

Preliminary Thoughts on Lamentations 2009 April 21st for 20th

Lamentations is an entire book of, well, laments. There are many famous quotes here that we will encounter as we go through. Some of the things you've heard in church all your life are laments.

It is thought that Jeremiah is the author of Lamentations and that it gives structure and a degree of formality to the sorrowful worship of the exiles whose Jerusalem had been destroyed and whose established place of worship had been desecrated and looted.

Several traditions apparently use the whole book of Lamentations for specific occasions, such as the Catholics for parts of Holy Week.

Lamentations 1:1 – 6

2009 April 22nd for 21st

“How deserted lies the city, once so full of people!
How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations!
She who was queen among the provinces has now become a slave.”

So begins the lament about the conquered and deserted Jerusalem.

She is bitter. All her friends have become enemies. Judah suffers harsh labor in exile. No one relieves her distress. Even the roads mourn. There are no longer any feasts held here for people to travel to attend.

“The Lord has brought her grief because of her many sins.
Her children have gone into exile, captive before the foe.

“All the splendor has departed from the Daughter of Zion.
Her princes are like deer that find no pasture;
in weakness they have fled before the pursuer.”

Lamentations 1:7 – 14

2009 April 22nd for 22nd

While wandering and afflicted, Jerusalem remembered the treasures she once had. But, she had sinned. When she fell to the enemy there was no one to rescue. The enemies laughed.

“All who honored her despise her, for they have seen her nakedness;
she herself groans and turns away.

“Her filthiness clung to her skirts; she did not consider her future.”

The enemies carried away all the treasures, all the things that were forbidden for even the Israelites to look at or touch. Now they are bargaining for enough food even to stay alive. She is despised. There is no suffering like this, like this that God afflicted in his anger.

“From on high he sent fire, sent it down into my bones.
He spread a net for my feet and turned me back.
He made me desolate, faint all the day long.”

She is bound, yoked by sin.

Lamentations 1:15 – 22

2009 April 22nd for 23rd

“In his winepress the Lord has trampled the Virgin Daughter of Judah.” All of the warriors were rejected, crushed. The enemy has prevailed, no one is rescued. There is no comfort.

God is righteous. The people rebelled. “My young men and maidens have gone into exile.” Even the priests and elders die in the streets looking for food.

“See, O Lord, how distressed I am! I am in torment within,
and in my heart I am disturbed, for I have been most rebellious.
Outside, the sword bereaves; inside, there is only death.”

The enemies rejoice at what God has done.

“Let all their wickedness come before you; deal with them
as you have dealt with me because of all my sins.
My groans are many and my heart is faint.”

Lamentations 2:1 – 7

2009 April 24th for 24th

Jerusalem was God’s footstool, but in his day of anger he forgot this. He threw them down from heaven to earth and destroyed their strongholds. They were dishonored. They were burned up in the fire. They all lamented. All of the gardens and meeting places were gone. All the festivals and Sabbaths were forgotten.

“The Lord has rejected his altar and abandoned his sanctuary.”

“... in his fierce anger he has spurned both king and priest.”

Lamentations 2:8 – 15

2009 April 24th for 27th

God has torn down everything. Like a construction survey he measured it all and destroyed it all. Everyone in authority is in exile, “the law is no more, and her prophets no longer find visions from the Lord.”

The elders are in sackcloth sprinkling ashes on their heads. All are silent or weeping. Infants and mothers are faint. There is no comfort. “Your wound is as deep as the sea. Who can heal you?”

“The visions of your prophets were false and worthless; they did not expose your sin to ward off your captivity. The oracles they gave you were false and misleading.”

“All who pass your way clap their hands at you; they scoff and shake their heads at the Daughter of Jerusalem; ‘Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of the whole earth?’”

Lamentations 2:16 – 22

2009 April 24th for 28th

“All your enemies open their mouths wide against you; they scoff and gnash their teeth and say, ‘We have swallowed her up. This is the day we have waited for; we have lived to see it.’”

Without pity God overthrew the city. Old and young were slain in the streets, lying in the dust. The tears of the mourners were like a river. The despair was like the watch in the middle of the night.

“Look, O Lord, and consider: Whom have you ever treated like this? should women eat their offspring, the children they have cared for? Should priest and prophet be killed in the sanctuary of the Lord?”

“As you summon to a feast day, so you summoned against me terrors on every side. In the day of the Lord’s anger no one escaped or survived; those I cared for and reared, my enemy has destroyed.”

Lamentations 3:1 – 24

2009 April 25th for 29th

The lamenter feels the anguish personally.

“I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of his wrath. He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light; indeed, he has turned his hand against me again and again, all day long.

