



1717 BIBLE STUDIES

"Your Word Is Truth" (John 17:17)

OVERVIEW

Study: Lamentations Theme: God-Given Grief

Overview: The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah wrote soulfully and poetically about the destruction of Jerusalem and of God's temple. Having spent his prophetic ministry warning Israel about their unfaithfulness to God and the punishment that was coming, Jeremiah now reflects with grief on the aftermath while maintaining hope in God's mercy and clinging to God's promise of restoration for his chosen people.

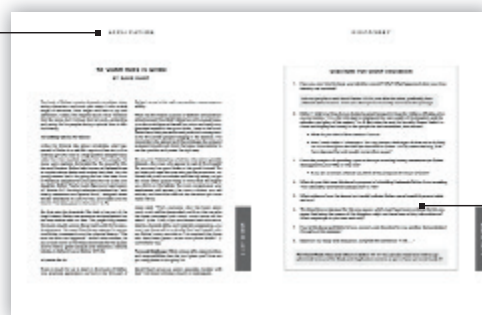
HOW TO USE

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.

INTRODUCTION

Author

The book of Lamentations is attributed to the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah. Tradition holds that Jeremiah wrote his laments in tears as he sat in the rubble of Jerusalem's destruction.

Audience

Jeremiah wrote Lamentations to express his personal grief over the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and to give voice to the grief of the exiles who also mourned the loss of their nation.

Date

Jeremiah wrote Lamentations around the time of Jerusalem's fall to Babylon in 586 BC.

Setting

Known as the weeping prophet, Jeremiah had consistently and faithfully announced the coming destruction of Jerusalem to the nation's rulers and people. Sadly his prophecies were ignored, and he fell victim to persecution. In the end, God poured out his

wrath on the disobedient nation as he permitted king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon to conquer Jerusalem.

Theme

The book of Lamentations addresses the grief and sorrow that follow sin and disobedience. It connects us with human suffering in the face of divine judgment, highlights the importance of repentance and faith, and offers the hope of restoration and renewal.

Structure

Lamentations is arranged in five sections or chapters. The first four chapters were written as acrostic poems, each verse beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

Why Study Lamentations?

Lamentations has value for God's children today as it gives voice to those who feel overwhelmed by grief. It provides a model for expressing lament in times of sorrow. It serves as a reminder that God is a just and kind God who will not be mocked, but also offers redemption in the midst of failure.

STUDY CONTENT

WEEK 1: Lamentations 4:1-22

WEEK 2: Lamentations 5:1-22

WEEK 3: Lamentations 1:1, 10-18; 2:5-14, 17, 20-21

WEEK 4: Lamentations 3:19-33, 39-42, 55-58

WEEK ONE

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

STUDY: 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.

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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. Mon-

ey 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.

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DISCOVERY

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

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 . . .”

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.

WEEK TWO

LESSON AIM: **Pray for mercy when
you suffer God's punishment.**

STUDY: Lamentations

THEME: God-Given Grief

LESSON TEXT: Lamentations 5:1-22

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: 2 Kings 21:10-16; Psalm 143:1-12; Jeremiah 4:16-18; Ezekiel 5:15

STUDY

PUNISHED BY MARK SCOTT

James Dobson told of a little boy who was cantankerous in church. His mother finally picked him up and hauled him down the center aisle to the foyer to discipline him. The little boy touched each person on the end of each pew as he was being hauled out and said, "Pray for me." Thank God for mothers (and fathers) who wisely punish their children when it is deserved.

Like the mother in this story, God has administered deserved punishment; for the Israelites, the reason was their unfaithfulness. The result was Lamentations, which we are working our way through. Last week we discussed God's discipline (chapter 4), and this week we discuss his punishment (chapter 5).

Bad News

Lamentations 5:1-18

Israel's Situation (vv. 1-10)—Chapter 5 begins with a prayer, "Remember, Lord. . . ." The situation was dire. Israel had been disgraced (reproached or scorned) by their Babylonian captors. Their *inheritance* (possession or property) and *homes* had been *turned over to foreigners*. Their pursuers had nipped at their heels (literally stood on their necks). The Israelites previously had submitted to *Egypt* and *Assyria* (representative of past captivities) to find bread. People groups who should have been Israel's slaves now ruled over them. No one could free Israel from their hands.

