. 4:8; Matt. 11:21).

Lam 2:11

**“My eyes are worn out from tears.”** Lamentations 2:11-13 suddenly changes the subject. The speaker, Jeremiah, now speaks of his own experience. This is in essence what Jeremiah said in the book of Jeremiah (Jer. 9:1), lending support to the idea that Jeremiah is the writer of Lamentations (see the REV introduction to Lamentations). For a fuller description and overview of Lamentations 2, see commentary on Lamentations 2:1.

**“my bowels are troubled.”** See Lamentations 1:20, which uses the same phrase. The word “bowels” is general and can refer to the internal organs in general.

**“are fainting away.”** The Hebrew is that they are becoming weak or sick because of the famine, and they are dying. The cost of war is horrific. Perhaps we expect soldiers to die, but the death of the children is a tragedy beyond words. The grief over the children is expressed in Lamentations 2:11-12, and then comes up again (Lam. 2:19; 4:4).

Lam 2:12

**“as their life is poured out.”** The word translated as “life” is often “soul,” but here it is well translated as “life.”

Lam 2:13

**“What can I testify on your behalf?”** The Hebrew is more literally, “What can I testify for you,” but the idea is, “on your behalf.” Jeremiah would like to speak up in God’s court on behalf of Judah, and he would like to comfort Daughter Zion, but her sin is so great he does not know what he could say on her behalf. Judah’s sin has gotten her into trouble, so there is really no “reason” that Jeremiah might say in God’s court that would excuse or explain her behavior. And given that, he does not know how he can comfort her. She has acted in a way that has brought her suffering upon herself (see commentary on Lam. 1:8).

**“Daughter Jerusalem.”** The Hebrew is similar to Daughter Zion (see commentary on Isa. 1:8).

**“Daughter Zion.”** The Hebrew is idiomatic for Zion itself, i.e., Jerusalem (see commentary on Isa. 1:8). In typical poetic fashion, Jerusalem is referred to twice in the verse by two different names, “Daughter Jerusalem” and “Daughter Zion.”

Lam 2:14

**“whitewashed.”** The Hebrew refers to something that has been covered over, and the false prophets whitewashed the truth of the situation.[[11]](#footnote-10267)

**“so that you could be restored from captivity.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “to restore your captivity,” but the REV nuances the literal to make the meaning clearer in English. If the prophets had been true prophets of Yahweh and reproved Judah in such a way that the people listened and turned from their idols and immorality, Judah could have been saved like Nineveh was saved by the prophecies of Jonah. But the false prophets, instead of giving godly advice, gave ungodly and misleading advice that led Judah deeper into sin, which led her into destruction.

**“false.”** The Hebrew can also be translated as “worthless.”

Lam 2:15

**“Daughter Jerusalem.”** This is similar to “Daughter Zion,” (see commentary on Isa. 1:8).

**“clap their hands at you.”** We generally think of clapping our hands in the context of enjoyment and approval, but there are times when we clap our hands when something bad happens to an enemy or someone we do not like, and that is the situation here. The enemy was approving of the disaster that had come upon Judah. Thus, the clapping was a sign of derision and glee over the destruction of Judah.

**“the joy of the whole earth.”** This phrase occurs in Psalm 48:2. The fact that people would speak of Jerusalem as “the perfection of beauty, the joy of the whole earth” shows how truly magnificent the city of Jerusalem was. At that time when most people lived in small villages, Jerusalem was huge, about a square mile in size, surrounded by a wall, and built mostly of stone. And the Temple was the centerpiece, glorious with its closely fitted stones, bronze, exotic woods, and gold.

Lam 2:16

**“All your enemies have opened their mouth wide against you.”** That Judah’s enemies opened their mouths wide against her is repeated in Lamentations 3:46. When disaster happens to someone who is disliked, it is common for enemies—and even people who just dislike the troubled person—to gloat and say such things as, “They deserved what they got.” To the one who has suffered disaster, this only adds to their feelings of being despised and despicable. It adds shame and misery to a miserable situation. Jeremiah foretold that this would happen to Jerusalem (Jer. 18:16).

Sadly, it is sometimes taught in Christian circles that if a person has troubles then they are not “right” with God—they have been sinning in some way. Job’s friends thought that. We know that Job’s troubles were not because of any “secret sin” that he had, but his friends looked at his troubles and were convinced that he had sin. His friend Eliphaz said, “Consider now: who, being innocent, has ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off? According to what I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same” (Job 4:7-8). It is truly a miserable situation—and very unjust—when a person’s friends turn against them because they are suffering disaster or some kind of trouble such as a sickness. This world has truckloads of trouble, and some of it is deserved and some of it is not, but no matter which, what people need in times of trouble is comfort and love, not scorn.

**“that we hoped for.”** The Hebrew uses a common word for “hope” here, but it can also be translated as the day we “longed” for. Both meanings are included in the word. The word “hoped” or “longed for” reveals the heart of the enemy. They had been hoping that the one they disliked would suffer disaster, and now it has happened.

Lam 2:17

**“fulfilled his word that he commanded in the days of old.”** God said that those who broke the Law would be cursed (Deut. 28:15-68; 32:19-26), and now that has come to pass in Judah.

**“He has caused the enemy to rejoice over you.”** That God’s enemies rejoice when something bad happens to God’s people is one of the themes that gets repeated in Lamentations (cf. Lam. 1:21; 2:17 and 4:21; and see commentary on Lam. 4:21)

**“he has exalted the horn of your adversaries.”** As in Lamentations 2:3, the “horn” refers to the ability to fight, and because of Judah’s sin, the enemy has been empowered and has conquered Judah. In this context, however, the horn would imply more than just military might, it would include pride and national pride, and a sense of jubilation. As the verse says, Yahweh “has caused the enemy to rejoice over you; he has exalted the horn of your adversaries.” So rejoicing at their victory over Judah is part of the “exalting” of the horn (strength, power) of the enemy (cf. commentary on Lam. 2:3).

Lam 2:18

**“Their heart cried out to the Lord.”** The “their” is all the people in Judah who have suffered disaster. The list is long, even in this chapter. It is “Daughter Zion” herself (Lam. 2:1), her leaders (Lam. 2:2), her powerful men, the “horns” (Lam. 2:3), all who were pleasant (Lam. 2:4), “Israel” (Lam. 2:5), the king and priest (Lam. 2:6), the prophets (Lam. 2:9), the elders and virgins (Lam. 2:10), and the children (Lam. 2:11). They are the suffering ones who cry out to the Lord.

Some scholars have suggested that the “their” refers to Israel’s enemies because that is the nearest antecedent to the “their,” but, as John Goldingay points out, the circumstances and the vocabulary in the verse “makes that interpretation implausible.”[[12]](#footnote-21775)

**“O wall of the Daughter Zion.”** Here the speaker speaks directly to the wall of Daughter Zion, which is the figure personification, as if the wall could hear and respond. The “wall” of Daughter Zion (Daughter Jerusalem) was supposed to protect her from the enemy. But alas! “Yahweh determined to destroy the wall of Daughter Zion...he has made the rampart and wall to mourn; they languish together” (Lam. 2:8).

**“Daughter Zion.”** The Hebrew is idiomatic for Zion itself, i.e., Jerusalem (see commentary on Isa. 1:8).

**“do not let the tear of your eye cease.”** The Hebrew is an idiom, more literally, “let not the daughter of your eye be still.” Many scholars think the idiom refers to the “tears” in the eye, and that meaning is likely given the context. The eyes give birth to tears like women give birth to children, so it seems natural that “the daughter of your eye” would be your tear.

Lam 2:19

**“the beginning of the watches.”** In the Old Testament, the Jews divided the night into three watches; roughly 6 p.m. to 10 p.m., 10 p.m. to 2 a.m., and 2 a.m. to 6 a.m. Under Roman influence, the watches changed to four watches (cf. Matt. 14:25). So at the time of Christ, both the Jews and Romans divided the night into four watches, each being three hours long: 6-9 p.m., 9 p.m.-12 a.m., 12-3 a.m., and 3-6 a.m.

**“Pour out your heart like water.”** This communicates an intensity of emotion, like water flowing like a flood.

**“your young children that faint away because of hunger.”** The horrific circumstances of children are expressed several times in Lamentations (Lam. 2:11, 12, 19; 4:4). Verses in Lamentations, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel all mention a famine in Jerusalem.

Lam 2:20

**“Should the women eat their fruit, the children that were tenderly cared for?”** The phrase, “women eat their fruit” refers to women eating their children because of the famine, and that cannibalism is mentioned again in Lamentations 4:10. There is no evidence that parents were killing their children and eating them, although that was known to occur sometimes in deep famine (2 Kings 6:28-29). It is most likely that people were eating the remains of their children who had died from starvation and other causes. Ezekiel, who also lived through the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, mentions fathers eating their sons and sons eating their fathers (Ezek. 5:10). Jeremiah had prophesied that if Judah resisted the Babylonian army that the famine in the city would become so severe that parents would eat their children (Jer. 19:9). It was the women who boiled their children; household cooking was done by the women in the biblical culture, and so that is the case here.

The point of the verse is that the people of Jerusalem (Lam. 2:18) were crying out to God that the disaster the people were living through was so horrific that God should pay attention to their cries for help.

Lam 2:22

**“You have called together my terrors.”** Here in Lamentations 2:22, the word “terrors” is put by the figure of speech metonymy for the things that caused terror. Without the figure, the sentence might read, “You have called together the things that terrify me.”

**“from every side.”** The terrors came from every side. This would certainly be true physically during the Babylonian attack on Jerusalem, but it is also an expression of how helpless, confused, and defeated people feel when “everything” seems to go wrong all at once. The people of Jerusalem (Lam. 2:18) are feeling like Yahweh has called together the enemies of Daughter Zion from every direction, and these would include the Babylonians, the famine, the death of many people in the city, and evil officials and priests (cf. Jer. 20:3). The idea of “terrors on every side” is evidence that Jeremiah is the writer of Lamentations because he uses a very similar phrase (Jer. 6:25; 20:3, 10; 46:5; 49:29). John Goldingay writes about the ones Yahweh called together against Judah, “The invitees are *terrors for me from all around*, a variant on a phrase that recurs in Jeremiah in the singular and thus more abstractly. ...In this context [i.e., Lamentations] it is natural to take the preposition *min* to mean *from*, whereas in Jeremiah it means ‘on.’”[[13]](#footnote-27709)

**“like on a day of an appointed feast.”** Israel had three main “appointed feasts”: Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread; Pentecost; and the Feast of Booths (cf. Exod. 23:14-17). At the time of an appointed feast, people would gather together from all over Israel. Here, Daughter Zion compares her enemies coming against her from every side to the people who come to Jerusalem from every side to go to one of the appointed feasts.

**Lamentations Chapter 3**

Lam 3:1

**“I am the man that has seen.”** Lamentations chapter 3 is written from a first-person perspective. The writer has experienced the tragedy and devastation that he is writing about. This is part of the reason that conservative scholars usually affirm that Jeremiah wrote Lamentations. Since Jeremiah lived in Jerusalem, much of the devastation that “Daughter Zion” experienced he personally experienced, so there are many parallels in chapter 3 (Jeremiah’s personal experience) and the other chapters that describe the experience of Daughter Zion.

Much has been written in psychological circles about “the wounded healer.” It has long been realized that people who have personally experienced being wounded and/or are still wounded, have been able to heal others when they communicate their personal stories. Hearing how others overcome tragedy helps us overcome our own tragedy.

Reading Lamentations chapter 3 affords readers the opportunity to experience the tragedy in Jeremiah’s life, and thus to some degree recognize the different feelings and different stages one goes through when tragedy occurs. Hopefully, the reader who goes through tragedy can be helped by Jeremiah who, here in Lamentations, is a wounded healer. There are emotionally low points in the chapter, but also periodically a proper assessment of God’s love and a hope for a better future shine through Jeremiah’s tears.

Jeremiah starts by announcing that God is against him and not listening to his prayers (Lam. 3:3, 8). Jeremiah is a laughingstock to others and is bitter because of what he is going through (Lam. 3:15). Jeremiah came to feel that his future and his hope were gone (Lam. 3:18). Then, in a moment of clarity, Jeremiah remembered Yahweh’s covenant faithfulness and “has hope in him” (Lam. 3:21-24). He remembered that Yahweh is good (Lam. 3:25-27). He states that Yahweh will not abandon His people forever, and it was not God’s heart to afflict people (Lam. 3:33). Jeremiah even encourages other people, saying, “Let us…turn again to Yahweh. Let us lift up our hearts…to God” (Lam. 3:40-41). But the troubles around Jeremiah are overwhelming, so he has an emotional relapse and again repeats that he is crying unceasingly (Lam. 3:48-49), and his enemies have gotten the better of him (Lam. 3:52-53). But he closes his account by pleading with Yahweh for vengeance on the enemy, saying that Yahweh has seen his situation, and the enemy is against him and he is the subject of their mocking songs (Lam. 3:61-63). Out of his pain, he speaks of God’s destruction of the enemy (Lam. 3:64-66). All of this is common for people who have suffered extreme tragedy.

