



Lady Zion and her lost children

Enduring suffering alongside faith

CALNE FREE CHURCH

John Lewis | Daily Devotionals | During the Covid19 lockdown

Welcome

Dear Friends,

It took me a while to find it too. Tucked away between the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel is a short book of five poetic laments composed after the city of Jerusalem fell to invading Babylonian armies in 586BC. The leaders and many of the people were marched six hundred miles away into exile. It was disaster and suffering on a massive scale and Lamentations is the cry of the mourners at the funeral of a city once known as 'the joy of the whole earth'.

We turn away in horror and disgust at the horrors of the holocaust, the mass genocide of Pol Pot's regime, or the more recent destruction of Raqqa, with all its human suffering and ask the age-old questions about why these things should be and how God acts amidst such acute suffering. The fall of Jerusalem was loss and carnage on a mass scale. Starvation, cannibalism and the murder of priests shows the loss of human worth and all normal human values as we see a description of the depths of human suffering.

Lamentations is not an easy read but it shows how we may be directed towards God rather than away from Him in the midst of suffering. It doesn't dodge the realities of guilt or the divine realities of judgement but it does keep our attention on the God who loves his people and who ultimately enters into our suffering in the Person of Jesus Christ.

In this devotional, there will be a chapter to read, a message for any children in your house and a section where you can go deeper, if you wish to further study this subject. The readings are a bit longer than previously, but even so, the study should only take about 15 mins and can be done with all your household. Continue to ask yourself the question, at the end of each study: "What does this show me about God?"

I pray this will be a blessing to you and all in your house during this time.

Prayer:

You may like to pray at the start of this study:

Heavenly Father,

We confess that we have sinned and done many wrong things before you. We thank you that our Lord Jesus entered our sinful and broken world to live a life of perfect obedience and then suffered and died on the cross to pay the price for all my sin. We praise you that He rose again, conquering sin and death so that we may have hope. Help us to live lives of thankfulness and hope of eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Reading 1

Lamentations 1:16-22 □

Children's questions/activities: Have you ever felt really sad and cried until your eyes were full of tears? What sort of things make you cry or very sad? These people cried because they had not obeyed and trusted God and so trouble had come upon them. Find an old hankie and a marker pen and write on it the words of Rev 21:4. Who is this promise for?

It's a picture of utter desolation and distress. From v12 on, it's as though Lady Zion (Jerusalem) speaks of her calamity and loss through a veil of tears. She feels the weight of her sins as though they have been bound together and hung round her neck (v14). She knows the Lord is righteous, that she has been rebellious (v18, 20) and that she has been dealt with as she deserved (v22), though she wishes the same on her enemies.

How do you reconcile the statement that it is the Lord who has 'summoned an army against me' (v15) with the understanding that 'the Lord is righteous' (v18)? What reasons are given for the suffering and horror that has suddenly come on God's chosen people?

What questions and cries might you expect from a believer experiencing great tragedy or suffering in their life and trying to reconcile their faith with their suffering?

Think this through: We are not meant to take this problem of suffering lightly. Here we are confronted with a situation that shows the awful consequences of sin and rejection of God as well as God's wrath (steady opposition) against sin, resulting in judgement. We see that God's judgement can operate through human beings who themselves are guilty of the most appalling wickedness and cruelty, even against the innocent. Throughout this book God appears to remain silent, His voice is not heard apart from a briefly remembered word (3:57) so we must be prepared for the 'sound of silence' as we wrestle with the issues of suffering set against the truth of God's sovereignty, love and justice. In this fallen and broken world, suffering affects everyone, so that 'bad things happen to good people' too.

Prayer ideas: Praise God for his sovereignty over all things, that He does what is right and is fair and just in all his ways. Give thanks for the cross of Jesus Christ, where God's love and justice meets and He takes the punishment for our sins on Himself. Pray for those who suffer as a result of war, natural disaster and sickness.

Going Deeper: Read the whole of Chapter 1. It is written as an acrostic poem, each stanza beginning with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet (of which there are 22). Each poem is a journey through grief, with a drive and a rhythm that suggest a limping and a moaning effect difficult to replicate in English. See how Zion's calamity is viewed first from the outside (1-11) and then from the inside (12-22) as 'Lady Zion' speaks for herself. Count how many times the phrase 'no-one to comfort' occurs and note the terrifying loneliness of separation. Think hard about the concepts of judgement and mercy and consider whether they are opposites or complement each other.

