



Lamentations

Video Transcript

Introduction

00:00-02:21

The book of Lamentations. It's a unique book in the Old Testament that contains five poems from an anonymous author who survived and is now reflecting back on the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem and the destruction and the exile that followed. Remember the whole story from the book of 2 Kings.

The fall of Jerusalem into exile was the most horrendous catastrophe in Israel's history up to this point. So remember, God had promised Abraham the land. He'd given David victory to make Jerusalem Israel's capital, and from David came the royal line of kings. You had God's presence there in the temple. That's where the priests maintained the rituals of Israel's worship. And after 500 years of all of this history, in the summer of 587 B.C., the city fell to Babylon. It was all decimated and gone. And so the book of Lamentations is a memorial to the pain and confusion of the Israelites that followed this destruction.

Now, the lament poems found here are not unique in the Bible. There's lots of them in the book of Psalms, and these biblical poems of lament, they do a number of things. They're a form of protest. They're a way of drawing everybody's attention, including God's attention, to the horrible things that happen in this world that should not be tolerated. They're a way of processing emotion. So in these poems, God's people vent their anger and dismay at the ruin caused by people's sin and selfishness. And these poems are a place to voice confusion. Suffering makes us ask questions about God's character and promises, and none of this is looked down on in the Bible, just the opposite. These poems of lament give a sacred dignity to human suffering. And so these human words of grief that are addressed to God have now become part of God's word to his people.

The design of these five poems is very intentional; it's part of the book's message. So chapters 1-4 are called acrostics, which means alphabet poems. Each poetic verse begins with a new letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which is made up of 22 letters. Now this very ordered and linear structure, it's in stark contrast to the disorder of the pain and confused grief that's explored in these poems. So it's like Israel's suffering is explored A to Z and is trying to express something that is inexpressible.

Chapters 1 and 2 each have one verse per letter, giving them a really similar design, but the themes are very different.

Chapter 1

02:22-02:56

So chapter 1 focuses on the grief and shame of a figure called Lady Zion. The poet personifies the city of Jerusalem as a widow, also called the daughter of Zion, and she sits alone. She's bereaved of her loved ones, devastated, no one comes to comfort her. It's a very powerful metaphor.

And then Lady Zion speaks. She calls on the Lord to notice her fate. And through this image, the poet, he's showing that the city's destruction brought a level of psychological trauma on the Israelites that can only be expressed as the experience of a funeral and the death of a loved one.

Chapter 2

02:57-03:51

Chapter 2 focuses on the fall of Jerusalem and how it was a consequence of Israel's sin and was brought about by God's wrath, which is a key word in this poem. Now, it's important to remember that in the Bible, God's wrath is not spontaneous, volatile anger. The biblical poets and prophets, they used this word to talk about God's justice.

So Israel had entered a covenant agreement with God, and for centuries they'd been violating it by worshipping other gods, perpetrating injustice, oppressing the poor. And so yes, God is slow to anger, but he eventually does get angry at human evil, and he will bring his just anger in the form of punishment.

In the case of Jerusalem, this involved allowing Babylon to come and conquer the city. And so this poem is acknowledging that God's wrath is justified, but this doesn't keep the poet from lamenting and asking God to show compassion once again.

Chapter 3

03:52-04:58

Chapter 3 breaks this design pattern by having three verses per letter, so it's the longest poem in the book. And the voice is that of a lonely man speaking out of his suffering and grief as a representative of the whole people. And what's interesting is that this chapter is full of language that's drawn from other parts of the Old Testament, from the laments of Job and from other important lament psalms, and even from the suffering servant poems in Isaiah.

And the poet sees his hardship as a form of God's justice like chapter 2 said, but paradoxically, this is what gives the poet hope. And it leads him to offer the only hopeful words in the whole book: "Because of the Lord's covenant faithfulness, we do not perish. His mercies never fail; they're new every morning. How great is your faithfulness, O God. So I say to myself, 'The Lord is my inheritance, therefore I will put my hope in him.'"

So the poet reasons if God is consistent enough to bring his justice on human evil, then he'll also be consistent with his covenant promise to not allow evil to get the final word. And so for this poet, God's judgment is the seedbed of hope for the future.

Chapter 4

04:59-05:51

Chapter 4 goes back to the same alphabet structure as chapters 1 and 2, and it's a vivid and disturbing depiction of the two-year siege in Jerusalem. And it contrasts how things used to be in Jerusalem of the past, and how terrible they became in the siege. So children used to laugh and play in the streets, but now they beg for food. The wealthy used to eat lavish meals, but now they eat whatever they can find in the dirt. And the royal leaders used to be full of splendor, but now they're famished and dirty and unrecognizable. And the anointed king from the line of David has been captured and dragged away.

So the poem's power comes from the shock of these contrasts, and it's exploring the depth of the suffering that Israel brought on itself.

Chapter 5

05:52-06:50

Now, the final poem is unique because it breaks the design pattern. It's the same length as all of the other alphabet poems, but the alphabet order is gone. It's like the poet can't hold it together anymore, and his grief has exploded back into chaos.

The poem is a communal prayer for God's mercy. Israel begs God not to ignore their suffering or abandon them, and the poem offers a long list of all of the different kinds of people who were devastated by the fall of the city. They ask God not to forget these people, and they lament on behalf of others, giving voice to their pain. Suffering in silence is just not a virtue in this book. God's people are not asked to deny their emotions, but voice their protest to vent their feelings and pour it all out before God.

The book ends with something of a paradox. The poet acknowledges that God is the eternal King of the world, but also that Israel's circumstances make them feel like God is nowhere to be found. And so the final words of the book leave this tension totally unresolved. It asks, "unless you've totally rejected us"—and the book ends.

Conclusion

06:51-07:15

The poet doesn't offer a nice, neat conclusion, much like our own experiences of pain and suffering. The story of the Bible doesn't end here, but this very important book shows us how lament and prayer and grief are a crucial part of the journey of faith of God's people in a broken world. And that's what the book of Lamentations is all about.