

A Commentary on Lamentations

By

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PREFACE:

This commentary is based upon my personal devotional notes and reflections on the *Book of Lamentations*. In reflecting on *Lamentations* I realized that so much of this book can also be applied to our day as we deal with grief over the loss of a loved one or the grief that comes when we repent of our sins. This commentary is therefore intended as an aid in that process. *Lamentations* gives us profound insights into grieving. It may have been written to help the Jewish people deal with their grief and pain over the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., but those same lessons can be applied to us today as we grieve. *Lamentations* can become more than Hebrew poetry over something that happened 2500 years ago. It can be God's Word to all of us as we struggle to deal with the loss of those we love.

This material is intended for use by members and friends of Southside Christian Church, especially those who are currently going through grief. It can be a resource for a follow up Bible Study after the GriefShare class. It can also be used by our small group leaders to help you lead your group in a verse by verse study of *Lamentations*. However, I do not include discussion questions in the commentary. That I leave up to you as an individual or a group leader. This commentary is intended to help you better understand some of the background and issues in *Lamentations*. It is not a technical commentary designed for academic projects.

A few things need to be noted. I go chapter by chapter in the commentary and sometimes individual verses are commented upon, sometimes it is several sentences and sometimes a whole paragraph. This commentary is based on the New International Version and all Scripture quotations are taken from that version of the Bible. All references to books of the Bible and specific Scripture passages are in italics.

I hope and pray you will find this resource useful for your own study and also for your small group. I also hope that reflecting on the words of the ancient Hebrew author of *Lamentations* will help you in your own grief and realize God included this book in his Word in order to help us. I pray this commentary will help grow your love and respect for God's Word, the Bible, and help motivate you to study it more so that you may come to know its author, our Lord Jesus Christ!

Pastor Galen Doughty

INTRODUCTION: *Lamentations* was written in response to the calamity of 586 and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple of Solomon by the Babylonians. Traditionally the Jewish rabbis viewed it as written by the prophet Jeremiah after Jerusalem's fall. The text of *Lamentations* does not mention its author although there is nothing in it that prohibits the traditional view. The first four chapters are written as acrostic poems in Hebrew with each verse or couplet beginning with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. For example, in English the first word of each line of the first stanza would use a word beginning with the letter A; the second stanza the letter B and so on until the whole alphabet was used to complete the chapter.

Lamentations is written therefore in a very precise and deliberate way in a literary form that would help people memorize the poetry and thus remember the message. If Jeremiah is the author then he must have written it soon after Jerusalem's downfall before he had joined Gedaliah in Mizpah and his subsequent exile to Egypt with Johanan. See *Jeremiah 40-41* for the details. If Jeremiah is not the author then some unknown author penned the poem of lament over Jerusalem expressing many of the themes of Jeremiah's prophecy, especially Judah's guilt over her sin and the Lord's just punishment of the nation.

Lamentations raises many of the issues with which the exiles struggled including the justice of God and whether God had forgotten or abandoned his people all together. It is one of the great expressions of grief in all the Scriptures. It may be the poem was written as an acrostic in order to help people focus their grief so they could heal from it. The precise structure can be an aid in expressing the intense and often chaotic feelings that come with grief. In Jewish synagogues today *Lamentations* is read in July or August of each year during the fast day that commemorates the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians in 586 BC and the Romans in 70 AD. In the Hebrew Bible *Lamentations* is included in the "Five Scrolls" of *Song of Songs*, *Ruth*, *Esther*, *Ecclesiastes* and *Lamentations* and is seen as part of the Writings or *Kethubim*, the third section of the Hebrew Bible. Our English Bibles and all Protestant Bibles follow the Septuagint's order (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) and place *Lamentations* after *Jeremiah*. The fact that *Lamentations* is included in the Writings in the Hebrew Scriptures suggests that Jeremiah was not the author and the work was written after the prophet had died. Even in the midst of the worst kind of grief *Lamentations* has expressions of hope and faith. 3:21-33 is one of the greatest statements of hope and faith in the entire Bible.

The issue of authorship is considerably in doubt so for this commentary's sake I will comment as if an unknown author wrote *Lamentations* and not the prophet Jeremiah.

Chapter 1:

1:1-3 - The lament begins by observing how empty the city has become. After the Babylonians burned the city most residents of Jerusalem had been killed, taken into exile or fled because the city had become simply unlivable. The Babylonians had torn down the walls and burned all the houses. There was no safe place to live that was secure. Jeremiah or an unknown author notes that Jerusalem had been a queen among cities but now looks like a slave. She is a grieving widow.

The author speaks as if Jerusalem was a person. She weeps in the night because there is no one left to comfort her. All her friends have betrayed her. The kings of Judah had counted on Egypt to help Judah against Babylon but Egyptian help proved ineffective and ultimately failed. The other little countries around Judah proved no help either. She was left without any allies, alone and deserted. God had decreed Jerusalem's destruction and punishment. From a human standpoint that meant the city stood alone.

Now Judah is in exile. She dwells among the nations, specifically Babylon. Even after the return of the Jews to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel in 538 there was still a large Jewish community in Babylon and other major cities in Persia. The Jews were without a homeland and her enemies had triumphed.

These initial descriptions of Jerusalem's grief give us clues as to how to address our own grief. We need to describe it and catalogue it. We need to acknowledge how grief feels and the loneliness, sadness, restlessness, weeping, distress and bitterness that comes with it.

1:4-5 - The city is empty. No one comes up the roads to Jerusalem for the feasts of God anymore. Her gates are torn down. Her priests groan and her maidens grieve. The people are in bitter anguish. One of the consequences of Jerusalem's fall was that the pilgrims who had flocked to the city at the times of Israel's feasts no longer came. The excitement of Passover, Pentecost and Succoth or Tabernacles was gone. The temple was silent.

This is part of what grief does to us. What we used to do now stops because of what has happened. Eventually the second temple was built but it was never the same as Solomon's temple. The crowds were smaller and it was not until Herod's remodel of the second temple in Jesus' day that the massive crowds from all over the world swelled Jerusalem on the feast days. For us Christmas still comes every year but it is different because of the loss we have suffered. When we experience that initial loss we wonder whether anything of our past lives will return at all. Will it ever be like it once was? The answer is, no. It will never be the same. It will be different. That does not mean it will be horrible but it will be different.

Judah's enemies have now become her masters, especially the Babylonians. It is the Lord who has done this because of the people's sin. Judah went into exile and for most of the people who were taken to Babylon they would never again set foot in Jerusalem. Their lives were irrevocably changed.

Grief permanently changes relationships. Things are never as they once were. Relationships will never return to how they used to be. Part of grieving is realizing that the past we once knew can never be recovered. It is changed and a new reality has taken its place. I may not like this new reality but it is the way things are and I cannot ignore it.

For the Jews, they had to come to terms with their own sin and how it had contributed to the fall of Jerusalem. When someone dies it is usually not our fault yet we also are forced to deal with our sins against that person. We may have hurt them and have no opportunity to make amends for our hurt. They are gone and we cannot ask for forgiveness. We must come to terms with the fact that we hurt them. We sinned. We are not perfect and neither was our relationship with the person we loved and have now lost. This process of remembering our sins against someone is painful and full of regret.