**“the rod of God’s wrath.”** The text reads “the rod of his wrath,” but that could be confusing in English. Many English versions see the problem and replace “his” with “God’s” or “the Lord’s,” and some just capitalize “His.”

Lam 3:2

**“walk in darkness.”** Jeremiah is expressing his feelings. He is “walking” (living) in “darkness,” i.e., despair, hopelessness, and sadness instead of “light,” i.e., happiness, joy, and hope.

Lam 3:3

**“Surely he.”** The “he” is God.

**“he turns his hand against me again and again.”** Jeremiah feels like God is causing him to suffer constant setbacks, defeats, and roadblocks.

Lam 3:4

**“he has broken my bones.”** This is not literal but is hyperbolic language meant to both grab the reader’s attention and express the depth of the pain that Jeremiah is feeling. A broken bone hurts terribly and for a long time, and that is the pain that Jeremiah is trying to express here in Lamentations 3:4. David used the same language in Psalm 51:8 to express the emotional pain he felt over his sin with Uriah and Bathsheba. Both Jeremiah and “Daughter Zion” use hyperbolic language and draw mind pictures to express what they are feeling (e.g., Lam. 1:9, 13, 15; 2:4, 9; 3:4, 11, 12,16).

Caregivers and pastors can expect hyperbolic language from the people they are ministering to who have been deeply hurt. People who have suffered tragedy will often exaggerate their situation just as Jeremiah and Daughter Zion do. Thus, what we see in Lamentations is what we see today in real life.

Lam 3:5

**“gall.”** The word “gall” refers to a bitter and poisonous plant. This is a figure for the enemy nation surrounding him.

Lam 3:6

**“live in dark places like those that have been long dead.”** Jeremiah is lamenting about his life. He feels like the situation he has been living in is dark and without the joy and light of life, and so he compares it to death.

This verse adds to the many that show that when a person dies they are not alive in heaven or “hell,” but are dead in the ground awaiting their resurrection and the Day of Judgment. When Jeremiah says the dead “live” in the ground, he does not mean they are alive in the ground, but that is where they are, in the ground, and that is correct. Ecclesiastes 9:5-6 says it well: “For the living know that they will die, but the dead do not know anything, nor do they have any more a wage, for even the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, have already perished, and they do not have anymore a portion forever in anything that is done under the sun.” The dead are in the ground awaiting their resurrection and the Day of Judgment.

[For more on dead people being truly dead, see Appendix 3: “The Dead Are Dead.”]

Lam 3:7

**“He has walled me in so that I cannot go out.”** Here in Lamentations 3:7, Jeremiah is likely expressing both a fact and a feeling. Jeremiah had been flogged and put in stocks (Jer. 20:2), and he had been in prison, which at some point may have involved actually being chained, although that is not expressly stated (Jer. 32:2; 33:1, 38:6). Yet in the context of Lamentations 3:7 it seems that what Jeremiah is expressing is a feeling based on facts and not that he was in prison at the time.

Jeremiah is expressing feelings that are common for people in horrific situations: they feel they are walled in, that they have no choices and no future, that they are doomed to lifelong misery. Different situations give rise to these feelings. Jeremiah felt them due to the Babylonian attack, while Job felt them due to the death of his family and workers, and the loss of his health and wealth (Job 19:8), but both situations were horrific and involved great loss. Caregivers and encouragers learn to help people through these kinds of emotions and see options available to them.

**“he has made my *prison* chain heavy.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “He has made heavy my bronze,” where “bronze” is used by the figure of speech metonymy for the prison chains that were made of metal, not even necessarily bronze.

Lam 3:8

**“call for help.”** The verb has the meaning “call out,” “call out for help,” thus the translation in the REV and many other English versions.

**“he shuts out my prayer.”** The word “shuts” is the same word as when a person “shuts” their mouth. Another translation would be “blocks,” that Yahweh “blocks” the prayer. The idea is that God simply does not hear the prayer. The essence of this verse is repeated again in Lamentations 3:44, which says, “You have covered yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can pass through.” Here again, like so many times in Lamentations, we see that grief and frustration lead to repetition. The same thoughts and feelings recur in the grieving person over and over. In this case, Jeremiah feels that God does not hear his prayer, and he expresses that feeling more than once, which is normal for grieving people.

We might wonder why God does not hear Jeremiah’s prayer, why he shut it out. To understand that we need to be aware that the sin of Judah was so egregious in God’s sight and their sin had continued for so long that at this point God, who knows the hearts of all people, knew that they were beyond help. The wheels that had started grinding because of their sin could not be stopped now. God knew this and told Jeremiah not to pray for Judah three different times (Jer. 7:16; 11:14; and 14:11). It is possible that here in Lamentations 3:8 Jeremiah only prayed for himself, but that is unlikely. For one thing, Jeremiah’s woes were directly connected with the woes of the people of Judah. We can understand Jeremiah’s love for Judah and his desire to pray for them (and himself) even though God said not to, but if God tells you three times not to pray for something then you should not feel abandoned by God if He does not hear your prayer.

[For information on God not answering the prayers of the wicked, see commentary on Amos 5:22.]

Lam 3:9

**“He has walled up my ways...he has made my paths twisted.”** The idea is that the writer has been walled in so that he is not free to go where he wants, so his paths seem twisted to him. This verse is a picture of restricted travel. God is said to be the cause, but the oppressor, Babylon, is the instrument of God’s wrath.

**“cut stone.”** “Cut stone” is stone that has been worked and shaped so that it fits tightly together with others. A wall of cut stone is very firm and stable, and will not fall down easily. Normally if a city was under siege and the enemy was building a siege wall, it would be of any material the enemy could find. The use of “cut stone” here shows a deliberate action to stop someone from doing something.

Lam 3:10

**“To me, he is a bear lying in wait.”** The Hebrew text is saying that to the writer, that is, as the writer sees things, God is like a bear or lion just waiting for the opportunity to attack and hurt him. Both bears and lions were native to Israel at the time of Jeremiah, and both were dangerous. The lions were taken from Israel by the Romans, who used them in gladiator games, but we see both lions and bears in the Old Testament in various contexts (e.g., Judg. 14:5; 1 Sam. 17:34-37; 1 Kings 13:24; 20:36; Prov. 28:15; Hos. 13:8).

Lam 3:11

**“He has turned aside my ways.”** Like in Lamentations 3:9, God made the writer go where he did not want to go.

Lam 3:12

**“arrows.”** The Hebrew is “arrow” (singular), but it is a collective singular so the translation “arrows” gets the meaning.

Lam 3:13

**“shot.”** The Hebrew is more literally “brought” or “brought in,” but that would be unclear in English. The idea is that God “shot’” the arrows.

**“the shafts of his quiver.”** “The shafts of his quiver” are His arrows, which are mentioned in Lamentations 3:12. The Hebrew is idiomatic, literally, “the sons of his quiver.” A “quiver” is the tube that holds the arrows that is usually carried on the back or side by a strap.

**“kidneys.”** The “kidneys” refers to a person’s emotional life. The Word of God points to the fact that our kidneys, bowels, and belly (or womb) are part of our mental/emotional life, not “just physical organs.” Our “gut,” including our intestines, bowels, kidneys, and stomach, contains as many nerve cells as our brain, and studies are now showing that our “gut” contributes significantly to our emotional life and health. In contrast, in the biblical world, the “heart” refers to the thoughts, not the emotions.

Jeremiah, the writer of Lamentations, is emotionally distressed because of all the trouble and disaster that is happening in his world.

[For more on the heart referring to the thought life, see commentary on Prov. 15:21. For more on kidneys referring to the emotional life, see commentary on Rev. 2:23, “kidneys.”]

Lam 3:14

**“I have become a laughingstock to all my people.”** It seems that this is the personal experience of Jeremiah, who had prophesied that disaster would happen and that it was from Yahweh. Most of the people of Judah, who were ungodly and idolaters, would have laughed that it was their behavior that brought on this disaster.

Lam 3:16

**“He has made my teeth grind on gravel.”** There was a famine in the city of Jerusalem so there was not much to eat.

**“made me cower.”** The Hebrew word only occurs here, and it has a number of possible meanings, which is why there is so much variation among the English versions. As translated in the REV, the idea is that the Babylonian attack was so strong and cruel that Jeremiah was cowering among some ashes. However, the meaning could be more like that Jeremiah was pushed down into the ashes, or even that Jeremiah was forced to eat ashes. If Jeremiah was hungry like so many others, he may have been picking scraps off the ground that would have had gravel and ashes mixed with them.

Lam 3:18

**“future.”** The Hebrew is related to “victory.” The word is also related to “endurance”—which is why some versions go with that translation—but it seems that in the context here, Jeremiah, now having seen Jerusalem destroyed and the Temple burned, sees his future and what he had hoped for—which could well be that Jerusalem would be somehow saved—was now gone.

**“*also* what I hoped for from Yahweh.”** This is a place where the Hebrew has to be expanded somewhat to bring the correct meaning into English. The Hebrew text reads “and my hope from Yahweh.” That literal rendition makes it seem like Jeremiah’s hope was gone, as if there was no hope of the Promised Land or everlasting life. That is not what the verse means. What Jeremiah had hoped for was gone, which was likely that somehow the people of Judah would change their hearts toward Yahweh and that God would rescue Judah, Jerusalem, and the Temple from the Babylonians. Now all those hopes were gone: Judah and Jerusalem were conquered and the people taken as captives to Babylon, and the Temple and the great houses in Jerusalem were burned to the ground.

Lam 3:19

**“Remember.”** Jeremiah here suddenly shifts from speaking to others to speaking to Yahweh, who was mentioned in Lamentations 3:18. Although this is not specifically said to be a prayer to God, that is no doubt who Jeremiah is speaking to (see commentary on Lam. 1:9), but only apparently for three sentences (Lam. 3:19-21). Then he returns to speaking to others until Lamentations 3:43-66, which are again addressed to Yahweh.

**“homelessness.”** The word can also mean “wanderings,” but here it most likely means “homelessness” (cf. CEB, CSB, NASB2020, NET, NRSV, NAB). Jeremiah, who was a priest by birth, had been living in Jerusalem, but that was destroyed. Also, his native hometown, Anathoth (Jer. 1:1), was too dangerous for him because the people there were seeking to kill him (Jer. 11:17-23).

**“gall.”** See commentary on Lamentations 3:5.

Lam 3:20

**“is bent over within me.”** The bending here is due to the oppression of the circumstances. Although some versions use “depressed” (cf. CEB, CJB, NET), that may not be exactly what the verse is saying even if the person is depressed by the circumstance.

Lam 3:22

**“Yahweh’s covenant faithfulness.”** Lamentations 3:22 is the first time in Lamentations 3 that the writer, likely Jeremiah, who began speaking in Lamentations 3:1, has mentioned God by name or by title. Before this, he has always used “he” and “his” (the use of “God’s” in Lamentations 3:1 was added for clarity in English, the Hebrew text reads “his”). After this, he uses “Yahweh” frequently, and also uses “Lord,” “God” (*el*), and “Most High.”

**“we have not ceased *to be*.”** The Hebrew text and the Aramaic targums and Syriac texts disagree. The Hebrew reads “we,” while the targums read “they,” and many English versions follow the Syriac and targums (cf. CEB; ESV), but other versions follow the Hebrew text (cf. CSB).

Lam 3:23

**“great.”** This does not mean so much “big” but rather “abundant,” or “numerous.”

**“is your faithfulness.”** God is faithful; He is reliable; He keeps His promises.

Lam 3:24

**“Yahweh is my portion.”** The text means that Yahweh is the center and focus in my life.

**“therefore I will hope in him.”** The word translated “hope” here has a lot of meanings, all of them applicable. We “hope” in God’s promises; we “wait” for Him, and we “long for” what He has promised. All these nuances are present in the phrase, “I will hope in him.”

Lam 3:25

**“Yahweh is good.”** There is a shift of emphasis and direction in Lamentations 3:25-39. These verses are less like Jeremiah’s personal experience and more like a teaching, a sermon, on God and his character and actions. Whereas in the rest of Lamentations 3, Jeremiah is speaking about his own suffering or including himself in what is going on using “us” or “we,” in verses 25-39 Jeremiah teaches and gives advice to other people. He speaks to “a man” or to people (using “those”). Then starting in Lamentations 3:40, Jeremiah returns to using “us,” or “we,” or he speaks again about his own personal pain.

