

Highlights of the Book of Lamentations



Written by **Jeremiah** (Priest, Prophet); Near Jerusalem (immediately after its destruction); In 607 BCE.

Five poems lamenting the tragedy that befell Jerusalem and its inhabitants in 607 BCE at the hands of the Babylonians.

INSIGHT:

In Biblical days lamentations, or dirges, were composed and chanted for deceased friends (2Sa 1:17-27), devastated nations (Am 5:1,2), and ruined cities (Eze 27:2,32-36). The book of Lamentations furnishes an inspired example of such mournful composition. It consists of five lyrical poems (in five chapters) lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem at Babylonian hands in 607 BCE.

The book acknowledges that Jehovah justly brought punishment upon Jerusalem and Judah because of the error of his people. (La 1:5,18) It also highlights God's loving-kindness and mercy and shows that Jehovah is good to the one hoping in him. -La 3:22,25.

Si:

THIS book of the inspired Scriptures is certainly well named. It is a lament expressing deep sorrow over that calamitous happening in the history of God's chosen people, the destruction of Jerusalem in 607 BCE by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. In Hebrew this book is named by its first word, '*Eh-khah*!', meaning "How!" The translators of the Greek *Septuagint* called the book *Thre'noi*, which means "Dirges; Laments." The Babylonian Talmud uses the term *Qi-nohth*', which means "Dirges; Elegies." It was Jerome, writing in Latin, who named it *Lamentationes*, from which the English title comes.

The time of writing is generally agreed to have been soon after the fall of Jerusalem in 607 BCE. The horror of both the siege and the burning of the city was still fresh in Jeremiah's mind, and his anguish is vividly expressed. One commentator remarks that no single facet of sorrow is fully exploited in any given place, but each returns again and again in the several poems. Then he says: "This tumult of thought...is one of the very strongest evidences that the book stands close to the events and emotions it purports to communicate."

The construction of Lamentations is of great interest to the Bible scholar. There are five chapters, that is, five lyric poems. The first four are acrostic, with each verse beginning successively with one of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. On the other hand, the third chapter has 66 verses, so that 3 successive verses begin with the same letter before passing on to the next letter. The fifth poem is not acrostic, though it does have 22 verses.

Lamentations expresses overwhelming grief at the siege, capture, and destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, and it is unsurpassed in any literature for its vividness and pathos. The writer expresses deep sorrow over the desolation, misery, and confusion that he views. Famine, sword, and other horrors have brought dreadful suffering to the city—all as a direct penalty from God, on account of the sins of the people, the prophets, and the priests. However, hope and faith in Jehovah remain, and to him go the prayers for restoration.

The book of Lamentations expresses Jeremiah's complete confidence in God. In the very depths of sorrow and crushing defeat, with absolutely no hope of comfort from any human source, the prophet looks forward to salvation by the hand of the great God of the universe, Jehovah. Lamentations should inspire obedience and integrity in all true worshipers, while at the same time providing a fearsome warning concerning those who disregard the greatest name and what it stands for. History does not show another ruined city lamented in such pathetic and touching language.

It is certainly of benefit in describing the severity of God toward those who continue to be rebellious, stiff-necked, and unrepentant. Lamentations is also beneficial in showing the fulfillment of a number of divine warnings and prophecies. (Lam 1:2-Jer 30:14; Lam 2:15-Jer 18:16; Lam 2:17-Lev 26:17; Lam 2:20-Deut 28:53) Also note that Lamentations provides vivid testimony to the fulfillment of Deut 28:63-65.

Heartrending indeed is the tragic plight of Jerusalem! Amid all of this, Lamentations voices confidence that Jehovah will show loving-kindness and mercy and that he will remember Zion and bring her back. (Lam 3:31,32; 4:22) It expresses hope in "new days" like the days of long ago when Kings David and Solomon reigned in Jerusalem. There is still Jehovah's covenant with David for an everlasting kingdom! "His mercies will certainly not come to an end. They are new each morning." And they will continue toward those who love Jehovah until, under his righteous Kingdom rule, every creature that lives will exclaim in thankfulness: "Jehovah is my share." -5:21; 3:22-24.