In addition to being enslaved, Israel's family life was a train wreck. Fathers had gone to war and were killed, and thus the nation was *fatherless* and many mothers were *widows*. The workforce was depleted, so *water* and *wood* had to be purchased for drinking and cooking. Prices were steep. *Bread* was secured *at the risk* of their lives. Their skin was feverish from working in the hot Palestinian sun, which Jeremiah described as being *hot as an oven*.

Israel's People (vv. 11-14)—Several groups of people are mentioned in these verses—women, virgins, princes, elders, young men, and boys. The women and virgins had been *violated* (raped) in the center of Judaism (Zion and the surrounding towns). The kingly families have *been hung up by their hands*. Older people were *shown no respect*. They were *gone from the city gate* (meaning that their influence in the market and courts was absent). Jobs typically carried out by animals (e.g., grinding at the millstones and carrying

wood) were being done by young men and boys. The music of young men had dried up.

Israel's Spirit (vv. 15-18)—The heart of the Israelites had been extinguished. The defeat of their hearts was worse than the desolation of *Mount Zion*. Joy had left their hearts. *Dancing* had *turned to mourning*. Their sense of royalty as God's special people had slipped like a crown from a king's head. Hearts had grown *faint*, and eyes had grown dim. They weren't trying to cover up anything, at least. The broken people of God admitted that their sin had created this dilemma. There was no singing in Zion; the sound of jackals was all that was heard.

Good News Disguised as Bad News

Lamentations 5:19-22

If the first part of this prayer is a plea for God to remember what had happened to Israel, then the rest of the prayer acknowledges that God was God, and he was uniquely postured to renew and restore his people. What is ultimately good news sometimes comes disguised as the bad news of judgment.

Jeremiah acknowledged that God would *reign forever* (in contrast to the Babylonians' reign, which would soon come to an end). God's throne endured *from generation to generation* (in contrast to the Egyptians' and Assyrians' thrones, which had already seen their demise). Israel was allowed to vent their frustration (via Jeremiah) and to ask why God seemed to *forget* and *forsake* them. The nation even wondered if God had *utterly rejected* her and was *angry . . . beyond measure* with her.

But deep within the soul of Israel was the desire to be restored and renewed (repaired or made new) as God's people. That was possible only by the grace of God. As strange as it might sound, the path to renewal is often punishment. That is the good news disguised as bad news.

Thank God the Father for being like a tough and tender parent. The stern lines in his face are really marks of love. Let us learn the lesson that Israel had to learn—that is, to pray for mercy

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APPLICATION

SEARCHING FOR GOD IN TIMES OF PAIN

BY DAVID FAUST

Have you ever wondered why there is so much sorrow in the world? Since God created freewill beings, is he responsible for pain and suffering? In his book *Where Is God When It Hurts?* Philip Yancey points out that “giving a child a pair of ice skates, knowing that he may fall, is a very different matter from knocking him down on the ice.”

In the book of Lamentations, Jeremiah used poetic prayers to voice deep sorrow over the fallen city of Jerusalem. He wrote, “Joy is gone from our hearts; our dancing has turned to mourning. The crown has fallen from our head. Woe to us, for we have sinned!” (Lamentations 5:15-16).

How should we handle times of mourning when joy disappears? Where is God in painful times?

Some hurts are hard to explain. The apostle Paul performed miracles of healing, so why did he leave Trophimus sick in Miletus (2 Timothy 4:20)? And why did God say no when Paul asked for removal of his thorn in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)? Pain shouldn’t surprise us. In our fallen world, nature itself aches for redemption like a woman in the throes of childbirth (Romans 8:18-25). Some hurts result from our own foolish choices, for “a man reaps what he sows” (Galatians 6:7). Some suffering comes from Satan’s direct attacks (Job 2:7; Luke 13:16) and some is caused by the evil choices of others. God uses hardship to instruct and discipline us, as loving parents do (Hebrews 12:4-11), but it’s not always easy to discern exactly what we’re supposed to learn.