“He has made my skin and my flesh grow old and has broken my bones.

He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship.
He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead.

“He has walled me in so I cannot escape; he has weighed me down with chains.
Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer.
He has barred my way with blocks of stone; he has made my paths crooked.

“Like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in hiding,
he dragged me from the path and mangled me and left me without help.
He drew his bow and made me the target for his arrows.

“He pierced my heart with arrows from his quiver.
I became the laughingstock of all my people; they mock me in song all day long.
He has filled me with bitter herbs and sated me with gall.

“He has broken my teeth with gravel; he has trampled me in the dust.
I have been deprived of peace; I have forgotten what prosperity is.
So I say, ‘My splendor is gone and all that I had hoped from the Lord.’

“I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall.
I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me.
Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:

[And this is a very famous lamentation, which we have set to music in our own time:]

“Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.
They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.
I say to myself, ‘The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.’”

Lamentations 3:25 – 48

2009 April 25th for 30th

There is still hope.

“The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him;
it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.
It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is young.”

He should offer his cheek to one who would strike him, bury his face in the dust, sit quietly. God does not punish forever. His love is unending; he will eventually show compassion. God will not stand for injustice, for depriving men of their rights.

“Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it?”

All blessing and calamity come from this God. Who can complain? Let us confess our rebellion. We are beaten, ground into the dirt. “You have made us scum and refuse among the nations.” We are humiliated.

Lamentations 3:49 – 66

2009 April 25th for May 1st

“My eyes will flow unceasingly, without relief,
until the Lord looks down from heaven and sees.
What I see brings grief to my soul because of all the women of my city.

“Those who were my enemies without cause hunted me like a bird.
They tried to end my life in a pit and threw stones at me;
the waters closed over my head, and I thought I was about to be cut off.

“I called on your name, O Lord, from the depths of the pit.
You heard my plea: ‘Do not close your ears to my cry for relief.’
You came near when I called you, and you said, ‘Do not fear.’

“O Lord, you took up my case; you redeemed my life.
You have seen, O Lord, the wrong done to me. Uphold my cause!
You have seen the depth of their vengeance, all their plots against me.

“O Lord, you have heard their insults, all their plots against me --
what my enemies whisper and mutter against me all day long.
Look at them! Sitting or standing, they mock me in their songs.

“Pay them back what they deserve, O Lord, for what their hands have done.
Put a veil over their hearts, and may your curse be on them!
Pursue them in anger and destroy them from under the heavens of the Lord.”

Lamentations 4:1 – 12

2009 April 27th for May 4th

The people of Israel are no longer valuable like gold and precious stones. They are like clay.

“Even jackals offer their breasts to nurse their young
but my people have become heartless like ostriches in the desert.

“Because of thirst the infant’s tongue sticks to the roof of its mouth;
the children beg for bread, but no one gives it to them.

“Those who once ate delicacies are destitute in the streets.
Those nurtured in purple now lie on ash heaps.”

The punishment here has been severe, greater than that of Sodom which fell in an instant with no one to help it. Those who were light skinned and upstanding are now ruddy, like soot. “Their skin has shriveled on their bones; it has become as dry as a stick.”

“Those killed by the sword are better off than those who die of famine; racked with hunger, they waste away for lack of food from the field.

“With their own hands compassionate women have cooked their own children, who became their food when my people were destroyed.”

No one believed that an enemy could overthrow Jerusalem, but God “has given full vent to his wrath” and the city is burned to the foundations.

Lamentations 4:13 – 22

2009 April 27th for May 5th

Why has all this disaster occurred in Jerusalem?

“But it happened because of the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests, who shed within her the blood of the righteous.

“Now they grope through the streets like men who are blind. They are so defiled with blood that no one dares to touch their garments.”

“The Lord himself has scattered them; he no longer watches over them. The priests are shown no honor, the elders no favor.”

They were scattered. Their end was near. They were overpowered.

But watch out Edom. Zion’s punishment will end but, “O Daughter of Edom, he will punish your sin and expose your wickedness.”

Lamentations 5

2009 April 27th for May 6th

The last laments are a prayer from the depths of distress.

“Remember, O Lord, what has happened to us; look, and see our disgrace. Our inheritance has been turned over to aliens, our homes to foreigners. We have become orphans and fatherless, our mothers like widows. We must buy the water we drink; our wood can be had only at a price. Those who pursue us are at our heels; we are weary and find no rest. We submitted to Egypt and Assyria to get enough bread. Our fathers sinned and are no more, and we bear their punishment. Slaves rule over us, and there is none to free us from their hands.

