

Lamentations (Part One)

Songs of Grief and Woe

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You may have noticed that there was a special kind of a event that took place recently. It was kind of big last Monday afternoon. For some, it was a once-in-a-lifetime phenomenon. Although I do not know if we could say that, because another another eclipse is going to cross the United States from southwest to northeast in just seven years in April 2024. But I guess for some people, they will not be able to see that one.

Most of us, I am sure, took the opportunity to go out and take a look at the eclipse. To view it as best we could from wherever we were. Hopefully, you used some sort of eye protection, otherwise you are probably not seeing very well right now. Maybe you had your certified eclipse glasses or shade 12, 13, or 14 welding helmet, or maybe you used a camera obscura—a pinhole type camera. In our backyard we did the eclipse glasses and the camera obscura in a couple different ways. And it was very nice where we were in Charlotte. It was about, I think they said, that it was 97.9 totality. It was not total, but we got to see quite a good view of it from Charlotte and just a few miles down the road in Columbia. It was 100% there. And some of our members took advantage of that and saw an amazing sight.

They said that they did a kind of survey found out that there are about 12 million people who were in the path of totality for it and that another 20 million traveled to be in those areas. So at least 32 million of us went to a place where we could see the totality of the eclipse. And because this very rare, celestial moment happened on a work day, on a school day, thousands of people took the day off. Either they called in sick or they skipped their regular duties to watch the moon's shadow block out the light of the sun. All just for 2.5 minutes of a totality or whatever was there. But all that time, I found out from Forbes Magazine, lost the United States businesses about \$700 million worth of productivity and even those that were on the path of totality lost \$200 million in productivity. But that is nothing. March Madness comes around every year and, believe it or not, the productivity loss during March Madness is about \$2 billion *every year*. Talk about being a distraction.

We tend to treat eclipses as amazing natural occurrences. Science has figured them out. Some of us, of course, have a more Christian viewpoint, and we see God's creative, brilliance in eclipses, how He put everything in place so that could happen. No other place in the universe, as far as we know right now, has eclipses. The distances, the sizes of the planets, and the moon and all that, make it possible here for us to have eclipses. But anywhere else, the distances are not right. The sizes are not right. So we have this natural phenomena that is unique to this area of the solar system, this area of the universe.

But for much of human experience, most people had little idea of what was going on when an eclipse came. They did not understand what they were seeing. And even just a few hundred years ago, before the understanding of the science of it all became general knowledge, the sun going dark in the middle of the day understandably frightened our ancestors. They did not know what was going on. They thought the world was coming to an end, something very bad was happening. So to make sense of this apocalyptic event as they saw it, one that they could not explain, ancient civilizations relied on mythology to give them some sort of backing for what they thought was happening.

Way, way back with the ancient Mesopotamians, they saw it as a sign that the king was nearing his death. Probably sparked a lot of coups, I imagine. "Well, he's going to die anyway, right?" The ancient Chinese believed that a dragon was responsible for devouring that fiery ball in the sky. In fact, the word in Chinese for solar eclipse is *chi*, which also means to eat. They saw it as a dragon eating the sun. In Scandinavia, people thought it was the demon sky wolf, Skoll, who wanted the sun for his next meal. And the Vikings or the Scandinavians thought that they had to make a whole lot of noise to chase him away. So I guess what they did when that happened they got out there with their pots and pans, and they made a whole lot of noise. And 2.5 minutes later, guess what happened? Skoll went away. It was all just the motions of sun, moon, and earth.

In South America, it was not a wolf. It was a celestial jaguar, or mountain lion, puma, or cougar that was thought to have eaten the sun there. In Indian mythology, in eastern India, the Hindu demon Rahu spent his days chasing the moon and the sun. Occasionally he caught and swallowed them. But Rahu was kind of weird. He only was a head. So since he only was a head and had no body, once he ate the sun, it came right back out again. And so that is why the sun returned to its brightness. That is how they explained it. (Don't look at me!)

In other civilizations, a solar eclipse meant that vampires were near, or that evil of some sort was near. Or one that is probably most relevant to us, and also the most widespread belief, is that solar eclipses portended the end of time, the end of the world, and superstitions like this persist today. Many claim that solar eclipses can be dangerous to pregnant women and to their unborn children, which is not true. In parts of India people fast during a solar eclipse because they believe that any food cooked during the eclipse is poisoned by the bad light of sun. In Italy, it says that the gardeners among them would go out and plant flowers during the solar eclipse because they believed that they were prettier and brighter once they grew into flowers.

Now the Bible may refer in one place, to an eclipse. That is in Amos 8.

Amos 8:9 "And it shall come to pass in that day, says the Lord God, that I will make the sun go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in broad daylight."

Now I say it *may* refer to an eclipse here. It may not, but beyond its prophetic significance, which is very clear here, it is in a book of prophecy, so you have to look at that first. This may refer to what is known as the Assyrian eclipse. It took place on June 15th, 763 BC in what is now Iraq over the land of Assyria. In the Assyrian king list for that year, for the ninth year of King Asherdan the III, there is a line that reads, "Revolt in the city of Asher, in the month Tumanu, an eclipse of the sun took place." So they knew what was going on, and they marked it down, and science has confirmed that that is exactly what happened. They could go back and trace things and figure out when they occurred. So that is the June 15th, 763 BC eclipse.