Some hurts are part of the healing process. Gardeners prune plants to make them more fruitful. Surgeons make strategic cuts to remove disease. Physical therapists use the temporary discomfort of stretching and exercise to bring their patients long-term improvement.

Some hurts result from trying to help. Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet because he bore a heavy

burden for the Jewish people. “Since my people are crushed, I am crushed,” he wrote (Jeremiah 8:21). It’s been said, “Hurt people hurt people.” And we’re surrounded by people who are hurting! When we bear others’ burdens and care for the suffering, we may get hurt in the process. “Wounded healers” are in good company, for Christ himself “took up our pain and bore our suffering” (Isaiah 53:4).

Some hurts will be healed only in heaven. The Lord is preparing a place for us where tears, death, mourning, and pain will disappear forever (Revelation 21:4). According to Philip Yancey,

The Bible consistently changes the questions we bring to the problem of pain. It rarely, or ambiguously, answers the backward-looking question “Why?” Instead, it raises the very different, forward-looking question, “To what end?” We are not put on earth merely to satisfy our desires, to pursue life, liberty, and happiness. We are here to be changed, to be made more like God in order to prepare us for a lifetime with him.

None of our hurts escape the heavenly Father’s attention. Jeremiah prayed, “Remember, Lord, what has happened to us; look, and see our disgrace” (Lamentations 5:1). God does see and remember. He is a very present help in times of trouble, and through Jesus Christ, he came in person to share our suffering. “The God of all comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:3) is with us in our pain.

Personal Challenge: With your small group or a trusted friend, talk about your own experiences with physical, emotional, or spiritual pain. What has God taught you through hardship and suffering?

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DISCOVERY

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How have you received and responded to any loving discipline from God over the past week?
2. Throughout your life, what has God taught you through hardship and suffering?

Ask two people to read aloud **Lamentations 5:1-22** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passage.

3. How would you describe the situation in which the people found themselves (see vv. 1-10)?
 - What might it have been like for the different people groups mentioned in verses 11-14?
 - Imagine we were living in what is described in this passage. What emotions might we be feeling and what might be the nature of our attitudes? (See vv. 15-18.)
4. What do you learn about people from this passage?
5. What do you learn about God?
6. In what ways can you relate to Jeremiah's prayer in verses 19-22 in your current circumstances?
7. Reread verse 19 out loud. With that truth in mind, how can we find hope in whatever circumstances we find ourselves?
8. Whom will you tell about God's sovereignty and your hope in him this week?
9. In what ways would you like to ask God to restore, renew, and revive yourself, the church, our country, and the world today?

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Lamentations 1:1, 10-18; 2:5-14, 17, 20-21**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK THREE

LESSON AIM: **Confess your sins and learn from the Lord when God wounds you.**

STUDY: Lamentations

THEME: God-Given Grief

LESSON TEXT: Lamentations 1:1, 10-18; 2:5-14, 17, 20-21

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Leviticus 26:38-44; 1 Kings 8:33-36; Psalm 32:3-5; 1 John 1:9

STUDY

WOUNDED

BY MARK SCOTT

Some great writers have used metaphors to describe preaching. John R.W. Stott used bridge-building as a metaphor (in *Between Two Worlds*), while Ian Pitt-Watson used dancing (*A Primer for Preaching*). But Chris Erdman used bleeding (*Countdown to Sunday*). Consider that Jeremiah was a living metaphor for the people to whom he preached, for he bled as he prophesied to them. And that fits, for Isaiah said of the Messiah—the greatest preacher ever—that by his stripes we would be healed (Isaiah 53:5).

The book of Lamentations is a bit like reading the Song of Songs—i.e., it isn't always clear who is speaking. In the case of Lamentations, is it the Lord? Is it the Lord through the prophet? Is it the people? Is it the people speaking through the prophet? In this early section of Lamentations, the people seem to be speaking (lamenting) through the prophet.

