

Lamentations 4 • The Beginning of Wisdom

Introduction

What is Lamentations doing in the middle of the books of the “great” prophets? To the left of it is Isaiah and Jeremiah, the greatest prophets of the time leading up to the exile of all Israel, to the right is Ezekiel and Daniel, the greatest prophets in the period of the exile, and right in the middle is Lamentations with its 5 little chapters. Why is it amongst the books of the major prophets? [No, it’s not just because most attribute its authorship to Jeremiah.] One way to look at it is that Isaiah and Jeremiah explain conditions **leading up** to judgment, Ezekiel and Daniel expound on the situation **after** judgment, but only Lamentations tells what it was like **during** judgment. Lamentations has been described as “the hinge on a great big door—small, but the crucial mechanism that allows the door to swing both ways”. Lamentations teaches how we should respond when we’ve experienced God’s judgment for the life-choices we’ve made and desire to be reconciled to Him. It’s a manual for the back-slidden.

Observation

Lamentations is not just 1 long poem repeating the same thing over and over—each chapter covers a distinct topic:

- **Chapter 1: Recognition.** Those having experienced God’s judgment are finally seeing with their eyes for the first time the truth of their spiritual condition that was the cause for judgment. Nowhere in Lamentations is the name of the nation or its ruler mentioned who conquered and enslaved them; they finally recognize they were just a tool of God’s judgment which was fully justified because of unfaithfulness.
- **Chapter 2: Acknowledgment.** Essentially this is the necessary next step after recognition, in this case acknowledgment of God’s judgment, its cause and purposes.
- **Chapter 3: Hope.** It is recognized that just as God and God alone is the author of judgment, God and God alone is the only source of mercy. It’s the beginning realization that everything has not yet come to an end and that there is still an opportunity to return to Him.
- **Chapter 5: Repentance.** The work of God’s judgment is completed. The goal of His judgment is not destruction but restoration.

In chapter 4 which we’re studying here, the theme is “The Beginning of Wisdom”. It is the point at which one learns from past mistakes, changes one’s behavior to incorporate those lessons into one’s life, and begins the process of firmly affixing one’s steps on God’s path leading to reconciliation.

¹How dark the gold has become,
How the pure gold has changed!
The sacred stones are poured out
At the corner of every street.
²The precious sons of Zion,
Weighed against fine gold,
How they are regarded as earthen jars,
The work of a potter’s hands!
³Even jackals offer the breast,
They nurse their young;
But the daughter of my people has
become cruel
Like ostriches in the wilderness.
⁴The tongue of the infant cleaves
To the roof of its mouth because of thirst;
The little ones ask for bread,
But no one breaks it for them.
⁵Those who ate delicacies
Are desolate in the streets;
Those reared in purple
Embrace ash pits.
⁶For the iniquity of the daughter of my
people

[Read v.1-6]

Q: What is the overall contrast being made? How has their faith been proved to be in the wrong thing?

A: It’s the contrast of the false security and faith placed in possessions (“gold”, “pure gold”, “sacred stones”, “precious stones”, “fine gold”, “delicacies”, “reared in purple”) that could not withstand God’s judgment (“regarded as earthen jars”, “become cruel”, “thirst”, hunger, “desolate”, “embrace ash pits”). They placed their trust in things rather than God and have now experienced the difference.

Q: Their sin is compared to that of Sodom in v.6. Why do you suppose that Sodom’s condition is called “sin” and their condition is called “iniquity”? Is there a difference?

A: The Hebrew word for “sin” means to miss the mark, another way of saying “way off course” from God’s ways. The word for “iniquity” implies the changing or twisting of a known standard. It’s someone that knows the course to begin with, but twists and changes it into something that suits their self.

Application: Is a “backslider” someone that is simply “missing the mark” or trying to redefine what they know to justify their choice/behavior?

Is greater than the sin of Sodom,
Which was overthrown as in a moment,
And no hands were turned toward her.

⁷Her consecrated ones were purer than
snow,
They were whiter than milk;
They were more ruddy in body than
corals,
Their polishing was like lapis lazuli.
⁸Their appearance is blacker than soot,
They are not recognized in the streets;
Their skin is shriveled on their bones,
It is withered, it has become like wood.

⁹Better are those slain with the sword
Than those slain with hunger;
For they pine away, being stricken
For lack of the fruits of the field.
¹⁰The hands of compassionate women
Boiled their own children;
They became food for them
Because of the destruction of the daughter
of my people.

¹¹The LORD has accomplished His wrath,
He has poured out His fierce anger;
And He has kindled a fire in Zion
Which has consumed its foundations.
¹²The kings of the earth did not believe,
Nor did any of the inhabitants of the
world,
That the adversary and the enemy
Could enter the gates of Jerusalem.

¹³Because of the sins of her prophets
And the iniquities of her priests,
Who have shed in her midst
The blood of the righteous;
¹⁴They wandered, blind, in the streets;
They were defiled with blood
So that no one could touch their
garments.
¹⁵“Depart! Unclean!” they cried of
themselves.

Point: The beginning of wisdom that leads the backslidden to see things as God sees them is to stop trying to redefine His ways to conform to their own lifestyle, but to actually change their life to conform to **HIM**.

[Read v.7-8]

Q: What was “purer than snow” that is now “blacker than soot”? What example is God expanding on?

A: “Her consecrated ones”. **BEFORE** engaging in iniquity—the twisting of God’s Word into something other than originally intended—they were faithful and obedient and therefore pure. The result of iniquity is to become spiritually unrecognizable. They have become as twisted as the ways of God they themselves twisted.