The book of Amos has been dated to 762 which was just one year later. So in writing about an eclipse, it would have been fresh on their minds. They obviously would have seen it in the land of Israel, so referring back to this eclipse it would have struck a chord with them about the sun not being visible at noonday. That would mean that this eclipse occurred roughly 40-41 years before the fall of Samaria in 722 or 721 BC. So this eclipse was out quite a ways from the actual end of times for those people, for their "Day of the Lord," when God's wrath came upon them and the Assyrians came down and defeated them in the Samaria and across the northern part of the land of Israel.

But because of verses like this one in Amos 8:9, Deuteronomy 28:29, which is part of the blessings and curses, says basically there, "You shall grope at noonday as a blind man gropes in darkness." Also Joel 2:31, "The sun shall be turned to darkness." Matthew 24:29 where Jesus says in His prophecy about the coming of the Son of Man, that "the sun will be darkened," and also Revelation 6:12 where John writes that the sun became "black as sackcloth hair." All these, among others, in the Christian way of thinking, eclipses have been considered to be omens of doom presaging the wrath of God and the end of the world. So eclipses have been thought down through the ages, at least since the time of Christ, or at least since the first century, I should say, that eclipses have something to do with portending great things coming, bad things coming.

But all the biblical examples, or references to solar eclipses, however, are about the end times, about the *very* end. Even the one in Amos, I said it could go either way. But even the one in Amos uses that phrase, that very particular phrase "in that day," which most often refers to the Day of the Lord. So, as far as we know, no eclipses portended the fall of Jerusalem. You would think that if there were ever a type, maybe, of the Day of the Lord, that it would be the fall of Jerusalem. As bad as things got there in the city of Jerusalem throughout the siege and the battle there that took place, and then the plundering afterward, in 586 BC. Or maybe you would think perhaps it was when the Romans came against the city of Jerusalem in AD 70 and it fell that there might have been an eclipse that rose one day portending the fall of Jerusalem. But history records none.

Besides, would an eclipse make any difference? Would it have made any difference? Would the people have changed if an eclipse had come within a year or two years of the fall of Jerusalem? Either one—586 BC or AD 70? Would the people have changed? Did the people change on Tuesday of this week when they saw an eclipse? We have, you know, generally in this nation, in Western civilization, have so divorced the idea of God away from these natural phenomena that something like an eclipse does not strike us in any way spiritually. We do not think that it is a portent of doom. Not really. We think it is a neat scientific phenomenon, and so it does not strike us in any way as a warning from God.

I am mostly referring now, and will through the rest of the sermon, to Jerusalem 586 BC, the fall of Jerusalem the first time, and the destruction of Solomon's Temple at that point. Instead, because of the fact that God sent no eclipses to warn them, He did something else. He did something that was probably much more effective, but it still did not work. God sent prophets, "daily rising up early and sending them," as Jeremiah writes several times in his book. But the people of Israel, and later the people of Judah, continued to go backwards and not forwards. He says there in Jeremiah 7:24 that "they walked in the counsels and imaginations of their evil heart." Sounds a lot like Genesis 6 and how God described the people before the Flood, that they did the same thing. "All the imaginations of their heart was only evil continually." And that is how it was in Judah right before their fall.

So ultimately, because they did not change, they stayed the same sinful, perverse people that they had been for several generations from before the time of Manasseh, God had to do something quite harsh. So He sent the Chaldeans, the Babylonians, to conquer them, enslave them, destroy their fair city Jerusalem, and even take out what may have been the most beautiful building in the world—the Temple of Solomon. Guess what? That got their attention! An eclipse would not have worked. Even if there was one, there is no sign of it working. Prophets being sent did not work. But what got their attention was total war—famine, pestilence, destruction. That got their attention. Well, maybe I should say it got the attention of those few who were left. Those very few who did not die in either the war, famine, or pestilence. Those few, the remnant that was scattered, went into exile.

With this background, thinking about the portents of doom and such, I want to begin a series on the book of Lamentations, which is a reaction to God's punishment of Judah and specifically His destruction of Jerusalem and her people for their sins. They continually broke the covenant with God. Because they did, He had to respond, and He responded with great strength, almost great cruelty, you might say, to take them down to the point where they were humble enough to listen once again. And so He brought them the destruction of the city and terrible, terrible destruction of life and property and of course, the Exile. As the name Lamentations suggests, it is a tale, a book of woe, of anguish, of grief, and of great regret. And there is a little eensy, weensy, teensy smidgen of hope.

Just so you know, so maybe you can go and compare, my Dad gave an eight part series on the book of Lamentations as a Bible study to the North Hollywood, California congregation back in 1989. We have them available online for you to listen to. I do not believe they are transcribed, but they are available online, and I am hoping that this series will be a bit shorter. It will not go out to eight parts, but we will see. I have not listened to the series for a long time but I hope that this series will be a nice complement to his series and maybe looking at it from two slightly different perspectives we can provide a good balance here on what is in the book.

