THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

The King Whose Mercies Are New

Lamentations, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Whose Mercies Are New: The Book of Lamentations, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the WEB. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

Lamentations is the saddest book in the Bible. It's five poems written after the worst disaster in Israel's history, when Jerusalem was burned, the temple was destroyed, and thousands of people were killed or dragged away as captives. It's full of tears, ruins, hunger, and hard questions.

So why would anyone want to read it? Because sooner or later, everyone faces grief. Someone you love dies. Your family breaks apart. A friendship ends. You move away from everything you know. Or you just wake up one morning feeling heavy and empty, and you can't explain why. When that happens, a lot of people think they have to hide their sadness, especially from God.

Lamentations says the opposite. It shows that God has room for your tears in His book. It gives you words when you don't have any. And right in the middle of all that darkness, it holds one of the most hopeful lines ever written: His mercies are new every morning.

Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Lamentations in five chapters, one for each of its five poems: how lonely sits the city (Lamentations 1), pour out your heart like water (2), great is your faithfulness (3), how the gold has become dim (4), and restore us, LORD (5).

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what happened in 586 BC, how these poems were built letter by letter,

who may have written them, and how Jewish communities still read them today. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or talk over with someone you trust; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as who wrote Lamentations, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. This book quotes Lamentations in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the twenty-fifth book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, and gently, with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Lamentations is a book of grief, and this book treats it that way. It explains the historical setting, the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC, and the careful acrostic structure of the poems, which gives shape to overwhelming sorrow. It presents authorship views fairly: the poems are anonymous, though tradition links them to Jeremiah.

Because Lamentations describes the horrors of war and siege, some verses are very difficult. This book handles them honestly but without graphic detail, including Lamentations 4:10, which is described only in general terms. A compassionate Real Talk box on grief and depression in chapter 3 encourages readers to talk to a trusted adult or counselor and lists 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. Other boxes address loss, lament as prayer, comforting grieving friends, and hope that doesn't deny pain.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how Jesus, the Man of Sorrows, wept over Jerusalem, took the ashes of sin on the cross, and rose at dawn with mercies new every morning, while respecting

that Jewish readers treasure Lamentations in their own rich ways, reading it each year on Tisha B'Av. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

Some readers may be carrying fresh grief as they read. The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion, and they may be best talked through with a parent or trusted leader. Don't rush anyone toward the happy ending. Lamentations doesn't.

My prayer is that every reader will learn to bring their sorrow to God, and will find that His mercies really are new every morning.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

What Happened in 586 BC

For about a year and a half, the Babylonian army surrounded Jerusalem. No food could get in. People starved. Then, in the summer of 586 BC, the walls were broken through. The Babylonians captured the king, burned the temple Solomon had built nearly four hundred years earlier, burned the palace and the houses, and tore down the city walls. Thousands died, and most of the survivors were marched hundreds of miles to Babylon as captives. The prophets, especially Jeremiah, had warned for decades that this would happen if the people kept turning from God. Now it had. Lamentations is what grief sounds like the day after.

Five Funeral Poems

Lamentations is made of five poems, one per chapter. In Hebrew, the book is called Eikhah, which means How! or Alas!, the first word of chapters 1, 2, and 4. It was a cry people used at funerals. Many of the poems use a limping rhythm called the qinah meter, in which each line has a longer first half and a shorter second half, like a sob catching in your throat. These poems are funeral songs, not for a person, but for a whole city.

A to Z Grief

Four of the five poems are acrostics. That means each verse, or group of verses, begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which has twenty-two letters. Chapters 1, 2, and 4 have twenty-two

verses, one for each letter. Chapter 3 is a triple acrostic, with sixty-six verses, three for each letter. Chapter 5 has twenty-two verses but isn't an acrostic. Why write grief in alphabetical order? Some think it was a way to say, We're grieving from A to Z, completely. Others think it helped people memorize the poems. Many readers see something else too: when grief feels chaotic and endless, giving it a shape helps. The alphabet puts a boundary around sorrow. It has a beginning, and it has an end.

Who Wrote It?

Lamentations doesn't name its author. Jewish and Christian tradition have long said that Jeremiah wrote it. The Greek translation adds a note at the beginning saying Jeremiah sat weeping and lamented over Jerusalem, and Second Chronicles mentions Jeremiah writing laments. Jeremiah witnessed the fall of Jerusalem, and many phrases in Lamentations sound like him. Many scholars today think the poems were written by one or more other eyewitnesses, pointing to differences in style and to lines that seem to praise people Jeremiah opposed. Christians hold different views on this, and the book's message doesn't depend on settling it. Either way, these are the words of someone who saw it all and wept.

