

Every year, Jews hold a special fast day called Tisha B'Av (translated as the ninth of Av, Av being a month in the Jewish calendar). It is believed to be the saddest day in the Jewish year and commemorates five key and tragic events in their history including the destruction of the Temple in 587 BCE and 70 CE. Tisha B'Av includes a number of prohibitions including a 25 hour fast. Also of significance is that the book of Lamentations is recited.

It is very appropriate to use this text, since it centres on the first of these events, the destruction of the Temple in 587 BCE.

The book of Lamentations is comprised of five poems, one in each chapter. They reflect on the events of 587 BCE in slightly different ways and deals with issues such as suffering, sin, God's wrath, despair and the possibility of hope. In many respects, it's like the book of Job as it ponders on this issue of suffering. However, there is one big difference. Whereas the book of Job is trying to make sense of the suffering of an individual, here in Lamentations we are reflecting on corporate suffering – that of a nation.

Although the basis for these poems then is the destruction of Jerusalem, the concerns are much wider than that. In many respects they address very difficult questions – in the face of so much suffering and tragedy, how can God be good and caring? We will all have had the experience that when we call out to God, we see to be answered with silence.

In the Hebrew Bible, the book is known as Ekaḥ meaning “How” and indeed the first sentence starts with “How lonely sits the city”. Some early manuscripts refer to it as Qinot meaning “Lamentations”. This is the name that was given to the book in the Greek and Latin versions and it is from these that we get the name that we use now.

In the Bible that we are used to, Lamentations follows Jeremiah and it was thought for a long time that he was the author. However, most scholars now disagree with this. In the Hebrew language texts of the Old Testament, the book forms part of a group called “The Writings” which also includes Job, Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. 5 books including Lamentations form what is known as “Megilloth” (scrolls) that are read at important Jewish festivals. So, although for us it is something of a Biblical backwater, for devout Jews, it is a familiar and important book.

As was stated earlier, the book contains five poems. Each one is an acrostic. That means that each line starts with the next letter of the alphabet. In actual

fact, we wouldn't notice that as the acrostic only works in Hebrew. But it shows that the poems were probably meant to be recited and that the writer took some trouble over how it is structured.

In this study, we are going to look at the first of these poems.

**Read** Lamentations Chapter 1 verses 1-11.

This is a poem lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem. The first 11 verses are in the part of an observer, watching the destruction of the city in 587 BC. The writer is very creative in the way in which he expresses himself. Look at this verse, "She weeps bitterly in the night with tears on her cheeks". The image is of the city as a woman who is in distress or peril. It's worth noting that Babylon is never referred to directly as the enemy, so inviting us to use this for our own lament. We can express our own feelings of pain and confusion alongside those of the writer. It also lends itself to this time of Covid-19 when direct comparisons can be made. The first of these takes us back to late March 2020 when the UK was in complete lockdown, "How lonely sits the people that once was full of people!" – at that time, the town centres were deserted and the roads were empty as "only essential travel" was allowed. The image continues in verse 4 as the comparison is made with a time when people thronged in pilgrimage to the Temple. Those days are mourned. How true it is for us as the church doors continue to be locked? The scene of stunning loss has been seen across countless TV screens over the years, whether it is the aftermath of a Tsunami, or the destruction of Christchurch Cathedral in the earthquake of 2011. People's loss has been both material and symbolic. It is not hard to imagine how the people feel as they are denied worship in their spiritual home as we share something similar.

All sorts of other emotions compete with each other as they conspire to overwhelm. There is a sense of violation,

"The enemy laid hands  
on all her treasures;  
she saw pagan nations  
enter her sanctuary—  
those you had forbidden  
to enter your assembly."

There is a sense of shame,

“All who honoured her despise her,  
for they have all seen her naked;”

There is abandonment: “Her princes are like deer  
that find no pasture;  
in weakness they have fled  
before the pursuer”.

And all the prestige has gone, leaving her destitute,

“All her people groan  
as they search for bread;  
they barter their treasures for food  
to keep themselves alive.”

The treasures may be treasure from the temple, or it may be even more valuable than that – their own children.

There is a feeling that, to use a phrase, “the chickens have come home to roost”. Jerusalem was guilty of complacency and turning away from God. This is the consequence.

All in all, the sense of destruction and degradation seems absolute.

**Read** Lamentations 1 Verses 12 to the end

From verse 12, the tone changes. Instead of a commentator describing what has happened, the city has been lent a voice.

The first part, verses 12-16 has the City describing what has happened, to whom we don't know. It is taken from the viewpoint (common at that time) that this destruction and humiliation has been brought about by God's action. Jerusalem shouts out to “All those who pass by” assuming that the surrounding nations are onlookers to what has happened. Clearly, the onlookers seem to take it all lightly, “Is it nothing to you?” But it is interpreted as a consequence of Judah's sin. The results of God's wrath are described in great detail to the uncaring onlookers. When you look at all that has been done to the city, inflicted sorrow on the day of His wrath, bound Judah's transgressions together as a weight on her neck, handed the city over to those it could not withstand, rejected all the city's warriors, crushed the city's young men and finally trod on Judah as in a wine press. All these together emphasise God's rejection of Jerusalem and systematically describe the city's destruction.

That this was a product of God's wrath taps in to an idea that was prevalent at the time – "the day of the Lord" – something that was often referred to by the prophets. The popular idea was, that on this day, God would set the world to rights and punish all the enemies of Israel and Judah. However, prophets such as Amos warned that instead it might be the people of Israel that would be judged. So here we have articulated the result of this day of the Lord – God's judgement has resulted in Jerusalem being at the mercy of her enemies.

So we have the emptying of the city, the plundering of riches, the loss of children, loss of prestige, military defeat, destitution all as a consequence of God's judgement, but more than that, going back more, it is self-inflicted as a result of Judah's transgressions. The judgement is not arbitrary.

So what can Jerusalem do at a time like this? The only thing the city can do is to turn to God in prayer. And this is what the remainder of the poem is about. The prayer has a number of diverse sections. It starts by affirming that God's response was appropriate, "The LORD is righteous, yet I rebelled against his command." . The plea is that, even if the suffering is deserved, then someone might respond. Political allies (referred to as lovers) have proved fickle. The religious and political leaders have perished seeking food (maybe there was a famine at the time). So, in the absence of any human help, the city turns to God in desperation. The city's situation is described one again, but this time to the Lord directly. Even though God has inflicted this punishment, surely he can show mercy? There is also, in the midst of this an appeal for justice for Judah's enemies – "All my enemies have heard of my distress;

they rejoice at what you have done.

May you bring the day you have announced

so they may become like me." "Let all their wickedness come before you; deal with them as you have dealt with me because of all my sins"

Finally, the poem ends with a plea – for God to intervene as the City's groans grow weaker.

This is a bleak chapter – but that is inevitable given the circumstances that God's people found themselves in. Their precious city and Temple were overrun and destroyed. Their sin of hubris had been found out.

I am sure that there are bleak episodes in all our lives where all seems lost. It is passages like this that give us permission to express a sense of despair. Yet

there is still a glimmer of hope – the prayer to God at the end is an acknowledgement that maybe he can bring the green shoots of new life.

Questions for reflection:

- 1) Are there any parallels that you can see with the situation today?
- 2) Is the idea of God's wrath and punishment legitimate? Or is the destruction more a result of human folly? Does sin have its own consequences?
- 3) When all else fails, the writer turns to prayer. Is that something that we are ever guilty of? What does it say about the relationship between Jerusalem and God?
- 4) Do you find the idea of Lament useful?