LAMENTATIONS - CONTENTS

AID BOOK

I. Jerusalem is personified as a widow, sitting solitary in her grief (Ch 1)

- A. Once a princess, now a slave; her "lovers" have forsaken her; her people have become captives of the adversary (1:1-7)
- B. Jerusalem's sinfulness has made her an abhorrent thing; her sanctuary has been violated by the nations, and hunger prevails (1:8-11)
- C. She cries out that Jehovah has been alert to her transgressions; Jehovah himself is the one who has justly brought calamity upon her for rebelling against him (1:12-20)
- D. She asks Him to repay her exulting enemies, dealing as severely with them as with her (1:21,22)

II. Jehovah has executed judgment against Jerusalem (Ch 2)

- A He has thrown her "down from heaven to earth," not remembering his "footstool"; he has become like an enemy (2:1-5)
- B. Jehovah has caused festival and sabbath to be forgotten and has spurned his sanctuary; in his anger he has shown no respect for king and priest (2:6,7)

- C. God has brought ruin; there is mourning over Zion's breakdown; her prophets have visioned worthless, misleading things; they have not uncovered her error (2:8-14)
- D. Passersby wonder and enemies gloat over her desolate state (2:15-17)
- E. Jeremiah calls on Jerusalem to pour out her heart to Jehovah (2:18,19)
- F. Jerusalem is pictured calling out to God for help because of the atrocities committed in His city and sanctuary (2:20-22)

III. As an "able-bodied man" the nation laments, expresses confidence in Jehovah's mercy and repurchase of his people (Ch 3)

- A. He describes great affliction suffered, the result of Jehovah's fury (3:1-18)
- B. Determines to show a waiting attitude, accept disciplinary yoke (3:19-30)
 - 1. Knows that Jehovah will show mercy; not out of his heart has Jehovah afflicted (3:31-33)
 - 2. As a sinful man, he cannot complain against God's righteous acts (3:34-39)
- C. Calls on nation to search out their own ways, return to Jehovah, who has up to this point blocked approach and prayer (3:40-45)
- D. Reviews oppression (3:46-54)
- E. Appeals to Jehovah with assurance that Jehovah will respond (3:55-58)
- F. Expresses faith in Jehovah's justice and repayment of vicious enemies (3:59-66)

IV. Distress attending the siege and captivity (Ch 4)

- A. The temple's glory has dimmed, Zion's "sons" are of little value, and thirst and famine prevail (4:1-5)
- B. Punishment for sin greater than that of Sodom; Nazirites' "aspect has become darker than blackness," and famine has caused women to eat their own children (4:6-10)
- C. Jehovah's anger has been poured out to burn up Zion, a thing unbelievable to land's inhabitants (4:11,12)
- D. Prophets and priests responsible for bloodshed (4:13-16)
- E. No salvation has come from looking to men (4:17)
- F. Enemies pursue mercilessly; even Davidic king has been captured (4:18-20)
- G. Let Edom exult now; but Zion's error paid for, now Edom will get attention for her sins (4:21,22)

V. Petition made to Jehovah for deliverance from desolation and captivity (Ch 5)

- A. Jehovah is asked to remember his 'orphaned' people (5:1-5)
- B. They have given their hand to Egypt and Assyria for bread, and have had to bear their forefathers' errors (5:6,7)

C. Mere servants rule over them; wives and virgins, princes, old and young men have been debased; they are sick at heart over their circumstances (5:8-18)

D. They beg that Jehovah bring them back to himself, though he has rejected them in indignation (5:19-22)

INSIGHT:

Contents. In the first chapter, beginning with verse 12, Jeremiah personifies Jerusalem, God's covenant "woman" Zion, as speaking. (Isa 62:1-6) She is now desolate, as though widowed and bereft of her children, a captive woman put into forced labor as a slave. In chapter 2, Jeremiah himself speaks. In chapter 3, Jeremiah pours out his feelings, transferring them to the figure of the nation as an "able-bodied man." In chapter 4, Jeremiah continues his lament. In the fifth chapter, the inhabitants of Jerusalem are pictured as speaking. The expressions of acknowledgment of sin, the hope and confidence in Jehovah, and the desire to turn to the right way, as portrayed throughout, were not the actual feelings of the majority of the people. However, there was a remnant like Jeremiah. So the view expressed in the book of Lamentations is a true evaluation of Jerusalem's situation as God saw it.

