

Lamentations Chapter 4

Verses 1-2

When Solomon dedicated the temple (1 Kings Chapter 8), no one could have imagined that such a beautiful and ornate place of worship would one day be laid waste.

The tarnished (“dim”), “scattered” structure paralleled the humiliation that Jerusalem’s leadership had endured (“precious sons of Zion”; Jer. chapter 52).

Lamentations 4:1 "How is the gold become dim! [how] is the most fine gold changed! the stones of the sanctuary are poured out in the top of every street."

“How is the gold become dim”:

The gold adornment of the temple, looted by the conquerors, lost its luster with a coating of dust where they scattered the remains.

Jeremiah is heartsick over the destruction of the temple.

We know from our lessons in Jeremiah, that the temple was ravaged and burned.

The precious metal, and everything they could take loose, they took to Babylon.

This cry of Jeremiah may not be accurate in every detail, but is what has happened to the temple in his heart.

The fullest statement is, "The precious temple with all of its beauty is gone"

Lamentations 4:2 "The precious sons of Zion, comparable to fine gold, how are they esteemed as earthen pitchers, the work of the hands of the potter!"

Either the nobles and great men, or the priests, or the good men amongst the Jews, that for their intrinsic worth and value may be compared to gold, are looked upon no better than earthen vessels, the workmanship of an ordinary potter.

God carried Jeremiah down to the potter’s house (Jer. 18:2; 19:1), and had taught them that they were no more in His hand.

He now proved it by His providence, they were indeed made so, and as miserably and irreparably broken in pieces.

"How are they esteemed as earthen pitchers, the work of the hands of the potter":

They are indeed earthen vessels with respect to their bodies, frail, weak, and mortal.

But they are the work of God's hands, even as creatures, and particularly as new creatures, and are a curious piece of His workmanship.

And so valuable, and especially by Him, who is as tender and as careful of them as the apple of His eye.

And yet these are greatly disesteemed by carnal men, are reckoned as the faith of the world.

And the off scouring of all things; as earthen vessels, fit for no use but common or dishonorable ones, or to be broke in pieces, and rendered useless and contemptible (see Psalm 31:12).

God's people are thought of as precious sons.

This is speaking of not just the priests and high priest, but of all of God's children.

This was the greatest loss of all.

Those who are fit for God's kingdom are spoken of as being like fine gold, tried in the fire and made pure.

They have been poured out on the street here.

There are dead everywhere.

These children are God's creation.

He is the potter, they are the clay.

They had been a beautiful vessel to honor, now they are crushed by their terrible fall into spiritual adultery.

Verses 3-10

Until Jerusalem, the destruction of “Sodom” was considered the epitome of God’s wrath.

That Sodom was “overthrown as in a moment”, compared to the duration of Jerusalem’s defeat, and underlines how much greater Israel’s sin was.

The devastation in the land was not only the result of military conquest but a famine so great that once-robust princes and nobles were dying of starvation and mothers resorted to cannibalism (2:20).

This was a living death; those slain in the siege seemed to be better off.

Lamentations 4:3 "Even the sea monsters draw out the breast, they give suck to their young ones: the daughter of my people [is become] cruel, like the ostriches in the wilderness."

"Give suck to their young ones":

Even worthless jackals by nature nurse their young, but under the severities of conquest, Israelite women were unable to nurse their babies (compare verse 4).

"Like the ostriches":

Birds which are notable for ignoring their young (compare Job 39:14-16).

This speaks vividly of the extent of the famine in the land.

It is natural for a mother to feed a baby, whether it is a sea monster, or any other being.

This is not a natural thing that is going on in Jerusalem.

These had been God's children.

We must remember that God did not cause this, their sin caused this calamity.

Lamentations 4:4 "The tongue of the sucking child cleaveth to the roof of his mouth for thirst: the young children ask bread, [and] no man breaketh [it] unto them."

Through want of the milk of the breast, which is both food and drink unto it.

"The young children ask bread":

Of their parents as usual, not knowing how the case was, that there was a famine in the city.