1:6-7 - All the splendor of Jerusalem and its nobles, the king and his court are gone. Like deer that can find no pasture they have run away or been killed. Those people looked up to as strong and as the leaders are now weak.

It was more comforting to remember the glory days of old and how things used to be when the people were happy and Jerusalem flourished. Now when they confront the reality of their existence the Jews are broken and beaten down. They are now alone and feel abandon by God and all her allies. The truth is their allies were no true friends. Only the Lord could have delivered them but they were the ones who abandoned him. Now their enemies laugh at them and their plight. All their pride has been stripped and they are humiliated.

Grief strips us of who we used to be. We often take our identity from our relationship with our loved one whom we have lost. Now we are not that person anymore. We are left questioning ourselves and our identity. Who are we now? We feel abandoned and weak; we feel vulnerable. It is a very uncomfortable feeling. That relationship which gave us meaning, purpose and identity has been stripped from us. We are forced to re-define ourselves. There is one relationship however, that remains constant - Jesus Christ. Our identity is found in him.

1:8-9 - Jerusalem's sin was exposed for all the nations around her to see. The Lord did this. She thought she could continue to live as she had and there would be no consequences. She thought she could come to the temple and worship the Lord and live as she pleased, worshipping other gods and divorcing her worship from obeying God's Law. God finally had enough and would no longer allow her to separate her worship from her behavior. Our sins are always exposed and found out because the Lord loves us too much to allow us to go on living in them. When we are mired in our sin we do not think of the future but only of the momentary pleasure we receive from sinning. Sin makes us selfish fools!

Repentance always is accompanied by grief. We are sorry for our sins. We must acknowledge we have sinned and see ourselves for what we are; sinners. We must accept and own the "filth" that clings to us and realize only God can save us. We must acknowledge that we were not thinking of the Lord when we sinned, or of others. We were only thinking of ourselves and our own selfish pleasures. At some point in that process of grief and repentance we come to the place where we realize God did us a favor by exposing our sin and not allowing us to hide it anymore.

In the midst of the grief of loss we come to a place of introspection and evaluation. We must come to terms with the sin we committed against the one we loved and have lost. For some it is in the loss that they are given sight for the first time as to the severity of their sin towards the one they loved and is now gone. The pain of the revelation of our sin and the shock of it makes it difficult however to come to the place of thanking God for the loss so that our sin could be exposed. Grief is difficult!

In GriefShare, the videos restate many times: "*It's not a grief problem but a sin problem.*" Not that we are being punished for sin, as the Jews were in *Lamentations*, but we realize that grief exposes our true selves and the sin that we have. What comes out during grief lays out what's in our hearts.

1:10-11 - The people of Jerusalem had seen the Babylonians and their allies come into the temple itself where all foreigners were forbidden. They desecrated the sanctuary. The people were probably waiting for God to strike them dead and when it didn't happen were confused and also filled with despair. God had left them to their enemies!

The aftermath of the destruction of the city was famine and want. The siege had destroyed the farmlands around the city. The food had long since run out. People were giving their treasures in exchange for enough food to survive. The Lord had punished them and they were despised by all the nations around them. They were to be God's witnesses in the world to the nations to show them that Yahweh alone was God. Now the nations are witnesses to Judah's defeat and sin. They are not a shining people but a despised one.

Sometimes the loss of a loved one creates an economic crisis in a family. Income is lost and if there was no financial plan or insurance people are forced to give up sometimes treasured possessions just to put food on the table.

1:12 - This is one of the great statements of grief in all of *Lamentations*. The author is asking all those who pass by and see the smoking ruin of Jerusalem if there is any suffering like his suffering and the pain of his people. He knows as well that it is the Lord that has brought all of this upon them for their sin. The author is identifying with his people and confessing their sin vicariously to God as Judah's representative before God just like a priest would. He stands with them in their pain and suffering. He confesses their sins and includes himself in their sin.

From the standpoint of grief it is often the case that we believe the pain we feel over the loss of a loved one is so great we must be the only person to feel this pain. No one else is going through what we are going through. That is a common experience of grief and though the statement isn't factually accurate, there are plenty of people going through very similar pain to ours, yet it describes the emotional reality inside of us. I am the only one who feels this emptiness and loss. Everyone else around me walks around happy. I and I alone, am broken. If there is comfort in the loneliness of grief it is found in sharing our pain with God and sharing it with others who are also going through grief. It doesn't take away the pain but it does help us gain perspective.

1:13-14 - The author writes in the first person as if he is Jerusalem personified. God sent fire down into his very bones. He sapped the strength of the city and robbed it of its ability to defend itself so that her enemies could come in and conquer her. The Lord has left Jerusalem desolate and destroyed.

Her sins God bound into a yoke and put it around her neck. The Lord has burdened Judah and Jerusalem with her sins in such a way that they have sapped her strength and allowed the enemy to capture the city. In essence the Lord allowed Judah to experience the consequences of her own sin. She was deep into intrigue and rebellion with Egypt so God allowed that to play out and incur the punishment of Nebuchadnezzar for rebelling. Her idolatry was so rampant that God stopped listening to her prayers. God allowed her to pray to all her idols that could not help her at all. The king's cowardice and his advisor's foolishness were allowed to prevail in the greatest crisis of their nation. In the end Judah had no one but herself to blame for her plight. The Lord did not allow the Babylonians to conquer her unjustly. She brought it on herself.

1:15-16 - The author recognizes that it is the Lord who has handed Jerusalem over to the Babylonians. He has experienced the trauma of Jerusalem's destruction and Judah's exile firsthand. God had handed over his city to the enemy. *Isaiah* and *Revelation* use the winepress as an image to describe the wrath of God over sin. That is the picture here. *Jeremiah* does not use the word in his prophecy. In the Lord's eyes Judah was like a virgin daughter, young and beautiful. God has crushed her in his wrath over her sin.

The author says that is why he weeps. There is no one to comfort him or restore his spirit. The children of Jerusalem are destitute and abandoned.

One of the almost universal feelings people in grief describe is the feeling of being alone in their grief. This is why family and friends around us at the time of a loss are so important. It is also why one of the hardest times a person has in dealing with their grief is when everyone goes home after the funeral. All the out of town family fly back home and the grieving person is left alone. The author experienced this aloneness because so many had died and so many had been taken into exile when Jerusalem fell. We experience the feeling when everyone else wants to return to life as normal and we are left with the blatant absence of the one we love.

1:17 - The people of Jerusalem reached out for someone to comfort them, someone to help them but there was no one. They were alone in their grief and shame. The author says they perceived that the Lord had turned their neighbors into their foes. Jerusalem had become as an unclean thing among the nations around Judah. They were avoided and shunned.

The author grasped that the Lord had caused Judah and Jerusalem to be seen as unclean and so their neighbors refused to help. This was part of God's judgment against them. For us in

grief God does not cause us to be seen as unclean but often that is how we perceive people are treating us. People are frequently uncomfortable around grieving people because they do not know what to say or the sadness and preoccupation of someone in grief with their own pain leads people to avoid talking with or spending time with someone in grief. The result is a perceived shunning by the grieving person of the people around him or her. It is not God's judgment upon them but a common reaction to grief in those who have not suffered the loss. No one enjoys or wants to go through grief and when we are around someone who is deeply grieving we become uncomfortable. We want to keep our distance. For the grieving person it feels like what happened to Judah. Their neighbors become their foes and no one is there to comfort them.