Tisha B'Av

Jewish communities still read Lamentations every year on Tisha B'Av, the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av, usually in late July or August. It's a day of mourning and fasting that remembers the destruction of the first temple by Babylon in 586 BC and the second temple by Rome in AD 70, along with other tragedies in Jewish history. On that evening, many synagogues dim the lights, people sit on the floor or on low stools like mourners, and Lamentations is

chanted to a slow, sorrowful melody. It's a powerful example of a community grieving together, honestly, before God.

The Map

Chapter 1 (Lamentations 1): How lonely sits the city.

Chapter 2 (Lamentations 2): Pour out your heart like water.

Chapter 3 (Lamentations 3): Great is your faithfulness.

Chapter 4 (Lamentations 4): How the gold has become dim.

Chapter 5 (Lamentations 5): Restore us, LORD.

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CHAPTER 1

How Lonely Sits the City

Lamentations 1

Lamentations begins with a cry. In Hebrew, the first word is eikhah, How! It's the sound someone makes at a funeral when the shock finally hits. "How the city sits solitary, that was full of people! She has become as a widow, who was great among the nations!"

The poet pictures Jerusalem as a woman. Once she was a princess, full of life, noise, and people. Now she sits alone, like a widow who has lost everything. "She weeps bitterly in the night. Her tears are on her cheeks. Among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Daughter Zion**
>
> Throughout Lamentations, Jerusalem is pictured as a woman, often called the daughter of Zion. Zion was the hill where the temple stood, and the name came to stand for the whole city and its people. Picturing the city as a grieving woman makes the loss personal. It's not just buildings that were destroyed. It's a family, a home, a community, and a life. The poet sometimes speaks about her, and sometimes she speaks for herself.

The phrase no one to comfort her shows up again and again in chapter 1, five times in all. That's the deepest pain of grief. Not just the loss itself, but the loneliness that comes with it. Jerusalem's lovers, the foreign nations she trusted instead of God, had abandoned her. Her friends had turned into enemies.

The poem walks through the ruins. The roads to Zion are empty, because no one comes to the festivals anymore. The gates are deserted. The priests groan. The young women grieve. The children have been taken away as captives. The leaders are like deer that can't find pasture, running away exhausted.

> **REAL TALK** **Grief Is Real**
>
> Grief is what we feel when we lose something or someone we love. It can come from a death, a move, a breakup, a divorce, a lost friendship, a serious illness, or a dream that didn't come true. Grief doesn't follow a schedule. It can show up as sadness, anger, numbness, tiredness, trouble sleeping, or not wanting to be around people. Sometimes it comes back suddenly, triggered by a song, a smell, or a date on the calendar. All of that is normal. Lamentations shows that grief deserves to be taken seriously, not rushed or hidden.

Lamentations doesn't pretend the disaster came out of nowhere. The poet is honest about why it happened. "Jerusalem has grievously sinned." The city had ignored God's warnings for generations. Prophets like Jeremiah had pleaded with the people to turn back from idols and injustice, and they had refused.

But notice something. The poet doesn't say, They deserved it, so stop crying. He holds both truths together. Yes, we sinned. And yes, this hurts terribly. Confession and grief sit side by side.

Halfway through the poem, Jerusalem herself begins to speak. And she says one of the most heartbreaking lines in the Bible. "Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look, and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow."

People were walking past the ruins without stopping. Nobody seemed to care. That's one of the loneliest feelings in the world, when you're falling apart and everyone else just keeps scrolling.

REAL TALK **Is It Nothing to You?**

When someone you know is grieving, it's easy to walk past. Maybe you don't know what to say, so you say nothing. Maybe it feels awkward. But Jerusalem's cry is a reminder that people who are hurting notice when others ignore them. You don't need perfect words. You can say, I'm so sorry. I'm thinking about you. Can I sit with you? You can send a text, bring a snack, or just show up. Paul wrote, "Weep with those who weep." Being present matters more than being eloquent.

Jerusalem keeps speaking. "For these things I weep. My eye, my eye runs down with water, because the comforter who should refresh my soul is far from me." And then she does something brave. She takes responsibility. "The LORD is righteous, for I have rebelled against his commandment."

She doesn't blame God for being unfair. She admits her own sin. But she also asks God to see her pain. "Look, LORD; for I am in distress. My heart is troubled. My heart turns over within me, for I have grievously rebelled."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Confession in Lamentations**

Confession means telling the truth about what you've done wrong. Lamentations is full of it. The poet doesn't say every sad thing in life is a punishment for sin. Many people suffer for reasons that have nothing to do with their own choices, as Job and Jesus Himself show. But in this case, the fall of Jerusalem had been clearly warned about for years as the consequence of the nation's unfaithfulness. So the poems mix grief with honest confession, and they bring both to God.