Those are such that were more grown, were weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts, and lived on other food, and were capable of asking for it.

"And no man breaketh it unto them":

Distributes unto them, or gives them a piece of bread; not father, friend, or any other person.

It not being in their power to do so, they having none for themselves.

Children suffer the most in a famine.

Throughout history, famine has been one way God has dealt with those who worship false gods.

If there is no bread, there is no way to give the children bread.

Lamentations 4:5 "They that did feed delicately are desolate in the streets: they that were brought up in scarlet embrace dunghills."

That were brought up in the king's palace, or in the houses of noblemen.

Or, however, born of parents rich and wealthy, and had been used to good living, and had fared sumptuously and deliciously every day.

They were now wandering about in the streets in the most forlorn and distressed condition, seeking for food of any sort, but could find none to satisfy their hunger.

And so, as the Vulgate Latin version renders it, perished in the ways or streets.

"They that were brought up in scarlet":

In dyed garments, as Jarchi; clothed with scarlet colored ones, as was the manner of the richer and better sort of people, (Prov. 31:21).

Or, "brought up upon scarlet"; upon scarlet carpets, on which they used to sit and eat their food, as is the custom of the eastern people to this day.

"Embrace dunghills":

Are glad of them, and with the greatest eagerness rake into them, in order to find something to feed upon, though ever so base and vile; or to sit and lie down upon.

Aben Ezra interprets it as their being cast here when dead, and there was none to bury them.

The Israelites had lived prosperous lives, and had plenty of all the foodstuff to eat.

They had eaten delicate food, because there was an abundance of food.

Now they are out in the street with no food at all.

"Scarlet" was a very expensive material.

This just shows that they lived above their neighbors.

This was a land of plenty.

Lamentations 4:6 "For the punishment of the iniquity of the daughter of my people is greater than the punishment of the sin of Sodom, that was overthrown as in a moment, and no hands stayed on her."

"The sin of Sodom":

Their sin was homosexuality.

The fact that the suffering of Jerusalem was prolonged, while that of even Sodom was swift, marks it as the greater punishment (compare 1 Peter 4:17).

There are worse things than instant death.

Sodom had been destroyed with fire and brimstone falling from heaven.

It was totally destroyed in one day.

The punishment for Jerusalem and Judah went on for years.

The actual fighting in Jerusalem took about 18 months.

The famine was a slower death, which took the lives of even the innocent babies.

Judah was in captivity 70 years.

God's anger was not soon cooled.

They had grieved Him greatly with their false gods.

Verses 7-8

“Nazarites”:

Those who were the purest, most devout (compare Num. chapter 6), strong, healthy and noble of the people became dirty, weak and contemptible.

Lamentations 4:7 "Her Nazarites were purer than snow, they were whiter than milk, they were more ruddy in body than rubies, their polishing [was] of sapphire:"

Her Nazarites were purer than snow, such who separated themselves by a vow to the LORD.

And abstained from drinking wine and strong drink, and by a moderate diet.

And often washing themselves, as well as taking great care of their hair, appeared very neat and comely, like snow, without any spot or blemish.

Some think such as were separated from others in dignity, very honorable persons, and the sons of nobles, are meant, since the Word has the signification of a "crown", and interpret it, her princes.

"Their polishing was of sapphire":

Or, their shape was "a sapphire."

The allusion is no longer to color, but to form.

Their shape was exact and faultless as the cutting of a precious stone.

Nazarites were those who separated themselves out and prayed.

They were supposed to be closer to the will of God because of these vows they took.

They would let their hair grow long, until the vow was over, and then cut it and sacrifice it in the temple.

White symbolizes righteousness.

To be as white as this speaks of, would mean they were holy before the LORD.

The "sapphire" is a brilliant stone and the "ruby" is as well.

This is probably speaking of the light of God that shone forth from them.

Lamentations 4:8 "Their visage is blacker than a coal; they are not known in the streets: their skin cleaveth to their bones; it is withered, it is become like a stick."

We look, as it were, on the two pictures: the bloom and beauty of health; or the appearance, worn, ghostly looks of starvation.

