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THE LOOKOUT

MAY 2023

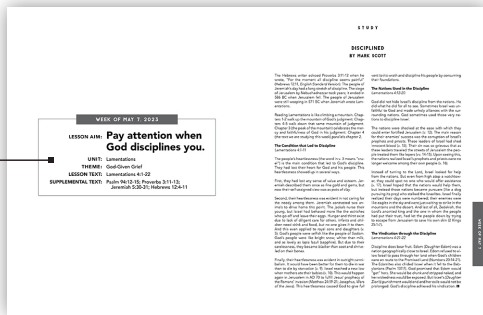
Unit: Lamentations

Theme: God-Given Grief

Overview: Not all grief is bad. There are redemptive tears. Sometimes hurting helps. The first word in Lamentations is “How” (*ekah*). We often ask, “How did this happen?” when we are in pain. Lamentations is attributed to Jeremiah, the weeping prophet. It is a tightly woven poetic piece that is read by the Jews in Jerusalem at the Western Wall every week. It starts with lament (1:1-2) and ends with repentance (5:21-22). Students will learn of God’s discipline and punishment as well as how confession of sins and waiting on the Lord helps his people experience his mercy and faithfulness.

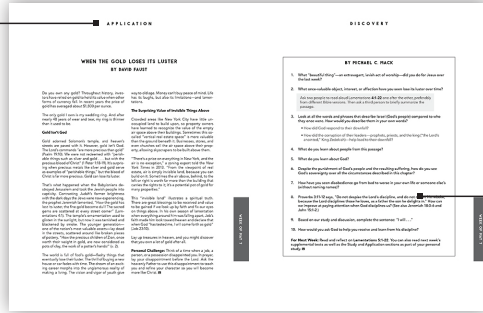
HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery**.



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

WEEK OF MAY 7, 2023

LESSON AIM: **Pay attention when
God disciplines you.**

UNIT: Lamentations

THEME: God-Given Grief

LESSON TEXT: Lamentations 4:1-22

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Psalm 94:12-15; Proverbs 3:11-13;
Jeremiah 5:30-31; Hebrews 12:4-11

STUDY

DISCIPLINED

BY MARK SCOTT

The Hebrews writer echoed Proverbs 3:11-12 when he wrote, "For the moment all discipline seems painful" (Hebrews 12:11, *English Standard Version*). The people of Jeremiah's day had a long stretch of discipline. The siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar took years; it ended in 586 BC when Jerusalem fell. The people of Jerusalem were still weeping in 571 BC when Jeremiah wrote Lamentations.

Reading Lamentations is like climbing a mountain. Chapters 1-2 walk up the mountain of God's judgment. Chapters 4-5 walk down that same mountain of judgment. Chapter 3 (the peak of the mountain) celebrates the mercy and faithfulness of God in his judgment. Chapter 4 (the text we are studying this week) parallels chapter 2.

The Condition that Led to Discipline

Lamentations 4:1-11

The people's heartlessness (the word in v. 3 means "cruel") is the main condition that led to God's discipline. They had lost their heart for God and his people. This heartlessness showed up in several ways.

First, they had lost any sense of value and esteem. Jeremiah described them once as *fine gold* and *gems*, but now their self-assigned view was as *pots of clay*.

Second, their heartlessness was evident in not caring for the needy among them. Jeremiah contrasted two animals to drive home this point. The *jackals* nurse their young, but Israel had behaved more like the *ostriches* who go off and leave their eggs. Hunger and thirst exist due to lack of diligent care for others. *Infants and children* need drink and food, *but no one gives it to them*. And this even applied to royal sons and daughters (v. 5). God's people were selfish like the people of *Sodom*. God's people were like bright snow, whiter than milk, and as lovely as *lapis lazuli* (sapphire). But due to their carelessness, they became *blacker than soot* and *shrivelled on their bones*.

Finally, their heartlessness was evident in outright cannibalism. It would have been better for them to die in war than to die by starvation (v. 9). Israel reached a new low when mothers ate their babies (v. 10). This would happen again in Jerusalem in AD 70 to fulfill Jesus' prophecy of the Romans' invasion (Matthew 24:19-21; Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*). This heartlessness caused God to give *full*

vent to his wrath and discipline his people by consuming their *foundations*.

The Nations Used in the Discipline

Lamentations 4:12-20

God did not hide Israel's discipline from the nations. He did what he did for all to see. Sometimes Israel was unfaithful to God and made unholy alliances with the surrounding nations. God sometimes used those very nations to discipline Israel.

The nations were shocked at the ease with which they could enter fortified Jerusalem (v. 12). The main reason for their enemies' success was the corruption of Israel's *prophets* and *priests*. These leaders of Israel had shed innocent blood (v. 13). Their sin was so grievous that as these leaders traveled the streets of Jerusalem the people treated them like lepers (vv. 14-15). Upon seeing this, the nations realized Israel's prophets and priests were no longer welcome among their own people (v. 16).