**“good.”** In the Hebrew text of Lamentations 3:25, 26, and 3:27, “good” is the first word in the verse. This threefold repetition of “good” might seem strange in the circumstances, and strange in light of the fact that life in Judah was so difficult that Jeremiah said he had forgotten what “good” even was (Lam. 3:17). We could well ask, “How can Yahweh be said to be ‘good’ to people when they are suffering so badly?” Indeed, it is common for people to be angry with God when they or people that they love suffer. But the verse shows us that even in the midst of suffering people have moments of clarity when they deal honestly with the situation instead of being overcome by emotion. Yahweh is a good God. Yahweh is not the cause of evil in the world or in a person’s life. God always works for the good of those who love him (see commentary on Rom. 8:28).

There are several factors to consider in understanding Lamentations 3:25. A major factor is that Yahweh did not cause Judah’s suffering. In this case, it was the sin of the people that brought disaster upon them, something that is stated over and over again in the five chapters of Lamentations (see commentary on Lam. 1:5). Another factor—one that Scripture (but not human theology) makes clear—is that God is not “in control” of everything that happens. He does not micromanage the earth or people. Life is harsh and difficult now because of the immense and direct influence that the Devil, “the god of this world,” has on the physical world and on people (sec commentary on Luke 4:6 and 1 John 5:19). Also, God cannot stop people from sinning. He has no way to do that. He cannot stop you or anyone else from sinning by telling “little white lies,” which are still lies (Col. 3:9), or keep people from using foul language or telling “dirty jokes,” (cf. Eph. 5:3-4), or getting drunk (Eph. 5:18), or committing sexual sin (Exod. 20:14; 1 Thess. 4:3). God gave people free will and cannot stop them from sinning. Instead, He sets life and death before people and asks them to choose the path they will take—and He encourages us to choose life (Deut. 30:15-19). Lamentations 3:25 is spot on: “Yahweh is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him.”

**“Yahweh is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him.”** This statement has to be understood in light of the scope of the whole Bible. Actually, God is good to everyone, believer and sinner alike. This was Christ’s message in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:43-48). But God is especially good and helpful to those who seek Him and obey Him (James 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5), and that is what Lamentations 3:25 is saying when it says that “Yahweh is good to those who wait for him.” The word translated “wait” also has the meaning of “hope.” It would not be off the mark to translate the verse as “those who wait with expectation,” or, ‘those who wait in hope.”

**“soul.”** In this context, “soul” refers to a person. God is good to every person who seeks Him.

[For more on the way “soul” is used in the Bible, see Word Study: “Psuchē.”]

Lam 3:26

**“quietly wait.”** The word “wait” is not specifically in the text. The idea is being quiet, but we wait in quietness, not in the sense of not talking, but in the sense of being mentally still, not worried, anxious, or causing a fuss.

**“wait for the salvation of Yahweh.”** In this context (and the way “salvation” is generally used in the Old Testament) the word “salvation” refers to physical deliverance at the time—being rescued, delivered, saved—from some circumstance or enemy. The Babylonian Captivity was horrible and the Babylonians were cruel to the Judeans (cf. Lam. 5), but there was nothing Jeremiah could do about it. In those situations in life, it is good if one can hold on to hope for the future and wait patiently for God’s deliverance. Deliverance did eventually come for the Judeans, at different times and in different ways.

Lam 3:27

**“It is good for a man that he carry the yoke in his youth.”** At first glance, this verse seems very confusing. How does this verse apply to Judah and how could carrying a yoke while a youth be good when often in Scripture the “yoke” is a bad thing? Earlier, in Lamentations 1:14, Judah’s sins became a yoke she had to wear. The slavery in Egypt was like wearing a yoke (Lev. 26:13). The hard work Solomon made the people do was considered a heavy yoke(1 Kings 12:4). And now, in the time of Jeremiah and Lamentations, servitude to Babylon was considered a yoke of iron (Jer. 28:14). But here in Lamentations 3:27, carrying the yoke while a youth is considered a good thing. What is the verse saying?

It is important to keep in mind that a “yoke” was a neutral thing. Sometimes it was good and sometimes it was bad. The context determined which it was. John Goldingay writes: “Wearing a yoke need not be a burden: it can be a means of discipline and training.”[[14]](#footnote-15586) In the culture, the Law and the teaching of the priests (the rabbis in Jesus’ time) were considered a “yoke.” That was true of Jesus’ teachings too, and was why he said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, because I am meek and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is kind, and my burden is light.”(Matt. 11:29-30). Jesus’ “yoke,” his commands and guidance, were a blessing, not a burden. Furthermore, what a person learns in their youth generally sticks with them and becomes part of how they live. Proverbs 22:6 says that if you train a child in the way they should live when they are young, when they are old they will continue to live that way. In fact, Proverbs is staged as a father teaching his son how to live, and it mentions the teaching of the mother as well (Prov. 1:8; 6:20; 23:22; 30:17; cf. Prov. 1:10, 15; 2:1; 3:1, 11, 21; 4:10, 20; 5:1; 6:1; 7:1).

Lamentations is saying—in a way that grabs our attention because a “yoke” is generally a bad thing—that Judah should have carried the yoke of the Law in her youth and obeyed its commands and guidance. Had she done that, she would have been blessed by God and not be in the mess that she is in. Frankly, Lamentations 3:27 is a lesson for all parents, because children have a much better chance of living godly and productive lives if they have love, attention, and training from their parents. “A rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child who is left to itself puts his mother to shame” (Prov. 29:15).

Lam 3:28

**“Let him sit alone and be silent.”** Sometimes the best way to deal with a tragic situation is to stop talking and take time to think about the situation and life in general. That sometimes allows one’s mind to calm down and opens the door for healing reflection. We cannot expect suffering people to quickly shift from being in despair to seeing a happy future, and we don’t see that in Lamentations. However, the next verse, Lamentations 3:29, says “Perhaps there is still hope,” and in saying “perhaps,” we see a shift in Jeremiah’s perspective. Instead of apparently feeling hopeless and like a dead person, he now acknowledges that there could be some hope for the future.

**“because he has laid it on him.”** The Hebrew does not say who the “he” who has put the yoke on the person is. It could be the man putting it on himself by his actions, or Yahweh putting it on him. There is a good chance that it is both; the man and Yahweh playing different parts in what happens.

Lam 3:29

**“Let him put his mouth in the dust.”** This is an idiom for humility, respect, and submission. The person who expects things from God must be humble, respectful, and submissive.

**“perhaps there is *still* hope.”** In saying “Perhaps,” Jeremiah opens the door to hope (see commentary on Lam. 3:28). If people seem to be in impossible circumstances but repent and are humble before God, and work on seeing a brighter future, it is amazing the deliverance that God can accomplish.

Lam 3:32

**“grief.”** The subject of grief has come up before (Lam. 1:5, 12).

**“yet he will have mercy.”** This is confirmed in Lamentations 4:22.

Lam 3:33

**“For it is not God’s heart to afflict *people*.”** It is never God’s heart to afflict people, because God is love. Nevertheless, there are times when God has to act to prevent greater harm, like He did in Noah’s flood, and there are times when He cannot stop people from being afflicted because of the free will decisions they have made.

A number of English versions translate Lamentations 3:33 as God does not afflict people “willingly,” but that misses the point. God is willing to afflict evil people, and He often does. For example, in the records of the Old Testament, God often afflicts the enemies of Israel, like when He threw hailstones down on the Canaanites (Josh. 10:11). Furthermore, in many cases, when the text says that God afflicts people, such as when Exodus 4:21 says that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart, God did not actually do it, but it was the idiom of permission (see commentary on Exod. 4:21). It is not God’s heart to afflict people, He would love it if everyone obeyed Him, but since some people make God and God’s people their enemies, God acts against them.

Lam 3:34

**“To crush underfoot all the prisoners of the land.”** In Lamentations 3:34, Jeremiah suddenly shifts from what Yahweh is doing and how he is feeling to how he and others have been treated by human oppressors. At first glance, Lamentations 3:34 seems to be speaking about the Babylonian oppressors who have conquered Judah, and to a certain extent that interpretation is correct. But it seems that the context, Lamentations 3:34-36, is about the Judean rulers and how they crushed their subjects, denied them justice, and subverted them when they tried to get justice. Jeremiah himself experienced this kind of mental and physical crushing when he was unrighteously put in the stocks (Jer. 20:2), unjustly imprisoned (Jer. 32:2), and even thrown into a pit with no food (Jer. 38:6-9). The leaders of Judah and the wealthy men crushed the poor and needy instead of helping them (Amos 2:6-7). However, the promise of God is that both good people and evil people will get what they deserve on Judgment Day, and the righteous can look forward to a glorious Hope of a better life (see Appendix 5: “Christ’s Future Kingdom on Earth”).

Lam 3:35

**“to deny a man justice before the face of the Most High.”** The fact that Lamentations 3:35 speaks of denying a man justice is evidence that this verse, and thus Lamentations 3:34-36, is speaking about the sin of the rulers and leaders of Judah and not the Babylonians. The Judean prisoners of war had no rights and no expectation of justice, but the poor people of Judah surely deserved and expected justice from the rulers of Judah as stated in the Law of Moses.

Also, the phrase, “before the face of the Most High” clearly seems to be more than the universal truth that God sees everything. Very often people would go to the priests to try to get justice, and the priests represented God and were supposed to give the judgment of God (Deut. 17:8-12). So people who went to the priests, especially if they were in the Temple or one of the cities of the priests, were in a very real sense, “before the face of the Most High,” but the priests in the time of Jeremiah were evil (cf. Jer. 1:18; 2:8; 5:31; 26:8; 32:32; 34:19-20; Lam. 4:13).

Lam 3:36

**“to subvert a man in his lawsuit.”** This phrase adds weight to the idea that Lamentations 3:34-36 are mainly about the leaders of Judah who abused their people and ignored and twisted the Law of Moses. The Judeans who were captives of the Babylonians had no rights and could not bring a lawsuit against their captors. The word “lawsuit” is one of the meanings of the Hebrew word, and fits well here. A broader term would be “case” or “cause,” because the leaders of Judah did not just subvert righteous people in the lawsuits they brought, but subverted them in all sorts of causes they worked to achieve. However, the major emphasis here seems to be lawsuits, and many English versions also have “lawsuits” (cf. CEB, CSB, ESV, NASB, NET, NAB).

It is also important to keep in mind that in the ancient world, it was both easier and cheaper to bring a lawsuit against someone than it is today. There was a king, judge, or priest, and people came on their own—no lawyers needed—and brought their case to the judge. The judge would hear it and make a decision, which was final. Wealthy and powerful men could easily win in court by bribing the judge, bribing false witnesses, or simply finding ways to threaten the person so that he did not bring his case. There were many ways the wealthy and powerful subverted justice, and sadly they still do it today.

Lam 3:37

**“if the Lord has not commanded it?”** This verse seems to say that both good and evil—such as the Babylonian attack on Judah—occur at the command of God, but that is not actually the case. There are a number of factors that must be considered when we are looking at verses such as Lamentations 3:37-38. The first is, where are the verses found? In this case, Lamentations is in the Old Testament, not in the New Testament. We know the world is a war zone between God and the Devil, and God is trying to do good while the Devil is working from an evil agenda. However, the conflict between God and the Devil is not clearly revealed in the Old Testament as it is in the New Testament. Jesus spoke of this fact in Luke 10:23-24. The Old Testament generally shows God being in control of both good and evil as it does here and in other places.

Another thing that we must be aware of is “who is speaking?” In this case, the writer Jeremiah is speaking, which is clear from the context. Jeremiah, like Job and the other Old Testament believers, generally thought that God was in control of both good and evil, and so it is perfectly natural that he would express that fact.

These verses are a good example of why we must examine the whole Bible in order to get a proper understanding about God. These verses clearly show us what the people of Jeremiah’s time thought, but they do not clearly reveal the truth about the goodness of God like the New Testament does.

Lam 3:38

**“bad and good.”** Although some English versions invert the Hebrew text from the original “bad and good” to the more common English “good and bad,” that misses the point Jeremiah is making. In circumstances like Jeremiah and the people of Judah are experiencing, the “bad” comes first, and after suffering and repentance, then “good” comes from Yahweh, the “Most High” God.

Lam 3:39

**“any man.”** Lamentations 3:39 seems almost ironic in light of Lamentations 3:1, which starts, “I am the man,” and then the writer (Jeremiah) seems to complain about the consequences of the sin of Judah.

Lam 3:40

**“Let us search out and examine our ways, and return to Yahweh.”** Lamentations 3:40 is a key verse when it comes to personal healing and returning to God’s favor. It is the very essence of “Repent!” To repent is to examine your thoughts and behavior and change to living God’s way, according to His guidance and rules. We cannot expect God’s blessings if we do not live according to His guidance and regulations. The self-examination of our lives must be very honest. Everything we do will come to light at the Judgment anyway, so there is no point in trying to hide anything now, or compromise on what God expects of us. “Cafeteria Christianity,” where believers “go through the commandment line and pick what they want to eat (obey) and ignore what they don’t want to eat” is not acceptable with God. He wants us to follow His ways when we like them and when we don’t. The message of “Repent” occurs many times throughout the Bible (e.g., Joel 2:12-14; 1 Kings 8:47, Isa. 1:27-28; Ezek. 18:30; Matt. 3:2; 4:17; Acts 2:38; 26:20; Rev. 3:19), and we see it here in Lamentations.