"They are not known in the streets":

Not taken notice of in a distinguished manner; no respect shown the Nazarites as they walk the streets, as used to be.

No, their countenances were so altered, and their apparel so sordid, as not to be known by their friends, when they met them in public.

"Their skin cleaveth to their bones":

Have nothing but skin and bone, who used to be plump and fat.

"It is withered, it is become like a stick":

The skin wrinkled and shriveled up, the flesh being gone; and the bone became like a stick, or a dry piece of wood, its moisture and marrow being dried up.

Visage, in this particular place, is speaking of their beauty or figure of appearance.

This just means their purity and beauty in God is gone.

They are black.

It appears they are among the starving.

They have become so thin, they look like a stick.

Lamentations 4:9 "[They that be] slain with the sword are better than [they that be] slain with hunger: for these pine away, stricken through for [want of] the fruits of the field."

During the siege, many were killed by the enemies' sword, many more perished by famine.

The prophet saith the condition of those who perished by the sword was much better than the condition of those who perished by famine, because they had a quicker death, and were sooner dispatched and put out of their pain.

Whereas they who perished by hunger died a miserable, lingering death, gradually pining away, because they wanted corn and herbs, the fruits of the field, to uphold their souls in life.

At least, a death with the sword comes quickly.

Those who die from lack of food suffer for months before they finally die.

The worst part of this famine is the fact that the fields had been so fruitful before.

The memory is almost as bad as the actual starvation.

Lamentations 4:10 "The hands of the pitiful women have sodden their own children: they were their meat in the destruction of the daughter of my people."

"Sodden ... children":

Strange contrast between the compassionate nature of woman (compare Isa. 49:15), and the dread horrors of this moral as well as physical catastrophe (compare note on Lam. 2:20).

Thus, was the prophecy of Moses (Deut. 28:53; 28:57), most awfully fulfilled (see the notes on Lam. 2:20).

The natural thing for a mother to do was to protect her children in the face of every danger.

It is hard for me to understand them eating their own children, but this is what this verse says.

This is morally wrong, as well as being so unnatural to the flesh.

Verses 11-16

The spiritual leaders were among those most responsible for the nation's sins, for as they behaved, so did the people.

Their offense was so repulsive that shouts like those of lepers were appropriate: "unclean!" (Lev. 13:34-46), and a condemnation to exile was truly just.

Lamentations 4:11 "The LORD hath accomplished his fury; he hath poured out his fierce anger, and hath kindled a fire in Zion, and it hath devoured the foundations thereof."

Which rose up in His mind, and which He purposed in Himself to bring upon the sinful people of the Jews.

"He hath poured out his fierce anger":

The vials of His wrath in great abundance, even all He meant to pour out upon them.

"And hath kindled a fire in Zion, and it hath devoured the foundations thereof":

Not in the strong hold of Zion only, but in the whole city of Jerusalem, which was set on fire by the Chaldeans, as instruments, according to the will of God.

And which not only consumed the houses of it, but even the foundations of them; so that it looked as if there was no hope of its ever being rebuilt.

Aben Ezra interprets this fire of the famine.

This fierce anger of the LORD is much worse than an attack by the devil.

When the devil attacks, you can call out for help from God.

There is no one to cry out to for help in this.

God has closed the door of communication with His people.

The temple, the city, and the country have been totally destroyed by God.

Zion was the foundation of the religion of the world.

It is gone. Perhaps making the way for the grace of God to take over.

Lamentations 4:12 "The kings of the earth, and all the inhabitants of the world, would not have believed that the adversary and the enemy should have entered into the gates of Jerusalem."

In looking to the fact that Jerusalem had been taken by Shishak (1 Kings 14:26), Jehoash (2 Kings 14:13), the statement seems at first hyperbolic.

It has to be remembered, however, that since the happening of these two wars, the city had been strongly fortified by Uzziah, Hezekiah, and Manasseh.

And the failure of Sennacherib's attempt had probably led to the impression that it was impregnable.

Jerusalem had been God's holy city.

