

LAMENTATIONS: JEREMIAH'S JOURNAL OF WOES

STUDY FOUR

None but the Lonely Heart

Selections from Lamentations 1

It's still the job of the preacher to remind men and women of the consequences of wrongdoing. Those reminders fit my life just as they fit yours. I do wrong, I suffer consequences. My message today: because the ancient Israelites did wrong, they suffered the consequences. I don't want us to ever forget it.

—Charles R. Swindoll

WHETHER it be fear, vanity, distraction, or hard-heartedness, people too often wall off their agony to keep their eyes dry. Many have felt the temptation to refrain from weeping. Some have even made it a habit, but they have done so to their own hurt.

If we learn anything from Jeremiah's journal of woes, we learn of the need to lament—to let ourselves weep over what's broken, what's wrong. We live in a world that often proves itself lamentable. When we refuse to lament, we refuse to embrace our own humanity. As beings stamped with God's image, we mirror His nature when we lament over what is truly lamentable.

Jeremiah lamented the preventable consequences of disobedience to God. Such destruction ensued as God turned away His favor to unfold His controlled, still dreadful, judgments on His people.

The first chapter of this five-chapter book immediately introduces us to the causes and outcomes of those judgments. In doing so, it instructs us and reminds us about our holy God who knows what He's about.



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

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PREPARE YOUR HEART

Before embarking on this study, pray that God would soften your heart and open your mind to receive from His Word. Nature and time do not keep the heart soft or attentive to divine things. Only the Spirit does that. That's why we always express our need for God's help to trust Him and obey Him.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Jerusalem's downfall occurred in 586 BC when Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar finally decided to decimate the city after two decades of slowly chipping away at its political independence. For centuries, God had warned His privileged people of the consequences of disobedience. But they yawned. They followed their own hearts. God led Babylon to destroy Jerusalem.

Jeremiah wrote Lamentations to sear the event and its lesson in history's memory bank. We wouldn't see it while reading Jeremiah's lines in English, but Lamentations in its original language has multiple acrostics incorporated into its poems.

Chapters one, two, and four contain twenty-two verses each because each begins with the consecutive letters of the twenty-two-letter Hebrew alphabet. Chapter three contains sixty-six verses with every three verses beginning with consecutive letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Chapter five breaks the acrostic pattern, perhaps indicating literarily Jerusalem's chaos.

Because most people in ancient times would have heard the poem read aloud rather than reading it personally in silence, the acrostic structure would have resonated in the ear. The form aided memory. How vital to remember the failures of the past so we can avoid them in the future!



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Observation: The Lonely Consequences of Wrongdoing

Biblical authors often used repetition to emphasize key points.¹ Observation helps us notice this repetition as we slowly and repeatedly read the text—often in multiple translations. Chuck Swindoll's favorite Bible translations are the New Living Translation and the New American Standard Bible.

In Lamentations 1, Jeremiah repeated the idea of loneliness—sometimes repeating the same phrase as well as using varying images. For example, he wrote, “Among all her lovers, there is no one left to comfort her” (Lamentations 1:2).

Carefully observe *Lamentations 1* and look for statements and images that deal with Jerusalem's loneliness. Note below what you find.

This is written to people who were free, who had known the blessing and the pleasure of God. Jeremiah had been sent to warn them. But they closed their ears to the prophet's words. Even their priests had no place for the living God in their preaching and in their ministry, if you can call it that. Now, we read the consequences on one page after another after another. It need not have been. —Chuck Swindoll

Now record the emphasis Jeremiah intended to convey through his repetition of the idea of loneliness.



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Night after night, Jeremiah must have replayed the terrors of shattered walls, emptied storehouses, and lifeless bodies. “It need not have been” and “if only they had taken God seriously” must have run through his mind over and over again. God is a holy God who will not let Himself be taken lightly.



Interpretation: Divine Judgment

In chapter one, sometimes the voice of the speaker is a bystander, but primarily the “speaker” is the city itself. Sometimes the bystander or city speaks to God or about God. For example, Lamentations 1:9 reads, “LORD, see my misery. . . . The enemy has triumphed.”

Once more, read *Lamentations 1* and this time look for statements about God and to God. Summarize what these statements teach us about God’s character and ways. Use your Bible study tools, like Netbible.org, to help you interpret these verses. Record below the truth from this passage that remains with us today.

May I remind all of us our God is a jealous God. He’s a holy God. He doesn’t share His glory with any other. He’s not one among many gods. He is the one and only God. The Bible is not one among many references to His mind and His will. The Bible is THE reference.

—Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: The Ancient Warnings

God’s people had received the warnings of disobedience and promises of obedience centuries prior to Jeremiah’s prophesying and Babylon’s devastation. Moses uttered these warnings and promises on Mount Gerizim just before he journeyed to Mount Nebo, gazed at the promised land, and breathed his last.



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The promises and warnings from one of Moses' last sermons help us understand the key themes of Lamentations. First, review the promises of *Deuteronomy 28:1–7*. Rather than destruction and exile in 586 BC, the people of Jerusalem would have received what benefits had they only obeyed God?

Second, review the warnings of *Deuteronomy 28:15–20, 25–26, 36–37, 45–52*. Summarize how these warnings portray the reality of Jerusalem's experience in 586 BC.

The physical blessings and curses of ancient Israel correspond with spiritual realities. Had they trusted, obeyed, and enjoyed God, they would have received the blessings. But they didn't. Their physical chaos for departing from God symbolizes what had happened when the whole human race rejected God: spiritual death.

Jesus came first to correct the curse of our spiritual death. On the cross, Jesus took upon Himself the curse for our wrongdoing (Galatians 3:13–14). Those who trust in Him now receive a foretaste of His spiritual blessings. They will one day inherit an uncursed earth and gain unhindered access to the fullness of God (Revelation 21–22).



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Application: Death in the City

The toxic spirituality and spoiled morality of Jerusalem reflects what happens to all people who ignore and resist God's truth. Chuck Swindoll gives two practical ways to appropriately respond to Lamentations 1 in light of your own city, culture, and historical situation.

Our Times Need to Grip Us Emotionally

Jeremiah said, "For all these things I weep; tears flow down my cheeks" (Lamentations 1:16). We need to pray for and weep over the spiritual and moral decay in our own cities. Record below a prayer for those in your city and culture who have turned from God or neglected God.

Our Times Need to Alert Us Spiritually

The spiritual leaders in Jeremiah's day shrouded spiritual truth. They preferred darkness to light—eyes shut versus eyes open. Chuck encourages us to keep awake spiritually, to spot where the culture strays, and to stay alert. What's one action you need to take to keep alert to spiritual deception and moral degradation?

Jesus Christ has promised us a city designed and built by God Himself. We don't stake all our hope in this life or the city of our residence. Streets of gold await us (Revelation 21:21). The Holy Spirit has empowered us to exist in the present as a bright light amid heavy darkness.



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A FINAL PRAYER

Father, thank You for preserving the laments of Jeremiah. Thank You for teaching me that it is okay to lament, for coming to me in my laments, and giving me hope beyond my laments. Thank You for lifting the curse from me and giving me Your Holy Spirit as a down payment of the inheritance You have promised. In Christ's holy name I pray, amen.

ENDNOTE

1. To review Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study method, visit the website sts.insight.org or grab a *copy* of the book for your library. Chuck also uses the *New Unger's Bible Dictionary*. It's one of his favorite Bible study tools.