Reading 2

Lamentations 2:13-22 □

Children's questions/activities: I hope there haven't been any tears since yesterday and you haven't had to use the hankie. Today's reading tells us that God's people were deeply wounded (v13) so that perhaps no-one could help. Borrow or make a bandage. Draw some fake blood on your leg and then practise patching it up to stop the bleeding. Jesus comes as the great healer of body and soul. He can heal wounds as deep as the sea!

There doesn't seem to be a glimmer of hope yet in these laments. Once more the Poet gives us a graphic account of the desolation of the city and the judgement that has befallen its inhabitants. It seems to be an eyewitness account in which the Poet is greatly moved by the plight of the children (v11-12) and longs to find words of comfort to bring to Lady Zion, who now seems mortally wounded (v13).

What do you think is the mood of this chapter? It is full of anger; the anger of God against his people (v1) but also a hint of anger or protest from the Poet at the devastation and suffering he has witnessed. There is frustration and incomprehension that the Lord would allow his temple to be desecrated and his festivals and Sabbaths forgotten (v6-7). Do you think it is ever permissible or understandable to protest to God about loss, suffering and evil?

There is recognition that the Lord has done exactly as he planned (v17). Israel had broken the covenant (binding agreement) with the Lord and the promised judgement had come upon them. Is the Poet in his grief trying to put 'God in the Dock' here, or does he recognise that what has befallen Zion is the inevitable consequence of persistent covenant rebellion?

Think this through: Three times we are told that God acted 'without pity' (compassion). How do we reconcile that with other Old Testament descriptions of God as having great compassion (Ex 34:6)? Does it mean that after many hundreds of years of sending warnings and showing pity, his mercy had finally been withdrawn?

Prayer ideas: It is good for us to confess our sin and in doing so we can give thanks again for Jesus and the great salvation won for us on the cross, where He took our punishment on Himself. Pray for a greater understanding of God's holiness, justice and grace as found in Jesus Christ our Saviour.

Going Deeper? Read the whole chapter. There are some interesting allusions to cloud and fire by which God guided and protected his people. V1 refers to 'the cloud of his anger' indicating that his protection is withdrawn along with 'his right hand' (v3). But God has not just withdrawn; he has become the enemy of Israel (v4-5). How then, can the Lord bear the sight of the children dying in their mother's arms (v12)? Does God's anger combine with his grief and tears at the consequences of sin?

Reading 3

Lamentations 3:1-33 □

Children's questions/activities: Why don't you try to make up your favourite sandwich or try to invent a new sandwich of flavours you've never tried before? Sometimes a sandwich looks a bit unattractive until you bite into the delicious filling and then you just want more. This sad and unappealing poem has a wonderful filling made up of hope, drawn from God's great love, care and faithfulness to those who trust Him.

At last, in this third poem comes a wonderful message of hope amidst the despair and destruction. You have probably sung the well known hymn, 'Great is thy Faithfulness' many times and its inspiration comes from v23 where our Poet emerges from his description of tremendous personal affliction to remember the Lord's great love, compassion and faithfulness despite all that has happened. Like a shaft of light in a dark place, the writer finds hope in the character of God and his faithfulness to those who seek him and wait patiently for His salvation (v24-26).

Lady Zion is now silent and the picture in this third poem is of a man (probably our Poet) weighed down and walled in by affliction and despair. Living in darkness he sees no way out; his prayers are blocked, his heart is broken and he is deprived of peace. This is a portrait of grief that we may have experienced for ourselves or seen in others but the remarkable thing is that the man who says that his hope is gone (v18) can move to a place of hope and trust in the Lord (v24-25) who is always faithful whatever the circumstances.

Think this through: What prompts this transition from the pit of despair to a place of hope? What does the Poet remember about the nature of God (v22-33)? How do you reconcile the understanding that the Lord 'does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone' (v33) with affliction, 'by the rod of the Lord's wrath' (v1)?

Prayer ideas: Praise the Lord Jesus that He rose to enjoy His power as King for ever. Pray we will know, even before He returns, how powerful He is and trust Him that He is in charge.

Going Deeper? Instead of each stanza beginning with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, this central poem contains 22 three-line stanzas with each line starting with a letter of the alphabet. So the result is a punchy, staccato effect which also creates a 'sandwich' in which the outer layers are wrapped in wrath and extreme suffering, while the centre is full of hope, love and salvation for those whose trust is in Him. Perhaps in that sense it is a very real picture of the fallen world in which we live, with the cross and resurrection of Jesus at the very centre of human history offering hope and salvation to those who seek him (v25).