REAL TALK **Not Every Sorrow Is Your Fault**

Lamentations describes a disaster that came because of a nation's sin. But please don't take that to mean that every bad thing in your life is your fault, or a punishment from God. If a parent left, if someone died, if you've been hurt or abused, if you're struggling with depression or anxiety, that is not God

punishing you. Jesus said that a man who was born blind was not suffering because of anyone's sin. Sometimes we need to confess. Sometimes we simply need to grieve. God welcomes both.

Chapter 1 ends without a happy resolution. Jerusalem is still crying, still alone, still asking God to see. But here's what's remarkable: she's talking to God. Even in the ruins, even feeling abandoned, she turns toward Him. That's where lament begins.

REAL TALK **Why Write Grief Down?**

The poet of Lamentations didn't just feel his grief. He wrote it down, carefully, letter by letter. Many counselors today recommend something similar. Writing about what hurts can help you understand your feelings, notice patterns, and release some of the pressure inside. You don't have to write poetry. You can keep a journal, write a letter to someone you've lost, or make a list of what you miss. Some people write their prayers. Others draw. Whatever you choose, putting grief into words is one way of giving it shape, just as the alphabet gave shape to Lamentations.

KEY VERSE

"Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look, and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which is brought on me, with which the LORD has afflicted me in the day of his fierce anger.

Lamentations 1:12 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the poet keeps repeating that Jerusalem had no one to comfort her?
2. Have you ever felt like people were walking past your pain? What did you need from them?
3. What's the difference between grief and confession? How can they go together?
4. Who in your life might be grieving right now?

TRY THIS *Think of someone who is grieving or going through something hard. This week, reach out to them with a simple message, a note, or a visit, just to say you care.*

CHAPTER 2

Pour Out Your Heart Like Water

Lamentations 2

The second poem is even more intense than the first. It begins with the same cry, How! And then it describes the disaster from a different angle: as an act of God's discipline. "How has the Lord covered the daughter of Zion with a cloud in his anger!"

That's hard to read. The poet says that God Himself had acted like an enemy. He had torn down the walls, rejected His altar, and abandoned His temple. The festivals and Sabbaths were forgotten. The king and priests were gone. The prophets received no visions from God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **God's Discipline**

Lamentations 2 describes the fall of Jerusalem as God's judgment. That can be uncomfortable. But it helps to remember the bigger story. For centuries, God had made a covenant with Israel. He had promised blessing for faithfulness and warned of exile for persistent rebellion. Through prophet after prophet, He had pleaded with His people to turn back. Lamentations 2:17 says, "The LORD has done that which he planned. He has fulfilled his word that he commanded in the days of old." In other words, this was not God losing His temper. It was God keeping His word, after long patience. And as the next poem will say, God does not afflict willingly. His discipline aims at restoration.

Then the poet's own heart breaks. "My eyes fail with tears. My heart is troubled." What breaks him most is seeing the children. Little ones were fainting from hunger in the streets, asking their mothers for bread, and there was none.

Then the poet speaks to Jerusalem directly, like a friend trying to find the right words at a funeral. "What shall I compare to you, that I may comfort you, virgin daughter of Zion? For your breach is as big as the sea. Who can heal you?" Her wound was as big as the ocean. No ordinary comfort could cover it.

> **REAL TALK** **When There Are No Words**
>
> Sometimes grief is so big that there's nothing anyone can say to fix it. The poet of Lamentations knew that. He asked, What can I compare you to? Who can heal you? It's okay to admit that you don't have the right words for someone who is hurting, or that nothing anyone says is helping you. Job's friends did the best thing they ever did in the first seven days, when they just sat with him in silence. Sometimes presence is the only comfort there is. And sometimes the deepest healing takes a long time.

Then the poet points to one of the reasons this disaster happened. "Your prophets have seen false and foolish visions for you. They have not uncovered your iniquity, to reverse your captivity."

The false prophets had a chance to warn the people. Their job was to uncover sin, to bring it into the open so people could turn back and be saved. Instead, they covered it up. They told people what they wanted to hear. Peace, peace, when there was no peace, as Jeremiah said. And because they hid the truth, the people never turned back.

> **REAL TALK** **People Who Tell You the Truth**
>
> The false prophets in Lamentations 2 did the opposite of what love does. Love sometimes tells you hard things, because it wants you to be okay. A good

friend might say, I'm worried about you, or, I don't think that's a good idea. A parent might set a rule you don't like because they see danger you don't. A counselor might help you face something you've been avoiding. Those conversations can be uncomfortable. But people who only tell you what you want to hear aren't always your real friends. Value the people who love you enough to be honest.