Please go to the book of Lamentations. Lamentations is a very interesting book in terms of just its name. Most, like the Greeks and the Romans, and we Americans using the English language, call this the book of Lamentations. Well, the Hebrews themselves did not call it that. They knew that it was a book full of lamentation, but they did not call it that. Normally what they do is call a book by its first word or words. And so this book in Hebrew is called Ekah. But that word means "how." And it really tells you the theme of the book. Because, here they were, Jerusalem was destroyed, most of the people were dead, things were just horrible, conditions were terrible. They were marching out either to Egypt or back to Babylon as captives. And all of them were saying, "How? How did this happen? We were once among the greatest of nations, and now we few are all that is left. What happened?" So that is what the book is all about. How can we get an explanation for all this? And it comes through in the lamentation.

But I want to read a couple scriptures here first. The first verse of Lamentations 1.

Lamentations 1:1 How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow is she, who was great among the nations! The princess among the provinces has become a slave!

Notice that this book just starts in with this question. How did this all happen? It should not have happened. What caused this, how have we come so low in such a short time?

Normally, though, you would think that it might start like some of the other books of the prophets. You know, "The words of the prophet Jeremiah during the reign" of this, that, or the other king. It does not say that. It starts out right into the theme of the book without giving us any idea of who offered it. Another place we might think to find an author, or at least the suggestion, would be like the last verse in the book. And it just says, "unless You have utterly rejected us and are very angry with us." Well, I think there is the answer to the question how God had rejected them and was very angry with them. But there is still no indication of who wrote these lamentations.

We see in our Bibles, Lamentations is squeezed between Jeremiah and Ezekiel. And that is chronological. Jeremiah and Ezekiel were contemporary, and they were there right in the 580's, maybe a little bit before, a little bit after, but this book is placed chronologically, and not just for that

reason, but because it has been traditional that Lamentations was written by Jeremiah, so it falls naturally right after the book of Jeremiah.

So what we have in the book of Lamentations is a reaction of one or more Jews who had been present in Jerusalem during the siege and fall of the city. That happened, as I said, in 586 BC. It is also mentioned that it has traditionally been ascribed to Jeremiah, although this may not be completely accurate. You know, it is usually best to go with the traditional understandings of these things because tradition holds a fair amount of weight. But there may be some things that we can consider about Jeremiah's authorship. If he did not write it himself, odds are that he at least collected the five songs that comprises what we see now in our Bibles. However, there is something in his favor. We will go back to II Chronicles 35 and we will see that the lament is something that Jeremiah was very good at writing, something that he had done previously, and he had obviously done it very well because it was mentioned in The Chronicle.

II Chronicles 35:25 [Going back about 40 years from the fall of Jerusalem.] Jeremiah also lamented for Josiah. And to this day all the singing men and the singing women speak of Josiah in their lamentations. They made it a custom in Israel; and indeed they are written in the Laments.

So evidently Jeremiah's lament for Josiah made it into the national laments of people. So it is not outside the realm of possibility that Jeremiah would have written other laments after the fall of Jerusalem. As a matter of fact, it sounds like or it seems to me that it would be a natural thing for him to have done. He seems to have been naturally a kind of person who complained a lot, grieved a lot. You know, some of you I am sure, that his nickname is the Weeping Prophet because of all of the the crying and anguish that he seems to do throughout his writing. So because the general tenor of his work is lament and grief for what is going on in Judah and Jerusalem, it seems like the book of Lamentations was right up his alley. It would fit him very well.

Traditionally, as I mentioned, it has been ascribed to him and this idea of Jeremiah's authorship goes all the way back to the Septuagint, which is the Greek version of the Hebrew scriptures. That goes way back to the third or second century BC. So we have more than 2,000 years worth of tradition that says that he wrote it. But the Septuagint begins the book of Lamentations with this introduction, "And it came to pass after Israel had gone into captivity and Jerusalem was laid waste, that Jeremiah sat weeping and composed this laments over Jerusalem, and said. . ." And then it begins with our text, "How lonely sits the city that was full of people!" So way back more than 2000 years ago there is record that Jeremiah was the author. So it is probably pretty certain, at least from our point of view, that he had something to do with it.

Another candidate is his secretary, Baruch. He was a scribe, he was a writer. He also tended to have a bit of "woe is me" attitude. I guess at the time you could not help but have a "woe is me" attitude because things were not looking all that great. You go back to Jeremiah 45 and you will see God's own words as he describes Baruch.

Jeremiah 45:2-3 "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, to you. O Baruch: 'You said, "Woe is me now! For the Lord has added grief to my sorrow. I fainted in my sighing and find no rest.'"

So if this was his attitude *before* the fall of Jerusalem, you could imagine what it was afterwards. And so it could very well be that he may have had a hand. Maybe more than just as a scribe for what

Jeremiah said. Maybe he had a part to play in its actual composition. This is pure guesswork. There is no proof of it whatsoever. But I give it to you just as a possibility.

Other than these two, Jeremiah and Baruch, the only other real candidate is a guy we all know and love, Anonymous. Some scholars think that these were songs that were composed during the siege of Jerusalem, and some as they were there waiting for the Babylonians to do what they were going to do, lamenting the fall, which they knew was inevitable, of the city. And Jeremiah or Baruch simply wrote them down to preserve them for posterity. And then they were later canonized as godly responses to God's judgment. I do not know. That is another supposition.

