

LAMENTATIONS - A TEACHER'S GUIDE

THE CENTRAL QUESTION:

What does this book/story say to us about God?

This question may be broken down further as follows:

- a. Why did God do it/allow it?
 - b. Why did He record it for our study?
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1. If you had been on the committee to pick the books of the Bible would you have included *The Lamentations*? Did you find Lamentations inspiring? Helpful? Does Lamentations add to our picture of God? Who was the author and when was it written?

“Lamentations, Book of. A series of laments composed by the prophet Jeremiah as an elegy upon the fall and destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. Hebrew Bibles title the book by the first word of the elegy, *’ekah*, “how.” According to the Talmud the Jews also knew the book as *Qînôth*, “Lamentations.” This title the translators of the Septuagint rendered as *Threnoi* [tears/wailings, or dirges], to which the Latin Vulgate added the explanatory note “That Is the Lamentations of Jeremiah the Prophet.” The English title, “The Lamentations of Jeremiah,” is an abbreviation of the Vulgate title. Prior to the rise of modern critical scholarship Jews and Christians alike uniformly attributed the book to the prophet Jeremiah. Modern critics point out that in the ancient Hebrew canon it stands, not in the prophetic section, as would be expected if its author were a prophet, but in the Hagiographa, or Writings, the 3rd section of the Hebrew canon. However, certain striking parallels of phraseology and subject matter between the books of Lamentations and Jeremiah point to a common authorship (compare Lam 3:14, 48 with Jer 9:1; 20:7; Lam 3:52–56 with Jer 12:9; 37:16; 38:6). Repeated references in Lam 3 (see especially vs 14, 48–57, 61–63) to the personal sufferings of the author correspond with what is known concerning the experiences of Jeremiah.

“The prophet Jeremiah bore God’s message to Israel prior to and during the early years of the Babylonian captivity. Tender of heart, he sensed keenly the evils of which the nation was guilty, and mourned as God revealed to him the retribution soon to overtake his beloved Jerusalem (see Jer 4:19; 10:20; 13:17; 14:17; etc.). Jeremiah counseled submission to the Babylonian conquerors as a means of avoiding further suffering and disaster (see Jer 27:11–14; 29:4–7), but kings and people alike refused to heed the message. As a result the “yokes of wood,” representative of the comparatively light suffering occasioned by the 1st and 2nd invasions of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar, were replaced by “yokes of iron”. This perversity of spirit made inevitable the captivity of practically the entire nation, the desolation of Jerusalem and Judea, and the destruction of the Temple. Only a few of the poorest people of the land were left, scattered about the countryside. Little wonder that Jeremiah is known as ‘the weeping prophet’—he had more than enough to weep about. In Lamentations he pours forth the sorrow of his heart.” (*SDA Bible Dictionary*)

“As was their custom, the Jews used the first word of the book as its title, and it originally became known as *’ekah*, “How!” This word was commonly used to mean something like “Alas!” Compare its use in 2:1; 4:1; and Isaiah 1:21. Some also referred to the book as *qinot* or “lamentations,” however, and this is how we arrived at the English title.” (*Spirit Filled Life Study Bible*)

“Author: The Book of Lamentations is traditionally attributed to the prophet Jeremiah. This has been true at least since the time of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament (c. 250 B.C.), where a note about the prophet’s authorship of the book appears as a heading before the first verse. The idea of Jeremiah as the author may have been encouraged by 2 Chr. 35:25, where we are told that the prophet composed laments for King Josiah. There is no direct evidence in the book

itself that Jeremiah was its author, although passages in the work distinctly recall his character and language, especially ch. 3 (Lamentations 3:48–51; Jer. 14:17). However, since the book consists of five different poems that vary somewhat in style, sometimes seeming to be spoken by an individual (ch. 3) and sometimes by a community (ch. 5), it may be that the poems come from different pens.” (*New Geneva Study Bible*)

“Historical Setting. Lamentations was composed [during or] after the author personally witnessed Judah’s downfall and the capture of Jerusalem, with the resultant suffering of his people. In its final form, the book cannot be dated much later than Jerusalem’s fall, 586 B.C. The author thus pens his sorrow over the tragedy that befell his country and city, and over the people’s sin that invoked God’s severe judgment. In response to all that has happened, he urges repentance (cf. 5:21) and leaves his bearers with a note of hope by personally relying on the sure mercies of God (3:22, 23).” (*King James Version Study Bible*)

“Lamentations is one of the five “Megillot” (“scrolls”) read on feast days, and is located after Proverbs in the final division of the Bible, which is called the “Kethuvim” (“Writings”). Today it is read on the “Ninth of Av [or Ab],” a fast day which commemorates the destruction of the temples of Solomon and Herod, as well as other major Jewish catastrophes. According to Jewish tradition, the Messiah would be born on this day (in July-August) and would turn mourning into rejoicing....

“THEME: The Destruction of Jerusalem

“Lamentations is an acrostic poem built upon the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Its acrostic structure not only aided in its memorization, but also it helped to convey in a steady, methodical way the overriding message of sorrow and lamentation. The prophecy poignantly depicts the sorrows which encompassed Jerusalem when its demise came. Jeremiah assesses the reasons for the judgment of God and declares repeatedly that God’s judgment is just. Chapter 3, however, is vibrant with the themes of hope and deliverance. The brief book consists of five poems, comprising our five chapters in English... The book was written as a reminder of the fall of Jerusalem and of the burning of the temple. Lamentations is read annually in the land of Palestine to remind the Jewish people of their hour of deepest humiliation and grief, caused by their sin and guilt, which necessitated God’s judgment. Furthermore, Lamentations enables the people to hope for the future deliverance which God has promised.” (*Believer’s Study Bible*)

One pattern suggested by the book of Lamentations is as follows: sin→suffering (1:8); sorrow→repentance (1:20); prayer→hope (3:19-24); faith→restoration (5:21).