Jerusalem is personified as a widow bereaved of her children, with no one to give comfort (Ch 1)

She acknowledges that her sin against Jehovah is the reason for her distress

She prays for the Almighty to punish those who rejoice over her suffering.

Jehovah has acted in anger against Jerusalem (Ch 2)

He has thrown Jerusalem down "from heaven to earth"

He has spurned his sanctuary and shown no respect for king and priest

As a result, passersby are amazed at what has happened to the city that was "the perfection of prettiness"

The "able-bodied man," representing the nation, speaks of his affliction, yet expresses hope (Ch 3)

He describes his present desperate situation

Nevertheless, he is confident that Jehovah will hear his people's prayers and show mercy

Terrible effects of the siege of Jerusalem (Ch 4)

Death by the sword was better than death from the famine; women even ate their own children

Fleeing survivors were relentlessly pursued in mountainous and wilderness regions

Jehovah is petitioned to note the people's suffering and to restore them to favor (Ch 5)

His people's hereditary possession has been given to strangers
They have been shamed and debased
They pray for Jehovah to bring them back to himself even though he rejected them with indignation

Si:

"O how she has come to sit solitary, the city that was abundant with people!" Thus **the first poem** opens its lament. The daughter of Zion was a princess, but her lovers have abandoned her and her people have gone into exile. Her gates are laid desolate. Jehovah has punished her for the abundance of her transgressions. She has lost her splendor. Her adversaries have laughed over her collapse. She has gone down in a wondrous manner and has no comforter, and her remaining people are hungry. She (Jerusalem personified) asks: "Does there exist any pain like my pain?" She stretches out her hands and says: "Jehovah is righteous, for it is against his mouth that I have rebelled." (1:1,12,18) She calls on Jehovah to bring calamity on her exulting enemies, even as he has done on her.

"O how Jehovah in his anger beclouds the daughter of Zion!" (2:1) **The second poem** shows that it is Jehovah himself who has thrown down to earth the beauty of Israel. He has caused festival and Sabbath to be forgotten, and he has cast off his altar and sanctuary. Oh, the pathetic sights in Jerusalem! Jeremiah exclaims: "My eyes have come to their end in sheer tears. My intestines are in a ferment. My liver has been poured out to the very earth, on account of the crash of the daughter of my people." (2:11) To what shall he liken the daughter of Jerusalem? How shall he comfort the daughter of Zion? Her own prophets proved worthless and unsatisfying.

Now passersby laugh scornfully at her: "Is this the city of which they used to say, 'It is the perfection of prettiness, an exultation for all the earth?'" (2:15) Her enemies have opened their mouth and whistled and ground their teeth, saying, 'This is the day we have hoped for to swallow her down.' Her children faint for famine, and women eat their own offspring. Corpses litter the streets. "In the day of the wrath of Jehovah there proved to be no escapee or survivor." -2:16,22.

The third poem, of 66 verses, stresses Zion's hope in God's mercy. By many metaphors the prophet shows that it is Jehovah who has brought the captivity and desolation. In the bitterness of the situation, the writer asks God to remember his affliction and expresses faith in the loving-kindness and mercies of Jehovah. Three successive verses begin with "Good" and show the propriety of waiting for salvation from Jehovah. (3:25-27) Jehovah has caused grief, but he will also show mercy. But for now, despite confession of rebellion, Jehovah has not forgiven; he has blocked the prayers of his people and made them "mere offscouring and refuse." (3:45) With bitter tears the prophet recalls that his enemies hunted for him as for a bird. However, Jehovah drew near to him in the pit and said: "Do not be afraid." He calls on Jehovah to answer the reproach of the enemy: "You will pursue in anger and annihilate them from under the heavens of Jehovah." -3:57,66.