We get our bread at the risk of our lives because of the sword in the desert.
Our skin is hot as an oven, feverish from hunger.
Women have been ravished in Zion, and virgins in the towns of Judah.
Princes have been hung up by their hands; elders are shown no respect.
Young men toil at the millstones; boys stagger under loads of wood.
The elders are gone from the city gate; the young men have stopped their music.
Joy is gone from our hearts; our dancing has turned to mourning.
The crown has fallen from our head. Woe to us, for we have sinned!
Because of this our hearts are faint, because of these things our eyes grow dim
for Mount Zion, which lies desolate, with jackals prowling over it.
“You, O Lord, reign forever; your throne endures from generation to generation.
Why do you always forget us? Why do you forsake us so long?
Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may return; renew our days as of old
unless you have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure.”

Concluding Thoughts on Lamentations 2009 April 29th for May 7th

Sunday I attended a Sunday school class. Being involved in the music of the church where we rehearse during the Sunday School hour, this is something I rarely do. It was a normal Sunday school class: they were worried about what God was telling them, what they would study next, how to be more Christian. People older than I am (53) seem to do this in their Sunday School classes universally, as if they had been trained to do this all their lives. People younger than I am don't seem to go to classes. People older than I am wonder why they don't.

I had my finger in Lamentations 1:

“All who honored her despise her, for they have seen her nakedness;
she herself groans and turns away.

“Her filthiness clung to her skirts; she did not consider her future.”

I was ready with my complaint that there's a whole lot of the Bible, like this, that we never hear or hear about in church. Why is it, I would ask, that our Bible has been sanitized and euphemised so that we can't see that these were real people in the real world with real problems like we have now? Why, I would ask, is our culture built more around Queen Victoria's standards of circumspect, leave-any-feeling-out, than it is around the Bible? These two issues are related, of course.

But, as usual, I didn't wade in with my out-of-the-box complaints. (This is a play on words. The class is named “out of the box” though you would only recognize this from the sometimes rearranged furniture.) After all, these are good people trying to be decent, good, trying to expand themselves in the right directions, towards perfection, all the things we're taught to do and be.

Then Kyron Millard preached in the service. This is the second time he has filled in during our transitional period. He preached from the first half of Micah 6 which ends with the famous Micah 6:8:

“He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God?”

That verse is famous. It has even been set to music and we sing it in church. The back story is pretty hair raising, however, not something we sing about in church. In a family squabble between God and his people Israel, God brings up that embarrassing series of events leading up to when they were ready to finally cross the Jordan when Moses was not going with them. Forty years in the wilderness and they were ready to cross except for one thing, none of the new generation had been circumcised. They had a big circumcision right there. The place was called “hill of foreskins” and that wasn’t the only part of the story that was detailed. We also heard about the prophet Balaam and his talking ass.

I had to congratulate Kyron on bringing us parts of the scripture that we’ve otherwise ignored, or weren’t even aware were there, due to the euphemisms in translation, and in acculturation.

If I had complained in Sunday School I would have complained too soon.

If I had passed through Micah in this series already (which I haven’t), I would have certainly missed this. I just would have said, “God recalls all the wandering in the desert with Moses and Aaron and Miriam and then there’s this famous verse....”

Lamentations, like Jeremiah and Isaiah and some of the Psalms, deals with all of human emotion and activity, not just those approved for church-like behaviors and civilized consumption. It is a tragedy that God has not only turned his back on his people but has actively worked against them and brought death and destruction on them. This is the same God who loves you now more than you can understand or possibly imagine. This horror and terror are the forms of punishment on his very chosen people, for their unfaithfulness.

Is everyone OK with all this?

When they report death and destruction, famine and siege, conquest and exile, they don’t hold back any detail. No stiff upper lip here. No saying, “Well there’s nothing we can do about it so just tolerate it and don’t make a fuss.” God’s people who he owned were *destroyed*. Many of them were *dead*. They are strewn around the streets like refuse. Mothers had eaten their own children, (also God’s people). Young folks had been hacked to pieces. All the treasures of the culture had been shamelessly and irreverently handled and carried off to be minor treasures to someone else’s culture. (And what’s worse, this was symbolic of the impotence of the God whose temple had been ransacked.) All the elders, religions and civil, had been slaughtered. What was left of Israel was so dark and scarred and burnt that you wouldn’t recognize her. She

had soiled herself. Foreign observers who didn't recoil in horror were ashamed that they hadn't. Others jeered. They seemed to be saying, "What about that great God who would establish you forever and protect you from everything and keep you in peace?"

But the survivors were certainly talking, wailing from the depths of their despair.

Those are the lamentations.

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