No one would ever have believed that God would have allowed the destruction of Jerusalem.

Lamentations 4:13 "For the sins of her prophets, [and] the iniquities of her priests, that have shed the blood of the just in the midst of her,"

Jeremiah's point remains constant: all that has happened to Israel is because of its sin (see the note on 1:18).

The greatest blame for all of this must be laid at the feet of the false prophets and the priests.

Instead of their being above sin and bringing the people out of false worship, they were involved in it themselves.

They were the leaders.

When the leaders are blind, the whole country falls into the ditch with them.

We must carefully choose who we will follow.

Christians need to learn the Word of God for themselves, so they can try the spirits and see whether they be of God or not.

There are many false prophets in our land today.

Those who do not lead wholesome lives, should not be leading others.

Lamentations 4:14 "They have wandered [as] blind [men] in the streets, they have polluted themselves with blood, so that men could not touch their garments."

They strayed from the paths of righteousness, and were blind to everything that was good, but to do evil they were quick-sighted.

“They have polluted themselves with blood”, so that men could not touch their garments”:

But they would be legally polluted; and there were so many of them, that a man could not walk in the streets without touching some of them.

I believe this is speaking of the prophets and the priests being spiritually blind.

To know the Word of God, as they should have, and still be blind is hard to understand.

The truth is that many times leaders such as these, get too involved in the technical side of ministry and do not spend enough time in God's Word.

These priests and prophets had shed innocent blood.

That is why they are polluted with it.

They had abused the office of priest and prophet.

Lamentations 4:15 "They cried unto them, Depart ye; [it is] unclean; depart, depart, touch not: when they fled away and wandered, they said among the heathen, They shall no more sojourn [there]."

“Depart”:

The people chased the false leaders away.

The people are crying out of the uncleanness of these prophets and priests.

They had prophesied lies.

Their sins were like leprosy.

The person who touched them, might be infected with their sins.

This is why the cry went out.

They were no more welcome in Jerusalem.

Lamentations 4:16 "The anger of the LORD hath divided them; he will no more regard them: they respected not the persons of the priests, they favored not the elders."

“The anger of the LORD”:

This was symbolic of divine anger.

The Jews had to face up to God.

This is speaking of some being killed, some taken captive to Babylon, and some remaining behind.

Showing no respect has to do with a rebellious people.

Verses 17-20

Captivity would be the new reality for God's people (Jer. 4:13).

The switch to first person reveals that the experience of siege and capture had been so horrific, they could not get its images out of their minds.

Lamentations 4:17 "As for us, our eyes as yet failed for our vain help: in our watching we have watched for a nation [that] could not save [us]."

Or, "while we were yet"; a nation, a people, a body politic, in our own land.

Before the city of Jerusalem was taken, we were looking for help, as was promised us.

But it proved vain, none was given us.

For which we kept looking to the last, till our eyes failed, and we could look no longer.

No help appeared, nor was there any prospect or probability of it, and therefore all gave up.

"In our watching we have watched for a nation that could not save us":

Not the Romans, as the Targum, but the Egyptians.

These promised help and relief, and therefore in their watching they watched, or vehemently watched, and wistfully looked out for it, but all in vain.

For though they made an attempt to help them, they dared not proceed; but were obliged to retire, being no match for the Chaldean army.

And so could not save them, or break up the siege, and relieve them.

God had warned His people not to look to the world (Egypt), for help.

Their help was in the LORD.

The arm of flesh is not a help.

The Right Hand of God is their very present help.

They had abandoned God for the world.

Lamentations 4:18 "They hunt our steps, that we cannot go in our streets: our end is near, our days are fulfilled; for our end is come."

The Chaldeans, from their forts and batteries, as they could see.

They watched the people as they came out of their houses, and walked about the streets, and shot their arrows at them.

So that they were obliged to keep inside, and not stir out, which they could not do without great danger.

"Our end is near, for our days are fulfilled":

For our end is come.

Either the end of their lives, the days, months, and years appointed for them being fulfilled; or the end of their commonwealth.

The end of their civil and church state, at least as they thought.

