

Small Group Guide  
Lamentations  
Cleary Baptist Church May 1, 2011 Lamentations

## Lamentations

The book of Lamentations is aptly titled due to its sorrowful tone. To “lament” means to express deep sorrow and grief. The book, then, consists of five dirges written to capture and to console those mourning over the just destruction of Jerusalem in 587/6 B.C. The prophet Jeremiah had issued multiple warnings to the people of Judah that God would judge Jerusalem due to their wickedness (i.e. Jeremiah 25:1-11). He pleaded with the people to repent and return to the LORD, yet they refused. The people did not heed the word of the Lord, and all that Jeremiah prophesied came to pass. Now that judgment has come in the form of a ruthless Babylonian siege, the city and its inhabitants lie in utter ruin and many are wondering if restoration is even possible. Without presuming upon the LORD’s mercy (5:21), Lamentations assures God’s people that restoration is possible if they simply remember and seek refuge in His compassionate character (3:21-33).

The LORD is in the right.

### Study the Text . . .

Lamentations is divided into five chapters reflecting the five distinct poems found therein. Four of the poems are single acrostics structured on the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The first word of each stanza begins with a different letter of the alphabet; hence why chapters 1, 2, 4 and 5 contain 22 verses. Since English translations cannot capture fully the acrostic structure of the book, it is important to point this out because the book’s design highlights chapter 3 as the crux of the matter. The third chapter is a triple acrostic containing 66 verses and the climactic appeal of the book. All in all, Lamentations is a literary masterpiece.

Chapter 1 portrays Jerusalem as a weeping widow who has digressed from royalty to slavery. Affliction, suffering, and sorrow have turned her life upside down. Her “majesty has departed” (v. 6). Memories of better days add to the bitterness of her tears (v. 7). Yet, while she mourns her destruction, she recognizes the justice of God in her demise. She “sinned grievously” (v. 8). In verse 9, her frequent rendezvous with idolatry are described by the phrase: “her uncleanness was in her skirts” (v. 9) Often, in the prophets adultery is used as a metaphor for idolatry. All the while, she “took no thought of her future,” meaning that the people of Jerusalem did not believe God would judge their sin (v. 9). The destruction of Jerusalem and the depression of the narrator are intertwined. Thus, the first poem seamlessly shifts back and forth between describing Jerusalem to discussing the narrator’s inner turmoil. As goes Jerusalem so goes the poet. Jerusalem sinned grievously and was judged. The poet was part of the problem. In verse 20, He states, “I have been very rebellious” (20). The writer is very careful to root the suffering and sorrow of Jerusalem as a just consequence of the people’s sin. In verse 18, he states clearly, “The LORD is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word.” By recognizing the justice of God, he rightly confessed his and everyone else’s sinfulness in response to the LORD’s judgment. He did not try to defend himself or anyone else.

- Identify all the points where the writer identifies Jerusalem’s sinfulness.
- Identify all the points where the writer identifies his own sinfulness.
- How does the writer describe Jerusalem’s struggle? What metaphors and images does he use?
- How does the writer describe his own struggle? What metaphors and images does he use?
- List some of the consequences of Jerusalem’s sinfulness? (i.e. in verse 7, the Babylonians gloated over the city’s downfall).
- What does it mean for the LORD to “be in the right”?

### Group Discussion . . .

- Do you ever feel like the punishment for sin outweighs the offense?
- Why is this never the case?
- Have you ever been tempted to accuse God of wrong doing?
- Is God ever guilty of sin? Why or why not?
- Is our first instinct to defend ourselves or to confess our sins in the midst of suffering and sorrow?
- Why do you think our first instinct is to defend ourselves rather than to confess our sins?
- How might we foster the humble discipline of confessing our sins when suffering?

### The LORD will do as He says.

#### Study the Text...

In the second and fourth chapters, the writer focuses mainly on God’s role in judging Jerusalem. God is the subject of most verbs in these chapters, and His severe sovereignty is portrayed with graphic clarity. He “swallowed up Israel” and “multiplied in the daughter of Judah mourning and lamentation” (2:5). God “gave full vent to his wrath” and “poured out his hot anger” (4:10). Yet, once again, the writer justifies God’s actions by identifying the transgressions of Israel.

In particular, the people chose to follow ungodly leadership. They gathered to themselves leaders who delivered false and deceptive visions and failed to identify sin as sin (v. 14). This too harkened back to Jeremiah’s warnings (i.e. Jeremiah 23:9-15). God held Judah responsible for who they chose to follow. If given a choice between following a likeable leader who is not faithful to speak God’s word or an unlikeable leader because he speaks God’s word, the people were to choose the latter (i.e. Jeremiah rather than the false prophets). God judges both ungodly leaders and their followers severely. God’s people must only follow leaders who are faithful to preach God’s word even when they are commissioned with a hard message.