1:18-19 - The author understands the consequences of his sin and his people's sin. The Lord is righteous but they had rebelled against him. This is the greatest insight about sin in the Hebrew Scriptures; sin is rebellion. They broke the Lord's covenant with them as his people. They rebelled against the Lord and damaged their relationship with their God. God therefore was completely justified in punishing them and holding them accountable for their sins.

The author outlines some of the consequences of Judah's sins against the Lord. The people suffer. The young men and maidens have been taken into exile, stripped away from the land, leaving only the old to work it. Judah called to their allies for help. *Kings* and *Jeremiah* tell us that the kings of Judah especially looked to Egypt for help against Babylon. Egypt, however, was too weak and did nothing to intervene and keep Jerusalem from falling to Nebuchadnezzar. When the people looked to their spiritual leaders, the priests and elders of the people, they proved incapable of providing the leadership and guidance necessary to weather the crisis. They perished along with the many who starved to death during the siege of the city.

One of the most important moments in repenting of our own sin before God is realizing that what we did against him is willful rebellion. We didn't just break a law or rule. We grieved our God, our Lord and Savior. Part of true repentance is recognizing our rebellion and owning up to it, admitting it and realizing that God is fully justified in punishing us. We deserve it. We are the ones who have damaged our relationship with the Lord. He did nothing for he is righteous. It is we who are rebellious. Repentance is more than a factual acknowledgment of our sin before God. It is grieving over the damage we have done to our relationship with the Lord, seeking his forgiveness and casting ourselves upon his mercy. It is coming to the recognition that unless God forgives us we have no hope of reconciling with him. We do not deserve forgiveness but punishment. It is the understanding David came to in *Psalms 51* when he said he had sinned against the Lord only and God was justified in his judgments against him. There is therefore an emotional component to repentance that is very similar to grieving the loss of a loved one.

1:20-21 - The author cries out to the Lord for God to acknowledge the pain of his heart. He is in torment because his heart has been rebellious. He knows his sin and the sin of his people. This has led to his pain. On the outside the Babylonian soldiers slaughter his people with the sword. On the inside there is only death. His heart is cold and sick because of all that has happened. People have heard his groaning but there is no one to comfort him. All his enemies have heard of his distress and they rejoice over what the Lord has done to Jerusalem. The author once again speaks as a representative for his people. All the pronouns are singular as if he was Jerusalem personified. In his grief he lashes out at those who wish him ill. He calls upon God to bring the Day of the Lord, the Day of Judgment, so that all the nations around him that mock him and rejoice over his fall will themselves be judged and experience what he now experiences.

The author repeats themes he has stated earlier in *Lamentations* and then adds new insight. The torment and pain of his heart is related to his understanding of his sin and rebellion. Yet he is still alone in his grief with no one to comfort him. He adds the wish for God's vengeance against those who have hurt him and rejoice at his grief. The author is speaking in the context of the national grief of Judah over the calamity of 586. Yet feeling the desire for revenge against those who have wished us harm is often part of grief. Sometimes we have family members from whom we are estranged or people at work who have opposed us and when they learn of our grief they gloat over us or are pleased that we are hurting. When that occurs we want to lash out. Our own pain causes us to wish them to experience pain as well. We want God to judge them and vindicate us! That was what the author of *Lamentations* was doing and it is what we often want God to do for us as well. Fortunately the author does the right thing with those feelings for vengeance against those who hate us; he expresses them to God. In doing so he leaves the judgment of people to God alone. As Paul says in *Romans 12* vengeance is the Lord's and his alone to execute. We are not to repay anyone evil for evil. By expressing such negative feelings to God and leaving them with him we deal with them and yet do not act upon them or express them to others in inappropriate or damaging ways. The *Psalms* are filled with many examples of the same principle. God is big enough, loving enough and strong enough to hear and receive all the bitterness, hatred, anger, and need for revenge that often comes with grief. In order to deal with those very powerful and negative emotions *Lamentations* shows us we take them to God and leave them there.

1:22 - The author continues to cry out for God to see the wickedness of his enemies and for God to deal with them as he has dealt with him. The Jews were faced with the problem of the justice of God in light of the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile. *Habakkuk* deals directly with this issue. How could a righteous and holy God use such a wicked and pagan nation like Babylon to carry out his judgment against Judah and let Babylon remain on the earth and grow in power? If God held Judah accountable for their sins why did he not also hold Babylon accountable? How could God let the Babylonians get away with all that they had done to God's people, even though Judah was sinful? The answer of the prophets, including *Habakkuk* and *Jeremiah*, was that he would not. History itself would show God's justice; just as he had judged Egypt and Assyria for their sins so the Lord would judge Babylon for hers. The hard part for the Jews was to trust God to carry out his justice while they lived in pain and misery and saw only the Babylonians prospering and getting stronger. It is hard to trust and be patient for God to work when we hurt.

When we are in grief we often have the same kinds of feelings that the author did about people around us who hate us or oppose us. Why are they prospering when we are suffering so badly? Where is God's justice in all of this? Why do we have to suffer the loss of a loved one when we have tried to follow the Lord and yet others who despise the Lord seemingly are free from such pain and suffering? Life seems so unfair to someone in grief. Like the Jews in *Jeremiah's* day it is hard to trust the justice of God when we are hurting. We don't want to be patient. We want to see justice done to the wicked around us. Why did we have to suffer and they do not? There are no simple answers to those questions. The only thing we can do is to day by day trust God and wait patiently for his justice to work itself out. When we are in grief it is easy to lose our eternal perspective because of our pain. We forget God loves even the wicked and does not desire their judgment but desires their salvation. If we had our way then God would judge them immediately and any hope for their eternity would be gone. The truth is grief often

makes us selfish and very self-focused. We need God's help to continue to love others when we grieve.

Chapter 2:

2:1-3 - The author declares what the Lord in his anger has done to Judah and Jerusalem. He has covered Zion with the cloud of his anger, not his glory. The cloud that has descended upon Judah is one of his wrath. He has hurled down the splendor of Israel, his footstool, meaning the temple. The Lord withdrew his pity from his people and all the dwellings of Israel have been destroyed. All the towns and fortress cities of Judah are gone. The Lord has brought down all the princes of Judah and in his fierce anger he has cut off the king. The Lord who rescued Israel from Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm has withdrawn his protection from his people. The enemy has come pouring into Judah and set fire to everything they find.

Lamentations expresses the theological conclusion that the prophets like *Jeremiah* and *Ezekiel* were guiding the people to reach. God was not impotent and weak against the gods of Babylon. The fall of Jerusalem was the Lord's doing because of Judah's sin. The Lord was using the Babylonians to judge his sinful, rebellious people. All the calamity the people were experiencing they had brought upon themselves because they had rebelled against the Lord. It was this conclusion that helped the Jews weather the disaster of 586 and allowed their faith to survive.

One of the essential steps of repentance is to perceive the truth of our sin and understand how the Lord is using difficult times to bring us to repentance and teach us to renew our commitment and love to him. The hard part is the discipline of the Lord often feels like rejection even though it is not. *Hebrews 12* reminds us that the Lord loves those he disciplines.