People passing by mocked the ruined city. They clapped their hands, hissed, and shook their heads, saying, Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty? Enemies gloated. And the poet admits that it all happened just as God had warned.

But then comes a turn. The poet tells the city's walls to weep, day and night. And then he says something that has given words to grieving people for thousands of years. "Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the watches! Pour out your heart like water before the face of the Lord. Lift up your hands toward him for the life of your young children."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Night Watches**

In the ancient world, the night was divided into watches, shifts when guards stayed awake to protect the city. At the beginning of the watches meant at the start of each shift, all night long. The poet is saying, Don't stop praying. Cry out to God every few hours, through the whole night. It's a picture of desperate, persistent prayer. Jesus told a parable about a widow who kept coming to a judge until he answered, to teach His disciples that they should always pray and not give up.

Pour out your heart like water. Think about what that means. When you pour out a glass of water, you don't hold anything back. It all comes out. The poet says, Bring everything to God: your tears, your fear, your anger, your questions, your sorrow for others. Don't hold back. Don't clean it up. Pour it all out before Him.

> **REAL TALK** **Lament Is Prayer**
>
> A lament is a prayer that cries out to God in pain. About a third of the Psalms are laments, and Lamentations is a whole book of them. Laments usually include honest complaint, a request for help, and some kind of trust, even if it's small. Many people think they need to be calm and positive when they pray. But the Bible shows that God welcomes honest sorrow. You can tell Him, This hurts. I don't understand. Why did this happen? Where are You? That isn't a lack of faith. It's faith that refuses to stop talking to God, even when it hurts. Try writing your own lament sometime. You might be surprised how much it helps.

The poem ends with Jerusalem crying out to God, asking Him to look at what has happened. It's raw and unfinished. But the poet has shown us the way forward: not running from God, but pouring out our hearts to Him.

KEY VERSE

Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the watches!
Pour out your heart like water before the face of the Lord.
Lift up your hands toward him for the life of your young
children, who faint for hunger at the head of every street.

Lamentations 2:19 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Lamentations is honest about God's discipline instead of hiding it?
2. What does it mean that the false prophets didn't uncover sin? Why was that so harmful?
3. What would it look like for you to pour out your heart like water before God?
4. Why do you think the Bible includes so many prayers of lament?

TRY THIS *Write your own lament. Tell God honestly what hurts, ask Him for help, and end with one sentence of trust, even if it's small.*

CHAPTER 3

Great Is Your Faithfulness

Lamentations 3

The third poem is the longest and most personal. It's a triple acrostic: sixty-six verses, three for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. And it starts at the very bottom. "I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of his wrath."

The speaker is an individual now, not the city. He describes feeling like God has led him into darkness. Like he's been walled in, chained, and trapped. Like his prayers bounce off the ceiling. Like a bear or a lion is waiting for him. Like he's being used as target practice. He says God has filled him with bitterness and covered him with ashes.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Is the Man?**
>
> Readers have wondered who the man in Lamentations 3 is. Some think it's Jeremiah, describing his own suffering, which included being beaten, imprisoned, and thrown into a muddy cistern. Others think the poet is speaking for the whole community, as if Jerusalem were one person. Others think it's a representative sufferer, someone whose story many people could see themselves in. Whatever the original meaning, millions of readers have found their own feelings in his words. Many Christians also hear in him a faint echo of the Servant in Isaiah, who suffered and was then lifted up.

Then he describes what this feels like. “You have removed my soul far away from peace. I forgot prosperity. I said, My strength has perished, along with my expectation from the LORD.”

He can’t remember what it was like to be happy. He’s lost his strength and his hope. And then, “Remember my affliction and my misery, the wormwood and the bitterness. My soul still remembers them, and is bowed down within me.” Wormwood is a bitter plant. His whole life tastes bitter, and his soul is bent over with the weight of it.

REAL TALK **Grief, Depression, and Getting Help**

The man in Lamentations 3 describes something many people know: darkness that won’t lift, feeling trapped, losing strength and hope, and forgetting what it was like to be happy. That might be grief. It might also be depression, a real health condition that affects how you think, feel, sleep, and eat, and it isn’t a sign of weak faith or a character flaw. If you’ve felt down, numb, hopeless, or exhausted most days for a couple of weeks or more, or if you’ve lost interest in things you used to enjoy, please talk to someone. Tell a parent, school counselor, pastor, coach, or doctor. A counselor or therapist can help, and sometimes a doctor can too. Getting help is a sign of strength and wisdom. If you’re having thoughts of hurting yourself or ending your life, call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time, day or night. If you’re in immediate danger, call 911. The man in Lamentations 3 found hope. You can too, and you don’t have to find it alone.