Lam 3:41

**“in addition to.”** The meaning of the text seems to be that the person is not to just lift up their hands, which can be done insincerely or just for show, but also lift up their hearts and thus really mean what they say. For the translation “in addition to,” see commentaries by John Goldingay[[15]](#footnote-22117) and by R. B. Salters.[[16]](#footnote-17422)

Lam 3:42

**“you have not forgiven.”** Although at first glance God’s not yet forgiving seems uncharacteristic of God, when we read the whole context and know the history of the situation we can see that Judah is still sinning and has not asked for forgiveness. It should go without saying that if we want God to forgive our sins we should first stop sinning and then ask for forgiveness (see commentary on 1 John 1:9). No doubt many of the people were sad and broken over what was happening to them, but that did not mean that they saw that their sin was the cause of the problem and that they had ignored and defied God. Many times in the life of an unbeliever the person is sad and broken over what they are going through but does not humbly go to God and ask forgiveness and also change their own behavior. We cannot appeal for God’s forgiveness based on the tragedy of our circumstances, we ask for forgiveness based on our repentance and appeal to God’s mercy.

Lam 3:43

**“You have covered *yourself* with anger.”** Jeremiah suddenly shifts from speaking to others to speaking directly to Yahweh, and he continues that for the rest of the chapter. This sentence points to human free will and our responsibility to obey God, our Creator. This is best understood when we connect Lamentations 3:42 and 3:43: “We have transgressed and have rebelled; you have not forgiven. You have covered *yourself* with anger....” By reading the context we can see that God’s anger is a response to human sin, just as God’s blessings are His response to human obedience (Deut. 28:1-14). Humans regularly ignore and/or defy God, and act like that has no consequences, but the Bible warns us differently and says there is a Day of Judgment coming when people will be held responsible for their actions and will get what they deserve (see commentary on 2 Cor. 5:10, “good or evil”). Evil people will be thrown into the fire and burned up (cf. Mal. 4:1; Matt. 3:12; 7:19; 13:36-43; John 15:6; Rev. 20:11-15).

[For more information on the wicked being burned up, see Appendix 4: “Annihilation in the Lake of Fire.”]

Lam 3:44

**“so that no prayer can pass through.”** Jeremiah’s prayers were ineffective. God did not answer them. This is the second time Jeremiah complained about this (cf. Lam. 3:8), but God had told Jeremiah not to pray for the people (Jer. 7:16, 11:14; 14:11).

[For more on Jeremiah’s complaint and God’s command not to pray for the people, see commentary on Lam. 3:8 and Jer. 7:16).

Lam 3:45

**“offscouring.”** The Hebrew word occurs only here, so scholars try to pick an appropriate meaning from the context, and so the English translations vary greatly (e.g., “offscouring” ASV, KJV, NASB1995, RSV; “waste” BBE; “trash” CEB; “rubbish” CJB, NJB; “scum” ESV, NIV; “filth” JPS, NRSV; “refuse” NASB2020, NLT).

The word “offscouring” refers to the black and burnt remains of food in a pot or pan. In the ancient world when everyone cooked over open fires, it was easy to burn the food and have its blackened remains stick to the pan. The offscourings are useless and have to be scraped out of the pan and thrown away. Jeremiah feels like God has treated him and the people of Judah like useless burnt food in a pan that is thrown away. It seemed God did not care about Judah and just threw them aside.

It could be confusing that the same man who in Lamentations 3:39 spoke about not complaining, now, in Lamentations 3:43 and following, breaks into a litany of complaints. But we must remember that Jeremiah is in the depths of grief and despair, and emotions flow like water and change constantly. So in his mind, Jeremiah knows that he should not complain, but his heart is hurting so badly that it overrides the mind and complaints burst forth into the open. This is common behavior for people experiencing deep grief.

Lam 3:46

**“opened...wide.”** The Hebrew word can, and seemingly here does, include the meaning of “open wide,”[[17]](#footnote-15302) not just “open.” The sentiment about the enemy opening their mouth against Judah was first stated in Lamentations 2:16, where the enemy gloats against Judah.

Lam 3:47

**“the pit.”** This word is commonly used as the grave.[[18]](#footnote-10298) Death was so common it seemed almost inescapable. The Hebrew text is very poetic. The first two words, “panic” and “pit” rhyme in Hebrew, and the second two, translated as “devastation” and “destruction,” also rhyme. The words themselves, emotionally emphasized by the rhyme, portray some of the fear and hopelessness the people of Judah were experiencing at the collapse of their country and the death or exile of so many people. At the time of the Exodus, there was loud crying among the Egyptians because “there was not a house where there was not one [person] dead” (Exod. 12:30), and the situation had to be somewhat similar in Judah. Almost every household would have had someone killed or carried away into captivity. The sorrow would have been almost unbearable, so Jeremiah cried so much that his tears flowed down like a river (Lam. 3:48).

Lam 3:49

**“My eyes flow.”** Here in Lamentations 3:49, the word “eyes” is put by the figure of speech metonymy for what flows from the eyes, which is tears. Some versions put the substitution in the text: “Tears flow from my eyes” (NET).

Lam 3:51

**“*What* my eyes see hurts my soul.”** This is perhaps more literally, “my eye causes my soul pain (or hurt).” Sometimes what we see causes huge emotional pain and also painful memories that stay with us and continue to be painful. There is little doubt that some of what Jeremiah saw not only hurt him at the time, but became painful memories.

Almost no one gets through life without having experiences that are painful and often regretful, and learning how to deal with those memories and the emotions they bring up in a godly and mature way is part of learning how to live a godly life.

**“the daughters of my city.”** In this case, the word “daughters” refers to the women in general, since every woman is someone’s daughter. Jeremiah here expresses special empathy for the women of Jerusalem because of the inexpressible hurt they are experiencing: their husbands and sons are killed or captured and carried off (Lam. 1:1, 3), their young children starved to death (Lam. 2:11, 12, 20), and they and their daughters are raped (Lam. 5:11) and killed or else carried off to Babylon to become someone’s slave.

Lam 3:52

**“For no reason, my enemies have hunted.”** Here in Lamentations 3:52, Jeremiah shifts his focus, and his “enemies” are the Judean leaders who are persecuting him and seeking to kill him (Jer. 11:19; 38:4), even his “friends” were against him (Jer. 20:10). The Babylonians had a “reason” for their attack and conquest, and that reason, as Jeremiah has expressed in other places, is the sin of Judah (e.g., Lam. 1:5, 8, 20). However, that was not the case with the Judean leaders. Their thoughts and actions, including gross idolatry, were defying God’s laws and thus bringing both personal and national trouble from God. All Jeremiah was doing was obeying God’s guidance and pointing out the sin of Judah and the need for repentance. But the leaders took Jeremiah’s warnings as a personal affront, and wanted him dead. So it is with ungodly people. They don’t want to repent or obey God, and they work to destroy anyone and anything that stands for godliness. That is certainly evident in the life of Jesus Christ and the world in general.

Lam 3:53

**“They have.”** The ones who threw Jeremiah into prison were his political and spiritual enemies, the leaders of Judah and the priests (Jer. 37:15-16; 38:1-4).

**“confined me alive.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “they have forcefully confined[[19]](#footnote-18423) my life in the cistern.” Jeremiah was put into a “cistern” two different times. The first one is mentioned in Jeremiah 37:16, and that “cistern” was more likely a dungeon. The second “cistern” that Jeremiah’s enemies put him in was a genuine cistern (Jer. 38:6-13). Jeremiah was only in that cistern for a short time, and he would have died there if he had not been rescued from it. He had no food or water in that cistern, and had sunk into the mud that was in it.

**“and have thrown a stone over me.”** Neither time that Jeremiah was in a “cistern” (Hebrew, *bor*; #0953) is it recorded that there was a stone placed over the “cistern,” and indeed, that seems most unlikely. This is almost certainly hyperbolic language in which Jeremiah is expressing his inability to escape his circumstances and imprisonment. He feels like he is trapped in a cistern and a stone has been placed over the top so there is not only no escape, but there is no light or fresh air.

Lam 3:54

**“I am cut off.”** Here in Lamentations 3:54, “I am cut off” is used idiomatically for “I am about to die.” Some English versions put the idiomatic meaning in the text with phrases such as, “I’m finished” (CEB). “I am going to die” (CSB). “This is the end” (NLT).

What Jeremiah wrote here was likely a reference to a real event. He had been put in a cistern that had mire in it. It is very likely that he thought he would die. The intent of the Judean officials seemed to be to kill Jeremiah without bloodshed (Jer. 38:4). Because of this verse, it is possible that people poured water onto Jeremiah to mock him and because they knew he was thirsty but had no way to get the water, it just became part of the mud he was in. Thankfully, Ebed-melek the Ethiopian, a eunuch in the palace, helped Jeremiah and rescued him from the cistern and the mire (Jer. 38:4-13).

Lam 3:55

**“I called on your name, O Yahweh.”** Here in Lamentations 3:55, the writer, Jeremiah, breaks out into prayer to God. Humble and sincere prayer is one of the outward signs of inner healing and working through grief. In the early stages of grief, many people may be too angry at God or confused by what has happened to pray. But here we see Jeremiah, who has just expressed how deeply hurt he is, reaching out to God in prayer. It is truly the case that in many situations God is our only hope, and humble and earnest prayer to him is a sign of healing but also a sign of turning from self-pity to right thinking. Also, prayer does help. God responds to prayer even when we do not receive exactly what we pray for.

Here in Lamentations 3:55, once again, we see Jeremiah, the wounded healer, correctly dealing with his own pain and at the same time being a model for us to follow in dealing with our pain. The example Jeremiah gives us is incredibly helpful. It gives us a depth and detail of how to work through painful emotions that we only get a small glimpse of in the life of Jesus Christ, a glimpse we see most fully in the Garden of Gethsemane when he prayed to God to remove his cup of suffering. In the situations that Jesus was in he was so in control, and so well understood the “what” and “why” of what was happening around him, that he does not present for us a good model of how to work through emotions when life is totally out of our control and our situation is horrific. God graciously gives us the example of Jeremiah and the Book of Lamentations to model for us the thoughts and emotions that are natural in horrific situations and how to work through them in a godly way.

**“out of the depths of the cistern.”** Jeremiah’s political and spiritual enemies, the leaders and priests of Judah, had Jeremiah put both into prison and also into an actual cistern (Jer. 37:16; Jer. 38:6-13). The Hebrew that is translated as “out of the depths of the cistern” in the REV is more literally translated as, “out of the cistern of the depths,” but we understand that to mean the depths of the cistern. The Hebrew word translated as “cistern” is *bor* (#0953 בּוֹר), and it means “pit, cistern, well” but it then gets used as a “dungeon,” generally a below-ground prison cell. Although the general meaning of *bor* makes Lamentations 3:55 understandable—Jeremiah was in some kind of dungeon cell—the breadth of meaning of *bor* makes its precise meaning uncertain. Was the dungeon a pit, or a converted cistern, or was it a place that was intentionally designed as a dungeon cell to hold the king’s prisoners? The specifics are not known.

It is also difficult to tell if Jeremaih was speaking metaphorically, expressing feelings of being trapped in a cistern or pit, or if Jeremaih is relating his feelings and experience of being in a literal cistern or dungeon. As was stated above, Jeremiah had literally been in a *bor* (cistern, pit, dungeon) two different times. He was imprisoned in one *bor* for “many days” (Jer. 37:16), and that “cistern” was more likely a dungeon. Then later he was put into a literal cistern with no food or water and he sank into the mud in it, and he would have shortly died in it if he had not been quickly rescued (Jer. 38:6-13). It seems likely that Jeremiah called on the name of Yahweh out of both “cisterns,” so Jeremiah’s statement, “I called on your name, O Yahweh, out of the depths of the cistern” is likely recalling a literal event or events.

Lam 3:58

**“you have taken up my cause.”** The Hebrew words in Lamentations 3:58 are often used in legal settings, and that has given rise to translations that more clearly present a courtroom setting, e.g., “You pleaded my case, Lord” (NAB). However, the Hebrew vocabulary can be used in a wider context than just a lawsuit and courtroom, and so the REV is translated to reflect that fact.

**“my cause.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “the causes of my soul,” where “soul” refers to Jeremiah himself. The word translated “cause” is plural; Here Jeremiah feels defended by God on many levels, but the word “cause” can refer to more than one aspect of the cause.

[For more on “soul” being used for the person himself, see Word Study: “Psuchē.”]