2:4-5 - The Jews were experiencing God not as their God but as their enemy. They felt his wrath in the attack of the Babylonians. After the fall of Jerusalem the people began to perceive that nothing they could have done to fight Nebuchadnezzar's army would have worked because the Lord was fighting on the side of the Babylonians against them. He was behind their siege. He was the one who caused the walls of Jerusalem to be breached and all the palaces and strongholds of the city to be destroyed. He was the one who brought mourning and grief to Judah.

The Jews had a choice. They could own their sin, confess it and repent because they understood God had judged them justly for their rebellion. Or, they could believe God had rejected them utterly as his people and was now their enemy which would have led them to abandon God completely and follow the idols of the nations. In their rebellion and sin they had been worshipping idols. It was the destruction of Jerusalem, the exile and the ministry of the prophets like *Jeremiah* and *Ezekiel* that brought them back to God. The Jews survived with their faith intact. That is perhaps the greatest miracle that came out of the exile.

God disciplines us to restore us. When we repent we come back to him and renew our faith and commitment to him. Our relationship is restored. That is the purpose of his discipline which for us today is often the Lord allowing us to experience the consequences of our own sinful choices and actions. Discipline is painful to experience as Judah knew. But the alternative is to be cut off from God all together and be completely out of fellowship with him. God dealt with our sin by putting all the punishment we deserved upon Jesus on the cross. The discipline of the Lord we experience now is not God's just punishment for our sins but his discipline designed to correct us, bring us to repentance and bring us back to him.

2:6-7 - The author continues to describe the events of 586 and the destruction of the temple of the Lord by the Babylonians. One can hear behind his words the shock and disbelief that God would allow his temple to be burned to the ground. The official theology of the king's court and the priests in the temple declared that because the temple was the footstool of God's throne on earth that the Lord would always preserve it and protect it and never allow any harm to befall it. When that theology proved false because it ignored God's covenant one can hear the Jews trying to understand how such a thing could even be possible. The Lord had laid waste his garden. He had destroyed his place of meeting. He had made Jerusalem forget the Lord's feasts and his anger had spurned both king and priest. The Lord had rejected his altar and abandoned his sanctuary. He had handed over the king's palace to their enemies. They have raised a shout against the Lord's temple as loud as one of the great shouts of the congregation on a feast day. This should not have happened. How could this be? The reality of the Lord's judgment against them and against his city and temple was almost more than their minds could even grasp. Their official theology had no frame of reference within which to fit the events of July and August 586. See *2 Kings 25* and *Jeremiah 52* for a description of the destruction of Jerusalem.

God allowed the Babylonians to destroy the temple and Jerusalem because he was judging the people for their rebellion and sin. Tragedy and disaster often strike us too, but not always because we are being disciplined by the Lord. When someone undeservedly dies of cancer we struggle to make sense of it all because it is not fair. We know God and his character and we cannot always fit events to match our understanding of God as we know him. Grief often presents a crisis of faith to us just like it did to Judah. Questions about God's justice, fairness, mercy and goodness often accompany grief. Sometimes when people cannot find satisfactory answers to their questions, they abandon their faith in God or are so angry at him that they move far away from him. In the end the issues that grief presents to us are some of the most difficult and profound in human existence. As people go through grief and process those questions rarely will their personal faith be unaffected. They will either move away from God because of confusion, anger and hurt and the inability to gain any kind of satisfactory answers to their questions, or their faith will deepen because their grief will lead them to new insights about God and who he is and how he works in the world despite the tragedies of life.

God sent prophets to the Jews like *Jeremiah*, *Ezekiel* and *Habakkuk* in order to help them process those difficult questions and gain insight into their own sin, God's justice and his continued love for them despite the tragedy of 586. We have their writings in the Scriptures in order to help us process similar questions even when those questions come from situations we did not deserve.

2:8-10 - The author says God was determined to tear down the walls of Jerusalem and destroy the city. He stretched out a measuring line or a plumb line against it. In *2 Kings 21:13* it says God will measure Jerusalem with the same plumb line with which he measured Samaria and Israel. God's moral standards do not change. The plumb line is the covenant God made with Judah and which she broke. The image of the plumb line occurs in *Isaiah*, *Amos* and *Zechariah*. The measuring line or rod is an image that also occurs frequently in the prophets, especially *Isaiah*, *Ezekiel* and *Zechariah*. *Jeremiah* uses it in *31:39* to describe the restoration of Jerusalem and Judah. *Ezekiel* uses the image in his description of the ideal temple in the Kingdom of God. John in *Revelation* uses the image to describe the measuring of the temple of God, which could be God's people in the Great Tribulation, and the measuring of the New Jerusalem in the

Kingdom of God. The image has to do with God's covenant with his people, his righteousness and holiness and his Kingdom purposes in the world.

Jerusalem and Judah have been measured and found wanting. That is why the Lord allowed them to be destroyed. Her walls have been torn down, her gates burned and her kings, priests and prophets taken into exile. The author says the Law is no more, meaning the priests no longer teach it in the temple and the prophets no longer find visions from the Lord. He is probably speaking about the court prophets who supported the official theology. They no longer find any message from God. The true prophets like *Jeremiah* and *Ezekiel* continued to speak the Word of God to their people. The leaders and elders of the people no longer sit in the city gates and govern the city, dispensing justice and wisdom. Now they sit in the dust, dressed in sackcloth, mourning and grieving the tragedy that has overtaken them. The young women have also bowed their heads to the ground.

Everything they had that they used to define who they were as a people and to define their country was stripped from them. They had been measured and found wanting. In their grief they began to question who they were and who God was because of what had happened. The loss of a loved one or a great tragedy in our own lives often produces the same crisis of identity. Who are we? What is the meaning of my life now? How can I go on? Does God still care and who is he? We may be innocent of any sin that caused our grief but the questions our loss raises are very similar. In some senses they may be more difficult because our grief is undeserved, unlike the Jews who had rebelled against God and his covenant. Yet in the end we too are sinners. We too rebel against God because of our sin. God does not owe us anything. If he treated us as we deserved according to our deeds and morality we would deserve hell. We have received grace and forgiveness. In the midst of grief we often have difficulty keeping that perspective.

2:11-12 - The author describes some of the horrific conditions that led to his grief over Jerusalem. The children of the city are starving to death. They faint in their mother's arms and cry, begging for food to eat when there was none. They are dying. At the last of the siege before the Babylonians breached the walls there was great famine in the city and many were starving to death. In fact *Lamentations 2:20* implies that people even resorted to cannibalism in order to survive. When we suffer such extreme conditions it often leads to the worst kind of grief and emotional pain. The author talks about grief so great he has no more tears to cry and his heart has been poured out on the ground. There is no more helpless feeling than to watch your children die of hunger and not be able to do anything about it.

It is no wonder the Jews struggled with the justice of God during their exile. It is one thing as an adult to understand one's own sin and rebellion and know that God was justified in his punishment and discipline. It is another to try and understand why innocent children have to suffer for their parent's sin. How is that just? How is that fair? Clearly the starving children of Jerusalem were caught up in their parent's sin and God's punishment of it. That is one of the horrible consequences of our sin. There is always collateral damage and often innocent people are hurt in ways we never intended and must also bear the consequences of our sin even when they are innocent. It is issues like this that cause us in our grief to question God and his goodness. Grief often leads to a crisis of faith. It did with *Job* until he understood that God did not owe him an explanation for his actions. The theologically correct answer that none of us deserve God's grace and mercy because all have sinned does not satisfy a mother who has had to bury her child or a helpless father who can do nothing but watch his family die of hunger. The questions that arise from those kinds of experiences are deep ones that do not have easy answers.

