

# Lamentations 1 • When Recognition Finally Comes

## 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 backslidden.

## Observation

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

- **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 4: 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.
- **Chapter 5: Repentance.** The work of God’s judgment is completed. The goal of His judgment is not destruction but restoration.

In chapter 1 which we’re studying here, the theme is “Recognition”. It is the point at which one finally comes to accept that what has been happening to them in life has actually been brought about by God to get them to recognize their true, spiritual condition as the very first step toward reconciliation with Him. Where literal Israel was concerned, 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*.

<sup>1</sup>How lonely sits the city  
That was full of people!  
She has become like a widow  
Who was once great among the nations!  
She who was a princess among the  
provinces  
Has become a forced laborer!  
<sup>2</sup>She weeps bitterly in the night  
And her tears are on her cheeks;  
She has none to comfort her  
Among all her lovers.  
All her friends have dealt treacherously  
with her;  
They have become her enemies.

## [Read v.1-2]

### Q: Who is this specifically talking about?

A: In v.1 the reference to “*the city*” indicates this is specifically referencing Jerusalem.

**Point:** Throughout Scripture the emphasis and center of attention is far more focused on Jerusalem than the whole land of Israel. Ultimately we will all live in the literal “new Jerusalem” (Rev. 21:2), but in the mean time we all belong to the spiritual “Jerusalem above”. (Gal. 4:6; Heb. 11:22). The literal, historical Jerusalem teaches something about the greater, spiritual one to come.

For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come. (Hebrews 13:14)

### Q: What has taken place historically?

A: In the course of the final invasion by the King of Babylon, those remaining in the land fled to what they thought would be the safety and protection of Jerusalem. All but a very few of whom would perish through famine, pestilence and the sword.

**Q: Why was this not just devastating physically and historically, but even more so spiritually?**

A: The people thought the city's special association with the Lord, particularly because it held the Temple, would provide literal physical protection when, in reality, they had long ago forfeited such protection by their spiritual compromise. They did not immediately recognize that God was bringing about physical circumstances to mirror their true spiritual condition.

**Q: What are the contrasts noted here which have a dual meaning literally and spiritually?**

1. **"...once great among the nations"..."she has become like a widow"**. (v.1) Historically Judah's king—her head and husband, was taken away captive; spiritually Yahweh—the husband of the Jewish people departed from them to leave them in a state of widowhood.
2. **"...was a princess among the provinces has become a forced laborer!"** (v.1) At Israel's height, the nations all around were subordinate and annually paid tribute, a willing arrangement to be her servants; now she is in the worst condition possible, *"a forced laborer"*, a condition imposed against her will and paying nothing in return. Likewise, this is reflected spiritually in her original calling and stature, compared to now being forced against her will by God Himself to recognize what she has truly become both literally and spiritually—a slave.
3. **"Among all her lovers...She has none to comfort her"**. (v.2) Repeatedly God has referred to Israel's pursuit of other gods as an adulteress going after other lovers. (Eze. 23:5) In this time of judgment, those *"lovers"* could not provide *"comfort"* either literally and physically, nor spiritually.
4. **"...her friends...have become her enemies."** (v.2) The nations around her with whom she had formed false relationships all withdrew and acted treacherously when judgment came through Babylon. This false seduction not only played out literally, but spiritually as they were ultimately and completely compromised.
5. **Summary:** *"...like a widow..."*—no longer in a right relationship with the Lord, *"...a forced laborer..."*—no longer serving the Lord, *"...none to comfort..."*—no longer supported by what was allowed to replace the Lord, and *"...friends...have become her enemies..."*—betrayed by the very world with which they compromised. This is a picture of what it takes for someone who has been seduced by the world to recognize the truth about their spiritual condition.

**Application:** *A relationship with the world which is allowed to supplant a biblical relationship with God results in judgment from God designed to precisely expose the truth of that behavior.*

<sup>3</sup>Judah has gone into exile under affliction  
And under harsh servitude;  
She dwells among the nations,  
But she has found no rest;  
All her pursuers have overtaken her  
In the midst of distress.

<sup>4</sup>The roads of Zion are in mourning  
Because no one comes to the appointed  
feasts.