The Wounds of the Lord

Lamentations 1:1, 10-18; 2:10-14

Wounds hurt. The people confessed as much. One wound was that of feeling deserted (1:1). The deportation of people to Babylon depleted Jerusalem's population. The city formerly was bursting with life. But this opening verse described it as a *widow*. (By the way, the Hebrew word for *widow* means deserted or silent.) At one point, Jerusalem was *great among the nations* on the order of a *queen*. But after its fall, it was more like a *slave* than a *queen*.

Another wound arose from the desecration of the city and temple (1:10). Babylon had stolen Jerusalem's *treasures*. They had even entered the *sanctuary* (holy place in the temple). That place, of course, was reserved for specially designated priests. That incursion made the Jews feel violated at the point of their faith.

Another wound was starvation (1:11). Besiegement is a terrible way to die. The people searched for bread anywhere and everywhere. They sold valuable treasures to *keep themselves alive*. Food is a powerful motivator, and we can feel *despised* when we do not have it.

Another wound emerged from the rejection of God's people (1:12-18). This is a long and involved section.

When we suffer (experience sorrow, grief, or pain), we feel rejected. It feels as if we are experiencing the *fierce anger* of God. Three metaphors—fire, hunting, and being yoked—drive home this feeling of sorrow. The people felt as if they

had fire in their bones (cf. Jeremiah 20:9) and as if someone had set a trap for them. Their strength was *sapped* by having to wear an uncomfortable yoke from their enemies. These enemies made war against God's people, crushed the young men, and caused the people to *overflow with tears*. The people, in fact, could not keep from weeping (2:11). God was using his enemies against his own people, and, worst of all, sending his people into exile.

Another wound was compromised leadership (2:10). The *elders* of the people could do nothing but sit *on the ground in silence* and be contrite. Young women bowed their heads in shame. Children and infants *fainted*. Mothers could not find food for their young. Prophets prophesied falsely. Face it, their wounds were as deep *as the sea*.

The Lord of the Wounds

Lamentations 2:5-9, 17, 20-21

The Lord acts like a physician who must hurt the patient to produce healing. He seems violent, but the Lord knows something about wounds, and he knows how redemptive they can be. It almost seemed that the Lord was the *enemy* (a national foe) of Israel. He *swallowed* them up, destroyed their strongholds, and multiplied their *lamentation* (2:5).

The Lord made the people into a tilled garden, messed with their religious ceremonies, and took out their leaders. He rejected the very altar he had consecrated. He exposed the people by allowing their walls (protection) to be taken away. The *ramparts* and *walls* were removed. The *gates* and the *bars* were taken out. The law of the Lord was no more, and the prophets were receiving no new visions from him.

The Lord of the wounds did exactly what he said he would do. Wrongdoing in his universe would be punished. He had no pity. He allowed enemies to gloat over Israel . . . he even exalted their power. Women were eating their young, leaders were being killed in the temple, and young and old were dying *by the sword*.

Jeremiah had one plea. "*Look, Lord, and consider: Whom have you ever treated like this?*" The only escape from the wounds of the Lord is to confess your sins to the Lord of the wounds.

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APPLICATION

DON'T CLOSE YOURSELF OFF

BY DAVID FAUST

Our youth minister purchased a new Bible for every high school senior in our youth group. Before giving the Bibles as graduation gifts, he asked several friends to highlight favorite verses and write encouraging Post-it notes to stick inside the Bibles. I noticed that the dark, sad book of Lamentations didn't get a lot of Post-it notes! Most of us prefer celebrations over lamentations.

And yet, "Jeremiah composed laments" (2 Chronicles 35:25)—sad songs grieving the death of King Josiah, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the sin that led to the city's downfall. The book of Lamentations is an acrostic poem where the verses begin with consecutive letters of the alphabet. Jeremiah wept "from A to Z," comparing the fallen city of Jerusalem to a grieving widow whose "eyes overflow with tears" (Lamentations 1:1-2, 16).