“Lamentations features six major themes, all linked with the concept of suffering:

“1. *Their Suffering Was the Result of Their Sin.* This strong theme is acknowledged in each chapter (as in 1:5; 2:14; 3:42; 4:13; 5:16). By the time the poems were written, this was obviously fully accepted. Even the Babylonians acknowledged the fact (Jer. 40:3). They knew that their suffering had not come upon them by chance. It was due to the wrath of God provoked by their sin (2:1). He was dealing with their spiritual condition, and they were supposed to take it personally.

“2. *Their Suffering Was Seen as Coming from God Rather Than from Men. The Babylonians were no more than an instrument in His hands. The fact that He was the ultimate cause is brought out throughout the book. No less than forty-four verses refer to this fact—an average of 1 out of every 3.5 verses.* A few examples are 1:13, 15; 2:1, 4; 3:1, 37, 38.

“3. *Their Suffering Could Direct Them Toward God.* The prophet is constantly conscious of God, of His purposes, and of His dealings with His people. **There is no indication here of suffering resulting in a total abandonment of God or an eradication of His principles from their minds.**

"4. *Suffering, Tears, and Prayer Belong Together.* They were encouraged to pour out their hearts to God, to weep before Him, and to tell Him all the details of their pain, grief, and frustration. Each chapter, except chapter 4, ends with a prayer. But then the whole of chapter 5 is a prayer, as though making up for this lack. The prayers are both detailed (2:20, 21; 5:1–10) and emotional (1:20, 21; 3:48–51). They contain the language of grief and repentance (1:20; 3:40–42), and are **an indication that it is entirely appropriate to pray like this when the occasion demands it.**

"5. *Prayer Should Always Look for Some Ray of Hope.* It should never be completely given over to sorrow. After the detailed descriptions of suffering and sorrow in the first two and one-half chapters, a new understanding seems to surface in 3:21–24. Here the poet speaks about hope, and about God's mercies, compassion, and faithfulness. It was a realization that a manifestation of God's discipline did not mean that His love had ceased. When the discipline had accomplished His purpose, the circumstances would change (3:31, 32). God may have been using Babylon, but that did not mean that they were His elect or that He favored their cruel methods (3:34–36). The future held a vindication of Israel over their enemies (3:58–66).

"6. *Their Responsibility Was to Submit to Their Sufferings Patiently.* Their sorrow had to be accepted in patience, with the realization that it would end when God's will had been accomplished (3:26–32)." (*Spirit Filled Life Study Bible*)

"Theological Significance • Like the Book of Job, the Book of Lamentations addresses human suffering. Unlike Job, Lamentations focuses on national suffering—specifically, the suffering of Judah. Along the way, the book tackles some of the toughest questions faced by God's people: **How can God's love and justice be reconciled with our pain? If God is in control of history, how could a nation suffer so much so soon after it had been led by such godly leaders as King Josiah and those involved in that revival? Where was God during His people's unhappiest hour?**

"The Book of Lamentations offers some very practical theological reflections on the purposes and results of suffering. Rather than explaining away pain, the book helps us face pain. By avoiding cheery clichés, the Book of Lamentations provides companionship for those who are suffering and plants seeds of hope for rebuilding after the suffering is over.

"In fact, the anger of God is a sign that He cares. The Lord's anger is never capricious or unreasonable. His discipline is a sign that He has not abandoned us. Even in His display of anger, God is still full of mercy and grace. The beacon light in the midst of disintegration is found in 3:22–24. Come what may, God remains faithful. His faithfulness is the greatest comfort to those who suffer; His compassions are new every morning." (*Nelson Study Bible*)

"Lamentations is a concentrated and intense biblical witness to suffering. Suffering is a huge, unavoidable element in the human condition. To be human is to suffer. No one gets an exemption. It comes as no surprise then to find that our Holy Scriptures, immersed as they are in the human condition, provide extensive witness to suffering.

"There are two polar events in the history of the Hebrew people: the Exodus from Egypt and the Exile into Babylon. Exodus is the definitive story of salvation into a free life. God delivered his people from Egyptian slavery (in about 1200 B.C.). It is a story of freedom. It's accompanied by singing and dancing—an exuberant experience. Exile is the definitive story of judgment accompanied by immense suffering. God's people are taken into Babylonian slavery (the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. marks the event). It is a time of devastation and lament. It is a terrible experience. The two events, Exodus and Exile, are bookends holding together the wide-ranging experiences of God's people that fall between the exuberance that accompanies salvation and the suffering associated with judgment.

“Lamentations, written out of the Exile experience, provides the community of faith with a form and vocabulary for dealing with loss and pain.

“The precipitating event, the fall of Jerusalem, is told in 2 Kings 25 and Jeremiah 52. It is impossible to overstate either the intensity or the complexity of the suffering that came to a head in the devastation of Jerusalem and then continued on into the seventy years of exile in Babylon. Loss was total. Carnage was rampant. Cannibalism and sacrilege were twin horrors stalking the streets of destroyed Jerusalem. The desperate slaying of innocent children showed complete loss of respect for human worth, and the angry murder of priests showed absolute loss of respect for divine will.

“The worst that can happen to body and spirit, to person and nation, happened here — a nadir of suffering. And throughout the world the suffering continues, both in large-scale horrors and in personal agonies.