And then, right in the middle of the poem, right in the middle of the whole book, something changes. Not his circumstances. His thinking.

“This I recall to my mind; therefore I have hope.”

He doesn't feel better yet. Nothing outside him has changed. But he remembers something. He calls it to mind on purpose. And what he remembers gives him hope.

"It is because of the LORD's loving kindnesses that we are not consumed, because his mercies don't fail. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Hesed**

The phrase loving kindnesses translates the Hebrew word hesed. It's one of the most important words in the Old Testament, and it's hard to translate with just one English word. Hesed means steadfast, loyal, covenant love, the kind of love that keeps its promises no matter what. It's the love of someone who says, I'm not going anywhere. The poet says it's because of God's hesed that the people haven't been completely destroyed. Even in judgment, God's covenant love was holding them. The word mercies here is related to the Hebrew word for womb, suggesting the tender compassion of a mother.

Notice where this verse appears. Lamentations has five poems. This is the third, the middle one. And within chapter 3, these verses come right at the center. Surrounded by ruins, hunger, tears, and darkness on every side, the heart of the book is a glowing ember of hope. It doesn't deny the darkness. It shines in the middle of it.

REAL TALK **New Every Morning**

God's mercies are new every morning. That means yesterday's failures don't use them up. You can't run out of God's mercy. Every morning, there's a fresh supply. If you messed up yesterday, if you had a terrible day, if you went to bed crying, the morning brings new mercy. It doesn't mean your problems disappear overnight. But it means God meets you again, every single day, with steadfast love. The famous hymn Great Is Thy Faithfulness, written in 1923, is based on these verses. Many people sing it at funerals, because it holds grief and hope together.

The poet keeps going. "The LORD is my portion, says my soul. Therefore I will hope in him." A portion was an inheritance, your share of land or goods. He's lost everything else. But he still has God. And that's enough to hope.

"The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that a man should hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the LORD." Sometimes faith looks like waiting, quietly, trusting that God will act.

Then he says something tender about God's heart. "For the Lord will not cast off forever. For though he causes grief, yet he will have compassion according to the multitude of his loving kindnesses. For he does not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Not From His Heart**
>
> The phrase he does not afflict willingly is literally, he does not afflict from his heart. God's discipline was real, but it didn't come from a heart that enjoyed causing pain. It came from a heart of love that wanted His people back. That's a crucial truth for anyone who wonders whether God is cruel. Lamentations insists that God's compassion is deeper than His anger, and that His anger has a limit, while His steadfast love doesn't.

The rest of the poem moves between hope and pain. The poet calls the people to examine their ways and return to God. He describes being trapped in a pit, with water closing over his head, sure he was about to die. But then: "I called on your name, LORD, out of the lowest dungeon. You heard my voice." "You came near in the day that I called on you. You said, Don't be afraid."

From the lowest pit, God came near.

REAL TALK **Hope Is Something You Do**

Look at how hope came to the man in Lamentations 3. He didn't wait until he felt hopeful. He called something to mind on purpose. He chose to remember who God is, even while everything still hurt. Hope in the Bible isn't wishful thinking or pretending to be okay. It's holding on to what God has promised, even in the dark. Some days, all you can do is remember one true thing about God. That counts. Write down times God has been faithful to you or to people you know, and look back at that list when the darkness comes.

KEY VERSE

It is because of the LORD's loving kindnesses that we are not consumed, because his mercies don't fail. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness.

Lamentations 3:22–23 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What do you think the poet called to mind that gave him hope?
2. Why does it matter that the book's greatest hope appears right in the middle of its darkest poems?
3. How does it change your day to know God's mercies are new every morning?
4. What would it look like for the LORD to be your portion?

TRY THIS *Write Lamentations 3:22-23 on a sticky note and put it where you'll see it first thing each morning. Every day this week, read it before you look at your phone.*

CHAPTER 4

How the Gold Has Become Dim

Lamentations 4

The fourth poem begins with the same funeral cry. “How the gold has become dim! The most pure gold has changed! The stones of the sanctuary are poured out at the head of every street.”

Gold doesn’t tarnish. That’s part of what makes it valuable. But the poet says Jerusalem’s gold had gone dull. The holy stones of the temple were scattered in the streets like rubble. And then he explains what he really means. “The precious sons of Zion, comparable to fine gold, how they are esteemed as earthen pitchers, the work of the hands of the potter!”