It is possible if you go through and look at the various songs there in the book of Lamentations, that chapters one, two, and four were by other people, these anonymous people, whoever they were, and that chapters three and five were written by Jeremiah or somebody with a bit more spiritual focus. Maybe, maybe not. That is just what some scholars see. I am not going to give you my opinion on it, because I really do not have an opinion on it. I would rather just say Jeremiah did it and leave it at that. But as I said, we cannot know for sure, but the strength of the evidence is behind Jeremiah writing it, either in part or in full, and you know that sounds good to me. God works through His servants that way, and that just seems like the best decision to come to without any other proof.

So that means that the laments here in these five chapters of Lamentations were likely written during or just after the siege of Jerusalem. That would be 586, maybe 585, somewhere around there. Some scholars believe that chapter 1 may actually have been composed during or just after the deportation of the Jews to Babylon. Not in 586 but in 598. This takes it back to the first exile of Jews when Nebuchadnezzar came down, laid siege to Jerusalem, and took back all the skilled people and the people of high rank. Remember, that was the exile of people like Daniel and his three friends who went back to Nebuchadnezzar's palace there. They saw that the handwriting was on the wall before the handwriting was ever put on the wall. So maybe someone who was fairly astute had written it way back then. But again, that is a supposition. That is trying to use the internal things in the chapter to try to figure out a date for it and who knows how much weight we can put on that?

Others think chapter five, which is not so much a lament as it is a prayer that pleads for restoration of God's people, people think that maybe that was written later by a pious exile in Babylon, someone who had been exiled and was looking back on what God had done. Some people have even suggested that maybe Daniel wrote that prayer. It has some similarities to what he prayed in Daniel 9. But we do not know that for sure, either. I am just throwing out these speculations so you can kind of start thinking about this book in a new way. So that would make the date of the last chapter pretty late. You could go 70 years from the fall of Jerusalem or during the time of the exile and bring it down to somewhere around 530 BC. But still, it is 6th century BC work, most people believe. Like I said, sheer speculation. If you are going to put a date down for the book, I put down the same year as the fall of Jerusalem, 586 BC and just leave it at that.

Lamentations is one of five books that are part of the Megillah, the festival scroll, along with Song of Solomon (or Song of Songs), Ruth, Ecclesiastes, and Esther. Think back to my sermons several years ago on the Psalms, and as we went through those, I kept mentioning over and over again that there is a grid that you could make. You put the five books of the Psalms down and the five summary psalms at the end of the book and they go hand in hand with the five books of the Pentateuch, five seasons of the year, and the five books of the Megillah.

So what you have then is that Lamentations, being the third of the festival scroll, the third of the Megillah, means that it was used during the summertime. Song of Songs was used at Passover time, Ruth was used at Pentecost time. Lamentations was used during the summer, specifically on the ninth of AB, which was the fall of Jerusalem. Both times it happened on the ninth of Ab. (By the way, the ninth of Ab this year was August the first. We are a little late on this, but we are in the season, as it were.)

The book of Ecclesiastes was read during the Feast of Tabernacles and the book of Esther was for the winter months, specifically the time of Purim. So that means that Lamentations is connected to, schematically, the third book of the Psalms, Psalm 148 is the general summary psalm and also the book of Leviticus and the season of summer. You put all those together and you mix them all up real well and you find the themes that pop out for this particular set of connected books and times, and what you get is this. These are the themes of that particular line in your grid.

Ripening fruit—think of that both physically and spiritually and therefore God's judgment. Correction, holiness. There is a lot of holiness, especially in the book of Leviticus. Cursing. Remember the blessings and the cursings in the book of Leviticus? Also affliction, trial. All those were bad things, were not they? But you have your one good thing, and that is, hope. Hope in God's redemption and His restoration, but that is still future. The fourth line in that grid is when it occurred in the time of Trumpets, Atonement, Tabernacles, and Last Great Day. That is when the hope is finally fulfilled. But we are still in the summer here, and it is still future then. So there is a hope that things will go well, but we still have not seen it yet.

I want you to see this in terms of theme. Remember, I mentioned fruit ripening. There was a whole sign that was given to Jeremiah just on this theme in Jeremiah 24.

Jeremiah 24:1-10 The Lord showed me, and there were two baskets of figs set before the temple of the Lord, after Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away captive Jeconiah the son Jehoiakim, king of Judah, and the princes of Judah with the craftsman and smiths from Jerusalem, and had brought them to Babylon. [So this was 598. This was the time of the exile of Daniel.] One basket had very good figs, like the figs that are first ripe; and the other basket had very bad figs which could not be eaten, they were so bad. Then the Lord said to me, "What do you see, Jeremiah? And I said, "Figs, the good figs, very good; and the bad, very bad, which cannot be eaten, they are so bad." Again the word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: "Like these good figs, so will I acknowledge those who were carried away captive from Judah, whom I have sent out of this place for their own good, into the land of the Chaldeans. For I will set My eyes on them for good, and I will bring them back to this land; and I will build them and not pull them down, and I will plant them and not pluck them up. Then I will give them a heart to know Me, that I am the Lord; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God, for they shall return to Me with their whole heart. And as the bad figs which cannot be eaten, they are so bad—surely thus says the Lord—'so I will give up Zedekiah the king of Judah, his princes, the residue of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt. I will deliver them to trouble into all the kingdoms of the earth, for their harm, to be a reproach and a byword, a taunt and a curse, in all places where I shall drive them. And I will send the sword, the famine, and the pestilence among them, till they are consumed from the land that I gave to them and their fathers.'"