Lam 3:59

**“Judge my case.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “Judge my judgment,” but that is unclear in English. In this context, the verb “judge” refers to not just making a mental judgment, but to act on behalf of the one who is favorably judged. Similarly, the Hebrew word translated as “case” is more literally “judgment,” which here is put by the figure of speech metonymy for those things that require judgment, i.e., the particulars of Jeremiah’s situation. Written in an expanded manner, the verse might be, “Judge and act on the things that need to be judged in my case.”

Lam 3:60

**“vengeance.”** Jeremiah is speaking of the vengeance of the Judean leaders against him. He spoke and wrote against them (cf. Jer. 19:6-15), so they sought vengeance against him. Jeremiah had been flogged and put in stocks (Jer. 20:2; 32:1-5; 38:2-3), and he had been in prison, which at some point may have involved actually being chained, although that is not expressly stated (Jer. 32:2; 33:1, 38:6). Many of the leaders of Judah wanted to put Jeremiah to death, but in a “bloodless” way, so they put him in a cistern with mud at the bottom where he would die of hunger and thirst (Jer. 38:4-9).

**“plans against me.”** Leaders and priests plotted and made plans against Jeremiah (Lam. 3:60; Jer. 18:18-19, 23).

Lam 3:61

**“all their plans.”** The Hebrew word translated as “plan” can refer to a plan, a plot, a thought, an intent, etc. The point Jeremiah was making was that what the Judean leaders did to him was not just a “crime of passion,” committed in the heat of emotion without forethought, but rather that the leaders knew what Jeremiah was saying and plotted against him to kill him. This is exactly what happened to Jesus 2,000 years ago and it is still happening today. Evil, godless people plot against godly people, it is all part of the battle between Good and Evil that started with Satan’s rebellion against God even before God created Adam and Eve.

Lam 3:62

**“the lips.”** The “lips” are put here by metonymy for the words spoken through the lips.

Lam 3:63

**“their sitting down and their rising up.”** “Their sitting down and their rising up” is the figure of speech polarmerismos, where the two extremes of something are given for the whole, in this case, the entire time. Saying that God sees “their sitting down and their rising up” is thus an ear-catching way of saying “You see their entire lives, the way they live.”

[For more on the figure of speech polarmerismos, see commentary on Josh. 14:11.]

**“I am *the object of* their *mocking* song.”** The Hebrew is short and poetic: “I am their song.” However, the word “song” in this context refers to a mocking song. Jeremiah’s enemies were mocking him and cruelly even making up “songs” (rhymes, sayings, and such) about him, so he was the object of their mocking songs. Sadly, it is often the case that hard and cruel people make up songs and rhymes about their enemies and people upon whom hard times have fallen. We see the same thing in Job 30:9 after Job had been struck with disaster.

Lam 3:64

**“Give them back what they deserve.”** Jeremiah’s desire for God to punish the enemy is also expressed in the book of Jeremiah (Jer. 20:12). The desire to give one’s enemies what they deserve occurs several times (cf. Lam. 1:22; 3:64-66; 4:21-22).

Lam 3:65

**“tortured mind.”** The Hebrew text is difficult to bring into English. Saying, “an insane/crazy heart” might be a more literal translation of the Hebrew text, but the Hebrew text has the idea of a mind that is twisted or tortured more than just “insane.” In Hebrew, the word translated “tortured” rhymes with “songs” used in Lamentations 3:63. The enemies of Jeremiah mocked him with mocking “songs,” so Jeremiah prayed for them to get tortured minds in return for their mistreatment of him (see commentary on Lam. 3:63). In Hebrew, the word “heart” can refer to the mind.

**“as your curse to them.”** The Hebrew can also be understood as “Give them a tortured mind; put your curse on them.” Jeremiah may well have had in mind some of the curses mentioned in Deuteronomy 28, such as confusion and madness (cf. Deut. 28:20, 28, 29).

Lam 3:66

**“from under Yahweh’s heaven.”** Here Jeremiah, in his poetic fashion, refers to Yahweh in the third person rather than addressing Him as “your” here. Addressing Yahweh, or other people, in the third person is not common, but it does occur.

**Lamentations Chapter 4**

Lam 4:1

**“How.”** This is the same Hebrew word that is translated “how” in Lamentations 1:1. It is a shriek or scream that comes from deep grief (see commentary on Lam. 1:1).

The opening of Lamentations 4, indeed, the whole chapter, might catch us off guard. Lamentations 1-3 covered Judah’s and Jeremiah’s suffering in some detail, and also that the cause of the suffering was Judah’s sin. Then Lamentations 3 ends with Jeremiah having hope for the future and praying to God (Lam. 3:43-66). But now, suddenly, we are back in the depths of suffering, with no prayer to God and no clear mention of hope for the future. The writer again mentions Judah’s sin (Lam. 4:6, 13), death and destruction (Lam. 4:7-10), God’s anger and wrath (Lam. 4:11, 16), and he expresses that it looks hopeless for Judah (Lam. 4:17), and death seems near (Lam. 4:18).

But Lamentations 4 shows us that there is no timetable for grief. Grief almost always comes in waves. Many times, just when a person thinks “I am through the worst of this, my strong and sad feelings are almost gone,” feelings of grief, sadness, and even anger come back as strong (and sometimes stronger) than they were before. People who have been through tragedy and the caregivers of those people can learn from Lamentations 4 that the return of strong feelings of grief is normal and even should be expected.

It is worth noting that lots of people die in the Bible, so lots of people mourn, but there is not one statement in the Bible about how intense or how long “normal” mourning is. There is no such thing as “normal” mourning. Grief and mourning are individual and personal. All the Bible says for caregivers to do is “cry with those who are crying” (Rom. 12:15).

It is also worth noting that our Western Culture is not honest about grief. In television shows and movies, it is important that “the show must go on,” so after a person dies on TV (often by murder or unexpected accident) there is no grief expressed beyond a “that’s too bad” and one or two sad looks. Seeing that fake stuff day after day sets people up for false expectations and failure. Tragedy and death are horrific and genuine grieving is a recurring event that takes time, energy, clarity of thought, and often support from friends and caregivers, to properly deal with. Lamentations show us how painful tragedy and grief can be when it compares grief to having broken bones (Lam. 3:4).

There are a couple of patterns in Lamentations 4 that help the reader understand the text and also get in touch with the physical and emotional pain that the Babylonian attack and the famine had caused. One pattern is that there are four or five verses that speak of tragedy, then a verse that mentions Yahweh’s wrath or punishment (see commentary on Lam. 4:6). So there is an outpouring of grief, then a realization of what is happening spiritually due to sin and Yahweh’s anger. The other striking pattern is the pattern of situation reversal throughout the chapter. Things go from good to bad, or bad to worse. The gold goes from shiny to dim (Lam. 4:1); the people go from being valued like gold to being worthless as clay pots (Lam. 4:2); mothers go from being loving to being cruel (Lam. 4:3); children go from being well cared for to being uncared for (Lam. 4:4); nobles go from being healthy and wealthy to being sick and poor (Lam. 4:7-8); mothers go from caring for their children to eating their children (Lam. 4:10); the priests and prophets go from being respectable leaders to being unclean in the eyes of the people and thus driven away (Lam. 4:13-15). These are the effects of sin. Sin turns things upside down and destroys people, and if not repented of, results in the ultimate destruction—eternal death.

**“the gold has become dim!”** Gold does not tarnish, so various suggestions have been made as to what this sentence means, and there is likely some truth in each of them. Jerusalem was burned down by the Babylonians (2 Kings 25:9; 2 Chron. 36:19), so it is likely that the literal gold in Jerusalem, especially on the Temple, had become dimmed and discolored by soot and smoke. It is also likely that, in light of the devastation and the inability of the gold to buy off the Babylonian aggressors, the gold had become “dim” (useless) in the eyes of the people. It is also a possibility that the “gold” in the city was metaphorical for the people, the Jews, who were God’s chosen people, but in light of their sin and God’s anger against them, they had become dim instead of shining brightly. The likelihood of that interpretation is augmented by the comparison to people as “pots” in Lamentations 4:2. As stated above, there is likely truth in each of these interpretations.

**“The stones of the sanctuary.”** The Hebrew text can also be translated as “ The holy stones are poured out.”

**“at the head of every street.”** The main streets of the city led to the Temple, so when the stones of the Temple were thrown down, they poured out onto the “head,” the start, of every street. It is worth noting that Lamentations chapter 4 starts with the stones of the Temple being poured into the “streets,” because the chapter follows with a number of “street scenes,” Jeremiah “narrates a series of street scenes in the first eighteen stanzas.”[[20]](#footnote-25538) In fact, the word “street” appears in Lamentations 4:1, 5,8,14, 18 (v. 18 uses a different word, one that refers to the open squares in the city, but in the context, it is basically equivalent to “streets.” Although “streets” are mentioned in other places in Lamentations (e.g. Lam. 2:11, 12, 19), no chapter has the kind of pattern we see in Lamentations 4.

The “street scenes” of chapter 4 emphasize the hardships the Babylonian attack has caused for the people of Judah, from the commoner on the street to the priests and royalty. The sin of the leaders, followed by the sin of the people, has brought indescribable tragedy upon everyone.

Lam 4:2

**“once valued as fine gold.”** Gold is expensive, clay is not, but also, gold is made by God while clay pots are made by humans. The people of Judah—God’s chosen people—once seemed to be valued like gold, but now they are considered only as clay pots, ordinary things to be used and that are often broken without much concern.

Lam 4:3

**“daughter.”** The Hebrew is “daughter,” a reference to “Daughter Zion” and a collective singular; the daughters among God’s people, which included every woman.

**“cruel like the ostriches in the wilderness.”** The plural word “ostriches” supports the idea that the word “daughter” (singular noun) is being used as a collective singular for “daughters,” i.e., “people,” the daughters of Jerusalem. If “daughter” was meant to be a reference to just one woman, we would expect “cruel like an ostrich.” Both Job and Lamentations write about ostriches in an unfavorable light (cf. Job 39:13-18).

There are many myths about ostriches, and we can see why female ostriches were thought to be cruel. Alice Parmelee writes about them: “The cock ostrich scoops a shallow depression in the ground where the hen lays her clutch of 12 to 20 eggs. Often two hens use the same nest, for these birds are polygamists. The cock is the chief guardian of the family nest, watching over it and incubating the eggs for a month and a half [the hen takes time watching over the nest as well]. …The glazed shell, six times thicker than that of a hen’s egg, protects the embryo within from the desert heat and an ostrich can safely leave her nest exposed during the noonday. When parent birds sense danger they run from the nest, apparently careless of the safety of the eggs or young. As the desert affords no good hiding places, however, the best safety for ostrich young lies in the protective coloration of eggs and chicks and the diversionary tactics of their parents. As soon as the chicks break through their shells the cock assumes all their care while the hens generally go off together.”[[21]](#footnote-31253)

Since ostriches flee the nest area if there is danger—it is in order to save the nest but does not appear that way—and since the female ostriches generally leave after the chicks are born, we can see why the women of Jerusalem are compared to ostriches. They did not follow God and did not do what it took to protect their children, who then starved in the streets.

Lam 4:4

**“young children ask for bread, but no one gives to them.”** The horrific circumstances of children during the Babylonian attack are expressed in heart wrenching terms several times in Lamentations (Lam. 2:11, 12, 19; 4:4).

Lam 4:6

**“the iniquity of the daughter of my people.”** A number of times in the Book of Lamentations the writer notes that Judah’s problems are due to her sin, and this verse, Lamentations 4:6, is one of those times (see commentary on Lam. 1:5). Lamentations chapter 4 has a pattern that has been pointed out by scholars and commentators, which is that the chapter divides into sections where there are four or five verses that speak about various aspects of Judah’s disaster, and then there is a verse about Yahweh’s wrath and/or punishment of Judah. Thus, Lamentations 4:6, 11, 16, and 4:22 mention Yahweh’s wrath or punishment (see commentary on Lam. 4:1).

**“is greater than the sin of Sodom.”** This is a sad but powerful statement that is important in understanding what happened to Judah and why. Sodom was a city that was so wicked that it did not even have ten righteous people in it (Gen. 18:32), and Yahweh destroyed it Himself, without human intervention (Gen. 18:20-33; 19:1-29). But what is germane to the point in Lamentations is that more than one hundred years before Babylon conquered Judah, Isaiah the prophet compared Judah and Jerusalem to Sodom (Isa. 1:10). So the sins of Judah had been ongoing for years and years with no intent to obey God and no repentance, and now those sins had come to the point of consequence, and Judah was conquered by the Babylonians.

**“even though no *human* hands were laid against her.”** The scholars and English versions differ on the meaning of this last phrase. Some think it basically means “without a hand to help her” (CJB). However, the comparison with Sodom seems to communicate that Sodom was overthrown in a moment (in contrast to Judah’s downfall, which took years), and in Sodom’s case God destroyed Sodom but it is the Babylonians who are destroying Judah because they abandoned God. In any case, there was no one to help the people of Sodom, and there is no one to help the people of Judah.

