

Lamentations 5: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Lamentations chapter 5 Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us. Look and see our disgrace. Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, our homes to foreigners.

We have become orphans, fatherless. Our mothers are like widows. We must pay for the water we drink. The wood we get must be bought. Our pursuers are at our necks.

We are weary. We are given no rest. We have given the hand to Egypt and to Assyria to get bread enough. Our fathers sinned and are no more, and we bear their iniquities.

Slaves rule over us. There is none to deliver us from their hand. We get our bread at the peril of our lives because of the sword in the wilderness. Our skin is hot as an oven with the burning heat of famine.

Women are raped in Zion, young women in the towns of Judah. Princes are hung up by their hands. No respect is shown to the elders. Young men are compelled to grind at the mill, and boys stagger under loads of wood.

[1 : 06] The old men have left the city gate, the young men their music. The joy of our hearts has ceased. Our dancing has been turned to mourning. The crown has fallen from our head.

Woe to us, for we have sinned. For this our heart has become sick. For these things our eyes have grown dim. For Mount Zion, which lies desolate, jackals prowl over it.

But you, O Lord, reign forever. Your throne endures to all generations. Why do you forget us forever? Why do you forsake us for so many days? Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored.

Renew our days as of old, unless you have utterly rejected us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us. With chapter 5, Lamentations ends.

The shadow of the acrostic pattern remains. There are 22 verses. But the actual substance of it is absent. There isn't the alphabetical sequence in this chapter. It is the shortest of all of the chapters of the book.

[2 : 08] The first three chapters have 66 lines each. The fourth, 44 lines. And now the final chapter, just 22. William Shea has made the case that the relative length of the chapters of Lamentations, and their varying use of the acrostic form, is an indicator of a pattern equivalent to the metre of the typical line of the earlier chapters being played out over the book as a whole.

The acrostic form of the book more generally might serve a broader purpose. Barry Webb writes, As Dilbert Hillers has noted, The acrostic form of the poems has the effect of giving grief a shape, which is itself a kind of resolution.

Grief itself, by its very nature, is a rather formless thing. The mind of a person in deep sorrow characteristically moves in circles, returning again and again to the source of the grief, unable to leave it, and unable to resolve it.

What the acrostic form does is to allow the grief to be fully expressed, and yet at the same time sets limits to it. These poems explore grief in its many and varied aspects, viewing it first from one perspective, then from another, and yet another.

The whole gamut of human sorrow is explored, the A to Z of sorrow. And yet, by that same acrostic pattern, the grief is shaped and led to a conclusion, a point of completeness, where everything necessary has been said, at least for the time being, and the mourner can fall silent without feeling he has been stifled.

[3 : 38] In this sense, the acrostic form has more than aesthetic significance, it has therapeutic and pastoral significance as well. The metre of the earlier chapters, which generally involved a 3-2 pattern between each set of half-lines, is largely switched in this chapter for a balanced 3-3 pattern.

The chapter describes the aftermath of the disaster, and gradually moves us towards what might be a more hopeful note. It begins by calling the Lord to take notice of the condition and the suffering of his people, as he did in the Exodus.

It might remind us of some of the Psalms, like Psalm 74, verse 22, Arise, O God, defend your cause, remember how the foolish scoff at you all the day.

Verses 2-18 offer a description of the state of the people, developing various aspects of their plight in succession. In verses 2-4 they are cut off from their inheritance.

In verses 5-10 they experience oppression, poverty and hunger. In verses 11-14, degradation, violation and humiliation. And in verses 15-18, grief and the loss of sovereignty.

[4 : 46] The inheritance of the land was the Lord's great gift to his people, a sign of his favour towards them. And the loss of that inheritance, its being turned over to strangers and aliens, and people who are hostile to them as their enemies, was a bitter blow, not just on a national and economic level, but also on a covenantal level.

The people are described as having become orphans and fatherless, and their mothers like widows. This may particularly be a reference to the loss of the men of the city, in exile and also to the sword.

However, since the Lord is the husband of his bride Israel, and according to a different metaphor, the father of Israel as his firstborn son, Israel's current position as the Lord has abandoned them to their fate, is similar to that of orphans and widows.

We might also here recall the first verse of the book, How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow has she become, she who was great among the nations, she who was a princess among the provinces, has become a slave.

Along with this destitution and loss of relationship, Judah has also lost access to the resources of the land. They have to pay for the water that they drink, and the wood that they use for fuel and for construction needs to be bought from others.

[6 : 01] They are harried by their enemies on all sides, are defenceless and lack security. In the past, they looked to Egypt and Assyria, and the consequences of those past imprudent alliances continue to be felt keenly.