Hebrew poetry includes both praise and lament. Praise celebrates what God has done. Lament cries out to God in the midst of pain. Both sides of that equation are important. We're meant to lament. If we skip too quickly to the happy side of things, we miss the lessons we can learn from grief. Before we celebrate Easter, it's healthy to lament on Good Friday. If we're open to its instruction, sorrow has a lot to teach us.

Different Kinds of Grief

Sadness comes in different forms. *Brief grief* hurts for a while, but as time passes we eventually get over it. *Extended grief* lasts a long time as we deal with the death of a loved one or recover from a devastating loss of money, health, a job, or a relationship. Someone has said, "Sadness is the soul's way of saying 'this mattered.'" C. S. Lewis wrote, "The greater the love, the greater the grief, and the stronger the faith the more savagely will Satan storm its fortress."

Have you experienced the *sorrow of repentance*? "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret" (2 Corinthians 7:10). *Individual grief* comes from repenting over our own personal sin, and *group grief* comes when a family, congregation, or even a nation goes through sorrow together. When Jonah preached, the whole city of Nineveh repented, including

the king. The 9/11 terror attacks made the whole world grieve.

And let's not forget about *God's grief*. Jesus the Messiah was acquainted with grief.

He knows how it feels to have a broken heart. He sympathizes with our sorrow.

Good Grief

Grief is good when it pulls people together. In sports, adversity can make individual athletes play better as a team. Trust and cooperation can grow deeper when family members and coworkers face difficulties together and learn to "rejoice with those who rejoice [and] weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15, *English Standard Version*).

Grief is good when it draws us toward God. Grief can make us bitter, or it can make us better. Pushing God away doesn't relieve grief. "Your wound is as deep as the sea. Who can heal you?" (Lamentations 2:13). Only God can.

The trailer of a movie shows just enough highlights to pique our interest. To get the whole story, we need to watch the whole movie. In life, we see short glimpses. Only God sees the whole picture. Whatever grief you are facing, the Bible extends this gracious invitation: "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7).

Personal Challenge:

What makes you sad? What emotional wounds are breaking your heart? In prayer, tell the Lord about your sorrow and ask him to heal your wounds.

OPTIONAL CHALLENGE:

Do you know someone who is dealing with grief? Write them a note, take them out for lunch or coffee, or find some other practical way to encourage them and show you care.

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DISCOVERY

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How did you find hope amid your circumstances over the past week?
2. How have you seen God redeem wounds, pain, and grief in your life or the lives of others?

Ask two people to read aloud **Lamentations 1:1, 10-18; 2:5-14, 17, 20-21** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passages.

3. What wounds and suffering were the Israelites experiencing?
 - In what ways did God directly and indirectly (through the Babylonian captivity, siege, and deportment) punish the people for their defiance and disobedience?
 - Imagine how these people, God's covenant people, must have felt with so much taken away from them: their homes, their city, their way of life and ability to worship God in his sanctuary, their ability to fix the situation, their loved ones, God's comfort, their morality, and much more. In what ways can you empathize with them? How would you respond?
4. What do you learn about people from this passage?
5. What do you learn about God?
6. What warnings can we take from this passage for today and the future?
7. How is confession (see 1:14, 18) and repentance involved in healing?
8. "Your wound is as deep as the sea. Who can heal you?" (2:13). How would you use this passage and especially that verse to tell someone about God's goodness and grace?
9. What healing do you need from God right now?

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Lamentations 3:19-33, 39-42, 55-58**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK FOUR

LESSON AIM: **Wait on the Lord to
restore you when you
are downcast.**

STUDY: Lamentations

THEME: God-Given Grief

LESSON TEXT: Lamentations 3:19-33, 39-42, 55-58

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Psalm 25:1-22; Jeremiah 31:16-20; Luke 2:25-32;
Hebrews 9:27-28

STUDY

WAITING BY MARK SCOTT

In the 1940s, Samuel Beckett wrote a philosophical play entitled *Waiting for Godot*. It was a tragicomedy in two acts. Two men (Vladimir and Estragon) wait for Godot—but he never comes. Many people wait for someone to come who never shows up. Not so with Jeremiah's God. When Israel's tears were sufficient, God would show up—but not until waiting had worked its charm.

