

Lamentations 4:1-22 Lament The Loss of Splendor Falls Ch. PM 3/24/2024

Lament is expressing the pain of suffering loss. The greater the loss, the more we lament its loss.

What is that one thing that if you were to lose it, life would feel hardly worth living? That is a true spiritual test. How we respond to losing something.

In the book of Lamentations, we see people losing things. In chapter 1, they lost the city, in chapter 2, they lost the temple, in chapter 3, the prophet Jeremiah suffered personal losses. Here in chapter 4, we read about multiple losses for the people, the citizens of Jerusalem. It is hard to read and study, but it is valuable because it teaches us where to turn when we lose everything.

Chapter 4 is not about sorrow. Sorrow is losing one thing.

Chapter 4 is about despair. Despair is losing everything.

How can we go on when we lose everything? When we stand and look at the rubble of our lives, what would we do? Where would we turn?

Actually, the event of losing everything only reveals where we have already turned. Losing everything reveals our true source of hope.

Just like chapters 1,2, and 3, also now here chapter 4 is again an alphabetic poem. By that we mean that each of the 22 verses begins with the next letter of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Bible scholars call this an acrostic poem. It is common in Hebrew writings, and takes a lot of skill to write in this style.

Beyond that, chapter four also has a structure of looking at a picture of the city as a double picture or split screen. Verses 1-11 show us the city being destroyed. Verses 12-22 start over and show us AGAIN the city being destroyed.

After we lament the loss of splendor, we return to God for hope.

1. The splendor lost. (v.1-11)

This first half of the chapter poetically catalogues and grieves the rapid decline from prosperity to destitution.

Verse 1- The glory of the city departed, and this fact can be expressed poignantly and tragically by one glance at the formerly splendid gold. “*How the gold has grown dim....*” This is a reference to certain golden articles from the temple in Jerusalem that were now to be found in the city’s streets growing dim and getting dusty. What is more precious than gold? People.

Verse 2 - is where we get the phrase “worth their weight in gold.” In reference to the precious sons of the city of Zion, while they are worth more than gold – they were the pride and joy and future hope of the city – are now regarded as just garden pots.

Remember how our author Jeremiah wrote in The Book of Jeremiah chapter 19, that he went into the shop of a maker of pots, a potter? Jeremiah purchased a clay pot, a earthenware flask, and then shattered it into hundreds of pieces, showing God’s coming judgment. It was such a shocking judgment that the ears of everyone who heard it would tingle. Jeremiah was prophesying of a time when God would make the city a horror. Jeremiah reported that God even said that their new name would have to be ‘The Valley of Slaughter!’ Why? Because the people would not listen to God. Well, here in Lamentations 4:2, Jeremiah observed that his former

prophecy happened exactly as Jeremiah said it would happen – the people were treated like shards of broken pottery.

Verses 3-11 paint a picture of a public crisis - no food and widespread hunger. Such hunger fell upon the city of Zion that they scavenged for food and the people became dangerously thin, looking like walking skeletons. The mothers' suffering brought out a shocking new low of selfish cruelty, such that the mothers were not feeding their infants in order to preserve themselves.

Verse 4 – whether we desired to track this storyline further or not, next we get a detailed report of the direct result from the cruelty of the mothers. The poem focuses on a certain nursing infant, who has so dry a mouth that the baby's tongue sticks to the roof of its own mouth.

Verse 5 – it was not just newborns, but other children who had recently “feasted on delicacies,” were now begging for food, not receiving any, and were dying right there in the streets.

The indigence here is repulsive to read, and sickening to fathom, and painful to rehearse. This cannot be just a catastrophe. This has to be God's action – deciding send a foreign army in order to deprive His city and its residents, including the women and children – of the gifts that God Himself had promised to His people.

What is it all about? Sin has consequences! In Lamentations 4, the covenant people of God had not believed nor obeyed God. The people of the city deserve to die for their sin. The whole city deserves to die for its sins, and each person in it.

Verse 6, if we compare deaths in this city to deaths in the city of Sodom, the suffering is greater here. Over in Sodom, with fire and brimstone raining down from heaven, the deaths would have been even faster, the city would be overthrown in a moment, which seems like mercy compared to this scene of suffering.

Verse 7, the physical attractiveness of their princes was part of the splendor that was lost. They were described as purer than snow, whiter than milk.