Lam 4:7

**“Her nobles were purer than snow.”** The meaning “nobles” is debated by scholars, and the English versions reflect that difference; note the translations: “nobles” (ASV, REV); “Nazirites” (CEB, KJV, YLT); “princes” (CJB, ESV, NIV); “dignitaries” (CSB); “consecrated ones” (NASB, NET); “young people” (NJB). Although “Nazirite” is a typical translation of the Hebrew word, that does not seem to be the most natural meaning here. It was the upper class, royalty, and the nobles who were “polished” and “known in the streets” (Lam. 4:8), not the Nazirites who were often ordinary people who had just taken a Nazirite vow for some special reason. John Goldengay writes: “While *nazirim* are usually people dedicated to Yahweh in a distinctive way (‘Nazirites’), that meaning does not fit here. But *nezer* can mean a crown, which suggests a meaning such as ‘princes’ here.”[[22]](#footnote-10409) The upper crust of society was normally well-fed, well-rested, well-educated, and not overworked, so they had a nice physical appearance. They were “purer than snow,” “whiter than milk” (this is not “white” skinned because the people were olive-skinned; but a reference to being clean and fresh-looking), ruddy (reddish, thus healthy looking) and “polished” like lapis lazuli (lapis lazuli was blue, but it symbolized glory and splendor; see Song 5:14).

**“snow...milk...coral...lapis lazuli.”** Lamentations 4:7 stands out from other verses in Lamentations in that the whole verse is full of color, and indeed, that is likely how the wealthy nobles seemed to the common people—full of color. Their skin was not wrinkled or darkened from the sun and hard work (cf. Song 1:5), their clothing was expensive and brightly colored, and they (especially the women, cf. Isa. 3:18-24) wore gold and colorful jewelry. That is how they were before their sin caught up with them and the Babylonians conquered Judah, but now things have changed drastically. “*But now* their appearance is darker than soot; ...Their skin has shriveled on their bones.” The Babylonian attack hit all segments of society very hard.

**“brighter than milk.”** The Hebrew word translated as “brighter” is *tsachach* (#06705 צָחַח), and it means “to shine, to be bright; to gleam”;[[23]](#footnote-31031) be “dazzling, be aglow.”[[24]](#footnote-16772)There was not much that was really “white” in the ancient world. Wool was an off-white, but not a bright white. So milk stood out as something that seemed to be bright, to shine, and that seems to be the emphasis here more than the color white, especially because the next phrase says they were “ruddy,” which is a healthy pinkish color.

**“coral.”** The coral being mentioned here came from deep in the Mediterranean Sea and had a beautiful deep orange-red color (see commentary on Prov. 31:10).

**“their form was like lapis lazuli.”** The Hebrew text of this phase is difficult and has been interpreted in several different ways, as reading the English versions reveals. However, the scholarly consensus is that the phrase refers to the form or shape of the bodies of the nobles, just as lapis lazuli is cut and polished into various beautiful shapes in pieces of jewelry. The Hebrew text being translated as “lapis lazuli” is correct. Some versions say “sapphire,” but there were no sapphires (or rubies) that archaeologists are aware of around Israel in those ancient times. However, since the Hebrew refers to a blue stone, the older translations that pre-date archaeology, such as the King James Version, assumed that the valuable blue stone was a sapphire, and that tradition has continued to this day (cf. CEB, CJB, ESV. Note that the NIV84 read “sapphire,” but was changed to lapis lazuli in the 2011 update).

[For more on lapis lazuli, see commentary on Ezek. 1:26.]

Lam 4:9

**“those killed by famine.”** The attack and siege of the Babylonian army had produced a horrible famine in Jerusalem, which is mentioned many times in Lamentations (e.g., Lam. 1:11, 19; 2:11, 19, 20; 4:3-4, 9-10; 5:4, 6).

**“by the *lack of the* fruit of the field.”** The words, “lack of” are added for clarity, but they change the text somewhat. The Hebrew is more literally “stabbed by the fruit of the field.” Although a little more difficult to understand, it makes perfect sense that the people in Jerusalem, who were starving to death, felt “stabbed by the fruit [the produce] of the field.” Used in that way, the fruit of the field, the crops, are an enemy who has betrayed the people of Judah and stabbed them to death by not producing the necessary food to eat. “Stabbed by the fruit of the field” is a beautiful poetic expression that fits well in the poetry of Lamentations.

When the people of Judah abandoned Yahweh, they acquired many enemies, including the ground itself, that when blessed by God produces abundant fruit. We learn from Jeremiah 14:1-6, 16, that there was a famine in Judah around the time of the Babylonian attack. The famine is also mentioned or made note of in other places as well in Jeremiah and Lamentations (e.g., Jer. 14:1-7; Lam. 4:4; see commentary on Jer. 14:1).

Lam 4:10

**“The hands of the compassionate women have boiled their own children.”** That the bodies of the children were being eaten is also mentioned in Lamentations 2:20 (see commentary on Lam. 2:20). There is no evidence that parents were killing their children and eating them, although that was known to occur sometimes in deep famine (2 Kings 6:28-29).

Lam 4:11

**“He has kindled a fire in Zion that has devoured its foundations.”** Lamentations 4:11 is metaphorically true in the sense that Zion’s foundations, the people who were the pillars of society had been killed or carried away to Babylon. However, it is also most likely literally true to some extent because the stone buildings of Jerusalem were built mainly from limestone, and limestone breaks down into powder when it is heated to a high temperature. Ancient cultures used to regularly burn limestone to get lime for the soil to make the soil more productive. That is a sad reality for archaeologists and historians because many ancient ruins have been devastated by locals burning pieces of the buildings for lime.

Lam 4:12

**“that the adversary…would enter into the gates of Jerusalem.”** It was commonly believed that because the Temple of Yahweh was in Jerusalem, Yahweh would protect Jerusalem from enemy attack, like He did in the days of Hezekiah when the angel of Yahweh killed 185,000 enemy soldiers and saved Jerusalem (2 Kings 19:35). God warned people against that false belief. The false prophets in Jerusalem were saying that Jerusalem would not fall (Jer. 14:13-14; 23:16-17). In Jeremiah chapter 7, He said 3“This is what Yahweh of Armies, the God of Israel, says: Amend your ways and your doings, and I will let you live in this place. 4Do not trust in lying words, saying, ‘This is the Temple of Yahweh, the Temple of Yahweh, the Temple of Yahweh.’ 5But if you truly amend your ways and your doings…7then I will let you live in this place…. 8Behold, you are trusting in lying words that cannot help.” (Jer. 7:3-8) Jeremiah went on to tell the people of Jerusalem to go and visit Shiloh, where the Tabernacle of Moses once stood. The people of Israel ignored God and now Shiloh was just a ruins. God does not promote or defend empty religion, and if the people of God are idol worshipers, then God will let His Temple be burned to the ground, which is what happened.

Lam 4:13

**“*It was* because of the sins.”** This first sentence is not complete in the Hebrew text, reading more like, “because of the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests.” The incomplete start of the first sentence means that it looks backwards to the verses before it and thus in a very real sense blames the ungodly priests and false prophets for the devastation of Judah and its people that is spoken of in those earlier verses.[[25]](#footnote-17181)

But what was the sin of the prophets and priests? We might expect that God would have said something about the false prophecies that were given, because false prophets and false prophecies are mentioned over and over again in Jeremiah and even mentioned in Lamentations (e.g., Jer. 5:31; 14:14; 20:6; 23:9-40, 32; 27:15; 29:9; Lam. 2:14). But what God was clearly upset about was the killing—the blood—of innocent, righteous, people. Of course, the false prophecies were responsible for the death of innocent people. For example, Jeremiah prophesied over and over that if Jerusalem surrendered to Babylon that many people would be spared, but if they fought Babylon there would be devastation (e.g., Jer. 21:1-7; 24:1-10; 27:1-15; 28:1-17; 32:1-5). In contrast, the false prophets were prophesying to resist Babylon and that there would be peace (e.g., Jer. 6:13-14; 8:10-11; 14:13-15; 23:16-22; 28:1-17). The leaders of Judah believed the false prophets, and the death of many thousands of people was the result of that error. It is worth noting that the false prophets were given their visions and dreams by demons or demonic influence, and Satan’s agenda is always to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10), and he certainly did a good job of that in Judah.

Besides the consequence of their false prophecies, the Bible tells us twice in Jeremiah that the priests and prophets were greedy for gain and were dealing falsely with the people (Jer. 6:13; 8:10). We can imagine what the greed of the priests and prophets led to, including immorally seizing people’s property and possessions and leaving them destitute. They also were responsible for killing people who opposed them, just as they would have killed Jeremiah if some people had not saved him (Jer. 26:7-16; 38:4-13). Many influential priests and prophets were immoral and ungodly, and Judah paid the price for it. Furthermore, things have not changed. Ungodly and immoral people at the top of nations today cause untold harm to people by their ungodly policies.

Lam 4:14

**“They wander like blind men in the streets.”** “They,” the priests and prophets (Lam. 4:13), wander like blind men in the streets. Blind men wander the streets, unaware of who is defiled and who is not, and thus they become unclean without even realizing it, and then touch others and make them unclean. The priests and prophets are like that; they are polluted with blood but are unaware of it, even though they were the ones who shed the blood.

Although the “they” is not specifically stated to be the priests and prophets, that makes the most sense in the context.[[26]](#footnote-26360)

Lam 4:15

**“Go away!” they cried out to them.”** The ones crying out are yelling to the polluted priests to leave.

**“Unclean! Go away!”** The people are treating the prophets and priests like lepers and are driving them away. The priests had been the very standard of cleanliness, but now they are unclean themselves. They have the blood of innocent people upon them, not physically, but morally and from God’s point of view, so they are unclean.

**“people among the nations said, ‘They cannot continue to stay here anymore.’”** The ungodly prophets and priests are driven from the land of Israel, but when driven among the nations, even the nations did not want them and told them to leave. Thus, the curses of Deuteronomy 28:64-65 are fulfilled in these ungodly leaders.

Lam 4:16

**“The face of Yahweh has scattered them.”** The look on Yahweh was so fierce it scattered the evil leaders (cf. Prov. 20:8). See Deuteronomy 28:64.

**“They did not respect.”** The context is ambiguous. It could refer to the people of Judah because “the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests” (Lam. 4:13) would have been well-known. It could also be the Babylonians who showed no honor to the elders or priests. However, the text is likely ambiguous because it refers to both the people of Judah and the Babylonians.

**“They did not respect the persons.”** The Hebrew is idiomatic: “They did not lift up the face….”

Lam 4:17

**“Our eyes.”** Note that the speaker in the text has suddenly changed, and the verses are now being spoken by more than one person, not just Jeremiah or God. This starts in Lamentations 4:17 and goes through at least verse 20.

**still fail *watching* in vain for our help.”** The Hebrew lacks the verb, here supplied as “watching,” and thus the sentence is awkward in English. A more literal translation of the Hebrew text would be, “Our eyes still fail for our help in vain,” but adding the verb “watching” and thus making the sentence read as “Our eyes still fail *watching* in vain for our help” makes the text much easier to understand.

**“a nation that could not save.”** In this case, the nation that people would have looked to for help against the Babylonians would be Egypt, but Jeremiah said they would not save Judah (Jer. 37:1-10).

Lam 4:18

**“They hunt our steps so that we cannot go in our *open* squares.”** The verse is poetry, using “our steps” for “us.” We would say more literally, “They hunt us.” The word “steps” is put by metonymy for the person who takes the steps, and the figure adds urgency and emotion as if to say, “The enemy is right at our heels, chasing us down.” The exact meaning of the verse is not stated, but many scholars assume that the Babylonians had thrown up their siege works against the walls of Jerusalem as Ezekiel had foretold (Ezek. 4:2; 21:22) and 2 Kings and Jeremiah describe (2 Kings 25:1; Jer. 6:6; 32:24; 33:4; 52:4), and they were using that high position to shoot arrows or sling stones at the people who came out into the open.

**“Our end is near, our days are done.”** The phrase “our end is near” (or “our ends have come”) is unusual because the noun “end” is plural but the verb “has come” is singular. The plural “ends” can be referring to a cataclysmic end, such as would happen at the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon, or it may be more like a plural of emphasis, expressing the totality of the end.[[27]](#footnote-30043) The verse is expressing a feeling more than a fact. Judah survived, even in captivity, and the city of Jerusalem survived and was eventually rebuilt, even though it was devastated. Nevertheless, the people felt that their end had come, and for some of them it had indeed come; many people were killed by the Babylonians.

After a great tragedy, it is common for people to think and express that their end has come; they don’t know how they will go on.