The real treasure of the city wasn’t its buildings. It was its people. And now those precious people were being treated like cheap clay pots, used and thrown away.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Clay Pots**
>
> In the ancient world, clay pots were everyday objects. They were cheap, easy to make, and easy to replace. When one broke, people tossed it and got another. Archaeologists find broken pottery, called potsherds, almost everywhere in Israel. The poet is saying the people of Jerusalem, who were worth more than gold, were being treated as if they were disposable. That’s what war does. It treats human beings as if they don’t matter. But to God, every person is precious.

Chapter 4 is the poem that looks most directly at the human cost of war. The poet describes what the siege did to ordinary people, especially the most vulnerable. “The tongue of the nursing child clings to the roof of his mouth for thirst. The young children ask for bread, and no one breaks it for them.”

People who had once eaten fancy food were now starving in the streets. Those who had worn fine clothes were digging through trash heaps. The city’s princes, who had once looked healthy and strong, were so thin that nobody recognized them. The poet even says that those who died quickly in battle were better off than those who slowly starved.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **What a Siege Was Like**
>
> A siege happened when an army surrounded a walled city and cut it off from the outside world. No food, supplies, or help could get in. The attackers simply waited until the people inside grew too weak to resist. Jerusalem’s siege lasted about eighteen months. As food ran out, prices soared, people grew desperate, and disease spread. Second Kings says that by the end, there was no bread for the people. Ancient sieges were among the most terrible experiences human beings could go through.

Verse 10 describes something so terrible that it’s hard even to talk about. It records that, in the worst moments of the famine, some starving people did unthinkable things that no one should ever have to imagine. The poet mentions it only briefly, and we don’t need the details. What matters is what it tells us: the siege pushed human beings to the very edge, beyond anything they could ever have imagined doing. Moses had warned centuries earlier that such horrors could happen if the people abandoned God and faced the full consequences of war.

REAL TALK **When the News Is Too Much**

Lamentations 4 describes real horrors. Today, through phones and screens, you might see images of war, disasters, or violence from all over the world, often without warning. It's normal to feel sad, scared, angry, or overwhelmed by it. It's also okay to take breaks from the news and social media when it becomes too much. Talk with a parent or trusted adult about what you've seen and how it makes you feel. You can pray for people who are suffering, and you might find a way to help, like giving to a relief organization. Lamentations shows that caring deeply about other people's suffering is part of loving God's world.

Why does the Bible include something so painful? Maybe because God refuses to look away from human suffering. Lamentations doesn't turn war into a heroic adventure or reduce victims to a number. It names the cost. It grieves for the children. It insists that every person was precious. And in doing so, it reminds us that God sees every single person who suffers, even the ones the rest of the world forgets.

The poet also returns to the question of why this happened. "The LORD has accomplished his wrath. He has poured out his fierce anger. He has kindled a fire in Zion, which has devoured its foundations." And he names those responsible: the prophets and priests who had shed innocent blood. The leaders who should have protected the people had betrayed them instead.

Even the king, whom the people had trusted to protect them, was captured. The poet calls him "the breath of our nostrils, the anointed of the LORD." They had thought they would live safely under his shadow. But King Zedekiah was caught while trying to escape.

REAL TALK **When Leaders Fail**

In Lamentations 4, the prophets, priests, and king all failed the people they were supposed to protect. Sadly, that still happens. Sometimes leaders, including parents, coaches, teachers, or church leaders, misuse their power or hurt the people in their care. If an adult is hurting you, threatening you, or making you feel unsafe, it's not your fault, and you don't have to keep it secret. Tell a trusted adult who will listen and act. You can call or text the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453 any time. If you're in immediate danger, call 911. God cares deeply about people who are harmed by those who should have protected them.

But chapter 4 ends with a surprising glimmer. In the last verse, the poet speaks to Jerusalem: "The punishment of your iniquity is accomplished, daughter of Zion. He will no more carry you away into captivity."

The punishment is complete. It has an end. The exile won't last forever. And the poet says that Edom, the neighboring nation that had cheered when Jerusalem fell, would face justice too.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Edom**

Edom was a nation southeast of Judah, descended from Esau, Jacob's brother. That made the Edomites relatives of Israel. But when Babylon attacked Jerusalem, Edom celebrated, and some Edomites even helped capture fleeing survivors. The tiny book of Obadiah condemns Edom for this, saying they should not have looked down on their brother in the day of his misfortune. Lamentations 4:21-22 promises that Edom's cruelty would not go unanswered.