“Neither explaining suffering nor offering a program for the elimination of suffering, Lamentations keeps company with the extensive biblical witness that gives dignity to suffering by insisting that God enters our suffering and is companion to our suffering.” (*The Message*)

It should be clear that some major issues are covered in this book. It helps to explain what happened to Solomon’s temple, Jerusalem and the people of Judah. The writings of Jeremiah are the major evidence we have about this siege and the final destruction of Jerusalem. Only sources that are thought to be influenced by the Hebrew Scriptures mention this third campaign of Nebuchadnezzar against Jerusalem.

The book of Lamentations helps to answer the question so often asked in times of distress and difficulty: Where is God when things seem to go wrong? Why do the wicked prosper? (See Jeremiah 12:1) This book makes it quite clear that many if not most of the troubles that we face are our own fault. Fortunately, God never abandons us fully, even if we have done terrible things such as were being done in Jerusalem at this time.

2. The Lamentations is in poetic verse form, but of an unusual pattern. Each stanza begins with the next letter in the Hebrew alphabet (There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet). Such a poem is known as an Acrostic. Imagine creating this literary masterpiece with the first stanza beginning with Aleph, the next with Beth, the next one with Gimel and so on, while Jerusalem was under siege by Nebuchadnezzar. Chapter one, two and four are like this. Chapter three is even more complicated. There are 66 verses, and the first three begin with Aleph, the second three with Beth, and the third three with Gimel etc.! Only Chapter five doesn’t exactly follow this pattern. Why do you think Jeremiah did this? Why would he write such a sad message in such a poetically balanced form? Who do you think this was written for? Did they all have copies of the “Bible” available to them? How many people during Jeremiah’s lifetime actually heard or read his writings? Do you think he wrote Lamentations like this so it could be an aid to memorization?

“The clearest evidence for meter in Hebrew poetry is the Book of Lamentations, which seems to use a line of five beats divided three-two. This meter is called *qinah*, after the Hebrew name for Lamentations. It is most often found in poetry of this sorrowful kind.” (*New Geneva Study Bible*)

“The book is made up of 5 elegiac poems, corresponding to its 5 chapters. The first 4 are written in the *qinah* or elegiac meter characteristic of Hebrew poetry, and the 5th, a prayer rather than an elegy, is in the usual Hebrew poetic meter. Lamentations 1, 2, 4, 5 each have 22 verses, corresponding with the 22 distinct letters of the Hebrew alphabet, while chapter 3 has 66 verses. In chapters 1, 2, and 4 the verses are arranged alphabetically, v 1 beginning with the 1st letter of the Hebrew alphabet, v 2 with the 2nd, and so on except for small variations in ch 2. In ch 3 the first 3

verses begin with the 1st letter of the alphabet, the next 3 with the 2nd letter, and so on to the end. The 5th chapter does not observe an alphabetical arrangement. It is of interest that the letters *pe* and *'ayin* are presented three times in a reversed order (ch 2:16, 17; 3:46–51; 4:16, 17) in contrast to the usual order *'ayin-pe* followed in other Biblical acrostic compositions. That this is no mistake, but simply a variant order, has been proved by the list of alphabetic characters preserved on the ostrakon found in 1976 at *'Izbet Šartah*, probably Biblical Ebenezer, of 1200 B.C.” (*SDA Bible Dictionary*)

“Literary Structure • The five chapters of Lamentations are five poems with ch. 3 as the midpoint or climax. Accordingly, the first two chapters build an “ascent,” or crescendo, to the climax, the grand confession in 3:23, 24: “Great is Your faithfulness. The LORD is my portion.” The last two chapters are a “descent,” or decrescendo, from the pinnacle of ch. 3.

“Chapters 1 and 5 provide summaries of the siege and fall of Jerusalem while chs. 2 and 4 offer more detailed and explicit descriptions of the devastation. Chapter 3 moves from a mixture of lament and hope in vv. 1–24 to colorful praise of the compassionate and faithful Lord in vv. 25–39. This is followed by the confession of vv. 40–54 and the accompanying prayer of vv. 55–66. Then ch. 4 relaxes the emotional intensity of the earlier chapters, dispassionately describing how suffering affected all classes of the populace of Jerusalem. The final chapter is a prayer that begins with “Remember, O LORD” (5:1) and ends with “Turn us back to You, O LORD” (5:21). In this way, Jeremiah’s lament moves from mourning to praise and then from praise to a prayer for restoration.” (*Nelson Study Bible*)

“The five chapters of the book are five poems. These poems take the form of laments, such as appear in other books of the Old Testament, principally the Psalms. Laments (both of the community and the individual) have certain typical characteristics, of which the most common are: (a) complaint about adversity, which the Lord either tolerated or even caused; (b) confession of trust; (c) appeal for deliverance, on the grounds of the Lord’s character and His covenant; and (d) certainty of a hearing, often with an assurance that the enemies and persecutors will in turn experience the wrath of God (Ps. 74). The Book of Lamentations has these typical marks, though it represents a unique set of variations upon them. It is sometimes compared with a particular kind of lament, the funeral lament (Amos 5:1–3), but it does not quite fit this category, because Jerusalem is not uniformly portrayed as ‘dead.’” (*New Geneva Study Bible*)

We are not exactly sure where Jeremiah was or what he was doing at the time he wrote Lamentations. Was he in “prison”? In any case it seems certain that during the siege of Jerusalem there was not a great deal for him to do. He could not leave the city to go to his ancestral home in Anathoth. He may have composed these poems to be recited or read at the temple. Since writing material would have been virtually impossible to get at the time, he may have memorized this “poetry” as he composed it. It is also possible that he recited it to others to encourage them to memorize it. We don’t know for sure how it was preserved or who brought it to Ezra who presumably included it with the other portions of his “Bible” during his day.