So we can see in this short chapter the theme of Lamentations, the theme of Leviticus, theme of Book Three of the Psalms, and the theme of summer. This is the theme—that God is making judgments about people. He is seeing them as their fruit begins to ripen. Some He considers to be holy, worthy of salvation, worthy of redemption, worthy of being brought back into the land, even though He makes them go through exile and He is going to make something of them.

But then there are those others. It says, I do not know, 4, 5, 6 times throughout this chapter, that they are *bad*, they are *very bad*, and He makes the decision, He makes a judgment, and He says, "Okay, I'm going to make an example of them and they are going to go through just horrible, terrible things as this example and they are going to be consumed, destroyed." So they are the ones that go through the main part of the affliction and the terror that comes because of God's judgment.

But there is hope, because there is that other group, the remnant, good figs that are going to be brought back after a time, and they will establish righteousness and the things that God wants to see in the people.

So there you have a pretty good overall statement of what is behind the book of Lamentations. In terms of organization, the five chapters of Lamentations are separate works, each one is separate. It appears that they are separate and they are. You can take them one chapter at a time and get a pretty good understanding of that one without having good understanding of the whole book, without having to look at the others. But it appears that someone, an editor, Jeremiah, or Jeremiah writing it all himself, however it worked out, that he put them together like this for a reason. Obviously, God was behind it. He does things like that. He makes sure that the organization and everything about it, the format, has something to add to our understanding.

So what we have in Lamentations, then, once we put all five of these songs together, is a well rounded response—God's judgment. Yeah, God allows us to say, "Oh, woe is me! Look at what happened. You know, this is just terrible." But then you get to chapter two and there is some real good thinking there, reasoning, about why this happened. Let me just give it to you chapter by chapter.

Chapter 1 describes the destruction of Jerusalem pretty graphically, so we get an idea of what has gone on.

Chapter 2 declares very forcibly that God brought the punishment on Judah. Not the Chaldeans, they were used. God did it.

Chapter 3 is a personal response from one person, perhaps by Jeremiah himself, and he sees hope on the horizon.

Chapter 4 reiterates God's judgment on His people. But it goes on to claim that beyond judgment is forgiveness, salvation, and renewed life. You see how we are progressing here. The thoughts are going a little bit further ahead, more thoughtful, we are beginning to think, "Why was this done? And what am I supposed to get out of it and what has God got in store for us now?"

And then we have chapter 5 where we have a corporate or a community prayer. It is the remnant, the people who are left behind, pleading for restoration.

So you go from the shock of seeing the destruction of Jerusalem and her people, to thinking—reasoning—that it was God that did this, to a response that acknowledges God's justice in doing what He did, then beginning to see some hope. And then you see again that beyond all of that, beyond in chapter four, beyond this judgment, God is willing to forgive. God is willing to save and deliver His people, those who are loyal to Him, and give them renewed life—something better in the future. And then finally, is a prayer that all this will come to pass, that He will restore His people to even greater things.

Internally, each chapter has its own format. Yes and no. The first four chapters of this book are acrostic. Each one is a separate song, but each one is itself an acrostic. An acrostic is just a fancy word that means it is alphabetical, each new section called a strophe. And in these particular poems, or these particular songs, each strophe is made up of three, what they call, double verses, so each verse has two lines. So that means usually there are six lines in each strophe. Anyway, each new section or strophe opens up with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. So the first strophe is *aleph*. The second strophe is *beth*. Third strophe is *gimel*, and on and on it goes through the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. This form was used because the acrostic poem was considered to be among the highest of art forms at the time. Each strophe would start then with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and then the next strophe would pick up with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

This acrostic form is also found in several psalms. You might want to put these down just to look at them later, maybe. Psalm 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, the famous Psalm 119 where each strophe, I believe, is eight verses long, and Psalm 145, which is the last psalm in the regular section of the Psalms before you get into the summary psalms. This is also present in the end of Proverbs. Proverbs 31:10-31. This is the well-known Proverbs 31 woman, the ideal woman, the godly woman. That is an acrostic.

Chapter 1 is a what they call a normal acrostic, and they call it that because each one of the strophes is in its correct order of the Hebrew alphabet. (If you go back to Psalm 119 you will see each one of those strophes has a Hebrew letter at the top of it.) Those are in the correct order. One through 22.

Chapters 2 and 4 of Lamentations, however, are not a normal acrostic. For some reason, the letters *ayin* and *pe*, which are the 16th and 17th letters of the Hebrew alphabet, are transposed in these two. For some reason, it does not fall in the same order. You know we have our A B C's. We do go from A to Z, and we all know which letter comes after the next. Well, in Hebrew, there must have been a time when *ayin* and *pe* were transposed, and then another time, or maybe in another place, they were the right way around. But the way that it is in Psalm 119 is considered the correct way, and so these ones were thought to be abnormal.