Verse 8, gives a status update - after God's actions of judgment, those same young men's faces had turned so black from malnutrition and exposure in the streets, that they cannot be recognized by people who knew them. Their skin became so dry and shriveled that they didn't really look human.

Verse 9, even the children had figured out that they would be happier if they were to be pierced with a sword and suddenly dead, than to be pierced with hunger, and as a consequence, to slowly waste away.

Verse 10, the unspeakable things that people in extreme crisis will do is only listed here so that the facts are not lost. Why did it happen? How could we get a more clear and accurate answer than verse 11?

Verse 11, *“The LORD gave full vent to His wrath; He poured out His anger, and he kindled a fire in Zion that consumed its foundations.”*

We have studied half of the chapter. Time to look at the second scene.

2. The reason. (v.12-20)

Listen to how our writer begins the second half of the chapter, the second picture of the destruction of Jerusalem. Verse 12, *“The kings of the earth did not believe, nor any of the inhabitants of the world, that foe or enemy could enter the gates of Jerusalem.”*

Everyone knew that enemies could not overtake this city. Even the foreign kings knew! Why? Because God Himself would protect it.

Then why has God the ultimate protector of Jerusalem, gone back on His Word to protect her?

The reason is that the city broke her side of her covenant agreement with God. But the city is not ready to seek God in repentance. Instead, the city seems to defend itself against this accusation in verses 13-16.

Verse 13 – blame the leaders of the city. It was the prophets and priests. It was their fault. They failed the city in their duty of leadership.

Here is verse 13, *“This was for the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests, who shed in the midst of her the blood of the righteous.”*

The city repudiated their sinning leaders. There was truth in this. The prophets sinned, leaving the people starved for the Word of God, like a famine. The result was the prophets had to bear the humiliation from God for their failures.

Verse 14, here is what happened with the prophets and priests of the city, *“They wandered, blind, through the streets; they were so defiled with blood that no one was able to touch their garments.”*

Verse 14 the inhabitants seem to scream – see it was all the prophet’s fault!

Verse 15 went further by making an attempt to distance the common people from the blame, by showing what the people did to distance themselves from the prophets and priests, *“‘Away! Unclean!’ people cried at [the prophets and priests]. ‘Away! Away! Do not touch!’ So they became fugitives and wanderers; peoples aid among the nations, ‘They shall stay with us no longer.’”*

Verse 16, the city inhabitants defended their viewpoint by saying, *“The LORD Himself has scattered [the prophets and priests]; He will regard them no more; no honor was shown to the priests, no favor to the elders.”*

Verse 17, the blame game of blaming their leaders seemed to be working, so they continued, now spilling over to blaming the king. The king had made bad alliances with nearby countries. Those nearby countries also did wrong - expanding even to blaming her friends in Egypt for agreeing to come to help, but later never arriving to actually lend that help. Listen to verse 17, *“Our eyes failed, ever watching vainly for help; in our watching we watched for a nation which could not save.”* In other words, the city of Jerusalem, through its king, kept on hoping that Egypt would rescue them, but Egypt never did rescue them.

Verses 18-19 has the opposite disappointment – here they were hoping that Babylon would NOT come to attack them, but Babylon DID come to attack them. Listen, *“They dogged our steps so that we could not walk in our streets; our end drew near; our days were numbered, for our end had come.”* Verse 19, *“Our pursuers were swifter than the eagles in the heavens; they chased us on the mountains; they lay in wait for us in the wilderness.”*

The people had put their hope in their king, who had been given them by God, but in the end, the king himself was betrayed into the hands of the enemies, Verse 20, *“The breath of our nostrils, the LORD’s anointed, was captured in their pits, of whom we said, ‘Under His shadow we shall live among the nations.’”*

The capture of their king was a devastating blow to the people in the city of Jerusalem, a clear indicator that the safety of their city was compromised.

It was not a political problem or a governmental problem. Rather, it was a spiritual problem. It was not restricted to being a leadership problem of sin only in the leaders, rather, it was a sin problem in all the leaders and in all the people.

It was true that there was tragic sadness here, that all three types of leaders failed the people of Jerusalem. The king, the prophets, and the priests. None was able to get the city corrected and turned around.

In this lament, we have reached a point of saturation of losses and utter deprivation. Is there any hope? This brings us to our third point.