3. Who seems to be causing all of Jerusalem’s and Jeremiah’s suffering? See Lamentations 1:5,12,15,16; 2:1-12,16. Is God actively involved in doing these things, or is there another explanation for such wording? Compare Jeremiah 12:1 and Psalms 77:1-10.

Lamentations 1:5: “Her enemies succeeded; they hold her in their power. **The Lord has made her suffer for all her many sins**; Her children have been captured and taken away.” (*GNB*)

Lamentations 1:12: “Look at me!” she cries to everyone who passes by. “No one has ever had pain like mine, **Pain that the Lord brought on me in the time of his anger.**”(*GNB*)

Lamentations 1:15,16: ¹⁵**The Lord jeered at all my strongest soldiers;** He sent an army to destroy my young men. He crushed my people like grapes in a winepress. ¹⁶ That is why my eyes are overflowing with tears. No one can comfort me; no one can give me courage. The enemy has conquered me; my people have nothing left.” (GNB)

Lamentations 2:1-12: ¹ **The Lord in his anger has covered Zion with darkness.**

Its heavenly splendor he has turned into ruins.

On the day of his anger he abandoned even his Temple.

² **The Lord destroyed without mercy** every village in Judah

And tore down the forts that defended the land.

He brought disgrace on the kingdom and its rulers.

³ In his fury **he shattered** the strength of Israel;

He refused to help us when the enemy came.

He raged against us like fire, destroying everything.

⁴ **He aimed his arrows at us like an enemy;**

He killed all those who were our joy and delight.

Here in Jerusalem we felt his burning anger.

⁵ **Like an enemy, the Lord has destroyed Israel;**

He has left her forts and palaces in ruins.

He has brought on the people of Judah unending sorrow.

⁶ **He smashed to pieces the Temple where we worshiped him;**

He has put an end to holy days and Sabbaths.

King and priest alike have felt the force of his anger.

⁷ The Lord rejected his altar and deserted his holy Temple;

He allowed the enemy to tear down its walls.

They shouted in victory where once we had worshiped in joy.

⁸ The Lord was determined that the walls of Zion should fall;

He measured them off to make sure of total destruction.

The towers and walls now lie in ruins together.

⁹ The gates lie buried in rubble, their bars smashed to pieces.

The king and the noblemen now are in exile.

The Law is no longer taught, and the prophets have no visions from the Lord.

¹⁰ Jerusalem’s old men sit on the ground in silence,

With dust on their heads and sackcloth on their bodies.

Young women bow their heads to the ground.

¹¹ My eyes are worn out with weeping; my soul is in anguish.

I am exhausted with grief at the destruction of my people.

Children and babies are fainting in the streets of the city.

¹² Hungry and thirsty, they cry to their mothers;

They fall in the streets as though they were wounded,

And slowly die in their mothers' arms." *Good News Bible: Today's English Version*

Lamentations 2:16: "All your enemies mock you and glare at you with hate. They curl their lips and sneer, "We have destroyed it! This is the day we have waited for!" (GNB)

Once again we are faced with the question that we have struggled with on numerous other occasions. **What is the relationship between the people' sins, the Lord's anger, the conquest ambitions of their enemies, and the punishment and destruction that result?** It should be obvious that Jeremiah felt that God was involved and the enemy were involved. He speaks of Nebuchadnezzar as Yahweh's servant! (See Jeremiah 25:8,9; 27:6; 43:10) Did God need to use Nebuchadnezzar to punish His own people? We know from previous passages that God could have sent a plague, a famine, or even have struck some of the Israelites dead Himself, if He wanted to or needed to. But for some reason, on this occasion, God chose to use the Babylonians. Or was God involved at all? Did He just sit back and allow the Babylonians to do what they wanted to do anyway? Was God not able to prevent the actions of the Babylonians? He apparently couldn't prevent the rebellion and idolatry of the Jews! What role could God play without violating anyone's freedom here?

4. Do you think Jeremiah's experience was similar to David's? (Psalms 6:6 and Lamentations 1:16) Is Jeremiah complaining? Didn't David do the same thing? Did others have similar experiences?

Many people in the Bible are described as weeping:

Job 2:12: "While they were still a long way off they saw Job, but did not recognize him. When they did, they began to weep and wail, tearing their clothes in grief and throwing dust into the air and on their heads." (GNB)

Job 16:20: "My friends scorn me; my eyes pour out tears to God." (GNB)

Psalms 6:6,7: ⁶ "I am worn out with grief;

every night my bed is damp from my weeping;

my pillow is soaked with tears.

⁷ I can hardly see;

my eyes are so swollen

from the weeping caused by my enemies." (GNB)

Psalms 31:10: "I am exhausted by sorrow,

and weeping has shortened my life.

I am weak from all my troubles;

even my bones are wasting away." (GNB)

Psalms 42:3: "Day and night I cry,

and **tears are my only food;**

all the time my enemies ask me,

“Where is your God?” (GNB)

Psalms 80:4-6: ⁴ “How much longer, LORD God Almighty,
will you be angry with your people’s prayers?

⁵ You have given us sorrow to eat,

a large cup of tears to drink.

⁶ You let the surrounding nations fight over our land;
our enemies insult us.” (GNB)

Psalms 119:136: “**My tears pour down like a river,**
because people do not obey your law.” (GNB)

Isaiah 16:9: “Now I weep for Sibmah’s vines as I weep for Jazer. My tears fall for Heshbon and Elealeh, because there is no harvest to make the people glad.” (GNB)

Jeremiah 4:8: “So put on sackcloth, and weep and wail

because the fierce anger of the LORD

has not turned away from Judah.” (GNB) These were God’s instructions!