All her gates are desolate;  
Her priests are groaning,  
Her virgins are afflicted,

**[Read v.3-5]**

**Q: Who are the three main figures being compared and contrasted in these verses?**

A: "Judah" (v.3), "Zion" (v.4) and Judah's "adversaries" (v.5).

**Q: What has happened to Judah?**

A: Having been a spiritual slave in service to other gods for such a long time, she is now a literal slave in service to other nations. The spiritual and the literal have been reconciled to simultaneously become the same thing.

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And she herself is bitter.  
<sup>5</sup>Her adversaries have become her  
masters,  
Her enemies prosper;  
For the LORD has caused her grief  
Because of the multitude of her  
transgressions;  
Her little ones have gone away  
As captives before the adversary.

**Q: How does the fact that “Jerusalem” is here referred to as “Zion” serve to help us understand what has happened to “Zion”?**

A: In Scripture, “Jerusalem” refers to the earthly city which is compromised and sinful, whereas as “Zion” is the designation used when acting in a right and faithful relationship to God as His heavenly city. What has happened is that no one is coming to fulfill the obligations of the rituals of the Law (“no one comes to the appointed feasts...her gates are desolate...her priests are groaning”) because of unfaithfulness (“her virgins are afflicted”). The greater tragedy being expressed here is that literal desolation is the direct result of spiritual desolation.

**Q: What is taking place with the enemies and adversaries?**

A: Both a literal and spiritual role reversal.

**Q: To what is all of this specifically attributed? What is the causal source for what has taken place with each of these figures?**

A: “...because of the multitude of her transgressions...” (v.5)

**Q: Why might it be significant that the term selected is “transgressions” rather than, say, “sins”?**

A: The underlying Hebrew word “*pasha*” describes what happens when there is a rebellion or revolt. It expresses the fundamental idea of what takes place when there is a civil or religious breach between two parties. In other words, having entered into a covenant relationship with God, this expresses a complete rebellion attempting to break that covenant agreement. This is describing the intentional abandonment of God’s Word and ways and what was expected from a “covenant” relationship.

**Application:** Rebellion to our covenant relationship with the Lord reverses one’s position compared to the world’s and invokes a profound response of mourning on the part of the Lord.

<sup>6</sup>All her majesty  
Has departed from the daughter of Zion;  
Her princes have become like deer  
That have found no pasture;  
And they have fled without strength  
Before the pursuer.  
<sup>7</sup>In the days of her affliction and  
homelessness  
Jerusalem remembers all her precious  
things  
That were from the days of old,  
When her people fell into the hand of the  
adversary  
And no one helped her.  
The adversaries saw her,  
They mocked at her ruin.  
<sup>8</sup>Jerusalem sinned greatly,  
Therefore she has become an unclean  
thing.  
All who honored her despise her  
Because they have seen her nakedness;  
Even she herself groans and turns away.  
<sup>9</sup>Her uncleanness was in her skirts;  
She did not consider her future.  
Therefore she has fallen astonishingly;  
She has no comforter.

**[Read v.6-10]**

**Q: So what is actually being specifically compared and contrasted here?**

A: Zion and Jerusalem. As stated before, the different names for the same city reflect spiritual faithfulness—“Zion”, and unfaithfulness—“Jerusalem”.

**Q: According to v. 7, what is the personal situation in which unfaithful “Jerusalem” now finds herself?**

A: “Jerusalem remembers all her precious things”—that is, the memory of the prosperity and blessings which previously came from faithfulness which have all subsequently been lost.

**Point:** In order to restore faithfulness, God must take the unfaithful to a place where they finally recognize not only how good things once were, but how far they have fallen from them.

**Q: According to v.8, what characterizes their current condition?**

A: “...she has become an unclean thing”. This is the biblical way of stating that one’s spiritual condition has become completely unsuitable not just for God’s service, but to even come before Him. Instead of living **in** the world but not **of** the world, they have **become** the world.

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“See, O LORD, my affliction,  
For the enemy has magnified himself!”  
<sup>10</sup>The adversary has stretched out his  
hand  
Over all her precious things,  
For she has seen the nations enter her  
sanctuary,  
The ones whom You commanded  
That they should not enter into Your  
congregation.

<sup>11</sup>All her people groan seeking bread;  
They have given their precious things for  
food  
To restore their lives themselves.  
“See, O LORD, and look,  
For I am despised.”  
<sup>12</sup>“Is it nothing to all you who pass this  
way?  
Look and see if there is any pain like my  
pain  
Which was severely dealt out to me,  
Which the LORD inflicted on the day of  
His fierce anger.