Elsewhere in scripture, in Ezekiel chapter 18 for instance, the Lord condemns the saying of his people, that the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge, the way that Judah was blaming the sins of their fathers for their current condition.

In verse 7, a similar claim is being made, but it is not used to deny the sin of the people themselves, that is, confess later on. It is not an attempt at blame-shifting. Rather, in this communal lament, which, unlike the other chapters, has a consistent single-speaking voice throughout, the people are recognising the consequences of past sins, and the way that the idolatry and rebellion of their fathers has ramifications down to the present day.

Their fathers may have died, but the poisonous legacy that they left behind lives on. The people of the former kingdom of Judah have been so diminished in their status that they are ruled over by slaves.

The exact group, or groups, that are being referred to as slaves here is not entirely clear. It might be a reference to the Babylonians, or to the authorities that the Babylonians put over them, perhaps to Jewish authorities appointed by the Babylonians, perhaps a reference to Babylonian soldiers.

[7 : 23] Maybe it's a reference to Babylonian slaves over Jewish work parties, or perhaps it's a reference to the other nations round about that are preying upon them. Whatever the group is, and it might be a reference to a number of these different groups, there is no one to deliver them.

Their oppressors have the upper hand, and there is no one to rival them. They suffer from famine, they struggle to get bread, and their skin is discoloured because of lack of food. One of the most common and tragic results of war is the raping of women.

As the men of Judah and Jerusalem have been utterly defeated, their women can be taken and raped by the enemy with impunity. The leaders of the people also suffer the most severe indignities, princes hung up by their hands, whether as a form of execution, or as a display of corpses.

The dishonouring of the elders of the people is a further humiliation. The young men are subject to harsh labour, to the back-breaking work that usually is left to slaves and to animals.

The community life of the nation has also dried up. The old men who had been in the city gate, as a place of judgement and rule, have now left it, and the young men have ceased to make music.

[8 : 31] The joy of the people, perhaps associated with their worship, has ended. Celebrations of feasts and of marriages have been silenced, and mourning and funerals take their place.

The fallen crown may be a reference to Jerusalem itself, or perhaps to the sovereignty of the people more generally, or maybe more narrowly to the king himself. The people clearly recognise that this is a result of their sin.

This has befallen them, not just on account of what their fathers have done, but also on account of their own iniquities. In verses 19-20 we see the contrast between the eternality and infinitude of God, and the temporality and mortality of man.

God's rule endures forever, but human beings soon wither and perish, which means that the continued absence of the Lord's favour is most keenly felt. This is directly addressed to the Lord. The people are calling upon the Lord to remember them, to take note of their suffering, to recognise all the things that they have just described, and to show his mercy towards them. We might here be reminded of places like Psalm 74, verses 1-2.

[9 : 38] O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture? Remember your congregation, which you have purchased of old, which you have redeemed to be the tribe of your heritage.

Remember Mount Zion, where you have dwelt. We might also think of the way that the Lord has expressed his comfort towards his people in similar language. In Isaiah chapter 49, verses 14-15. But Zion said, The Lord has forsaken me. My Lord has forgotten me. Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.

The final verses are a plea for restoration to the Lord. We might again think of verses like Jeremiah chapter 31, verse 18. I have heard Ephraim grieving. You have disciplined me, and I was disciplined, like an untrained calf.

Bring me back, that I may be restored, for you are the Lord my God. The petition here is for the restoration of the relationship that the Lord once had with his people, for the re-establishment of the covenant.

[10 : 45] The final line of this chapter, of this poem, and indeed of the book, is a challenging one both to translate and to interpret, and several different readings of it have been advanced.

Some translations and commentators like the ESV read it as, Unless you have utterly rejected us. Others read it as a question, Or have you utterly rejected us?

Paul House lists several other alternative approaches. Some have read it, But rather you have utterly rejected us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us. A further alternative could be to read it as, Even though you had despised us greatly, and had been very angry with us.

The interpreter of this verse is then left with the challenge of determining the note on which the book ends. Is it a note of refusal, that the Lord has refused to hear the plea of his people?

Is it more open-ended, not knowing exactly the way that things might work out? Is it contrasting the restoration that is hoped for, with the judgment that the Lord has brought upon them in the past?

[11 : 47] Following House at this point, it seems most likely to me, that this is a reference to the current situation of the people, and a confident and hopeful petition, that the Lord will reverse his judgment.

Understood this way, we might think back to Lamentations chapter 3, verses 31 to 32. A question to consider.

How does an understanding of the character of God help us better to understand his judgment?