3. Yet hoping in the God of Reversal. (v. 21-22)

Yes, there is hope! The hope comes in God's covenant. The hope comes in God's faithfulness to His covenant, even when we sinners are not faithful to God. The hope comes in an end to God's destroying, an end to the wrath of God being expressed.

How will the end of God's judgment come? When God decides here in verse 22, that the remainder of God's judgment will be given elsewhere. When God's judgment will be transferred to another – transferred to the Messiah for us. God's judgment comes to an end when God will accept another suffer to take our place. Our only hope comes in God's wrath being fully given out on Christ in our place, and when God's wrath is satisfied. When will that be? God has a saving plan.

The lamentation turns when there is faith and hope for the future of God's people. How can that be? God has promised to send a Redeemer.

Underneath all of God's judgments is the firm conviction that God has chosen this people to be His covenant people. God cannot break His own covenant promise. God can give them severe judgment, because judgment is earned by their sins. But God cannot leave it there. For the covenant-keeping God, there is always exile followed by restoration. Verse 22, "*The punishment of your iniquity is accomplished.*" Punishment is over. Verse 22, "*he will keep you in exile no longer.*" With our covenant-keeping God, we have come to expect the consistent pattern of judgment unto restoration.

How can God be both holy and merciful? Only when God will turn the wrath and judgment for our sins onto His perfect Son.

We ought to have a split screen. One screen is the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem. The other screen is the destruction of Jesus, who called Himself the temple.

What if we had one king who was sinless and did what was right? What if we had one prophet who consistently spoke the Word of God without fail? What if we had one priest who brought us to God in the proper way with a right sacrifice?

We have the perfect priest, king, prophet, and even temple in Jesus. Listen to John 2:19-22, Jesus said, "... *Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.*" 20 *The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?"* 21 *But he was speaking about the temple of his body.* 22 *When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken."*

Conclusion:

Jeremiah was lamenting the absence of Jesus Christ, the true temple, true priest, true king and true prophet.

Even the best of the Old Testament leaders only pointed ahead to the coming of Jesus our Redeemer.

The Old Testament kings, prophets, and priests all failed. All they managed to accomplish was to show us why the coming of the Lord Jesus was so very necessary.

Imagine your church, your family, your life, without Jesus.

Jesus is what God's people have always needed. When we lament, we are lamenting the absence of Jesus. When we think of splendor, splendor is best seen in the presence of King Jesus, who rules over us and conquers our enemies, even to going to the cross for us.

When we think of splendor recovered, we think of the resurrection of King Jesus to rule over all of heaven and earth.

When we think of splendor lost, we think of Jesus the best preacher and bringer of the Word of God ever known to earth, being silenced by the tomb. The recovery of splendor is when Jesus rose again, and began to teach Mary and the disciples in His resurrected body as their rabbi again. Following that 40 days, Jesus ascended to heaven, and sent His Spirit of Splendor on His people, so that we are never without the Spirit of Christ and the Word of Christ.

SI - There is a story about an artist named Niggle who worked meticulously on a grand painting of a tree, but he worked so carefully on what he wanted to paint, that he painted only one leaf in his whole lifetime of work. Towards the end of the story, Niggle was taken to a heavenly place where, to his surprise, he was shown the leaf that he had painted, attached to the tree he never had time to finish during his lifetime – now completed and finished:

Before Niggle now stood the Tree, his Tree, finished. If you could use the word “finished” to describe a Tree that was alive, its leaves opening, its branches growing and bending in the wind that Niggle had so often felt or guessed, and had so often failed to catch. He gazed at the Tree, and slowly he lifted his arms and opened them wide. “It’s a gift!” he said. He was referring to his art, and also to the result; but he was using the word quite literally. He went on looking at the Tree. All the leaves he had ever labored at were there, as he had imagined them rather than as he had made them; and there were others that had only budded in his mind, and many that might have budded, if only he had more time.

The point of the story – while we are in this world, we are lamenting the absence of a splendor that we have never had. Lamentation is the default position of the Christian who has not yet arrived in heaven’s city, to see heaven’s trees, and to see Christ Himself.

In Hebrews 11:11-16, we know that all the heroes of the faith “...*were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak [like this] make it clear that they are seeking a homeland... they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.*”