Chapter 5 is not an acrostic. Chapter 5 is set apart, it is a little bit different. But chapter 5 also contains 22 verses, so each one of the five chapters of the book of Lamentations is set up in a 22 verse, if you want to put it that way, or a 22 part organization. Even chapter 3, if you look at it, you will see it is 66 verses. But that could just as easily have been made into 22 rather than 66. All they have done is separate out three verses for each one as a strophe. So this actually, probably, should have been also 22 verses.

So you have five chapters, all of 22 verses, very clearly acrostic but for some reason, whoever was the monk or whatever, that did all the change-making these into verses, changed chapter 3 very differently from the other ones. If you see, like the end of chapter 2, if you count the lines there,

"You have invited us to a feast day." That is one. "Terrors that surround me" is two. "In the day of the Lord's anger" is three. "There was no refuge or survivor" is four. "Those whom I have borne and brought up" is five. "My enemies have destroyed" is six. So there are six parts there.

But if you look in chapter 3, the first three verses can be split up into those six parts, so I just do not get it. Why did that person do it differently in this? It would have made it so much better because it would have kept the order of acrostic organization much clearer.

All right, let us go back to Lamentations. Get into this just a little bit. Lamentations 1:1. We have read that already, but I will read it again, and I am going to hop, skip, and jump through the first half of this chapter so we can look at the background in this book.

Lamentations 1:1, 3, 5, 8, 10 How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow is she, who was great among the nations! The princess among the provinces has become a slave! . . . Judah has gone into captivity, under affliction and hard servitude; she dwells among the nations, she finds no rest; all her persecutors overtake her in dire straits. . . . Her adversaries have become the master, her enemies prosper; for the Lord has afflicted her because of the multitude of her transgressions. . . . Jerusalem has sinned gravely, therefore she has become vile. All who honored her despise her because they have seen her nakedness. Yes, she sighs and turns away. . . . The adversary has spread his hand over all her pleasant things; she has seen the nations enter her sanctuary, those whom You commanded not to enter Your assembly.

These verses supply a quick summary, we could say, of what happened to elicit this outpouring of grief and anguish that we see in the book of Lamentations. We see a lonely city. It has been depopulated. The walls have been breached, it has fallen. Its citizens are now slaves. They have been taken into captivity. They have been afflicted with hard labor. The nation's enemy have become its master and taken away all its wealth, it is destitute. It has nothing anymore. Its people have been exposed as a weak and perverse people, and even its holy places have been defiled. And amid all this, right in the center of what we read, the writer posts the reason for this tragedy for all to see, for everyone who is reading this to consider: God sent this severe punishment on His people Judah because of the multitude of her transgressions. Verse 20 implies that this multitude of transgressions could also be thought of as repeated rebellion. That they never did agree with God. And because of this, they had to be punished very severely.

Let us go back to Jeremiah the fifth chapter and see God's case against His people. This is to both Israel and Judah, but we will take it just in terms of Judah at this point. What God does is He builds a case here against the people, using the character of Jeremiah's contemporaries as the example that He uses. So we are seeing in chapter 5 a bit of an insight into what was going on in Judah and Jerusalem. I want you too, as we read this, to go through and think about or note, the traits that He brings out that He hates so much.

Jeremiah 5:1-31 "Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem; see now and know; and seek in her open places if you can find a man [*one* man], if there is anyone who executes judgment, who seeks the truth, and I will pardon her. Though they say, 'As the Lord lives,' surely they swear falsely." O Lord, are not Your eyes on the truth? You have stricken them, but they have not grieved; You have consumed them, but they have refused to receive correction. They have made their faces harder than rock; they have refused to return [or repent]. Therefore I said, "Surely these are poor. They are foolish;

for they do not know the way of the Lord, the judgment of their God. I will go to the great men and speak to them, for they have known the way of the Lord, the judgment of their God." But these have altogether broken the yoke and burst their bonds. Therefore a lion from the forest shall slay them, a wolf of the deserts shall destroy them; a leopard will watch over their cities. Everyone who goes out from there shall be torn in pieces, because their transgressions are many; their backslidings have increased. How shall I pardon you for this? Your children have forsaken Me and sworn by those that are not gods. When I had fed them to the full, then they committed adultery and assembled themselves by troops in the harlots' houses. They were like well-fed lusty stallions; every one neighed after his neighbor's wife. Shall I not punish them for these things?" says the Lord. "And shall I not avenge Myself on such a nation as this? Go up on her walls and destroy, but do not make a complete end. Take away her branches, for they are not the Lord's. For the house of Israel and the house of Judah have dealt very treacherously with Me," says the Lord. They have lied about the Lord, and said, "It is not He. Neither will evil come upon us, nor shall we see sword or famine. And the prophets become wind, for the word is not in them. Thus shall it be done to them." Therefore thus says the Lord God of hosts: "Because you speak this word, behold, I will make My words in your mouth fire, and this people wood, and it shall devour them. Behold, I will bring a nation against you from afar, O house of Israel," says the Lord. "It is a mighty nation, it is an ancient nation, a nation whose language you do not know, nor can you understand what they say. Their quiver is like an open tomb; they are all mighty men. They shall eat up your harvest and your bread, which your sons and daughters should eat. They shall eat up your flocks and your herds; they shall eat up your vines and your fig trees; they shall destroy your fortified cities, in which you trust, with the sword."