Like the gold that was dimmed, the people of Jerusalem had been treated as worthless. But God hadn't stopped seeing their worth. Their suffering had a limit. And their story wasn't over.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Fair Questions: Does God Cause Every Disaster?**

Lamentations describes the fall of Jerusalem as God's judgment, because the prophets had clearly warned about it for years as the result of the covenant being broken. But Christians are careful not to assume that every war, earthquake, or tragedy today is a direct punishment for a specific sin. Jesus warned against that assumption when He talked about people killed when a tower fell in Siloam, asking whether they were worse sinners than everyone else, and answering no. Christians hold a range of views on how God's sovereignty and human evil fit together. But all agree on this: God hates evil, grieves over suffering, and will one day set everything right.

KEY VERSE

The punishment of your iniquity is accomplished, daughter of Zion. He will no more carry you away into captivity.

Lamentations 4:22 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What do you think the poet meant by comparing the people to gold and clay pots?
2. Why do you think the Bible includes such painful descriptions of war?
3. How can you care about people suffering in the world without being overwhelmed?
4. Why is it significant that chapter 4 ends by saying the punishment is complete?

TRY THIS *Pray this week for one place in the world affected by war or disaster. If you can, talk with your family about one practical way to help.*

CHAPTER 5

Restore Us, LORD

Lamentations 5

The fifth poem is different from the other four. It still has twenty-two verses, the same number as the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. But it isn't an acrostic. The verses don't begin with the letters in order. And it's much shorter, with brief lines rather than the long, limping lines of the earlier poems.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Chapter 5 Breaks the Pattern**
>
> Why would the poet drop the acrostic in the last poem? No one knows for sure, and scholars offer different explanations. Some think the pattern breaks because the grief has become too much to hold in order. The structure collapses, like the city did. Others think the final poem was written by someone else or meant to be used differently, as a community prayer. Others notice that keeping twenty-two verses still gives it a sense of completeness, even without the alphabet. Many readers see the change as meaningful: the earlier poems describe the disaster; this one turns entirely to God in prayer. It's no longer a funeral song. It's a plea.

The prayer begins, "Remember, LORD, what has come on us. Look, and see our reproach." This is the whole community speaking now, using the word we. They describe their lives after the disaster. Their land has been given to foreigners. "We are orphans and fatherless. Our mothers are as widows." They have to pay for their own water

and firewood. They work like slaves. They risk their lives just to get bread.

They admit, "Our fathers sinned, and are no more. We have borne their iniquities." The generation that had refused to listen to the prophets was gone, and their children were left to live with the consequences.

> **REAL TALK** **Living With Someone Else's Choices**
>
> Sometimes you have to live with the results of choices other people made: a parent's divorce, a family's money problems, a sibling's addiction, a move you didn't choose. That can feel deeply unfair, and Lamentations 5 doesn't pretend it isn't. The good news is that the Bible also says each person is responsible for their own choices before God. Ezekiel 18 makes that clear. You don't have to repeat the past. With God's help, you can start something new. And if you're struggling with what's happening at home, please talk with a trusted adult, a school counselor, or a pastor. You don't have to carry it alone.

The poem describes how life had fallen apart. Elders no longer sat at the city gate. Young men no longer played music. "The joy of our heart has ceased. Our dance is turned into mourning. The crown has fallen from our head. Woe to us, for we have sinned!"

And then, after all that loss, the community looks up. "You, LORD, remain forever. Your throne is from generation to generation."

Everything else had fallen. The city, the temple, the king, the crown. But God hadn't. His throne was still standing. That's the solid ground they stand on to pray.

But faith and pain still sit side by side. The next verse asks, "Why do you forget us forever, and forsake us for so long a time?" They know God reigns. They still feel forgotten. Both are true for them at the same time.

Then they pray the most important prayer of the whole poem. "Turn us to yourself, LORD, and we will be turned. Renew our days as of old."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Turn Us and We Will Be Turned**
>
> The prayer turn us to yourself, and we will be turned is a confession of need. The people had tried to fix things on their own and failed. Now they admit they can't even turn back to God without His help. They're asking God to do the turning. Jeremiah had used similar words. And this is the same hope as the New Covenant Jeremiah promised, when God would write His law on their hearts. Renewal doesn't start with us. It starts with God's grace drawing us back.

And then comes the last verse of the book. "But you have utterly rejected us. You are very angry against us."

That's it. That's how Lamentations ends. No resolution. No happy ending. The final line is a fear that maybe God has rejected them for good. Some translations make the verse a question, asking whether God has utterly rejected them. Either way, the book closes with the question still hanging in the air.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Repeating Verse 21**
>
> Because Lamentations ends with such a painful line, there's a beautiful Jewish custom. When Lamentations is read aloud in synagogues on Tisha B'Av, the congregation doesn't end with verse 22. After reading the final verse, they repeat verse 21: Turn us to yourself, LORD, and we will be turned. Renew our days as of old. The same thing is done at the end of a few other biblical books that end on a hard note, like Isaiah, Ecclesiastes, and Malachi. It's a way of saying, We won't let despair have the last word. We'll end with a prayer for hope.