"O how the gold that shines becomes dim, the good gold!" (4:1) **The fourth poem** bemoans the faded glory of Jehovah's temple, whose stones are poured out in the streets. The precious sons of Zion have become of little value, like jars of earthenware. There is neither water nor bread, and those raised in luxury "have had to embrace ash heaps." (4:5) The punishment is even greater than that for the sin of Sodom. The Nazirites, once 'purer than snow and whiter than milk,' have become "darker than blackness itself" and are all shriveled up. (4:7,8) Better to have been slain by the sword than die by the famine, at a time when women have boiled their own children! Jehovah has poured out his burning anger. The unbelievable has happened - the adversary has come into the gates of Jerusalem! And why? "Because of the sins of her prophets, the errors of her priests," who poured out righteous blood. (4:13) The face of Jehovah is not toward them. However, the error of the daughter of Zion has come to its finish, and she will not again be carried into exile. Now it is your turn, O daughter of Edom, to drink the bitter cup of Jehovah!

The fifth poem opens with an appeal to Jehovah to remember his orphaned people. The inhabitants of Jerusalem are pictured as speaking. It is their forefathers that have sinned, and it is their error the people must now bear. Mere servants rule over them, and they are tortured by pangs of hunger. The exultation of their heart has ceased, and their dancing has been changed into mourning. They are sick at heart. Humbly they acknowledge Jehovah: "As for you, O Jehovah, to time indefinite you will sit. Your throne is for generation after generation." They cry out: "Bring us back, O Jehovah, to yourself, and we shall readily come back. Bring new days for us as in the long ago. However, you have positively rejected us. You have been indignant toward us very much." -5:19-22.

(w88 9/1 p26) Jehovah Gives Hope Amid Sorrow

JEHOVAH is "the God who gives hope," even amid sorrow. (Rom 15:13) This is a point made clear in the book of Lamentations, completed by Jehovah's prophet and witness Jeremiah in 607 BCE. But let us highlight some of the lessons it contains.

Jerusalem's Plight

Sin brings no joy. Look! Sinful Jerusalem, once Judah's teeming capital, sits solitary. Judah herself is like a weeping, widowed princess because she has been devastated. Such "lovers" as Egypt did not save her from Babylonian conquest in 607 BCE. People no longer stream to Zion for festivals. Her children are captives, and foes laugh over her collapse. Unclean foreigners have desecrated the temple, and her people have had to give valuables for food. All of this because of sin! -1:1-11.

Jehovah is righteous in punishing wrongdoers. This is admitted as Jerusalem herself speaks. She asks if there is any sorrow like the pain that God has caused her. He sent fire that desolated the temple. The city's sins became a yoke, and blood flowed like juice as God tread her "winepress." Zion spread out hands in sorrow and entreaty but found no comforter, and Jehovah was righteous in punishing rebellious Jerusalem. May he deal as severely with her exulting enemies. -1:12-22.

"The Wrath of Jehovah"

Responsible ones bear guilt if they do not condemn sin. God cast Jerusalem "from heaven to earth," allowing her destruction and that of his "footstool," the temple. (Ps 132:7) He thus "profaned the kingdom" of Judah. As a mere booth, the temple was destroyed by foes whose triumphant shouts were like festal cries. Dying children begged their mothers for food. But who chiefly bore guilt? False prophets who made misleading pronouncements instead of condemning Jerusalem's sin. (Jer 14:13) Prayer is fitting, for so many have died in this 'day of Jehovah's wrath'! -2:1-22.

Jehovah's Mercy Endures

We should patiently hope in Jehovah. Jeremiah makes this point as he speaks representatively for the afflicted people. God hampers his prayer, and he has become the theme of his enemies' derisive song. His hope, or "expectation from Jehovah," seems to have perished. But he will have "a waiting attitude" because "good is Jehovah to the one hoping in him." -3:1-27.

True repentance brings divine mercy. Convinced of this, Jeremiah urges: "Do let us return clear to Jehovah." As with a cloud mass of anger, God has blocked approach in prayer because of the people's sins.

But Jeremiah prays: "I have called out your name, O Jehovah...Do not hide your ear to my relief." Of course, unrepentant foes will be annihilated. -3:28-66.

"Bring Us Back"

We can bring destruction upon ourselves through willful sin.

Because of Judah's sin, "precious sons of Zion" were viewed as worthless broken pottery. In the siege, those slain by the sword were better off than others dying slowly of hunger. God had, indeed, "poured out his burning anger." Polluted prophets and priests were wandering blindly, and King Zedekiah - "the anointed one of Jehovah" - had been captured. Now God would turn his attention to sinful Edom. -4:1-22.