"Nevertheless, in those days," says the Lord, "I will not make a complete end of you. And it will be when you say, 'Why does the Lord our God do all these things to us?' then you shall answer them, 'Just as you have forsaken Me and served foreign gods in your land, so you shall serve aliens in the land that is not yours.' Declare this in the house of Jacob and proclaim it in Judah, saying, 'Hear this now, O foolish people, without understanding, who have eyes and see not, who have ears and hear not: Do you not fear Me?' says the Lord. 'Will you not tremble in My presence, who have placed the sand as the bound of the sea, by perpetual decree, that it cannot pass beyond it? [Yeah, He are saying here, look who you are dealing with here. I am the Creator of all this. You think you have power with Me? You think you could just go your own way.] And though its waves toss to and fro, yet they cannot prevail; though they roar, yet they cannot pass over it. But this people has a defiant and rebellious heart; they have revolted and departed. They do not say in their heart, "Let us now fear the Lord our God, who gives rain, both the former and the latter, in its season. He reserves for us the appointed weeks of the harvest." Your iniquities have turned these things away, and your sins have withheld good things from you. 'For among My people are found wicked men; they lie in wait as one who sets snares; they set a trap; they catch men. As a cage is full of birds, so their houses are full of deceit. Therefore they have become great and grown rich. They have grown fat [Like Jeshurun. Remember that?], they are sleek; yes, they surpass the deeds of the wicked; they do not plead the cause, the cause of the fatherless; yet they prosper, and the right of the needy they do not defend. 'Shall I not punish them for these things?" says the Lord. 'Shall I not avenge Myself on a nation such as this?' "An

astonishing and horrible thing has been committed in the land: The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule by their own power; and My people love to have it so. But what will you do in the end?"

We have a whole chapter of God telling why He was doing this. And He highlights several sinful traits that He is going to do this because of. He starts out with dishonesty and deceit. Then He goes to forsaking God and following idols. He has a few verses on their horrible and perverse sexual sins. He talks about their treacherous dealings with each other and with God. He talks about their defiance in their rebellion against Him. He also mentions their indifference to the poor and the needy. Their fat cat behavior in which they abuse the weak. He speaks about their injustice. They do not make right judgments. He talks about their feel-good religion. Oh, the people love to have it so, they love to be lied to. And He speaks about their arrogant ministers. These know it all's, who speak out of their own head and not out of God's Word.

And then He asked this final question in verse 31. "What will you do in the end?" And what this means, if I can put it in different words is, "What will you do when you realize it is these very sins that has brought all this evil upon you? What will you do when you realize that it was your deeds that brought on this calamity? What will you have at that time that will be able to provide any help? What will you lean on for support?" Because they have destroyed everything that is good. It is rhetorical, this question. The answer to all those questions is "nothing." What will you do in the end? Nothing. You can do nothing. It is inevitable. The sword is going to fall.

So these transgressions of the covenant, generation after generation, had become such a stench in God's nostrils, and according to the terms of the covenant, He had every right to punish them, to unleash the curses of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 because they had broken every law that there was. Every one of those tenets of the Covenant had been smashed in pieces by them. And God said, "I told you way back in the time Moses what was going to happen. And I've been very merciful all these generations that have rolled down since then." Eight hundred years or so, He had been merciful, and He said, "I'm sorry, but this generation is going to pay."

Does not chapter 5 sound a lot like modern day America? If you just switched out Israel and Judah for America, it would sound a lot like what we are going through here. Let us go to Jeremiah 25. You know, God did His due diligence here. He just did not suddenly spring this on them.

Jeremiah 25:1-11 The word that came to Jeremiah concerning all the people of Judah, in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah (which was the first year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon), which Jeremiah the prophet spoke to all the people of Judah and to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, saying [this is the warning]: "From the thirteenth year of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, even to this day, this is the twenty-third year in which the word of the Lord has come to me; and I have spoken to you, rising early and speaking, but you have not listened. And the Lord has sent to you all His servants the prophets [because it was not just Jeremiah], rising early and sending them, but you have not listened nor inclined your ear to hear. They said [these prophets said], 'Repent now everyone of his evil way and his evil doings, and dwell in the land that the Lord has given to you and your fathers forever and ever. Do not go after other gods to serve them and worship them, do not provoke Me to anger with the works of your hands; and I will not harm you.' Yet you have not listened to Me," says the Lord, "that you might provoke Me to anger with the works of your hands to your own hurt. Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts; 'Because you have not heard My words, behold, I

will send and take all the families of the north,' says the Lord, 'and Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, My servant, and will bring them against this land, against its inhabitants, and against these nations all around, and will utterly destroy them, and make them an astonishment, a hissing, and perpetual desolations. Moreover, I will take from them the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones and the light of lamp. And this whole land shall be a desolation and an astonishment, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.'