REAL TALK **When the Ending Isn't Happy Yet**

It's tempting to rush from pain to a neat lesson. But Lamentations shows that faith can sound unfinished. Sometimes you pray, and things don't get better right away. Sometimes grief lasts longer than you thought it would. Sometimes you still have questions. That doesn't mean your faith has failed. God included this honest, unfinished ending in His book. He's not afraid of your questions. And just because the story hasn't resolved yet doesn't mean it never will. Lamentations ends with a question. The rest of the Bible answers it.

Did God reject His people forever? No. About seventy years after Jerusalem fell, as Jeremiah had promised, God brought His people home. They rebuilt the temple and the walls. Ezra and Nehemiah tell that story. God's mercies really were new every morning, even on the mornings when the people couldn't feel them.

REAL TALK **Comforting a Grieving Friend**

Lamentations shows what grieving people need. Here's what often helps: showing up, listening more than talking, saying the name of the person who died, remembering hard dates like birthdays and anniversaries, and offering practical help, like bringing food or doing a task together. Here's what often doesn't help: telling someone how they should feel, saying everything happens for a reason, comparing their loss to yours, or expecting them to be over it by now. Grief can last a long time. Keep checking in, even months later. And if a friend talks about not wanting to live or seems in danger, tell a trusted adult right away, and help them reach 988.

KEY VERSE

Turn us to yourself, LORD, and we will be turned. Renew our days as of old.

Lamentations 5:21 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the final poem isn't an acrostic?
2. How can someone believe God reigns forever and still feel forgotten?
3. What does it mean to ask God to turn us to Himself?
4. Why do you think synagogues repeat verse 21 after verse 22? What does that say about hope?

TRY THIS *Make Lamentations 5:21 your prayer this week. Each night, ask God to turn your heart toward Him and renew your days.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

Lamentations ends without an answer. The city is still in ruins. The people are still asking whether God has rejected them forever. And yet, right in the center of the book, the poet remembers that God's mercies never fail. They are new every morning.

Jewish readers treasure Lamentations as a sacred way to grieve, and they have kept hope alive through centuries of loss by holding on to its center and its final prayer. Six hundred years after the poet wept over Jerusalem, another man came near the same city. Luke writes, "When he came near, he saw the city and wept over it." Isaiah had described the coming Servant as "a man of suffering," often translated the Man of Sorrows. Jesus knew grief. At His friend's tomb, "Jesus wept." On the cross, He cried out with words from the Psalms: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Like the poet of Lamentations, He felt abandoned. But Jesus wasn't suffering for His own sin. He was taking the ashes of ours. The judgment Lamentations describes fell on Him. And then, "on the first day of the week, at early dawn," His friends found the tomb empty. Mercy rose with the sun. Because of Him, the mercies of God really are new every morning, and one day, as Revelation promises, God will wipe every tear from our eyes.

Here's what that means for you, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He loves you. His mercies toward you are new every morning.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We've all sinned.

Lamentations says honestly, We have sinned. The Bible says all of us have sinned.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is holy, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says its result is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus took the ashes.

Jesus, the Man of Sorrows, took the ashes of our sin on Himself at the cross. Then He rose at dawn, so mercy gets the last word.

> *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live to righteousness. You were healed by his wounds.* **1 Peter 2:24 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Mercy is a gift, not a wage. Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Turn to Him.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. Lamentations shows you can come to God with tears, questions, and even anger. You can talk to God right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I bring You my sorrow and my sin. I've gone my own way, and I can't fix that myself. Thank You that Jesus, the Man of Sorrows, wept for this broken world, took the ashes of my sin on the cross, and rose again at dawn. Forgive me, and make me Yours. When I'm grieving, help me pour out my heart to You, and remind me that Your mercies are new every morning. Turn me to Yourself, and I will be turned. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want Him to be my King. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Lamentations 3, then Luke 19:41-44 and John 20, from tears to an empty tomb.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized. Grief is lighter when it's shared.

Start each morning with mercy. Before you check your phone, thank God for one new mercy.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Lamentations is full of hard questions, and God let them stay in His book. Keep asking. Keep reading. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Lamentations is right, even in the ashes, God's mercies don't run out. Tomorrow morning, there will be new ones waiting for you.

The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves those who have a crushed spirit.

Psalm 34:18 (WEB)