Jeremiah 9:1: “**I wish my head were a well of water,**

and my eyes a fountain of tears,

so that I could cry day and night

for my people who have been killed.” (GNB)

Jeremiah 14:17: ¹⁷ The LORD commanded me to tell the people about my sorrow and to say:

“May my eyes flow with tears day and night,

may I never stop weeping,

for my people are deeply wounded

and are badly hurt.” (GNB)

Lamentations 1:16: “That is why my eyes are overflowing with tears.

No one can comfort me; no one can give me courage.

The enemy has conquered me; my people have nothing left.” (GNB)

Lamentations 2:11: “My eyes are worn out with weeping; my soul is in anguish.

I am exhausted with grief at the destruction of my people.

Children and babies are fainting in the streets of the city.” (GNB)

Lamentations 2:18: “O Jerusalem, let your very walls cry out to the Lord!

Let your tears flow like rivers night and day;

Wear yourself out with weeping and grief!” (GNB)

Lamentations 3:48-50: ⁴⁸ “**My eyes flow with rivers of tears at the destruction of my people.**

⁴⁹ “**My tears will pour out in a ceaseless stream**

⁵⁰ Until the LORD looks down from heaven and sees us.” (GNB)

Malachi 2:13 “This is another thing you do. **You drown the LORD’s altar with tears, weeping and wailing because he no longer accepts the offerings you bring him.**” (GNB)

As you can see there is a lot of talk about weeping and shedding of tears in the Old Testament. Much of it is clearly poetic hyperbole. But the authors have a clear message for their listeners and for us. Very serious things were taking place. God’s people failed to do what they were supposed to and the consequences in some cases were terrible. How does God feel about this outpouring of human emotion? Why is it included in Biblical history? Who gave us the ability to feel so strongly about things? Shouldn’t the Bible writers have been a little more modest in their statements? Compare Psalms 22:1 and Matthew 27:46.

5. Do you think you could become so hungry that you could eat your own child? Did the Jews actually reach such a state? (Lamentations 2:20; 4:10; Leviticus 26:27-29; Deuteronomy 28:53-57; 2 Kings 6:26-29; Jeremiah 19:9; Ezekiel 5:10)

Leviticus 26:27-29: ²⁷ “If after all this you still continue to defy me and refuse to obey me, ²⁸ then in my anger I will turn on you and again make your punishment seven times worse than before. ²⁹ **Your hunger will be so great that you will eat your own children.**” (GNB)

Deuteronomy 28:53-57: ⁵³ “When your enemies are besieging your towns, you will become so desperate for food that **you will even eat the children that the Lord your God has given you.**⁵⁴⁻
⁵⁵ Even the most refined man of noble birth will become so desperate during the siege that **he will eat some of his own children** because he has no other food. He will not even give any to his brother or to the wife he loves or to any of his children who are left. ⁵⁶⁻⁵⁷ Even the most refined woman of noble birth, so rich that she has never had to walk anywhere, will behave in the same way. When the enemy besieges her town, **she will become so desperate for food that she will secretly eat her newborn child and the afterbirth as well.** She will not share them with the husband she loves or with any of her children. (GNB)

2 Kings 6:26-29: ²⁶ The king of Israel was walking by on the city wall when a woman cried out, “Help me, Your Majesty!” ²⁷ He replied, “If the Lord won’t help you, what help can I provide? Have I got any wheat or wine? ²⁸ What’s your trouble?” She answered, “The other day this woman here suggested that **we eat my child, and then eat her child the next day.** ²⁹ **So we cooked my son and ate him. The next day I told her that we would eat her son, but she had hidden him!**” *Good News Bible: Today’s English Version*

Isaiah 49:15: “So the LORD answers,

“Can a woman forget her own baby
and not love the child she bore?

Even if a mother should forget her child,

I will never forget you.” *Good News Bible: Today’s English Version*

Ezekiel 5:10: “As a result, **parents in Jerusalem will eat their children, and children will eat their parents.** I will punish you and scatter in every direction any who are left alive.” (GNB)

Jeremiah 19:9: “The enemy will surround the city and try to kill its people. The siege will be so terrible that the **people inside the city will eat one another and even their own children.**” *Good News Bible: Today’s English Version*

Lamentations 2:20: “Look, O Lord! Why are you punishing us like this?”

Women are eating the bodies of the children they loved!

Priests and prophets are being killed in the Temple itself!" (GNB)

Lamentations 4:10: "The disaster that came to my people brought horror; **loving mothers boiled their own children for food.**" *Good News Bible: Today's English Version*

Matthew 24:19: "How terrible it will be in those days for women who are pregnant and for mothers with little babies!" *Good News Bible: Today's English Version*

This kind of behavior was documented in the sieges of Samaria (capital of the northern kingdom of Israel) by Assyria in 723 B.C., in the siege of Jerusalem by Babylon in 588-586 B.C. and in the siege of Jerusalem by the Romans under Titus in A.D. 70. It is almost unimaginable to us. We regard with horror the cases that reach the news media about young women abandoning their babies in the trash, but this would be so much worse. But it is hard to imagine what one would do under similar circumstances. In the final persecution of the righteous by the Devil himself, do we think he will be "kinder" to us who live in the final days of earth's history? **This will be his final showdown; his last chance to really do anything. It is hard for me to believe that he will not try everything that he has tried in the past and even more. Such are the fruits of sin and rebellion.**

6. What picture of God is Jeremiah reflecting in Lamentations 3:7,8? How could he speak of God like this under inspiration? Lamentations 3:44 says, "Thou has wrapped Thyself in a cloud so that no prayer can pass through." Is there ever a time when God does not hear our prayers? In Isaiah 1:15 (NIV) we are told, "When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you...I will not listen." Compare Jeremiah 7:16; Psalms 77:10. Are these statements true? If they are not true, why would God allow Himself to be pictured like this? Compare Psalms 22:1 and Matthew 27:46, "Why hast thou forsaken Me?"--didn't Jesus feel like He had been abandoned? Is God offended if we feel moved to cry out like this?