<sup>13</sup>From on high He sent fire into my  
bones,  
And it prevailed over them.  
He has spread a net for my feet;  
He has turned me back;  
He has made me desolate,  
Faint all day long.  
<sup>14</sup>The yoke of my transgressions is bound;  
By His hand they are knit together.  
They have come upon my neck;  
He has made my strength fail.  
The LORD has given me into the hands  
Of those against whom I am not able to  
stand.  
<sup>15</sup>The LORD has rejected all my strong  
men  
In my midst;  
He has called an appointed time against  
me  
To crush my young men;  
The LORD has trodden as in a wine press  
The virgin daughter of Judah.

**Q: What is the meaning in v.9, “Her uncleanness was in her skirts”?**

A: God often uses the image of adulterous and/or promiscuous physical behavior to teach the full meaning of unfaithful spiritual behavior.

**Q: What is meant by “all her precious things” in v.10?**

A: It refers to all the spiritual things entrusted to God’s people which were intended to outwardly testify to their true inward spiritual condition. Having given themselves to the world spiritually, the things of God have been compromised literally.

**Application:** Just as adulterous behavior renders the marriage relationship both legally and spiritually empty and without credibility, so unfaithfulness renders the same in our ministry and testimony where our Christianity is concerned.

**[Read v.11-12]**

**Q: What is different about who is being referenced here?**

A: It is not just the priests, Levites or ruling class, but “all her people”. We have arrived at the lowest, common denominator to show that **everyone** is to blame, not just a select few.

**Q: What is particularly revealing about the statement that their ultimate condition is “pain...severely dealt out to me, which the Lord inflicted...” (v.12)**

A: They recognize that what has taken place literally by the hand of Babylon and their enemies is actually at the hand of God.

**Observation:** Nowhere in Lamentations is Babylon ever mentioned; this book is about the recognition of what is really taking place and by Whose authority, Babylon and Judah’s enemies merely being a tool of God’s judgment.

**Application:** The ultimate goal of spiritual recognition of those in rebellion to God is that their “bottoming out” experience, although coming about by worldly forces, is but a tool in the greater hand of God’s judgment.

**[Read v.13-15]**

**Q: How are these verses a more detailed extension of the previous verses?**

A: Having established in v.11-12 that God is the true source of judgment behind all the earthly things taking place, we are now presented with a list of what is directly **attributable** to God.

**Q: According to v.13, what has God done?**

1. “**He sent fire into my bones, and it prevailed over them**”. God has been working and convicting internally to the point that they became conscious of their spiritual condition.
2. “**He has spread a net for my feet**”. This alludes to how birds and wild beasts were captured in that time, an acknowledgment that everything that came about at the hands of the Babylonians was laid out in advance by the Lord.
3. “**He has turned me back**”. No longer continuing according to their own path and desires, the situation has resulted in their finally returning back from the wrong, ultimate destination.
4. “**He has made me desolate...faint all day long**”. It took the worst kind of “bottoming out” experience in what was taking place historically and literally to realize what they had done to themselves spiritually. They have finally arrive at a point where they can no longer continue in their

own strength, even if they wanted to.

**Point:** *It is God who has been working on every level, both internal and external, to bring about right recognition of what is truly taking place.*

**Q: Keeping in line with the discussion to this point, what is significant about the yoke and bound hands in v.14?**

A: The physical and literal continue to teach about the spiritual—the true situation as God sees it. Whereas they are being taken captive into slavery literally by the Babylonians, the acknowledgment here is that the true source of this is personal unfaithfulness for having rebelled—“*my transgressions*”—from their covenant agreement. Literal slavery is actually the result of spiritual slavery.

**Q: What is basically being expressed in v.15?**

A: All efforts out of personal strength have completely failed.

**Q: What might be significant about the “wine press”?**

A: It is a repeated scriptural image of final judgment. (Is. 63:2; Joel 3:13; Rev. 14:19, 19:15) It speaks of a judgment from which there is no escape. The consequences for their “*transgressions*” can no longer be avoided.