**“our end...our end.”** The phrase is repeated for emotional emphasis. The writer feels doomed.

**“our days are done.”** The word “done” is literally “filled, fulfilled.” The end has come. The time to die has come. “Our days are full” is an expression for the soon-coming end of something; the completion of a time period (cf. Gen. 29:21; Mark 1:15), here in Lamentations, it refers to the end of life (cf. Jer. 25:24).

Lam 4:19

**“Those who chased us.”** Lamentations 4:19-20 skips forward in time a little bit from Lamentations 4:18, and they describe the desperate attempt of some of the Judeans, including King Zedekiah Himself, to escape Jerusalem. The details are given in 2 Kings 25:3-5 and Jeremiah 52:6-9.

**“were swifter than the eagles.”** The writer uses hyperbole to express his emotion. The Babylonians were not literally faster than flying eagles, but if someone is running after you to take your life, it can well seem that they are faster than eagles.

**“of the heavens.”** In Hebrew, the word “heavens” is always plural, there is no singular word “heaven.” Here it means the sky, but the Hebrews called it the heavens.

**“They hotly pursued us.”** This pursuit was no mere game of tag, but a desperate chase. The people fleeing did not know what fate awaited them if they were caught, but they knew it would not be good. Similarly, the Babylonian pursuers knew that if the king and Judean leaders escaped their victory over Judah would not be complete. The fleeing people were caught, and as for king Zedekiah, “They killed the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes and *then* put out the eyes of Zedekiah and he [Nebuchadnezzar] bound him in bronze chains and carried him to Babylon, (2 Kings 25:7), where he died. Two other places where the Hebrew phrase is used are Genesis 31:36 and 1 Samuel 17:53.

**“wilderness.”** The “wilderness” in Israel is more like a desert, and some translations say “desert” (CJB; NIV). The “Judean Wilderness was east and southeast of Jerusalem, which was the direction given in 2 Kings 25:4 and Jeremiah 52:7.

Lam 4:20

**“The breath of our nostrils, the anointed of Yahweh.”** Here King Zedekiah is portrayed as the very life-breath of the people of Judah, which was much better than he actually was in real life, but he was the descendant of David reigning on the throne of David, and as such he was very much the hope of the people—but what a disappointing hope he was! Actually, once Zedekiah was taken to Babylon he was outlived by the former king, Jehoiachin, who thus became the last rightful king of Judah. That the identity of “The breath of our nostrils, the anointed of Yahweh” is Zedekiah is confirmed by him being called “the anointed of Yahweh,” a phrase that referred to the king or priest (1 Sam. 10:1; 15:17; 16:6; 26:9, 23; 2 Sam. 19:21; 2 Kings 9:6, 12; Isa. 45:1), and by the last part of the verse about his protective “shade.” Even in captivity, the people thought they could depend upon Zedekiah for protection and procuring favor for them from the Babylonians. The people would take shelter “under his shadow (or “shade”) even when among the nations (cf. Dan. 4:12; people found shelter under Nebuchadnezzar).

Jeremiah had foretold that Zedekiah would be captured by the Babylonians (Jer. 21:7).

**“their pits.”** Here the word “pits” is used metaphorically. Pits were dug to catch wild animals, and so by using the word “pits” Zedekiah is portrayed as some kind of wild animal and not the godly king and descendant of David that he actually was. To our knowledge Zedekiah was not caught in a pit, but was captured in the Plains of Jericho (2 Kings 25:5; Jer. 52:8). The “Plains of Jericho” is the flat area around the town of Jericho. The Bible tells us that when the Babylonians breached the wall of Jerusalem, Zedekiah and the men with him fled the city through a gate on the southeast of the city. The group headed east down into the Arabah (the Rift Valley), apparently trying to get across the Jordan to Moab, likely planning to go onward from there, but Zedekiah was caught at the plains of Jericho (2 Kings 25:3-6; Jer. 52:6-8).

**“Under his shade we will live among the nations.”** The people of Judah thought Zedekiah could provide help for them even when they were in exile in Babylon. It could be that kings in exile continued to have some influence in the courts of foreign kings.

The phrase “under his shade,” points to the relaxing and protective value of shade in Israel. Israel was very hot in the summer, and some places were almost always hot, such as by the Dead Sea. Shade was a very valuable asset, and was understood in the culture to refer to help, support, and longed-for relief from the hot sun. For example, Psalm 121:5 says, “Yahweh is your *protective* shade.” Many verses refer to the value of shade (cf. Judg. 9:15; Job 7:2; Isa. 25:4; 32:2; Ezek. 31:6, 12, 17; Dan. 4:12).

Lam 4:21

**“Rejoice and be glad.”** “Edom” represents the country of Edom itself and God’s enemies in general, who rejoice at the calamities that come upon God’s people. This is a sad but solemn reality. The lives of many people are so empty of true meaning and value, and they are so envious and upset by the success of others, that they cannot be happy within themselves but instead rejoice at the troubles of others. But there will be a day of reckoning later, so the imperative commands in the Hebrew text to “rejoice!” and “be glad!” are meant to be ironic, not literal, because the day of their judgment will come. However, until Judgment Day comes for the enemies of God, believers must learn to comfort and support each other, and must learn how to not lose their own joy just because others are mocking or disparaging them. That God’s enemies rejoice when something bad happens to God’s people is one of the many things that is repeated in Lamentations (cf. Lam. 1:21; 2:17; 4:21).

What the enemies of God don’t know because they ignore and defy God, is that the “last laugh” will be God’s. He will laugh and mock them when His anger is finally released (Ps. 2:3-4). God has made it very clear in many different verses that people are His creation and He expects them to know and obey Him, and He will judge them for how they lived. Wise people pay attention to that and humble themselves before God.

**“O Daughter Edom.”** The country of Edom is personified as a woman, and is portrayed as being in personal conflict with “Daughter Zion” (“Daughter Jerusalem,” “Daughter Judah”). Since Israel (Jacob) and Edom (Esau) were brothers and both descendants of Abraham and Isaac, the conflict between the two countries, Judah and Edom, here being portrayed as a bitter conflict between two sisters, almost like Jacob’s wives, Leah and Rachel were in conflict.

Edom is often portrayed as an ancient and aggressive enemy of Israel (e.g., Ps. 137:7; Jer. 49:7-22; Ezek. 25:12-14; 35:1-15; Amos 1:11-12). The entire book of Obadiah is about Edom and its sins and punishment (note especially Obad. 1:13 in the context of tragedy in Israel). Because of that, it makes sense that although many countries joined Babylon in taking advantage of Judah’s defenselessness, Edom was the one God chose to mention in Lamentations as being Judah’s enemy and rejoicing at her destruction.

**“Edom, you who live in the land of Uz.”** Job lived in the land of Uz (Job 1:1). If this is the same location, which it likely is, then Job lived in the area of Edom.

**“the cup *of judgment*.”** The remoter context reveals that Jeremiah is speaking of the cup of judgment and wrath (Jer. 25:15-26). In the biblical culture, the “cup” often, but not always, represented disaster and wrath, especially the wrath of God (cf. Isa. 51:22; Jer. 25:15; Rev. 14:10; 16:19). Jesus prayed to let the “cup” pass from him, meaning this time of disaster and wrath (Matt. 26:39).

**“you will get drunk and strip yourself naked.”** Alcohol lowers a person’s natural inhibitions, and under its influence people do things that they would not ordinarily do (cf. Hab. 2:15). In this case, the cup of God’s wrath and judgment will come upon Edom and they will be ashamed of their behavior just as they would be ashamed of being naked in public. The writer uses the word picture of being naked to express the feelings of shame that go with it.

Lam 4:22

**“Daughter Zion.”** The Hebrew is idiomatic for Zion itself, i.e., Jerusalem (see commentary on Isa. 1:8). The same is true of the phrase “Daughter Edom.”

***“the punishment of* your iniquity is completed, he will not continue to exile you.”** Here at last in Lamentations 4:22 is the only glimmer of hope that is offered to Judah in Lamentations 4. But it is not as bright as it could be. The verse seems to pick up on the hope offered in Lamentations 3:31-32, but even so, it is not saying that Judah’s exile is coming to an end and the people will return to Judah (which they eventually did, but not now), nor is it saying that Judah will never be exiled again in the future. Rather it is saying that the exile of Judah, which was the punishment for their sin, has been completed—this series of exiles has come to an end. If this is a historically accurate statement, that would place this comment sometime after 586 BC. Furthermore, Judah will get to see some divine retribution for sin visited upon Daughter Edom, who had afflicted Judah. The “he” in the verse (“he will not continue to exile you;” “he will punish your iniquity”) is God. So Lamentations 4 ends with God being the One who acts in life’s situations.

**“he will punish your iniquity.”** The word “punish” is more literally, “visit.” The Hebrew verb is *paqad* (#06485 פָּקַד), and it often describes a divine intervention for blessing or cursing; the coming of good or evil. Here it is used of “visiting” for punishment (see commentary on Exod. 20:5).

**Lamentations Chapter 5**

Lam 5:1

**“Remember, Yahweh.”** In one sense, Lamentations does not end on an “up note;” it does not end in a positive way. The end of Lamentations chapter 4 seems to be headed in a hopeful direction (Lam. 4:22), but then Lamentations 5 puts the reader right back into grieving over the circumstances. But we need to read more deeply, because actually, all of Lamentations chapter 5 is a prayer. Yahweh is specifically addressed by name three times, and spoken to as “you” in verses 19, 21, and 22. In that sense, Lamentations 5 is an appropriate ending to Lamentations. It is always a hopeful sign when a grieving person can turn to God and pray for guidance and help.

Often our circumstances in life do not improve, even until our death, and that was certainly the case for many Judeans. Many were killed, and many others were taken into slavery and many of those no doubt ended up in horrific circumstances. In all circumstances, but perhaps most especially in those kinds of circumstances, the most profitable thing a person can do is pray, like Jeremiah is doing here. God sees people praying, and he rewards those who pray with a sincere and humble heart. People who pray may not have a wonderful life here on earth but they do have a wonderful reward awaiting them in the next life.

Hebrews 4:16 directs us to “approach the throne of grace with open and honest *speech*, in order to receive mercy and to find grace to help *us* in *our* time of need.” We certainly see that in the prayer of Jeremiah in Lamentations chapter 5. He doesn’t hold anything back in his prayer to God. He openly speaks of the tragedy that he himself and Judah are going through. He speaks of disaster and disgrace in both general terms and with specific examples. He is obviously not afraid of making God angry by asking the wrong question. In fact, he openly questions God about what is happening in Judah, and asks, “Why do you continually forget us and forsake us for so long?”

There are a couple of things that we should particularly take note of and learn from in Lamentations 5. One is that Jeremiah models for us how to pray with humility, and yet honesty and intensity. Everyone should pray like that. God looks on the heart, and honest, heartfelt prayers, not flowery-sounding insincere prayers, are a breath of fresh air to Him. Another noteworthy thing is that Jeremiah’s prayer did not get answered for years. Jerusalem was still in ruins and the people were in exile in Babylon when Jeremiah died. Eventually, Jerusalem was rebuilt and the people returned from exile, but that was years after Jeremiah’s prayer. Sometimes it takes years for peoples’ prayers to be answered. Often the sin that caused the problem took place over years, and it takes years to correct the sin, so people should not be discouraged when their prayers, like Jeremiah’s prayers, are not answered quickly. Also, it seems that many prayers will not be answered in full until the Kingdom of God comes.

**“Remember, Yahweh...Look, and see.”** Jeremiah is not praying in vague, third-person terms. He has a personal relationship with Yahweh and prays to Him as if He were a friend who simply had not noticed the need. Furthermore, his prayer is a call for God to see, and then ostensibly do something about it. The idea behind this request is the idea that if God really understood what we humans were going through, He would do something about it. But God does see and does understand what we humans go through. So while the words honestly express our feelings, we must also intellectually grasp that it is our repentance for our sins, our commitment to live a holy life, and our faithful prayers made from a humble heart that really make a difference.

Lam 5:2

**“Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers.”** God gave the land of Israel to Israel as an inheritance for them to live in (Num. 34:1-15), but their sin caused it to be taken from them by the Babylonians. The verse could be written more honestly as “Our sin has allowed our inheritance to be given over to strangers.” Sadly, that is the way it is in the lives of many people. They give away their inheritance and any possessions they have or could have had because of the bad choices they make. How many people could be wealthy but spent their money on alcohol, drugs, unnecessary stuff, and such like? Wisdom and self-control are major keys to success in life.

Lam 5:3

**“without a father; our mothers are like widows.”** Many of the fathers had been killed, and many of them had been carried away to Babylon, making the children like orphans and the wives like widows.

Lam 5:4

**“the wood we get comes at a price.”** The idea is that the people had to buy the water they drank and the wood they cooked on and used for heat. They were no longer in control of their own land.