Reading 4

Lamentations 4:16-22 ☐

Children's questions/activities: So what do you think you are worth if your family decided to put you up for sale on eBay? Of course they wouldn't because to them you are worth more than your weight in gold! In this sad story, the children became worth the same as a cheap clay jar because everyone was starving (v2). Why not make a clay jar or a plasticine pot and remember that you were worth so much to the Lord Jesus Christ that he was willing to pay for you with his life.

In this forth poem, the Poet seems to be limping slowly to a close, exhausted and weary. The stanzas are shortened to two-line descriptions that give us stark contrasts between life before and after the siege and conquest of the city. The precious children are worth no more than clay jars, the rich have become destitute, the princes have become pitiful beggars... and worse! Judgement is a great leveller, no-one is exempt because of their previous status or wealth but all have suffered the same fate. And it all happened because of the sins of the people, especially the prophets and priests, who should have known better (v6, 13).

From the security of Jerusalem, the people are scattered (v16). Gone is the Lord's protection and those who had lived in God's presence now find no respect among the people and are disgraced. The people had looked for salvation in all the wrong places (Egypt) and so the Babylonians had been allowed to conquer the City of David and capture the King and its fleeing inhabitants (v19-20)

Think through: It is certainly true that war, disease and natural disasters can affect us all. A pandemic is a stark reminder even now that a virus knows few boundaries and affects rich and poor, Prime Ministers and care workers alike. Good times breed complacency and false confidence can soon take hold as it did then (v12). Isn't it also true that people look for salvation in all the wrong places, when full salvation is only found in Jesus Christ?

Prayer ideas: We are encouraged to pray for our nation and our national leaders and all in authority (1 Tim 2:1-6). Pray especially at this time that God would have mercy on our nation and not treat us as we deserve. Pray that many would turn from running after false gods and seek the Lord while he may be found.

Going Deeper? There is another glimmer of hope in the last stanza of this poem, which begins (lit), "It is finished" or as translated in the NIV, "Your punishment will end". It seems that the judgement has been delivered and that the exile would not last forever but there would be restoration. Amazingly, despite almost total destruction, the Poet knows that God has not finished with His people yet.

Reading 5

Lamentations 5 □

Children's questions/activities: Have you ever been sent away from the rest of the family when you have done something wrong? Perhaps you have been sent to your bedroom to 'cool off' or out of the room where everyone is having fun. After a while, don't you wish it was all forgotten and you could be back with the others but it seems to be taking ages and no-one seems to care. This last chapter is a prayer to God asking Him to remember His people, to look and to bring them back to how they were before. Perhaps you could find something to mend today and remember that God is the great fixer and restorer of people.

This last poem loses the acrostic form and is composed as a prayer for restoration. After the outbursts, the tears and the emotion, the Poet leads the people in prayer for God to look and see. It begins with a description of life for the surviving people of Judah in a land that has been ravaged and occupied and perhaps the call for God to remember and look is an echo of the cry of the people in Egypt before the Exodus. Now the people are aliens in their own land, 'internally displaced' under Babylonian occupation. Even slaves rule over them (v8) and there seems to be no hope of freedom.

What have you been learning about the nature of God from this book and especially from this prayer? The Poet has posed many questions throughout but he hasn't lost his faith in God or his understanding of who God is. He seems to hang on to the love, compassion and faithfulness of God and that is why he leads the people in prayer for God to look at their disgrace, to show compassion and to restore them to Himself as in the days of old (v21-22). In the end, Jesus is the answer to the question left hanging (v22) because he bore the rejection and anger of God on the cross so that we might be restored to a right relationship with our Maker.

Prayer ideas: Acknowledge God for who He is (v19) and praise Him who can restore us to himself in Jesus Christ. Praise Him who turned aside God's wrath by humbling Himself to die on a cross, so that you could enjoy life with Him forever.

Think this through: Lamentations 5 is not a beautifully composed prayer; it is the outpouring of people in deep pain and distress. This should encourage us to speak to God even in deep confusion and grief and to come in prayer just as we are and say it as it is. God the Father will hear and the Spirit will help us as we come in the name of Jesus. At the end of Lamentations the grieving people are brought from a place of complete despair to a position where they can pray, trust and hope.