The amazing thing is the Bible does not ignore them or avoid them. *Lamentations* raises them in order to wrestle with God and come out on the other side of grief whole and renewed. Many do not want to go through that process because it is difficult and painful. We try and avoid grief and unfortunately only make matters worse because grief cannot be avoided. We will grieve in some way, shape or form even if we try and deny the feelings and experience. It is like Whitworth University professor Jerry Sitzer's dream of the dark cloud pursuing him towards the sunset. The only way to reach the dawn is to face the darkness and go through it. Only then can we emerge into the light again.

2:13-14 - The author is at a loss for words in order to comfort the people of his city. There is no one to compare them to and no one to give them comfort. The wound of the people of Jerusalem is as deep as the sea and who can heal them? In the next chapter the author will finally look to God but he only raises the question here. For the deepest hurt and grief in life only God is strong enough and merciful enough to provide us with healing. There is no other option. In the cross of Jesus God gathered all the grief and pain that sin had caused in the human race and killed it. The Bible ends with the great promise that in the Kingdom of God he will wipe away all our tears and sorrow and grief will be no more.

In the midst of grief it is often common to feel that no one understands what we are going through and the pain we feel is so great that we cannot imagine we will ever be healed from it. It is extremely difficult in the midst of grief to grasp that grief is only a temporary condition. It does not last forever if we can deal with it and go through it. It seems at the time that we will always feel this way and there is no end in sight. That is why we need God's help and the help of others around us to maintain some balance and perspective. If we are alone in our grief it will seem that our wound is as deep as the sea and there is no hope for a cure.

The author recognizes and indicts the court prophets for their false prophecies based on the official theology. In the end their messages from the Lord were worthless because they did not speak the truth. They did not tell the people of their sin and lead them to repentance. They only gave false and misleading messages from the Lord, saying what everyone wanted to hear rather than what they needed to hear.

Today we need to read and listen to God's Word in the Scriptures because it will give us a complete perspective on our grief and not just tell us what we want to hear. God knows our needs and he knows where we are weakest. It is why he gave us books such as *Lamentations* in order to deal with one of the most difficult experiences in life: grief.

2:15-16 - The author in vv.13-16 shifts to a second person perspective rather than first person, when he was speaking as if he was Jerusalem itself. He says all who pass by "you" scoff and shake their heads at the Daughter of Jerusalem. He asks if this is the city that was called the perfection of beauty and the joy of the whole earth. That is very similar to a line in *Psalms* 48:2 which speaks of Jerusalem. It says: "*It is beautiful in its loftiness, the joy of the whole earth.*" The reference to the beauty of Jerusalem and being the joy of the whole earth is probably to Solomon's temple. All the enemies of Judah scoff at Jerusalem and proclaim how they have waited for this day to see Jerusalem fall.

This passage is especially related to Jerusalem and its enemies which included Babylon but also the Edomites and other peoples around Judah who wanted to see Jerusalem's destruction. It is difficult to relate it specifically to the grief we experience when we lose a loved one. Most of

us do not have people who so strongly hate us they want to see us brought down and rejoice when we are in grief. That does happen to people today but it is rare.

2:17 - The author declares what the people were coming to understand. The Lord has done this to Jerusalem. He decreed it through his prophets and he has fulfilled his Word. Many prophets from *Amos* and *Hosea* onward prophesied that if Judah and Jerusalem would not repent God would judge them. *Amos* prophesied in the middle 700's. This is now 586 or after. For a century and a half God had told his people to repent or else he would destroy them. They did not listen so he sent the Babylonians to carry out his Word. The Lord has done this without pity and has let the enemy gloat over Judah. He has exalted the strength or the horn of their enemies.

The Jews experienced the wrath of God over their sin. It is a chilling thing when God turns away from us and we only experience his holiness and wrath against sin. The Lord's righteousness must be satisfied because he cannot let sin go unpunished. It is not his first desire but it is consistent with his character. The Lord's holiness is terrifying when it is not tempered with his love. It is at the cross of Jesus that the holiness and righteousness of God intersect with his love for the sinner. Praise God we can know Jesus and his forgiveness because otherwise we would have to face the Lord's wrath on our own. Judah did and it destroyed them.

When our own sin causes us to suffer and others around us to suffer we experience what the Jews did. We grieve because the Lord has not allowed us to continue sinning with impunity. He has put a stop to our sinning by allowing us to suffer the consequences of our sinful choices and actions. He has brought our sin out into the light and exposed it and us for what we are. That is painful and causes us grief. We need to understand that the Lord disciplines us not only because he is holy and will not tolerate sin in us but also because he loves us and wants to see us free from sin and its consequences. He disciplines us to restore us not to punish us. This side of the cross we experience the Lord's discipline for our sin and not his punishment and wrath as Judah did. Even so, discipline is a painful and grief-filled process.

2:18-19 - The Jews cry out to the Lord. They weep day and night before him pouring out their grief over the Lord's punishment of their sin and Jerusalem's destruction. They cry so much they cannot stop. The author calls the people to cry out to the Lord even in the watches of the night. Pour out your heart like water to him. Lift up your hands to the Lord in prayer for the sake of your children who are dying from hunger in the streets.

It is difficult to tell if the reference to the children fainting with hunger in the streets is looking back to the last stages of the siege of Jerusalem or is describing the current state of people in the city after the Babylonians had burned it to the ground. Both are possible. There is no way to tell how long any of the citizens of Jerusalem stayed in the city after its destruction. After Nebuzaradan, the captain of Nebuchadnezzar's guard, burned the temple and the city in August of 586 he took another group into exile and the only people who were left in the city were the poor. Some fled to Gedaliah, the governor appointed by the Babylonians, in Mizpah. Perhaps some tried to stay in the city yet its walls were destroyed and it was no longer secure. When such a disaster and tragedy strikes, people often are paralyzed and don't know what to do. The situation is so overwhelming they are incapable of doing anything to respond. They are in shock. It is possible that this is what the author is describing in the aftermath of Jerusalem's fall.

Grief often overwhelms us and paralyzes us, especially when it comes to us unexpectedly. We are in shock. A long terminal illness produces grief but the loss is at least anticipated and in some ways we begin grieving before our loved one dies. A sudden death like a

heart attack or a car accident that takes the person we love without any preparation creates an abrupt jolt for which we are totally unprepared. Regardless of the circumstances of our loved one's death grief produces feelings and behaviors in us we can't control. We are in shock and are overcome with weeping and tears. It seems all we can do is cry and there is no end to it. We are paralyzed and even the normal activities of the day become more than we can handle.