Lamentations 3:7,8: ⁷ "He has bound me in chains; I am a prisoner with no hope of escape. ⁸I cry aloud for help, but **God refuses to listen;**" (GNB)

"On occasion, God had forbidden Jeremiah to pray for the deliverance of Judah (see Jer. 11:14; 14:11)." (*Nelson Study Bible*: article on Lamentations 3:8)

"The Assyrians had a form of torture in which prisoners were walled into a very small place." (*Spirit Filled Life Study Bible*: article on Lamentations 3:7)

Psalms 22:1,2: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

I have cried desperately for help,
but still it does not come.

² During the day I call to you, my God,
but **you do not answer;**

I call at night,
but get no rest." (GNB) Compare Job 19:7,8; 30:20; Habakkuk 1:2.

Lamentations 3:43-45: ⁴³ "You pursued us and killed us; your mercy was hidden by your anger,

⁴⁴ **By a cloud of fury too thick for our prayers to get through.**

⁴⁵ You have made us the refuse heap of the world." (GNB)

The heathen often feel that they have to do some great thing to get the attention of their “gods”. Look at Elijah’s speech to the prophets of Baal: 1 Kings 18:27-29. But how can Yahweh be described in similar terms? Don’t we have a lot of promises that He is always awake and alert to our every request and need? See Psalms 121. But there are times when God must say something through silence. By behaving at times like the heathen “gods” Yahweh may be able to get His people to realize how crazy they would be to abandon Him for them!

7. Whose experience is being referred to in Lamentations 3:13-15 and 3:61-63?

Lamentations 3:13-15: ¹³ He shot his arrows deep into my body.

¹⁴ People laugh at me all day long; I am a joke to them all.

¹⁵ Bitter suffering is all he has given me for food and drink. (*GNB*)

“**Lamentations 3:10-13.** God’s actions seemed designed to single out Jeremiah for punishment. God was **like a bear or lion in hiding** beside **the path** who attacked and mauled Jeremiah. Switching figures, Jeremiah said he felt like a **target** against which God was taking target practice (cf. Job 6:4; 7:20; 16:12-13). God had chosen him for adversity.” (*The Bible Knowledge Commentary*)

Lamentations 3:61-63: ⁶¹ “You have heard them insult me, O Lord; you know all their plots.

⁶² All day long they talk about me and make their plans.

⁶³ From morning till night they jeer at me.” *Good News Bible: Today’s English Version*

Lamentations 3:64-66 “These verses are typical of what are called “taunt songs,” which people used against their enemies in wartime. A taunt song was supposed to be rather vindictive (Ps. 137:8, 9; Hab. 2:6-19). This one was based on God’s promise ultimately to vindicate them (Jer. 50:9).” (*Spirit Filled Life Study Bible*)

“**Hunted down like a bird**, stoned in a **pit**, engulfed by water, the prophet thought the end had come (vv. 52–54). He prayed earnestly **from the lowest** depths, and God answered, telling him **not to fear** (vv. 55–57). Now he asks the **LORD** to consider how he has been mistreated—the **vengeance, schemes, reproach**, insults, gossip, and taunts against him—and to judge his case. Righteousness demands that his enemies be punished, cursed, pursued, and destroyed (vv. 58–66).” (*Believer’s Bible Commentary*)

“Jeremiah then called on God to vindicate him before his **enemies**, those in Judah who opposed him. God had **seen . . . the wrong done to Jeremiah—their vengeance . . . their plots. . . their insults**, and their mocking. Jeremiah also asked God to **pay them back what they deserve**. This was fulfilled historically when Nebuchadnezzar entered Jerusalem. The leaders responsible for rejecting and persecuting Jeremiah were punished by Babylon (cf. Jer. 39:4-7; 52:7-11, 24-27). The parallel to Jerusalem was obvious. She too was persecuted by her enemies (Lamentations 3:46-47); but she could be confident that God would vindicate her before her enemies if she would turn to Him.” (*The Bible Knowledge Commentary*)

It seems clear here that Jeremiah was using his personal experience to parallel the experience of the Jewish people in Jerusalem. The language may seem strong to us, but how else could you respond to the injustices being done? Does God ever take upon Himself the punishment of His people? Was this just discipline?

8. How can Jeremiah speak the words of the first part of this book and then say what he does in

Lamentations 3:21-33 and 3:55-60? Doesn't verse 33 clearly suggest what Jeremiah thinks is happening? Would you feel comfortable saying all these things about your God under similar circumstances?