Instead of turning to the Lord, Israel looked for help from the nations. But even from high atop a watchtower, they could spot no one who would offer assistance (v. 17). Israel hoped that the nations would help them, but instead those nations became *pursuers* (like a dog pursuing its prey) who stalked the Israelites. Israel finally realized their days were numbered; their enemies were like *eagles in the sky* and were just waiting to strike in the mountains and the desert. And last of all, Zedekiah, the *Lord's anointed* king and the one in whom the people had put their trust, had let the people down by trying to escape from Jerusalem to save his own skin (2 Kings 25:1-7).

The Vindication through the Discipline

Lamentations 4:21-22

Discipline does bear fruit. Edom (*Daughter Edom*) was a nation geographically close to Israel. Edom refused to allow Israel to pass through her land when God's children were en route to the Promised Land (Numbers 20:14-21). The Edomites also chided Israel when it fell to the Babylonians (Psalm 137:7). God promised that Edom would "get" hers. She would be *drunk and stripped naked*, and her wickedness would be exposed. But Israel's (*Daughter Zion's*) punishment would end and her exile would not be prolonged. God's discipline achieved his vindication. ■

APPLICATION

WHEN THE GOLD LOSES ITS LUSTER

BY DAVID FAUST

Do you own any gold? Throughout history, investors have relied on gold to hold its value when other forms of currency fail. In recent years the price of gold has averaged about \$1,800 per ounce.

The only gold I own is my wedding ring. And after nearly 48 years of wear and tear, my ring is thinner than it used to be.

Gold Isn't God

Gold adorned Solomon's temple, and heaven's streets are paved with it. However, gold isn't God. The Lord's commands "are more precious than gold" (Psalm 19:10). We were not redeemed with "perishable things such as silver and gold . . . but with the precious blood of Christ" (1 Peter 1:18-19). It's surprising when precious metals like silver and gold serve as examples of "perishable things," but the blood of Christ is far more precious. Gold can lose its luster.

That's what happened when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and took the Jewish people into captivity. Contrasting Judah's former brightness with the dark days the Jews were now experiencing, the prophet Jeremiah lamented, "How the gold has lost its luster, the fine gold become dull! The sacred gems are scattered at every street corner" (Lamentations 4:1). The temple's ornamentation used to glisten in the sunlight, but now it was tarnished and blackened by smoke. The younger generation—one of the nation's most valuable assets—lay dead in the streets, scattered around like broken pieces of pottery. "How the precious children of Zion, once worth their weight in gold, are now considered as pots of clay, the work of a potter's hands!" (v. 2).

The world is full of fool's gold—flashy things that eventually lose their luster. The thrill of buying a new house or car fades with time. The dream of an exciting career morphs into the unglamorous reality of making a living. The vision and vigor of youth give

way to old age. Money can't buy peace of mind. Life has its laughs, but also its limitations—and lamentations.

The Surprising Value of Invisible Things Above

Crowded areas like New York City have little unoccupied land to build upon, so property owners have learned to recognize the value of the empty air space above their buildings. Sometimes this so-called "vertical real estate space" is more valuable than the ground beneath it. Businesses, stores, and even churches sell the air space above their property, allowing skyscrapers to be built above them.

"There's a price on everything in New York, and the air is no exception," a zoning expert told the *New York Times* in 2013. "From the viewpoint of real estate, air is simply invisible land, because you can build on it. Sometimes the air above, behind, to the left or right is worth far more than the building that carries the rights to it; it's a potential pot of gold for many properties."

This "invisible land" illustrates a spiritual truth. There are great blessings to be received and value to be gained if we look up by faith and fix our eyes on things above. In his own season of lamentation when everything around him was falling apart, Job's faith made him look toward heaven and declare that when God "has tested me, I will come forth as gold" (Job 23:10).

Lay up treasures in heaven, and you might discover that you own a lot of gold after all.

Personal Challenge: Think of a time when a job, a person, or a possession disappointed you. In prayer, lay your disappointment before the Lord. Ask the heavenly Father to use this disappointment to teach you and refine your character so you will become more like Christ. ■

DISCOVERY

BY MICHAEL C. MACK

1. What “beautiful thing”—an extravagant, lavish act of worship—did you do for Jesus over the last week?
2. What once-valuable object, interest, or affection have you seen lose its luster over time?

Ask two people to read aloud **Lamentations 4:1-22** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passage.

3. Look at all the words and phrases that describe Israel (God’s people) compared to who they once were. How would you describe them in your own words?
 - How did God respond to their downfall?
 - How did the corruption of their leaders—prophets, priests, and the king (“the Lord’s anointed,” King Zedekiah)—help lead to their downfall?
4. What do you learn about people from this passage?
5. What do you learn about God?
6. Despite the punishment of God’s people and the resulting suffering, how do you see God’s sovereignty over all the circumstances described in this chapter?
7. How have you seen disobedience go from bad to worse in your own life or someone else’s (without naming names)?
8. Proverbs 3:11-12 says, “Do not despise the Lord’s discipline, and do not resent his rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.” How can we improve at paying attention when God disciplines us? (See also Jeremiah 18:3-6 and John 15:1-2.)
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: “I will . . .”
10. How would you ask God to help you receive and learn from his discipline?

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Lamentations 5:1-22**. You can also read next week’s supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. ■