2:20-22 - The author asks whom the Lord has ever treated like he has treated Jerusalem. He states some horrific conditions in support of his question. Women have been forced to eat their dead children in order to survive. *Lamentations* has the only references to cannibalism in the Old Testament books that deal with the fall of Jerusalem. If it is accurate then the suffering in the city must have been beyond bearing. He notes that priest and prophet were slain in the temple itself. If one believed in the official theology and was deceived by it then one would have fled to the Lord's temple because he would protect it and you would be safe. When the Babylonian soldiers slew priest and prophet and sacked the temple the last vestiges of the official theology collapsed. God had abandoned them. It would have been very easy to lose all hope. The author notes young and old lie dead in the streets with no one to bury them. The Babylonians did what many ancient armies did when the walls were breached at the end of a long siege. They poured into the city killing everyone in sight. It was a slaughter. Many young people died in the sack of Jerusalem. The author notes it was the Lord's doing and he did it without pity. In times of peace God would summon the people to the temple on the high feast days of the Lord. Now in his anger the Lord has summoned terror to Jerusalem. Instead of pilgrims pouring into the city in celebration, the Babylonian soldiers poured into the city in blood lust. The author says in the day of the Lord's anger no one escaped or survived. All those he cared about, including perhaps his children, the enemy has killed. Between exile and slaughter Judah was destroyed. The Jews as a people were severely damaged. Their population must have shrunk considerably though there is no way to know accurate numbers. It is clear from all the Biblical accounts however that far more were slain than taken into exile. It is also clear that those who were taken to Babylon with King Jehoiachin in 597 were the fortunate ones. They were spared the destruction of the city and the slaughter of the people.

Underlying these verses is the question of whether God was fair in his judgment against Judah and Jerusalem. The author asks the Lord if he has ever treated any people this way. What makes it more difficult is that the Jews were his people! How could God have allowed this to happen? He has already stated they have rebelled and sinned against the Lord but the issue he raises here is whether their sins justified the Lord's punishment. In grief, especially after a sudden or tragic loss, we often raise the issue of the fairness of God. We are trying to make sense out of what happened and have no clear answers. We ask God why and often hear only silence. Our grief in the midst of loss and tragedy leads us to question what we know of God's character. We have difficulty reconciling what we have experienced of God with what we are experiencing in grief after such a devastating loss. Is God fair? Is he truly good? Does he still love me and can I trust him? Will he be there to see me through this? All of those questions are legitimate to ask, even if the answers are not readily apparent. It is very difficult in the midst of terrible grief to see the larger picture of things and not let our experience of grief be the standard by which we understand God rather than his Word. We easily forget that almost all the great heroes and heroines of the Bible went through great trials and grief, including Jesus. Just because we know God and have a relationship with him does not mean we are somehow exempt from the worst tragedies of life and the grief that goes with them. That is small comfort in the midst of the pain

but it is still the truth. The key is to know that God is still God and his character does not change. We can count on his presence in our grief even when we cannot perceive it or directly feel it. He is still there. That is the issue with which the author of *Lamentations* was struggling.

Chapter 3:

3:1-9 - Chapter 3 of *Lamentations* is an acrostic poem in form just like the first two chapters. The verses in each stanza begin with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the verses within each stanza begin with the same letter.

The author laments about his life and how he perceives the Lord has treated him. It is possible that he is personifying Jerusalem here as he did in the earlier chapters but it appears he is speaking in the first person as himself. He has experienced the Lord's rod, his wrath. He has been driven away into the darkness and not the light. God has turned his hand against him again and again. His flesh has grown old and his bones have been broken. The Lord has surrounded him with hardship and bitterness and has made him live in darkness like the dead. He has not been able to escape that darkness and it is as if the Lord has walled him in. He is weighted down with chains and even when he cries out for help from God he shuts out his prayer. The Lord has barred his way with blocks of stone and he cannot get through.

Often in grief we perceive God as against us and not for us. Like the author a common occurrence is the perception that we are shut off from God and our prayers are not getting through. We cry out to him but nothing happens. There is no sense of God's presence with us. We feel alone, isolated and cut off. C.S. Lewis commented in *A Grief Observed* that when he went to God in prayer all he heard was the sound of doors being bolted and double bolted, and then nothing. He even began to question whether God was there at all. He had seemed so once and yet deep in his grief over his wife Joy's death this man who had a tremendous faith could not sense God.

3:10-15 - He continues to describe his experience with God in the midst of his grief over the fall of Jerusalem. The Lord to him is like a bear or a lion waiting to drag off its prey and kill it. He feels as if the Lord has mangled him and left him without help. He has been the target of the Lord's arrows and his heart has been pierced. People laugh at him; even his own people and they mock him all day long. The Lord has filled his heart with bitter herbs, like the bitter herbs the Israelites ate at Passover to remind them of their bitter slavery in Egypt.

The author's description of himself and how he has been treated both by God and by his own people sounds a lot like Jeremiah's laments in his prophecy. This is one of those places in *Lamentations* where there are striking similarities to the *Book of Jeremiah*.

Like vv.1-9 these verses continue the author's description of his isolation and pain in his grief. The experience of grief can leave people feeling as if they have been attacked and mangled, especially after a sudden and devastating tragedy.

3:16-18 - He feels as if all his teeth have been broken and he has been trampled in the dust. The Lord has deprived him of peace, Hebrew *shalom*, and he has forgotten what prosperity is. The days of blessing seem like a distant memory to him and his soul is broken and not whole. He exclaims that his splendor is gone; meaning his relationship with God feels broken and all that he had hoped for from the Lord is gone as well.

God seems totally distant and opposed to him rather than his friend and protector. Grief can often produce these feelings of distance between us and God. It is hard for us to imagine

when we are in the pain and sadness of grieving someone we love that God is close to us and we feel his comforting presence. The sadness and ache make us feel as if he is far away. In fact it often makes us feel as if God has abandoned us all together. What we once had is lost and it feels as if we will never again have that sense of closeness with God we once had. Our feelings of grief and sadness overwhelm our faith's ability to know God's presence with us. It was happening to the author and it can happen to us as well.

3:19-21 - When he thinks about what has happened he is downcast. All the suffering that has happened to him and his people through the fall of Jerusalem fills him with bitterness and it depresses him. "*Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope.*" With those words *Lamentations* changes from simply a book of depressing expressions of grief to a book that can help us in our grief and restore us to wholeness again. The author makes a conscious decision to think about the Lord, who he is and what he has done. In the next few verses he will recall to mind the Lord's character and not focus just on his circumstances. Up until this point he has dealt with his grief by expressing it, often in graphic terms. He has expressed his questions about God and his sense of God's absence in his life. Now he will turn to the revealed character of God. At some point in our grieving process in order to begin to heal we have to take our eyes off of our pain and loss and focus upon God and who he is. At first the author's feelings have overridden his faith. This is the point where he chooses to let his faith override his feelings. It is an essential step in the process of healing from our grief because the feelings of grief are so strong that we feel as if they will never get better. We will always feel this profound sadness and sense of loss. When in faith we turn to God and focus on his character we begin to understand that our grief is not a permanent reality. When we take that step hope begins to grow in us. His circumstances had not changed but his view of them began to change when he focused on God. The same can be true for us.