The time appointed for their destruction was not only near at hand, but was actually come; it was all over with them.

This is explaining that there is no way to hide from this destruction.

All hope is gone.

They believe death is near.

Lamentations 4:19 "Our persecutors are swifter than the eagles of the heaven: they pursued us upon the mountains, they laid wait for us in the wilderness."

Better, "our pursuers"; the words referring to the Chaldean enemies rather than to persecutors in the modern sense of the word.

The comparison with eagles has a parallel in (Deut. 28:49).

"They pursued us upon the mountains, they laid wait for us in the wilderness":

Or "plain"; there was no safety in either. Such as fled to the mountains were pursued and overtaken there; and those who attempted to make their escape through the valleys were intercepted there.

The reference is to the flight of Zedekiah, his nobles, and his army with him, who were pursued by the Chaldeans, and taken in the plains of Jericho (Jer. 52:7).

It did not help to run, as the king found out.

The enemy pursued and caught them in the open field and on the mountains.

Be sure your sin will find you out.

You cannot run from sin.

You must repent and be cleansed from it.

The one thing all of this happened for, was to get them to repent.

Verses 20-21

“Edom” was singled out because they had rejoiced over Jerusalem’s demise and even profited from it (Psalm 137:7; see Obadiah).

It is dangerous business to gloat over the demise of others, even if their affliction was deserved (Prov. 24:17-18).

Despite its devastation, Jerusalem expected God’s justice to ultimately prevail because of His faithfulness to His promises.

Lamentations 4:20 "The breath of our nostrils, the anointed of the LORD, was taken in their pits, of whom we said, Under his shadow we shall live among the heathen."

The “breath of life” (of Gen. 2:7).

The phrase emphasizes the ideal character of the king as the center of the nation’s life.

"Of whom we said":

The words that follow point to the scheme which was rendered abortive by Zedekiah’s capture.

Those who followed him had hoped to find a refuge among some friendly neighboring nation, where they might at least have maintained the continuity of their national existence, and waited for better days.

Nothing ripens a people more for ruin, nor fills the measure faster, than the sins of priests and prophets.

The king himself cannot escape, for Divine vengeance pursues him.

Our anointed King alone is the life of our souls; we may safely live under His shadow, and rejoice in Him in the midst of our enemies, for He is the true God and eternal life.

Breath and life are interchangeable.

They mean the same thing.

They are speaking of God's family, when they speak of the anointed of the LORD.

It could also be meaning their king, Zedekiah.

They thought perhaps, the king of Babylon would let them have one of their own leaders in Babylon.

Verses 21-22: "Edom ... land of Uz":

In effect God said, "Laugh all you want now.

Your judgment will come" (compare 25:15-29).

Lamentations 4:21 "Rejoice and be glad, O daughter of Edom, that dwellest in the land of Uz; the cup also shall pass through unto thee: thou shalt be drunken, and shalt make thyself naked."

The land of Idumea, and the inhabitants of it, who did indeed rejoice at the destruction of Jerusalem (Obad. 1:12).

And here, in an ironic manner, are bid to go on with their mirth, if they could, like the young man in (Eccl. 11:9).

As Aben Ezra observes; for it would not last long, their note would soon be changed.

"That dwellest in the land of Uz":

Not the country of Job, which had its name from Uz the son of Nahor (Job 1:1).

But a country in Idumea, from whence the whole was so called.

And that from Uz the son of Dishan, one of the sons of Seir.

Or else the sense is, that Edom or Idumea, and the inhabitants of it, dwelt upon the borders of Uz; and so agrees very well with the place of Job's residence, which was near the land of Edom.

"The cup also shall pass through unto thee":

The cup of God's wrath and vengeance; which, as it had come to the Jews, was passing from one nation to another, in its turn would come to these Edomites (see Jer. 25:15).

"Thou shalt be drunken, and shalt make thyself naked":

Be overcome by it; as persons with wine, or any strong drink, reel to and fro, and fall.

And be utterly destroyed, lie helpless and without strength: "and be made naked".