The ungodly leaders had set a pace of ungodly living before the people. They were faithless, proud and violent (4:12-13). God's people need godly leaders who speak the truth even if the truth hurts initially and strive to live their lives accordingly because God will always do as He says. "The LORD has done what He purposed; He has carried out His word, which He commanded long ago" (2:17) Israel's problem with ungodly leadership anticipated what Paul would warn Timothy about in 2 Timothy 4:3-4 and always reflects the spirit of the times prior to Day of the LORD (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11).

- What did the false prophets fail to do (vv. 9, 14)?
- In what ways did the people fail to believe that God would do as He said? (i.e. 4:12)
- Read and examine Jeremiah 23:9-15 and 2 Timothy 4:1-5.

### Group Discussion...

- In light of chapters 2 and 3, why is following godly leadership important?
- Why does God hold people accountable for who they choose to follow?
- Discuss nonnegotiable markers of godly leadership and teaching?
- Do Paul's words to Timothy (2 Timothy 4:1-5) ring true today? Why or why not?
- How can we be responsible to hear and to heed the word of God?
- How might our lives better reflect that we believe God will do as he says?

### The LORD will hear our contrite requests for restoration.

#### Study the Text . . .

Chapter 5 presents a corporate prayer of contrition and restoration. The passage reminds God's people to pray forward into the future. The implication is that with God, there is always hope for restoration even if all the evidence of the present situation points to the contrary. However, this does not mean God's people can presume upon the kindness of the LORD.

The truth of God's kindness is meant to lead people to repentance (Romans 2:4). Unfortunately, however, people tend to mistake God's kindness with indifference. Some assume that because God is kind, he will tolerate their disregard for His word and ways. Yet, this is exactly what Paul warns against in Romans 2:4-5, "Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteousness will be revealed." Confusing God's kindness with indifference renders repentance unnecessary and thus restoration unattainable.

Perhaps the most devastating, yet common, errors of our culture is widespread presumption upon the LORD's kindness. Such an assumption leads many to think that repentance is unnecessary to enjoy God's grace and favor. This was certainly the climate in Jerusalem for years leading up to the Babylonian siege. No one believed God would judge them for their sin. They presumed upon His kindness and as a result they experienced a foreshadowing of the final Day of the LORD. The closing verses of Lamentations, however, reveal that that changed. The people are now contrite and humble in their request for restoration.

- Read and reflect on Romans 2:14
- Why does Lamentations end with a corporate confession and appeal for restoration?

### Group Discussion...

- What does "presumption" mean?
- What does it look like to presume upon the LORD?
- Why might the sin of presumption be so common?
- What does "contrition" mean?
- What does a prayer of contrition sound like?
- Why is contrition necessary for restoration?
- How can we further guard ourselves from the sin of presumption?

## God's Mercies are New Every Morning

### Study the Text...

Nestled in the middle of Lamentations is perhaps one of the more famous and beloved passages about the mercy of God found in the Old Testament. 3:21-33 represents the crescendo of the book and the source of the people's hope and grace. These verses shine forth much promise for the people's restoration despite the devastation that surrounds them.

The writer calls to mind the character of God, which is the source of his hope (v. 21). He emphasized the steadfast love, unending mercies, and faithfulness of the LORD (v. 22). The wonder of God's grace is highlighted by the fact that the judgment the people are enduring is just. He does not "willingly afflict or grieve the children of men" (v. 33). In other words, God does not exercise wrath flippantly or sadistically. All that He does is right and just, including the punishment He brings about in response to human sin. Moreover, God does not have to restore His people, but He chooses to do so because of His remarkable character. His willingness to be the only source of hope for His hurting people induces humble contrition within them.

Verse 23 captures that memorable phrase about God's mercies being "new every morning." The writer's experience with the Babylonian siege has reminded him that he is not promised tomorrow. Each day he lives is a testimony to the merciful restraint of the LORD. Therefore, each day is a day graciously given by God to exercise repentance and faithful obedience to His glory.

- List the attributes of God peppered throughout this passage.
- Define those attributes (i.e. what is steadfast love?).
- What does it mean to "wait for the LORD" (v. 25-26)?
- What does it mean that God "does not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men" (v. 33)?

### Group Discussion...

- What does it mean to be hopeful?
- What do people put their hope in?
- Why is it important that God be the object and source of one's hope?
- What does it mean for God's mercies to be new every morning?
- How does being mindful of the merciful restraint of God affect our day to day lives?
- What aspects of our character does being mindful of the merciful restraint of God change?
- What does waiting on the LORD look like?
- Why does God willingly restore His people?
- What does restoration look like?
- Share testimonies of how you have experienced Divine restoration.