3:22-24 - He understands that the Lord still loves his people. He still keeps his covenant of steadfast love with them. That is the reason the Jews were not wiped out as a people. They could have been, but a remnant has survived and still lives. The author sees all the tragedy in a new light. God still has compassion on him and his people. Great is your faithfulness. That line became the title of a classic old hymn. God's faithfulness is new every morning. Every day if you open your eyes you can see little things that speak of God's mercy and love to us. God still loves us! The author tells himself that the Lord is his portion, the Lord is his inheritance and therefore he will wait on him. The tragedy is almost more than he can bear. Yet it is his relationship with the Lord that triumphs in the end. It is his decision to hope in God and see his mercies every day that will finally help him emerge from his sadness and grief. The word for wait can also be used for hope. The two concepts are related. We wait in expectancy for God to act and save us because of who he is and his promises to us. That describes hope and it is the attitude the author takes when he says he will wait for the Lord.

The author's decision to hope in the Lord and wait upon him was a conscious choice on his part to let his faith lead him rather than his grief. I have often said faith is acting as if the promises of God are true. These verses in *Lamentations* illustrate that understanding of faith. One makes a faith decision to act on God's character and his promises despite one's grief. Yet the decision is not based on wishful thinking but on God's revealed character and his daily demonstrations of his love for us. The author's hope is grounded in his experience with God. He has reached a point where he no longer will allow his grief to dictate to his faith. Now his faith

speaks to his grief. This is a turning point that is crucial. In the rest of *Lamentations* he will go back to expressing his pain and sadness yet here in the middle of the book there is one of the greatest statements of hope and faith in all the Scriptures. It is what makes it so powerful and it points us to the way out of our grief. When we can focus on God and hope in him our grief can turn. We can open our eyes to even the little signs of God's love and mercy each day. That process begins to restore our souls and heal the pain we feel. In the end, it is our relationship with God that changes our perspective on our loss. C.S. Lewis came to a similar insight in *A Grief Observed*. He uses the example of a man who thinks he has been shut up in a basement away from everything. He hears a noise and realizes that he is actually in the open air and has been all the time. His circumstances hadn't changed. He was still in the dark, but now his perspective was radically different. Faith and hope in God can transform our grief.

3:25-30 - The author affirms that the Lord is good to those who hope in him. This is the same Hebrew word he has been using from 3:21 onward and it can mean both to wait and to hope. God is good to those who seek him. He follows that affirmation with it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is young. He wants to affirm God's goodness and the hope that we have in him but he also realizes that often life is difficult and hope leads us to wait quietly for the Lord to act. We trust he will act on our behalf even when we are suffering. The image of the yoke is one of suffering and oppression. The survivors of Jerusalem, many of whom were taken into exile to Babylon, were under the yoke. Figuratively we could say the yoke is any suffering we experience. We need to bear up under that yoke as we wait for the Lord to act.

Part of what makes grief so difficult to deal with is that it keeps going on and on and, at times, seems like it will never end. We want it to be over quickly. But grief takes what it takes, and sometimes it takes a long time. When the sadness and fog of grief continue for months and months we find it hard not only to wait for the goodness of God but to keep believing that God is good. It is hard to hope when we grieve.

The author invites the one who is under the yoke of suffering to sit alone in silence and accept the suffering because the Lord has brought it upon them. He counsels his people to embrace their grief and shame. Accept their captivity and the Babylonians as their overseers. Offer them one's cheek to strike and accept their disgrace. The author describes a humble attitude toward their oppressors rather than fighting back.

We want to deny our grief or feel it intensely at a funeral and then be done with it. We don't want to embrace months and months of sadness and listlessness. We don't want to let grief overwhelm us and be in control of our lives we want to be in control. *Lamentations* counsels us to humble ourselves in our grief. Accept it, in fact embrace it because God has placed us in this situation and the pathway back to hope is not to resist grief but to go with it. When we submit ourselves to the sadness and the pain of the loss and allow ourselves to feel these things and let them affect us, it is then we begin to discover again the goodness of God. Hope is reborn. It seems totally counter-intuitive but that is the counsel *Lamentations* gives us.

3:31-33 - The author states a profound fact about grief. It is not permanent. Though the Lord brings grief he will show compassion because of his unfailing love. He does not willingly bring affliction to people. His first choice is always to show his love and mercy. Given the context of *Lamentations* this is a great statement of faith from the author. Yes, God had allowed Jerusalem to be destroyed and the Jews are experiencing intense grief and suffering. But God has not

forgotten them. He still loves them and will show his love to them. The truth was, within a generation the exiles would return home and Cyrus and the Persian kings would allow the Jews to even rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.

Often people in grief believe they will always feel the sadness, emptiness and loneliness of grief. It will be a permanent reality for the rest of their lives. The facts are the opposite. The intense feelings of grief are only temporary. Given time they will pass as people work through their grief and process their loss. The loss will always be there and nothing can bring back the person we loved. Yet the pain of grief will subside, especially the sadness that seems to be there day after day. There will come times when we feel the loss more acutely but the duration of that sadness will lessen. We will rediscover the mercy and compassion of God again. Loss and grief tend to lead us to believe God has abandoned us and he no longer loves us. As we process our grief and work through it we discover those feelings of distance from God are not reality. Our faith has been clouded and limited by our grief. God has been there all along we simply could not sense him in our pain. He still loves us and has always loved us. It is his nature and character.

3:34-36 - The author shifts focus from God's compassion to his justice. Part of the struggle the Jews had with Jerusalem's fall and the exile was the question of God's justice and essential fairness. Did he still love them was the question he raises in 3:22-24. Here in 3:34-36 he raises the question of is God truly just and fair. He names three things and asks if the Lord does not still see these things occurring. When prisoners are crushed underfoot, meaning oppressed and treated harshly, does not God see this and respond to it? When someone's rights are denied before the Lord is not God angry because of this? When someone is deprived of justice does not God come to that person's aid? These things were happening to the Jews and the author is declaring that God is still just and righteous and he will respond to their unjust treatment.

What does he mean by "*deny a man his rights before the Most High*", or deprive someone of justice? One has the right from God to righteous, fair and moral treatment according to the Law of God and his Word in the Scriptures. All people have these rights because it is God who made us and he is just and righteous. It is this fundamental concept that guided Thomas Jefferson when he wrote the words of the Declaration of Independence. "*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal and they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these rights are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.*" Jefferson understood that fundamental human rights do not come from governments or kings. They come from God because God created us and gave us these rights before him and before all other human beings. Therefore all governments, including the most powerful like the Babylonians, are responsible and accountable to God when they deprive any person of these God-given rights. The author is trying to help his people understand that though the Babylonians have conquered the Jews and they have treated them harshly and brutally God will hold the Babylonians accountable for their behavior. History itself will show the judgment of God and they will be held to account for their actions. In other words God will not let them get away with their treatment of the Jews.

The issue of God's fairness and justice is one we often confront in grief. Those questions are especially acute when the death of a loved one is a sudden tragedy like a car accident caused by a drunk driver or when someone young dies of cancer. If God is fair and just how could he have let this happen? *Lamentations* tells us that God is still fair. The Lord does see the injustice of the world and will respond. Like the Jews we may go through a time of suffering and bearing injustice. Our timetable for when God should right the wrongs we have suffered is often not

God's timing. We need to affirm however, that God will bring all people to account, either in this life or in the final judgment. God has also acted in history on the cross of Jesus Christ to judge human sin once and for all and punish it through the death of his Son. The cross paints the larger picture of God's justice and fairness when dealing with human sin. That larger picture is not a great comfort however when we are dealing with the immediate aftermath of the loss of a loved one to a tragic and unfair death. The larger perspective of the cross is a theologically accurate answer but it is often not an emotionally satisfying one to someone in grief.