Jehovah alone gives true hope amid sorrow. Jeremiah realized this, for he pleaded: "Remember, O Jehovah, what has happened to us." 'Foreigners occupy our houses. We bear the consequences of our forefathers' error, and mere boys carry firewood in forced labor.' Yet, Jeremiah hopes for mercy, praying: "Bring us back, O Jehovah, to yourself, and we shall readily come back." -5:1-22.

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THE prophet Jeremiah sees the fulfillment of the judgment message that he has been uttering for 40 years. How does the prophet feel when he personally witnesses the destruction of his beloved city? "Jeremiah sat down weeping and lamented with this lamentation over Jerusalem," says the Greek *Septuagint* in its introduction to the book of Lamentations. Composed in 607 BCE while the memory of the 18-month-long siege followed by the burning of Jerusalem is still fresh in the prophet's mind, the book of Lamentations vividly expresses Jeremiah's heartfelt anguish. (Jer 52:3-5, 12-14) No other city in history has been lamented in expressions so touching and heartrending.

The book of Lamentations is a collection of five lyrical poems. The first four are laments, or dirges; the fifth is a petition, or prayer. The first four songs are acrostics, successive verses beginning with a different letter in the order of the 22-character Hebrew alphabet. Although the fifth song has 22 verses to correspond to the number of letters of the Hebrew alphabet, it is not arranged alphabetically. -Lam 5:1, footnote.

'MY EYES HAVE COME TO THEIR END IN TEARS' (Lam 1,2)

"O how she has come to sit solitary, the city that was abundant with people! How she has become like a widow, she that was populous among the nations! How she that was a princess among the jurisdictional districts has come to be for forced labor!" Thus begin the lamentations of the prophet Jeremiah regarding Jerusalem.

Giving the reason for this calamity, the prophet says: "Jehovah himself has brought grief to her on account of the abundance of her transgressions." -Lam 1:1,5.

Personified as a widow bereaved of husband and children, Jerusalem asks: "Does there exist any pain like my pain?" Concerning her enemies, she prays to God: "May all their badness come before you, and deal severely with them, just as you have dealt severely with me on account of all my transgressions. For my sighs are many, and my heart is ill." -Lam 1:12,22.

Deeply distressed, Jeremiah says: "In the heat of anger [Jehovah] has cut down every horn of Israel. He has turned his right hand back from before the enemy; and in Jacob he keeps burning like a flaming fire that has devoured all around." Depicting his profound sorrow, the prophet laments: "My eyes have come to their end in sheer tears. My intestines are in a ferment. My liver has been poured out to the very earth." Even those passing by have expressed amazement, saying: "Is this the city of which they used to say, 'It is the perfection of prettiness, an exultation for all the earth'?" -Lam 2:3,11,15.

"DO NOT HIDE YOUR EAR TO MY RELIEF" (Lam 3-5)

In Lamentations chapter 3, the nation of Israel is spoken of as "the able-bodied man." Despite experiencing adversity, this man sings: "Good is Jehovah to the one hoping in him, to the soul that keeps seeking for him." In prayer to the true God, he requests: "My voice you must hear. Do not hide your ear to my relief, to my cry for help." Asking Jehovah to give attention to the reproach of the enemy, he says: "You will give back to them a treatment, O Jehovah, according to the work of their hands." -Lam 3:1,25,56,64.

Jeremiah pours out his feelings over the terrible effects of the 18-month siege of Jerusalem and laments: "The punishment for the error of the daughter of my people also becomes greater than the punishment for the sin of Sodom, which was overthrown as in a moment, and to which no hands turned helpfully." Jeremiah continues: "Better have those slain with the sword proved to be than those slain by famine, because these pine away, pierced through for lack of the produce of the open field." -Lam 4:6,9.

The fifth poem portrays the inhabitants of Jerusalem as speaking. They say: "Remember, O Jehovah, what has happened to us. Do look and see our reproach." As they recount their afflictions, they petition: "O Jehovah, to time indefinite you will sit. Your throne is for generation after generation. Bring us back, O Jehovah, to yourself, and we shall readily come back. Bring new days for us as in the long ago." -Lam 5:1,19,21.