**Application:** *God brings about true recognition of how He has been working on every internal and external level to see one’s true spiritual condition.*

**[Read v.16-17]**

<sup>16</sup>For these things I weep;  
My eyes run down with water;  
Because far from me is a comforter,  
One who restores my soul.  
My children are desolate  
Because the enemy has prevailed.”

<sup>17</sup>Zion stretches out her hands;  
There is no one to comfort her;  
The LORD has commanded concerning  
Jacob  
That the ones round about him should be  
his adversaries;  
Jerusalem has become an unclean thing  
among them.

**Q: What is the most repeated word/phrase in this chapter?**

1. “...*She has no one to comfort her...*” (v.2)
2. “...*She has no comforter...*” (v.9)
3. “...*There is no one to comfort her...*” (v.17)
4. “...*There is no one to comfort me...*” (v.21)

**Q: Within the context of what has taken place in this chapter, what might be the greater spiritual meaning of having no comforter?**

A: The principal comforter of God’s people is God Himself. He has brought about a condition by which no one—not even “*my children*” (v.15)—can bring personal peace so that the backslidden will recognize the need for reconciliation to God and God alone. Even “*the ones round about*” (v.17)—earthly relationships—are of no use.

**Point:** *The point at which backsliders finally turn back is like that of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:11-32) who come to a point where they realize that returning to the Father alone is the only thing that can make a difference.*

**Q: What might be telling that Israel is here called “Jacob”?**

A: Just as “*Jerusalem*” and “*Zion*” refer to the worldly vs. spiritual character of the city, “*Jacob*” and “*Israel*” likewise refer to the worldly vs. spiritual character of His people. He calls them “*Jacob*” when they act in the character of Jacob in his old life, and “*Israel*” when he is renamed and living a changed life going forward after his personal encounter with God.

**Q: What is telling that “Jerusalem has become an unclean thing among them”?**

A: It is the second time (v.8 & 17) that this issue has been raised, which is the biblical way of stating that in this backslidden state they are not just disqualified from right service and worship of God, but have destroyed their personal witness to all around them.

**Application:** *God brings about personal recognition that there is no viable alternative except Him alone.*

<sup>18</sup>“The LORD is righteous;  
For I have rebelled against His command;  
Hear now, all peoples,  
And behold my pain;  
My virgins and my young men  
Have gone into captivity.

<sup>19</sup>I called to my lovers, but they deceived me;

My priests and my elders perished in the city

While they sought food to restore their strength themselves.

<sup>20</sup>See, O LORD, for I am in distress;

My spirit is greatly troubled;  
My heart is overturned within me,  
For I have been very rebellious.  
In the street the sword slays;  
In the house it is like death.

**[Read v.18-20]**

**Q: How have we finally come the right recognition of the true cause and effect for experiencing God’s judgment?**

A: It is the dual contrast of realizing, “*The LORD is righteous*” (v.18) and “*I have been very rebellious*” (v.20).

**Q: What was specifically the object of rebellion?**

A: “*For I have rebelled against His command*” (v.18)—rebellion against obedience to God’s Word and ways.

**Q: What is the greater point of the list of people—virgins, young men, lovers, priests and elders—in terms of what has taken place?**

A: Because of spiritual rebellion against the Father in heaven, in turn an earthly type of rebellion has occurred in every earthly relationship in order to illustrate what is actually taking place spiritually.

**Application:** *There is finally recognition not just of the spiritual superiority and authority of the Lord, but the real behavior of rebellion to His Word which is the true root cause of everything that has been subsequently experienced.*

<sup>21</sup>They have heard that I groan;

There is no one to comfort me;  
All my enemies have heard of my calamity;

They are glad that You have done it.  
Oh, that You would bring the day which You have proclaimed,

That they may become like me.

<sup>22</sup>Let all their wickedness come before You;

And deal with them as You have dealt with me

For all my transgressions;

For my groans are many and my heart is faint.”

**[Read v.21-22]**

**Q: How is this actually a prayer for spiritual restoration?**

A: It seeks to restore the spiritual state of the backslidden back to experiencing God as faithful and obedient and the end of the wicked as God’s tool of judgment back to experiencing the consequences of wickedness.

**Application:** *The only cure for disobedience is obedience; the only cure for unfaithfulness is faithfulness.*

**Overall Application**

*Why does God go to such extremes with the backslidden?*

*But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world. (1 Corinthians 11:31-32)*