Lamentations 3:21-33: ²¹ Yet hope returns when I remember this one thing:

- ²² The Lord's unfailing love and mercy still continue,
- ²³ Fresh as the morning, as sure as the sunrise.
- ²⁴ The Lord is all I have, and so I put my hope in him.
- ²⁵ The Lord is good to everyone who trusts in him,
- ²⁶ So it is best for us to wait in patience—to wait for him to save us—
- ²⁷ And it is best to learn this patience in our youth.
- ²⁸ When we suffer, we should sit alone in silent patience;
- ²⁹ We should bow in submission, for there may still be hope.
- ³⁰ Though beaten and insulted, we should accept it all.
- ³¹ The Lord is merciful and will not reject us for ever.
- ³² He may bring us sorrow, but his love for us is sure and strong.
- ³³ He takes no pleasure in causing us grief or pain." (*GNB*)

Lamentations 3:55-60: ⁵⁵ "From the bottom of the pit, O Lord, I cried out to you,

- ⁵⁶ And when I begged you to listen to my cry, you heard.
- ⁵⁷ You answered me and told me not to be afraid.
- ⁵⁸ "You came to my rescue, Lord, and saved my life.
- ⁵⁹ Judge in my favor; you know the wrongs done against me.
- ⁶⁰ You know how my enemies hate me and how they plot against me." (*GNB*)

These are probably the key passages in the entire book. It is easy for Christians to jump on them and rationalize that this is how the Christian God always acts. But what was the truth in Jeremiah's day? Did the people's sins have anything to do with their current problems? If so, what? Did Nebuchadnezzar's army care about Judah's sins? Is that why they came from Babylon to conquer this rebellious city? Or did God choose Nebuchadnezzar to carry out His will in this case? Jeremiah on several occasions calls Nebuchadnezzar Yahweh's servant! (See Jeremiah 25:8,9; 27:6; 43:10) If God had anything to do with either the abandonment of Jerusalem in her time of peril or the commissioning of Nebuchadnezzar to actually do this work, isn't He responsible in some way? Would we dare to suggest that God was "punishing" the Jews for their rebellion? Since many of them died in this siege, was God responsible for their deaths? Hundreds of years earlier the Bible suggests that God gave the Canaanites a period of probation and then when the 400 years were over, they were displaced or destroyed. Is this same kind of thing now happening to the Jews? Or was God not involved in either of these occasions? See next question.

9. Is Lamentations 3:37-39 an explanation for the apparent conflicts that precede it? Is it true that both "calamities and good things come" from "the mouth of the Most High?" (Lamentations 3:38, *NIV*, Compare Isaiah 45:7, especially *KJV*) What do you think should be our interpretation of these verses? The Jews were anxious to acknowledge the total sovereignty of God. Is it true that nothing could happen without His will, or permission?

Lamentations 3:37-39: ³⁷ The will of the Lord alone is always carried out.

³⁸ **Good and evil alike take place at his command.**

³⁹ Why should we ever complain when we are punished for our sin?" (GNB)

Lamentations 1:5: Her enemies succeeded; they hold her in their power.

The Lord has made her suffer for all her many sins;

Her children have been captured and taken away." (GNB)

Lamentations 1:12: "Look at me!" she cries to everyone who passes by.

'No one has ever had pain like mine,

Pain that the Lord brought on me in the time of his anger." (GNB)

Lamentations 1:15: "The Lord jeered at all my strongest soldiers;

He sent an army to destroy my young men.

He crushed my people like grapes in a winepress. (GNB)

Lamentations 1:17: "I stretch out my hands, but no one will help me.

The Lord has called enemies against me from every side;

They treat me like some filthy thing." *Good News Bible: Today's English Version*

Lamentations 1:22: "Condemn them [my enemies] for all their wickedness;

Punish them as you punished me for my sins.

I groan in misery, and I am sick at heart." *Good News Bible: Today's English Version*

Lamentations 2:1,2: ¹"The Lord in his anger has covered Zion with darkness.

Its heavenly splendor he has turned into ruins.

On the day of his anger he abandoned even his Temple.

² The Lord destroyed without mercy every village in Judah

And tore down the forts that defended the land.

He brought disgrace on the kingdom and its rulers." *Good News Bible*

See also Lamentations 2:3-8, **17,20,21**; 3:1-18, 37-39; 4:6,11; 5:20-22;

Contrast Lamentations 2:16; 3:52-60; 5:3

Who is the cause of all this disaster? Is it Yahweh or Israel's enemies? Or were they somehow jointly involved? If both were involved do they share responsibility? Would a loving God every be involved in such a thing? How does this help us to understand God's anger or wrath?

10. In the *New English Bible*, Lamentations 2:5 says "The Lord played an enemy's part." The *New International Version* says, "The Lord has become like an enemy." Why would he write like this? Doesn't a child think his parent has turned against him when he spans him?

Lamentations 2:5:

.hYnla)" hYnla)T' hdlWlyAtbB] brYw" wyr:xb]ni tj wi hyt/nm]r]pAl K; [LBi l arc]j] [LBi byZaK] yndæ} hyh;

⁵ Egenhgh kurio" wI' epcroI' (LXX - Septuagint)

⁵ **The Lord hath been as an enemy**, He hath swallowed up Israel, He hath swallowed up all her palaces, He hath destroyed His fortresses, And He multiplieth in the daughter of Judah Mourning and moaning. *Young's Literal Translation*

⁵ The Lord was as an enemy:... (*Geneva, KJV*)

⁵ The Lord is become as an enemy:... (*Douay, Darby, ASV*)

⁵ The Lord became like an enemy;... (*Leeser*)

⁵ The Lord has become like an enemy...(Smith-Goodspeed, RSV, NASB, 1995 update, NRSV, Clear Word)

⁵ The Lord has been like an enemy,... (*Jerusalem*)

⁵ The Lord has become an enemy,... (*NAB*)

⁵ The Lord has become our enemy,... (*Moffatt*)

⁵ The Lord is like an enemy;... (*NIV*)

⁵ The Lord was like an enemy!... (*CEV, NCV, NKJ*)

⁵ The Lord became an enemy. (*God's Word*)