Make Jehovah Your Confidence

The Bible book of Lamentations reveals how Jehovah viewed Jerusalem and the land of Judah after the Babylonians burned the city and laid the land desolate. The expressions of acknowledgment of sin recorded therein make it clear that from Jehovah's standpoint, the reason for the calamity was the error of the people. This book's inspired songs also contain lyrics that express hope in Jehovah and the desire to turn to the right course. While these were not the sentiments of most people in Jeremiah's day, they represented those of Jeremiah and the repentant remnant. Jehovah's evaluation of Jerusalem's situation as expressed in the book of Lamentations teaches us two vital lessons. First, Jerusalem's destruction and the desolation of Judah urge obedience to Jehovah and serve as a warning not to ignore the divine will. (1 Cor 10:11) The second lesson is from Jeremiah's example. (Rom 15:4) Even in a seemingly hopeless situation, the deeply grieved prophet looked to Jehovah for salvation. How vital that we place our complete trust in Jehovah and his Word and make him our confidence! -Heb 4:12.

LAMENTATIONS – Points of Special Interest

(w88 9/1)

1:1-9 Jerusalem weeps profusely during the night, and her tears are upon her cheeks. Her gates lie desolate, and her priests are sighing. Her virgins are grief-stricken, and she herself has bitterness. Why? Because Jerusalem has committed outright sin. Her uncleanness is in her skirts. The fruitage of transgression is not joy; it is tears, sighing, grief, and bitterness.

1:15 *How had Jehovah "trodden the very winepress belonging to the virgin daughter of Judah"?* In destroying the city, described as a virgin, the Babylonians shed blood in such quantity that it was comparable to the squeezing of grapes in a winepress. Jehovah foretold this and allowed it to happen, so it can be said that he had 'trodden the winepress.'

1:15 'Jehovah had trodden the very winepress belonging to the virgin daughter of Judah' because he had decreed and allowed what happened. "The virgin daughter of Judah" was Jerusalem, thought to be like an inviolate woman. When the Babylonians destroyed that capital city of Judah in 607 BCE, there was great bloodshed, comparable to the squeezing of juice from grapes in a winepress. Jehovah will see to it that Christendom, antitypical Jerusalem, is similarly crushed.

1:18 In punishing transgressors, Jehovah is always just and righteous.

2:1 *How was 'the beauty of Israel thrown down from heaven to earth'?* Since "the heavens are higher than the earth," the abasement of exalted things is at times represented by their being "thrown down from heaven to earth." "The beauty of Israel" - the glory and power it enjoyed while Jehovah's blessing was upon it - was thrown down with the destruction of Jerusalem and the desolation of Judah. -Isa 55:9.

2:1,6 *What is Jehovah's "footstool" and his "booth"?* The psalmist sang: "Let us come into his grand tabernacle; let us bow down at his footstool." (Ps 132:7) Hence, the "footstool" of Lamentations 2:1 refers to Jehovah's house of worship, or his temple. The Babylonians 'burned the house of Jehovah' as if it were a booth, or a mere hut, in a garden. -Jer 52:12,13.

2:6 God's "booth" was the temple in Jerusalem. When that sanctuary was devastated by the Babylonians, he was allowing it to be 'treated violently,' like a mere hut in a garden. Such a temporary shelter from the hot sun is torn down.

2:16,17 *Should not the 16th verse begin with the Hebrew letter ayin and the 17th begin with pe to follow the order of the Hebrew alphabet?* While composing poems in this style, inspired writers usually followed the alphabetical order. However, they did not do so at the cost of sounding artificial or unnatural. The matter of thought content was considered more important than the adherence to a literary device that merely served as a memory aid. The reversal of the same two characters is also found in songs 3 and 4 of Lamentations. -Lam 3:46,49; 4:16,17.

2:17 *What particular "saying" did Jehovah accomplish in connection with Jerusalem?* The reference here is apparently to Lev 26:17, which states: "I shall indeed set my face against you, and you will certainly be defeated before your enemies; and those who hate you will just tread down upon you, and you will actually flee when no one is pursuing you."

2:20 The Israelites were warned that if they did not listen to the voice of Jehovah, they would experience maledictions, which included eating 'the flesh of their sons and daughters.' (Deut 28:15,45,53) How unwise to choose a course of disobedience to God!