As it may be rendered: stripped of their riches and wealth; or that they should strip themselves of their clothes, and behave indecently, and expose those parts which ought to be covered, as drunken persons.

The sense is, they should be exposed, or expose themselves, to shame and contempt.

For the "cup" as a figure of judgment (see the note on Jeremiah 25:28).

This is a sarcastic remark to Edom.

They had better enjoy the defeat of Judah while they can.

Soon, they will be attacked too, and left naked.

Lamentations 4:22 "The punishment of thine iniquity is accomplished, O daughter of Zion; he will no more carry thee away into captivity: he will visit thine iniquity, O daughter of Edom; he will discover thy sins."

In part in the seventy years' captivity in Babylon, and more fully in their present captivity.

For, as has been observed, there are some things in the preceding account, which had a further accomplishment in the destruction of Jerusalem, and the distress of the Jews by the Romans.

The Targum is, "and after thine iniquity is fulfilled, O congregation of Zion, and thou shalt be delivered by the hands of the Messiah, and of Elias the high priest;"

"He will no more carry thee away into captivity":

He, the enemy; or the LORD, as the Targum.

That is, thou shalt no more be carried captive: this seems to confirm the above observation, that this chapter is a prophecy of what would be, as well as a narrative of what had been; and includes the destruction both of the first and second temple, and of the Jews both by the Chaldeans, and by the Romans.

For it is certain, that, after their deliverance from the captivity of Babylon, they have been carried away captive, and are now in captivity.

"He will visit thine iniquity, O daughter of Edom":

Punish the Edomites for their sins, as is elsewhere threatened (Jer. 49:7; Amos 1:11); which was fulfilled by Nebuchadnezzar as an instrument.

And may have some respect to the destruction of the Romans, when the Jews shall be converted, and return to their own land.

The Targum, in the king of Spain's Bible is, "and at that time I will visit thine iniquity, O wicked Rome, which art built in Italy, and full of multitudes of the children of Edom; and the Persians shall come and oppress thee, and make thee desolate".

"He will discover thy sins":

By the punishment of them; as when God pardons sins, He is said to cover them.

So, when He punishes for them, He discovers them (see Jer. 49:10).

It appears from this, that the punishment of Judah and Jerusalem is over.

God will no longer carry her into captivity.

Edom will soon be judged of God for her iniquities, and will suffer as did their neighbor, Judah.

We said before that Judgement begins at the house of God, but it does not overlook the sins of others.

They will feel the judgement of God, as did God's own people.

Our world today is guilty of many of the sins mentioned here.

Church, God begins with us.

We must repent and turn to God today while we still can.

Just as God's wrath came down on the people here, there is a day of wrath waiting in the wings now.

We must open the ear of our spirit, and learn from these people's mistakes.

God is love, but He is also Judge.

Lamentations Chapter 4 Questions

1. What was Jeremiah heartsick about?
2. What happened to the temple?
3. Who are the precious sons of Zion?
4. Those who are fit for God's kingdom are spoken of, as being like _____.
5. They had been a beautiful vessel of _____.
6. Now, they are crushed by their terrible _____.
7. What is verse 3 speaking vividly of?
8. Who caused this calamity?
9. Who suffer the most in a famine?
10. How had the Israelites eaten before this famine started?
11. What does the "scarlet" show us?
12. The punishment of Jerusalem was greater, than the punishment of _____.
13. What was the difference?
14. How many years was Judah in captivity?
15. Who were Nazarites?
16. What do the "sapphire" and "ruby" mentioned in verse 7, mean?
17. What does "visage" mean?
18. They have become so thin, they look like a _____.
19. They that be slain with the sword are better off, than they that be slain with _____.
20. What terrible thing is verse 10 telling of?
21. Why is an attack from God worse than an attack from the devil?
22. Who should bear the greatest blame?
23. The priests and prophets were called as _____ men in verse 14.
24. What had divided them?

25. Who had Judah looked to for help, instead of God?
26. Breath and _____ are interchangeable.
27. Who rejoiced in Judah's destruction?
28. What lesson can we receive from this?