[Read v.9-10]

Q: What does “food” most often symbolize in the Bible?

A: God’s Word.

Q: How is the judgment of the destruction of earthly food a judgment of one’s spiritual condition?

A: Just as iniquity twisted God’s Word—their spiritual food—into something completely useless for their spiritual hunger, so God has withheld physical food. They trusted in the things of this world rather than the things of God, so the things of this world are literally failing to fulfill or even meet their needs.

Application: Do spiritual choices sometimes result in circumstances wherein horrific earthly choices have to be made? What is the difference between “judgment”, “testing”, and “persecution”?

[Read v.11-12]

Q: How was their trust misplaced?

A: They trusted in the physical city of Jerusalem—its foundations, walls and gates—rather than the spiritual city of Jerusalem intended to serve and worship God—a far greater strength and protection.

Q: Why was this just as great an example to the rest of the world as to the nation of Israel specifically?

A: No one thought it could actually be accomplished because ever since the conquest of Canaan, Jerusalem had withstood all efforts against it. There was a false belief on **EVERYONE’S** part that God was protecting something physical regardless of the spiritual condition of its inhabitants—now everyone was learning the truth.

[Read v.13-15]

Q: How far had they twisted God’s Word to justify their own behavior?

A: To the point of killing those that remained true to God. They so completely redefined what it meant to serve God that it resulted in their becoming “defiled”, unfit for the very presence and service of God.

Q: What does God’s Law teach regarding how to deal with something unclean or defiled?

A: It must be abandoned or separated. It cannot be allowed into any part

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“Depart, depart, do not touch!”
So they fled and wandered;
Men among the nations said,
“They shall not continue to dwell with
us.”

¹⁶The presence of the LORD has scattered
them,

He will not continue to regard them;
They did not honor the priests,
They did not favor the elders.

¹⁷Yet our eyes failed,
Looking for help was useless;
In our watching we have watched
For a nation that could not save.

¹⁸They hunted our steps
So that we could not walk in our streets;
Our end drew near,
Our days were finished
For our end had come.

¹⁹Our pursuers were swifter
Than the eagles of the sky;
They chased us on the mountains,
They waited in ambush for us in the
wilderness.

²⁰The breath of our nostrils, the LORD’S
anointed,
Was captured in their pits,
Of whom we had said, “Under his
shadow
We shall live among the nations.”

²¹Rejoice and be glad, O daughter of
Edom,
Who dwells in the land of Uz;
But the cup will come around to you as
well,
You will become drunk and make
yourself naked.

²²The punishment of your iniquity has
been completed, O daughter of Zion;
He will exile you no longer.
But He will punish your iniquity, O
daughter of Edom;
He will expose your sins!

of the temple, much less the very presence of God. It must be made pure
or clean again.

Application: *Have you ever known someone whose actions are undeniably
entrenched in sin, yet they vehemently deny that they’ve left the faith? Do you
see parallels with Paul’s actions to separate such people from the body of Christ?
When is such an action warranted?*

[Read v.16-20]

**Q: What are the 4 actions they experienced which caused them to finally
realize that this was God’s judgment for their iniquity?**

1. “scattered” (v.16)
2. “hunted” (v.18)
3. “chased” (v.19)
4. “captured” (v.20)

Q: What was their false belief that was shattered by these events?

A: They “had said, ‘Under his shadow we shall live among the nations.’”
In other words, they thought having an heir to David’s throne was
enough, that they didn’t actually have to **BE** like David.

Q: How do we know that they now see the error of their beliefs?

A: In v.16, they acknowledge that “*The presence of the LORD has
scattered...*”; that is, the very presence Whose shadow they thought it
was enough to be in has caused this.

Q: How is this the “beginning of wisdom” for the backslidden?

A: They clearly understand the cause and effect, that this has not come
about as a test of faith or persecution by man, but judgment for their
unfaithfulness. They understand that God is the source behind the
instruments used and this will lead to the realization it is with God, first
and foremost, that amends must be made.

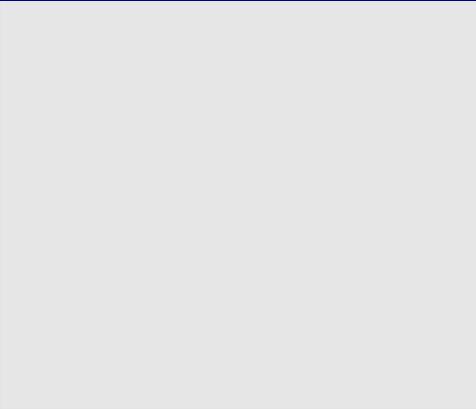
[Read v.21-22]

Q: What is Edom teaching us about this situation?

A: Like Israel who did not learn the lessons of God’s judgments against
other nations, so Edom is not learning the lesson of what has happened
to Israel. Some people think while God is occupied with someone else
that somehow that means they’re exempt when in reality it only means
that they’re squandering the opportunity to repent and avoid judgment
themselves.

Q: What is the good news conveyed in v.22?

A: Punishment does not go on forever for those working towards
reconciliation—the end is in sight.



Overall Application

- *How are you justifying some of your behavior, your “shortcomings”, your sins? Do you go to great lengths to justify them, particularly by twisting Scripture to fit what you want rather than what it plainly states?*
- *Have we blinded our self to what God Himself is doing by attributing it to the actions of someone else? Are you confident that your faith is being tested or that your unfaithfulness is being judged?*
- *How can we best pray for the backslidden? What’s the best course of action we can take in dealing with/assisting them in being reconciled to Christ?*

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