3:8,43,44 During the calamity that befell Jerusalem, Jehovah refused to listen to the cry for help of the city's inhabitants. Why? Because the people had been disobedient, and they remained unrepentant. If we want Jehovah to answer our prayers, we must obey him. -Prov 28:9.

3:16 *What is suggested by the expression: "With gravel he makes my teeth get broken"?* One reference work states: "The Jews, on their way into exile, were compelled to bake their bread in pits dug in the ground, so that their bread was mixed with grit." Eating such bread could break off part of one's teeth.

3:16 One calamity that Jehovah allowed to come upon unfaithful Jerusalem as a consequence of the city's fall to the Babylonians is described in the words, "With gravel he makes my teeth get broken." Apparently, when the Israelites were on their way into exile, they had to bake bread in pits dug in the ground. Therefore, the bread came to contain grit, and a person eating such bread could break off part of his teeth.

3:20 Jehovah, "the Most High over all the earth," is so exalted that he condescends in order "to look on heaven and earth." (Ps 83:18; 113:6) Yet, Jeremiah was well-aware of the Almighty's willingness to bow low over the people, that is, to come down to their level in order to encourage them. How glad we can be that the true God is not only all-powerful and all-wise but also humble!

3:21-26,28-33 How can we endure even intense suffering? Jeremiah tells us. We should not forget that Jehovah is abundant in acts of loving-kindness and that many are his mercies. We should also remember that our being alive is reason enough not to give up hope and that we need to be patient and wait silently, without complaining, upon Jehovah for salvation. Moreover, we should "put [our] mouth in the very dust," that is, humbly submit to trials, recognizing that what God allows to happen is permitted for good reason.

3:27 Facing up to tests of faith during youth may mean enduring hardship and ridicule. But it is 'good for an able-bodied man to carry the yoke during his youth.' Why? Because learning to bear a yoke of suffering while young prepares a person to deal with challenges in his later years.

3:39-42 'Indulging in complaints' when suffering for our sins is not wise. Rather than complain about reaping the consequences of wrongdoing, "let us search out our ways and explore them, and do let us return clear to Jehovah." We are wise to repent and correct our ways.

4:3 The cruelty of mothers toward their children is here contrasted with the maternal care provided by jackals. Though jackals may be considered savage beasts, even they 'present the udder and suckle their cubs.' Because of great food shortages in besieged Jerusalem, famished Jewish women became cruel in that they had no milk to give their offspring and actually ate their own children to stay alive. (Lam 2:20) Thus, the women also became like ostriches that lay their eggs and abandon them.

4:3,10 Why does Jeremiah compare "the daughter of [his] people" to "ostriches in the wilderness"? The ostrich "does treat her sons roughly, as if not hers," states Job 39:16 After the eggs are hatched, for example, the hen goes off with other hens while the male assumes the responsibility of caring for the young.

And what happens when they come face-to-face with danger? Both male and female birds flee from the nest, abandoning their young. During the Babylonian siege, the famine in Jerusalem became so severe that mothers who would normally have been compassionate became cruel to their own offspring, like ostriches in the wilderness. This was in stark contrast to the maternal care exhibited by jackals.

5:7 *Does Jehovah hold people accountable for the errors of their forefathers?* No, Jehovah does not directly punish people for the sins of their ancestors. "Each of us will render an account for himself to God," says the Bible. (Rom 14:12) However, consequences of errors can linger on and be experienced by later generations. For example, ancient Israel's turning to idolatry made it difficult even for the faithful Israelites of later times to adhere to the course of righteousness. -Ex 20:5.

5:7 The Jews of Jeremiah's day had to bear the errors of their forefathers, but this does not mean that Jehovah directly punishes children for the sins of their parents. Actually, the bad consequences of wrongdoing are felt by later generations. (Jer 31:29,30) We therefore do well to remember that we must personally render an account to God. - Rom 14:12.

Reflect, then, on these lessons taught in Lamentations:

Sin does not bring joy, God is righteous in punishing sinners, and responsible ones are guilty if they do not condemn wrongdoing. We should patiently hope in Jehovah, confident that divine mercy comes because of true repentance, whereas we can bring destruction upon ourselves through wilful sin. This inspired book also convinces us that Jehovah alone gives true hope amid sorrow.