Like I said, He did his due diligence. He sent the prophets. He warned, He cajoled. He frightened them. He tried to scare them straight. He gave them reason. He reminded them of the covenant and their special place as His people. He pointed in other places to Israel's example. But nothing He said made any difference. They were not listening! It never sunk in. They just kept on provoking Him to anger by their sinful actions, their idols, their alliances, and all of their many personal sins. So He did what He said. He sicced Babylon on them. And as the Habakkuk shows, they were a fearsome people, the worst of the heathen and they did what the worst of the heathen people do. Let us go to II Kings 25.

II Kings 25:1-10, 18-21 Now it came to pass in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month [He is talking about Zedekiah], on the tenth day of the month, that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and all his army came against Jerusalem and encamped against it; and they built a siege wall against it all around. So the city was besieged until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah. By the ninth day of the fourth month the famine had become so severe in the city that there was no food for the people of the land. Then the city wall was broken through, and all the men of war fled at night by way of the gate between two walls, which was by the king's garden, even though the Chaldeans were still encamped all around against the city. And the king went by way of the plain. But the army of the Chaldeans pursued the king, and they overtook him in the plains of Jericho. All his army was scattered from him. So they took the king and brought him up to the king of Babylon at Riblah. And they pronounced judgment on him. Then they killed the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, put out the eyes of Zedekiah, bound him with bronze fetters, and took him to Babylon. And in the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month (which was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon), Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. He burned the house of the Lord and the king's house; all the houses of Jerusalem, that is, all the houses of the great, he burned with fire. And all the army of the Chaldeans who were with the captain of the guard broke down the walls of Jerusalem all around. . . . And the captain of the guard took Seraiah the chief priest, Zephaniah the second priest, and the three doorkeepers. He also took out of the city an officer who had charge of the men of war, five men of the king's close associates who were found in the city, the chief recruiting officer of the army, who mustered the people of the land, and sixty men of the people of the land who were found in the city. So Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard, took these and brought them to the king of Babylon at Riblah. Then the king of Babylon struck them and put them to death at Riblah in the land of Hamah. Thus Judah was carried away captive from its own land.

Jeremiah 52:28-30 These are the people who Nebuchadnezzar carried away captive: in the seventh year, three thousand and twenty-three Jews; in the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar he carried away captive from Jerusalem eight hundred and thirty-two

persons; in the twenty-third year of Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried away captive of the Jews seven hundred and forty-five persons. All the persons were four thousand six hundred.

God did exactly what He said he would do. He brought the Babylonians against them and they did what they did best. They killed, plundered, destroyed the city. They besieged the city, starved the people, forced the army to make a run for it, killed and scattered Judah's warriors, then plundered and burned the city, taking what few people remained into captivity to Babylon. Did you notice the numbers there? He said, in total, over that whole time, 4,600 captives were taken. That may not seem like a lot, but you know what that represents? That represents a pitiful remainder of the many thousands that started out hiding behind Jerusalem's walls. That is all that were left, basically. They left some people in the land, but they only took 4,600 in total. How many thousands died from famine and disease and war? And as we saw, execution. Actually, after the fall of Jerusalem, the Babylonians took only 832 people, not 4,600. That was in total over the past about 20 years. And five years later they came back and took 745 more.

We are talking a land that was pretty much depopulated, not very much to show for 800 plus years in the land. And that is all that were left. Those few in captivity, those few that went down to Egypt and that was about it. And God said He was going to send a sword after those in Egypt too.

Perhaps now we have a better understanding why the grief in Lamentations is so deep and inconsolable, why there is only a little smidgen of hope there. While we cannot say that the whole nation was exterminated, it surely seemed like it to the very few survivors that were left when it uses words like desolate, vile, naked, no sorrow like my sorrow, trampled, faint, distress, troubled, bereft, tears, and ruined. Even these words, which cause an emotional reaction, barely describe the reality of a nation reduced to almost nothing. What it described, in reality, is utter failure. Utter failure after all those years of God working with them, they *never* got the point. They *never* really turned to Him. Only a few whom God called and worked with had ever really turned to Him. Their pride in being God's nation was a total sham, just as ours is of being a Christian nation. We are *nothing* like true Christian people in this land. We just have it as a banner that we do not even try to aspire to. We just use it to try to win arguments. That is about it.

Let us conclude in a strange place, maybe, Luke the 13th chapter. And I want you to see God's reaction. We normally would go to this in Matthew 23, but I thought I would use Luke's version. It is pretty much the same as Matthew, but *this* is the God who struck them low. That sent the famine, that sent the pestilence, that sent the Chaldeans and their cruel officers and army. And this is what He says about 500 to 600 years later.

Luke 13:34-35 "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate, and assuredly, I say to you, you shall not see Me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!'"

He is saying it is happening again, just like the first time. And the lament, the grief, the outpouring of woe will come, and it would come in just another 40 years after He was crucified. God wanted to comfort His people and bless them. He wanted to gather them, not scatter them. But they were the ones with the head, the forehead of flint. They were the ones with a stiff neck. They were never willing. They wanted to go their own way. And He let them. But they had to pay the price,

ultimately. For most of them, it ended. If it was not in death, it ended in anguish, grief, sheer agony, and lamentation.

Let it be a lesson to us so that we can say every day, as it is written in Lamentations 3:24, "The Lord is my portion. Therefore I hope in Him."