As mentioned in an earlier lesson, reading Lamentations is like climbing a small mountain. One climbs up through trials and judgments (chapters 1–2) and goes down the other side through the same (chapters 4–5). But at the top of the hill (chapter 3), the book's perspective is clear. We see how God worked through the tears with his mercy and faithfulness. Memorial Day is about remembering, but Lamentations is about waiting.

What Weighs on Waiting

Lamentations 3:19-20

Many things cause the human soul to be *downcast* (humbled). Jeremiah thinks back to four of them. He remembered his *affliction* (poverty or misery) and *wandering* (restlessness). He also remembered his *bitterness* (wormwood) and *gall* (poison or venom). Such things as these can suck the life out of people. They marshal an attack against waiting on the Lord.

What Helps Waiting

Lamentations 3:21-33

Jeremiah mentioned at least five qualities that help waiting. His *hope* (mentioned three times in the lesson text; it means "to expect or trust") drove him to wait on the Lord. God's *great love* caused the people not to be consumed. Love was placed beside compassion (mentioned twice in the lesson text; it means "mercy").

God's *faithfulness* seemed to be at the heart of the book of Lamentations. The word means "steady" or "truthful." Because God is so faithful, Jeremiah could lean into God being his *portion* (inheritance) forever. Learning to *wait quietly* on the Lord offers up the greatest help (i.e., *salvation*). Any trial can be endured when rescue and deliverance are in sight; we can even bear up under a challenging yoke or burden.

People adopt a posture of solitude while waiting, which is not only a good spiritual discipline, but also a great help in waiting. To *sit alone in silence* can be very redemptive. Burying one's face *in the dust* can sometimes demonstrate a contrite spirit and repentance. In fact, if people let God fight the battles and if they don't retaliate, their silence can overcome the enemy.

The text at this point takes a strange messianic turn. The phrase *let him offer his cheek to one who would strike him* perfectly described the Servant who would come and not return evil for evil (Isaiah 50:6; 1 Peter 2:23). Beyond that, this kind of behavior is expected of the Servant's followers in the kingdom of God (Matthew 5:39).

The heart of God also helps waiting. He does not want to *cast off* people forever. Even though God brought *grief*, he continued to show *compassion* and *unfailing love*. In his heart, God does not want to bring *affliction* or *grief* to *anyone*. He wants to save the world, not condemn it (John 3:17).

What Waiting Helps Us Do

Lamentations 3:39-42, 55-58

Waiting does not automatically bring healing. But waiting creates the context for healing and allows time for healing. Jeremiah mentioned four ways in which people benefit from waiting. First is examination, for waiting allows for serious reflection. A person logically reasons that they should not complain when they are rightfully punished for sin (though such an intellectually honest response probably is not a suffering person's first thought). Examination and testing make us want to run home to God.

Second, waiting helps us confess. Heart and hands are lifted up to God in a contrite spirit. We say, "*We have sinned and rebelled.*" He may not forgive instantly (though he might—1 John 1:9), but he will forgive in the end. God is bent in the direction of forgiveness.

Third, waiting helps us pray. God always welcomes prayer. He is put off by our distance and our preoccupation with other things. Jeremiah had literal experience with this. He cried to God *out of the depths of the pit*, and God sent Ebed-Melek to his rescue (Jeremiah 38:7-13). Jeremiah heard those words that divinity always says in the presence of humanity, "*Do not fear.*"

Finally, waiting helps us with confidence. This is a hard quality to find in the book of Lamentations. In fact, the other qualities help lead to this. Jeremiah confidently said, "*You, Lord, took up my case; you redeemed my life.*" Waiting is hard for an impatient culture with instant everything. But waiting helps us see God's sovereignty at work.

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APPLICATION

NEW EVERY MORNING

BY DAVID FAUST

One evening years ago, I tucked my young daughter into bed while she complained about her early bedtime. “After all,” she insisted, “I’m a *night* person, Daddy!”