⁵ The Lord behaved like an enemy;... (*NJB*)

⁵ The Lord has acted like a foe,... (*Tanakh, The Holy Scriptures*)

⁵ Like an enemy, the Lord has destroyed Israel;... (*GNB*)

⁵ Yes, the Lord has vanquished Israel like an enemy. (*The Living Bible, NLT*)

⁵ Enemies he counts us,... (*Knox*)

⁵ The Lord has become like one fighting against her,... (*Basic English*)

⁵ The Lord played an enemy's part... (*NEB, REV*)

Does Yahweh ever act the part of an enemy? When a parent disciplines a child is that considered playing the part of an enemy? Does the parent think so? Does the child think so? Might it seem so to an observer? Did God play the part of an enemy to the Canaanites? Is He doing that now to the Jews? Does He need to do this? What did He accomplish by doing this? Did the children of Israel learn anything from their time in exile? Only a few of them ever came back home. Was God "thinning" them out? Were the ones who came home better than the ones who stayed in Babylon and Susa? Consider the book of Esther.

11. Does Jeremiah seem to be confused as he swings from his grief at what is happening, to his trust of God and His mercy and love? What are we supposed to learn from this?

Jeremiah had many years of experience working for the Lord. No doubt he felt that he understood Yahweh pretty well. He probably had access to the writings of former prophets and kings who had been through similar troubling experiences. But things seemed to continue to get worse. Jeremiah must have been on the verge of mental collapse from the stress and despair as he watched all that was going on. It seemed like God was helping their enemies! God instructed him to tell His own people to surrender to their enemies! But yet Jeremiah could not abandon his faith in God. There was no one else that he could turn to. So we shouldn't be surprised at what we read in this book. It probably, in fact, represents the ups and downs of Jeremiah's emotional roller coaster. Does that make some of the statements false? Not at all! Jeremiah is pouring out his heart

at the distress that he sees all around him.

We need to realize that here is a perfect example of what it means to be honest in prayer! When we talk to God (like Jeremiah's prayer in Lamentations 5) there is no reason to cover up the facts. God knows them already. There is no reason to put on a false "happy face", because God knows exactly how we feel already. The only rational thing to do if we have a correct picture of God is to open our hearts and minds to Him and pour out everything. It will help us emotionally. It will help us to think through the issues. It will help us to be more honest when dealing with others! And when it is appropriate, God will gladly respond to our cries and help us in every way that He can without violating anyone's freedom or changing the outcome of the great controversy.

12. How should God have dealt with all of this rampant evil that was taking place in Jerusalem? When a body is being destroyed by cancer, is it morally wrong to cut out the cancer? When an infectious disease is spreading over the land, is it fair to quarantine the infected? See Lamentations 3:37 "the Lord ordained it."

It should be fairly clear that God had to do something. Should He have sent another flood? A fire? A series of plagues? Disease? Was it wrong for God to work through forces that were already at work in the world of Jeremiah's day? Should God have avoided even the appearance of cooperation with a pagan king like Nebuchadnezzar? We have already seen clearly that Jeremiah specifically states that Nebuchadnezzar was Yahweh's servant. (See Jeremiah 25:8,9; 27:6; 43:10) This doesn't mean that everything that Nebuchadnezzar did was approved by God! It simply means that when it was time for someone to come and "discipline" God's people, the Babylonian army was handy and ready to do the job. God did not need to create some massive intrusion into human history as He did at the time of the flood in order to bring about the discipline that was required. What we don't know is how much "guidance" God gave to the Babylonian army. Apparently, God was pretty significantly involved because Jeremiah says:

Jeremiah 37:6-10: ⁶ "Then the LORD, the God of Israel, told me ⁷ to say to Zedekiah, "The Egyptian army is on its way to help you, but it will return home. ⁸ Then the Babylonians will come back, attack the city, capture it, and burn it down. ⁹ I, the LORD, warn you not to deceive yourselves into thinking that the Babylonians will not come back, because they will. ¹⁰ **Even if you defeat the whole Babylonian army, so that only wounded men are left, lying in their tents, those men would still get up and burn this city to the ground.**" (GNB)

This sounds like more than human power at work. I don't think the Babylonian army were that much superior to all others. So if it is true that God actually worked with the Babylonians to help in the conquest of Jerusalem and Judah, we have to believe that God is willing at times to discipline His people. Would He ever actually kill some of His own people? Or should we conclude that all who suffered and especially all who died in Jerusalem were already rejected by God? Will any of those children who were eaten in the siege of Jerusalem be in the kingdom of God? Some of us may find it hard to think of God as acting like this but we have to deal fairly with Scripture. We cannot change the meaning of Scripture just because we don't like what it seems to say! That's what some other religious groups have done and we condemn them for doing it!

13. How could he end with the questions in Lamentations 5:19-22? Can you think of parallel passages elsewhere?

Lamentations 5:19-22: ¹⁹ "But you, O Lord, are king for ever,
and will rule to the end of time.

²⁰ Why have you abandoned us so long?

Will you ever remember us again?

²¹ Bring us back to you, Lord! Bring us back!

Restore our ancient glory.

²² Or have you rejected us for ever?

Is there no limit to your anger?" *Good News Bible: Today's English Version*

Why would Jeremiah end his prayer like this?

Almost every book in the Old Testament ends on some positive note. Is this a positive note? How would Jeremiah have defined God's anger? Shouldn't we always include the book of Lamentations when we talk about God's anger? Unless we believe that Jeremiah was deceived or a liar we have to read his words as suggesting that Yahweh was somehow involved with Judah's and Jerusalem's downfall.

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