Lam 5:5

**“we are weary and have no rest.”** The Babylonians were always around; the threat was always present.

Lam 5:6

**“put out a hand.”** An idiom for making a treaty or agreement that places you in a subservient position to the other party. The Jews who had been deported into other lands had to make an agreement with the people there to serve them in order to get food and water.

Lam 5:7

**“fathers.”** Not just the people’s immediate fathers. Here, in typical Semitic idiom, “fathers” means ancestors, and the ancestors were “no more,” they were dead. The Jews had been sinning for centuries, and the Babylonian Captivity was a consequence for that. It is a sad reality that in many cases, some of the consequence for other people’s sin often comes upon those who do not deserve it or do not deserve the full force of it. Life is not fair in that way, but that is the reality of life.

**“bear.”** The Hebrew word often has the sense of suffering under a burden, and that is the sense here. The CEB tries to catch the sense of the text: “Our fathers have sinned and are gone, but we are burdened with their iniquities.”

**“iniquities.”** The Hebrew text has a word that means both “iniquities” and the punishment for iniquities. So, in this context, “iniquities” are also being put by metonymy for “punishment.” The children were bearing the iniquities and the punishment that their ancestors should have received themselves because they were the ones who sinned. However, Jeremiah’s generation was sinning too, so what had come upon them was not all the fault of the ancestors. The people of Judah were sinning too. However, it often happens in historical and/or spiritual settings that an ancestor does something bad that later affects the children. The NET text note speaks to the vocabulary in the verse and says, that the Hebrew word translated as iniquities “...has a broad range of meanings, including: (1) iniquity, (2) guilt of iniquity, and (3) consequence or punishment for iniquity (cause-effect metonymical relation). The context suggests that ‘punishment for sin’ is most appropriate here.”

Here in Lamentations 5:7, Jeremiah admits that sin is the cause of Judah’s problems, but he does not specifically admit the sin of his own generation, but he does at other places (cf. Lam. 5:16; and see commentary on Lam. 1:5).

Lam 5:8

**“Slaves rule.”** The culture is upside down due to sin. Slaves (and “servants;” the Hebrew word can refer to both) of Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 24:10-11) were ruling over the Judeans (Prov. 17:2; 19:10). No doubt they abused their authority and made the lives of the Judeans miserable.

**“to tear us out.”** The Hebrew text uses a word for pulling something apart (cf. NAB). The Babylonians had a firm grip on Judah, and no one was there to tear Judah from the grip of Babylon.

**“hand.”** In typical Semitic idiom, “hand” is put by metonymy for “power” or “authority.” It was common for people of power to use trusted slaves to rule over others. During the time of the Roman Empire, even Roman senators complained bitterly that the slaves of the emperor were given positions of power and ordered them around.

Lam 5:9

**“We get our food.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “we bring our bread,” and the picture being painted is that the people had to travel home with the food they acquired and that was dangerous.

**“souls.”** Here the word translated as “souls” means “life.”

**“sword.”** In this case, the “sword” refers in large part to the sword of robbers who lurk in the wilderness and desert regions, but it also has the wider meaning of other dangers, such as getting lost in the desert and dying.

**“wilderness.”** This is hard to translate into English because we don’t have an equivalent word. It refers to a place that cannot be, or easily be cultivated, and thus wilderness, desert, remote place, uninhabited place, etc. Sometimes these areas were very small, perhaps just a few acres, just very rocky or barren, but sometimes they would be the great deserts. The places to which the Jews were deported had uninhabited places that were dangerous. The Hebrew text is more literally, “the sword of the wilderness,” but the sword is “in” the wilderness.

Lam 5:10

**“because of the burning heat of hunger.”** The Hebrew is unclear, and there are two primary meanings suggested by scholars. One is that the skin is hot due to fever caused by hunger and thirst. The other is that the people’s skin is hot because the people’s hunger drove them out into the hot wilderness to search for food. It is very possible that the reality of the situation involved both those things.

Lam 5:11

**“raped.”** The Hebrew word is poetic and means more like “humbled, humiliated, degraded, or caused to submit,” but the idea is that the women were raped. Note that this happened in the “cities of Judah,” showing that the Babylonian conquest was widespread and not just around Jerusalem. The rape of female captives was commonplace (cf. Zech. 14:2).

Lam 5:12

**“Officials were hung up by their hands.”** The commentators and versions disagree about what this phrase means. The Hebrew “by their hand” (the Hebrew is singular but can often be put for what we would understand as plural, “hands”) can be literal, that the officials were hung up by their hands as torture and to disgrace them (cf. CJB, HCSB, ESV, NIV), or it can be the simple idiom “by them,” meaning the official were hung by their oppressors, the Babylonians (cf. NAB, Rotherham).

The context favors that the officials were indeed hung up by their hands as torture and to disgrace them. The women were raped (Lam. 5:11), the elders were abused (Lam. 5:12), the young men were shamed by having to do women’s work (Lam. 5:13). It is not out of context that the officials, who would have given the orders to fight the Babylonians instead of just surrendering, would be tortured. Torturing captives was common in the ancient world, and the Bible mentions several cases of it, including the ones here in Lamentations 5:12. Women were commonly abused. They were raped, led around on ropes by hooks that went through their lips or tongues (Amos 4:2-3), and sometimes even their pubic hair was shaved to embarrass them (see commentary on Isa. 7:20).

**“the faces of elders were not honored.”** This is the figure of speech tapeinosis; stating something in a lesser way to magnify it. The elders were not just “not honored,” they were dishonored and treated with great disrespect.

[See Word Study: “Tapeinosis.”]

Lam 5:13

**“Young men labor at millstones.”** Many translators do not understand the huge cultural disgrace it was for a young man, especially of higher rank, to have to grind grain with a hand mill, which was always the work of women or slaves. The Philistines did the same thing to Samson (Judg. 16:21). This was not difficult physical labor, this was to disgrace them and break their spirit.

[For more on the hand mills, see commentary on Deut. 24:6.]

**“boys stumble under *loads of* wood.”** It is hard for us today to imagine the immense amount of wood that was burned in the ancient world. Everyone cooked with it, warmed themselves with it, and used a tremendous amount of it to burn all their various sacrifices. If a person had slaves, one of their jobs was almost always to carry wood (cf. Josh. 9:21, 23, 27).

Lam 5:14

**“elders have ceased from the *city* gate.”** In the biblical culture of the Old Testament it was the custom that the elders of a city would sit at the city gate (Gen. 19:1, 9; Deut. 21:19; 22:15; 25:7; Josh. 20:4; Ruth 4:11; 1 Sam. 4:18; Esther 2:19, 21; 3:2; Lam. 5:14; Dan. 2:49). The Hebrew word translated as “ceased” is related to the word “Sabbath,” and during the Babylonian Captivity the land would get a chance to rest and have a “Sabbath” (cf. 2 Chron. 36:21). So during the “Sabbath” for the land, normal activity ceased, like elders judging in the gates and young men playing music for weddings, celebrations, and funerals.

[For more on the elders at the gate, see commentary on Ruth 4:11; and for Wisdom being at the city gate, see commentary on Prov. 1:21.]

Lam 5:15

**“dancing has been turned into mourning.”** This is the case when national tragedy strikes. When the Lord Jesus rules the earth the situation will be different and mourning will be turned to dancing (cf. Jer. 31:13; and see Ps. 30:11).

Lam 5:16

**“The crown has fallen from our head.”** The word “head” is singular, but here it most likely means “heads,” referring to the people. The meaning of this would then be similar to what Job expressed when he experienced tragedy: “He [God] has stripped me of my glory and taken the crown from my head.” God’s people had a kind of royal honor due to their relationship with and obedience to God. But when tragedy strikes due to the people’s sin, it is like the crown has fallen from the heads of the people. The other possibility is that the “head” of the people was the king, and the king had been conquered, so it is as if the crown had fallen off the king and the royal dynasty he represented.

**“Woe to us, because we have sinned!”** Here again we see people in Lamentations, in this case, Jeremiah, admitting their sin and thus admitting that they caused the disaster that had come upon them (see commentary on Lam. 1:5).

Lam 5:17

**“faint.”** The Hebrew word can mean “faint” or “sick,” but in this context “faint” seems the better choice. In light of all the horrific things happening, people’s energy to press on was sapped and gone. The people were “faint.” When used of women, the Hebrew word often means menstruating.

**“our eyes grow dim.”** The heart is faint and the eyes are “dim.” There is no energy for life and no clear vision of the future—the future looks bleak. Although some translations say that the eyes are “dark” (cf. BBE), that does not fit well with the first part of the verse. While it is true that excessive crying can make the eyes bloodshot and dark looking, that does not seem to fit with the heart being “faint” as well as the idea of the vision of the future being “dim” does, so most versions go with “dim.”

Lam 5:18

**“jackals.”** The Hebrew word for “fox” and “jackal” is the same, so the versions are divided, some saying foxes and some saying jackals. The context and known behavior of the animals is the determining factor in the translation. Foxes are solitary, not really dangerous to people, and tend to avoid human contact. In contrast, jackals are pack animals, dangerous to humans, and become very bold in their packs. Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians and by the time Jeremiah was writing it had become abandoned so completely that jackals roamed there, making the holiest sight on earth, the singular place where God decided to put His house, the Temple, unsafe for humans.

**“prowl.”** The Hebrew is the intensive form of the verb for “to walk.”

Lam 5:19

**“You, Yahweh.”** Jeremiah continues his prayer (see commentary on Lam. 5:1, and also the REV introduction to Lamentations).

**“You, Yahweh, reign forever.”** The literal Hebrew text is more like, “You, Yahweh, sit forever,” the custom being that the king “sits,” that is, sits on a throne. So the meaning of the sentence is that Yahweh sits on His throne forever.

Lam 5:20

**“Why.”** Most people who are experiencing deep tragedy ask “Why?” Leslie Allen writes, “‘Why?’ in the complaint psalms is never an intellectual request for information but a loaded rhetorical question that conveys emotional bewilderment and protest. It expresses an indirect petition that God should act otherwise, to be consistent with the divine character.”[[28]](#footnote-24194) Of course at one level the person wants to know why what happened happened, but on another level, the “why” is a disguised way of saying, “This should not have happened.”

**“continually.”** The word is different from “forever” in Lamentations 5:19, but it can also mean “forever” and thus be a hyperbole.

**“forsake us for so long.”** The Hebrew is more literally, “for length of days,” meaning, “for so long.”

Lam 5:21

**“as of old.”** This refers to former times. We might say, “Renew our days as they were in former times.” A similar use is in Micah 5:2.

Lam 5:22

**“rejected, yes, rejected.”** This is the figure of speech polyptoton, used for emphasis (see commentary on Gen. 2:16).

1. Leslie Allen, A Liturgy of Grief: A Pastoral Commentary on Lamentations, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-32627)
2. Christopher Wright, The Message of Lamentations,The Bible Speaks Today, 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-16116)
3. Leslie C. Allen, A Liturgy of Grief: A Pastoral Commentary on Lamentations, 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-16097)
4. John Goldingay, The Book of Lamentations [NICOT], 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-12071)
5. John Goldingay, The Book of Lamentations [NICOT], 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-11572)
6. Christopher Wright, The Message of Lamentations [BST], 70-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-14760)
7. R. B. Salters, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Lamentations [ICC], 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-18042)
8. Leslie Allen, A Liturgy of Grief, 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-32103)
9. Leslie Allen, A Liturgy of Grief, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-20815)
10. R. B. Salters, Lamentations [ICC], 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-28238)
11. For “whitewashed,” see Koehler and Baumgartner, HALOT Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon. [↑](#footnote-ref-10267)
12. John Goldingay, The Book of Lamentations [NICOT], 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-21775)
13. John Goldingay, The Book of Lamentations [NICOT], 115-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-27709)
14. John Goldingay, The Book of Lamentations [NICOT], 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-15586)
15. John Goldingay, The Book of Lamentations [NICOT], 150-151. [↑](#footnote-ref-22117)
16. R. B. Salters, Lamentations [ICC], 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-17422)
17. Koehler and Baumgartner, HALOT. [↑](#footnote-ref-15302)
18. HALOT; BDB. [↑](#footnote-ref-10298)
19. Koehler and Baumgartner, HALOT. [↑](#footnote-ref-18423)
20. Leslie Allen, A Liturgy of Grief, 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-25538)
21. Alice Parmelee, All the Birds of the Bible, 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-31253)
22. John Goldingay, The Book of Lamentations [NICOT], 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-10409)
23. BDAG, s.v. “צָחַח.” [↑](#footnote-ref-31031)
24. Strong’s, s.v. “צָחַח.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16772)
25. See commentary by John Goldingay, The Book of Lamentations [NICOT], 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-17181)
26. Cf. John Goldingay, The Book of Lamentations [NICOT], 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-26360)
27. John Goldengay, The Book of Lamentations, NICOT, p. 182 [↑](#footnote-ref-30043)
28. Leslie Allen, A Liturgy of Grief, 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-24194)