Some of us roll out of bed at sunrise and hit the ground running, while others take a while to get going. For night people, “A.M.” stands for “*Already Morning?*”

We all recognize the sounds of morning. Showers spray, hair dryers hum, and school bus brakes squeak. Radios buzz with music, weather updates, and traffic reports. Morning also has unique smells (shaving cream and hair spray, fresh-perked coffee, toasted bagels) and sights (that frightening first glance at the bathroom mirror, your pet’s wagging tail, the dim but brightening dawn skies).

Have you ever wondered what God does every morning?

Every Morning, God Hears Prayer

David said, “In the morning, Lord, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly” (Psalm 5:3).

We can pray any time, but countless believers recognize the value of spending at least a few minutes with God at the start of each day. Some read the Bible and journal alone at their desks, while others meet for breakfast with a small group to pray and discuss Scripture.

A friend of mine worked in a college cafeteria, and his job required him to get up early every morning. He trained himself to say “Dear Lord” as he rolled out of bed. Then when he went to bed at night, he would say, “Thank you, Lord” before drifting off to sleep, so his whole day was enveloped by prayer.

Every Morning, God Dispenses Justice

Many mornings greet us with discouraging reports about crime in our cities, confusion in our culture, and corruption in our government. Each new day brings another skirmish in spiritual warfare as we take our stand against the devil’s schemes (Ephesians 6:11). The prophet Zephaniah was dismayed by the rebellion, arrogance, and profanity in Jerusalem. He compared the

city’s leaders—including the prophets and priests—to “evening wolves” that spend the night eating their prey (Zephaniah 3:1-4).

If you sometimes feel like a sheep among wolves, remember: the Good Shepherd stands with his flock. Despite all of Jerusalem’s troubles, the prophet affirmed, “The Lord within her is righteous; he does no wrong. Morning by morning he dispenses his justice, and every new day he does not fail” (Zephaniah 3:5). As each day begins, we can take comfort in the never-failing justice of God.

Every Morning, God Provides New Mercies

One hundred years ago (in 1923), Thomas Chisholm wrote the words of a magnificent hymn that proclaims throughout the refrain,

Great is Thy faithfulness!

Great is Thy faithfulness!

Morning by morning new mercies I see.

Chisholm’s lyrics came directly from Lamentations 3:22-23: “Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” Ironically, Jeremiah penned these uplifting words during a time of excruciating sorrow for the Jewish people. He believed that even when circumstances are frightening, God is faithful.

Every morning, God finds innovative ways to pour out his compassion. We should view each new day as an opportunity to catch fresh glimpses of God’s grace. The Lord’s daily mercy makes every morning a little easier to face, even if you’re a night person.

Personal Challenge:

Examine your morning routine. What grabs your attention most—your Bible or your cell phone? What fills your mind first thing each day—God’s Word or the daily news? How could you use your mornings more effectively to fix your mind on things above?

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DISCOVERY

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How did you use last week's Scripture passage to tell someone about God's goodness and grace?
2. For what have you waited on the Lord for a long time?

Ask two people to read aloud **Lamentations 3:19-33, 39-42, 55-58** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passage.

3. What is the general tone of this passage (especially as compared to others from Lamentations)?
4. What kinds of things help us to faithfully wait for God, particularly when we are (or have been) downcast?
 - What "advice" does the prophet give us for waiting on God?
 - What parts do repentance, confession, and prayer play as we wait for God to move in our circumstances?
5. What do you learn about God from this passage? (See especially verses 22-23, 25, 31-33, 57-58.)
6. What do you learn about people through Jeremiah?
7. When have you called on the name of the Lord from the depths of a "pit"? What were the circumstances? How did the Lord respond?
8. Consider a time when you trusted in God's great love, compassion, and faithfulness during a difficult period when you were waiting for him to answer and act. How would you tell that story to a friend or family member to help them trust God more?
9. For what in your life today do you need God to come near and say, "Do not fear"?

For Next Week: This week's lesson brings this unit of study to a conclusion. Look for additional **"1717: Your Word Is Truth"** studies, for use with your Sunday school classes, small groups, or personal studies, at *ChristianStandard.com*.