3:37-39 - The author continues to ponder the issue of God's fairness and justice. He speaks about prophecy, predicting something and then having it happen as predicted. This is the Lord's doing. No one else is capable of that. Then he states that calamity and good things both come from the mouth of the God. One could take this to mean that both good and evil come from God, which the rest of Scripture makes clear, is not true. That would be a view that is prevalent in the earlier books of the Old Testament when there is not a developed view of spiritual evil as in the New Testament. It is also possible given the context and the statement about prophecy that the author is saying that God through his prophets has predicted both blessing and judgment. This is the more likely viewpoint. He concludes the stanza by asking why anyone therefore should complain when God punishes them for their sins. God had warned the Jews through his prophets like *Jeremiah* that if they did not repent he would punish them. They failed to listen to the warnings, refused to repent and so God destroyed their temple and sent them into exile just as he had warned them he would. In Judah's case the calamity of 586 was God's punishment for their sins. The cross is God's gracious way of punishing human sin by sacrificing his Son rather than making every human being bear the cost of their own sins. All the punishment we deserved for our sins was placed on Jesus on the cross. If something bad or destructive happens to people now on this side of the cross it is not punishment for their sin because that has already taken place through Jesus' death for us. God disciplines those he loves, allowing consequences to occur that flow from our sinful choices in order to correct us and bring us to repentance. Bad things that happen to people like getting breast cancer are not God punishing us for sin. They are the unfortunate consequences of living in a fallen world where sin and death still reign. This is an important distinction to make when dealing with tragedies and grief because often people believe falsely that God is punishing them for some sin. That is not the case.

In grief it is always good when we suffer a loss to examine our own lives and ask if there is any sin in our lives that God has disciplined us about. Did we ignore his warnings and now we are suffering the consequences of our own actions? Is our grief the result of our own sin? That is a very difficult conclusion to reach but when it is true then it is the truth that will help heal us. Until we face our sin and responsibility in a situation we continue in denial and our guilt, shame and grief will continue to overwhelm us. This only applies when the loss is related to our sinful actions. When the loss of a loved one had nothing to do with God's discipline then this principle does not apply.

3:40-41 - The author follows his conclusion about God punishing us for our sins with a call to examine our ways and repent by returning to the Lord. Confession of sin becomes an essential step in repentance. We acknowledge we have sinned. In classic Hebrew thought the author describes sin as rebellion against God as Creator and Lord. Our sin might have caused harm to some other person and it is good to ask for forgiveness from the one we harmed. But like David in *Psalms 51* the author implores us to lift up our hands to heaven and confess our sins to God.

Even sinful acts done to another human being are ultimately done to God. Through prayer and confession we gain healing and forgiveness from the Lord and our relationship with him is restored. God does not turn away a repentant heart.

When we are dealing with the loss of someone that was close to us we need to examine our behavior toward that person and see if there are things we need to confess to God. The difficulty in realizing our actions and attitudes have hurt someone who is now gone is that we can no longer ask forgiveness from that person. They are dead and beyond our ability to communicate with them. Fortunately God provides an alternative for us. We can confess those harmful actions to him and receive his forgiveness. When there is no possibility for repentance and reconciliation with a dying person God steps in and becomes the one through whom absolution and forgiveness comes to us. Ultimately all our sins are against him anyway. Confession and repentance are essential steps in dealing with our grief so that guilt and remorse over past actions, attitudes and harsh words can be dealt with and released.

3:43-48 - The author shifts focus again to God's wrath against Judah for her sins and his punishment of them. This returns to the theme of chapter 2. God has clothed himself in wrath and not compassion. He has pursued the Jews without pity. He has covered himself with a thick cloud so that no prayer can get through. The metaphor of the cloud gives us an insight into prayer. Sin hinders our prayers. When we are far from God and our relationship with him is strained we need to come to him in repentance and confession. When we do he will hear us. But when we refuse to confront our sin and act as if there is nothing wrong then our sin puts distance between us and God and our communication with him is cut off. In order to restore our fellowship and relationship with him we need to confess our sins. That is why confession is always a critical part of prayer.

The author says God has made the Jews the scum and refuse of the world. Paul describes the apostles as the scum and refuse of the world in *1 Corinthians 4:13*. That could mean that the world will continually cause Christ followers grief and pain because the world hates us as it hated Jesus. As Christians we should expect to be acquainted with grief just as Jesus was. See *Isaiah 53:3-4*.

He continues to describe the ridicule, suffering and destruction that have been visited upon the Jews. Streams of tears flow from his eyes because his people have been destroyed. He has reflected on God's goodness and love and reminded his readers that God will not push them away forever. He will remember them and his covenant with them. But his pain once again overwhelms his faith and he returns to dwelling upon the disaster and his grief. This is a common occurrence in dealing with grief. We have moments of faith and hope and then another wave of sadness and pain overwhelms us. Grief comes and goes in cycles like waves. Tears come for sometimes no apparent reason or we cannot name the cause of why we are suddenly sad and overcome. The perspective of faith and hope that we had just gained seems now lost again in the wave of grief that has overtaken us. That process is reflected here in *Lamentations* by the author.

3:49-51 - The author continues writing about his grief and the tears he sheds for his people and his city. He will continue to cry until the Lord looks down and sees their situation. What he sees brings grief to his soul because of all the women in Jerusalem. Their plight breaks his heart. These verses are related to the ones previous where he speaks of a wave of grief that has overtaken him. He wants God to notice their situation and perhaps do something about it. He is going to weep and cry out to God until he does. In our grief we often wonder whether God

knows what is happening to us. The sadness is so intense and it seems never-ending so we conclude that God does not know or worse that he does not care. Our feelings overwhelm our faith and understanding of God.

3:52-63 - This whole section is a lament over the author's enemies and how they pursued him and tried to harm him. The details sound similar to Jeremiah's situation and it is possible that he wrote this section or someone close to him did who knew his circumstances.

He complains to the Lord about his enemies who have hunted him down to destroy him. They tried to kill him by throwing him into a pit. If this is Jeremiah then he could be referring to the incident in *Jeremiah 38* during the siege of Jerusalem when Jeremiah's enemies threw him into an empty cistern to keep him from speaking the Lord's Word. Ebed-Melech, the Cushite saved him by pulling him out. Jeremiah thought he was going to die in that cistern. If this is an unnamed author then the pit could be a metaphor for his enemies trying to kill him in some other way. In the pit the author cried out to the Lord and the Lord answered him. He told him do not fear. The Lord came to him in his desperation and saved him. The author (Jeremiah?) calls upon God to take his case and give him justice. He was attacked wrongly and his enemies tried to take vengeance upon him. He calls the Lord to take vengeance upon them. He knows the Lord has heard and seen what they wanted to do to him and how arrogant they are, mocking him. He is hurt, angry and fearful for his life. He has been attacked unjustly and there is no one but the Lord to bring to justice those who tried to kill him. He calls upon God to do it. God rescued him out of the pit and saved his life now God can give him the satisfaction of seeing his enemies punished for what they did to him.

When unjust acts are the cause of our grief and pain we want justice. We want God to pay back those who hurt us or those we love. The author shows us what to do with those feelings; bring them to God. We should not try to act on them ourselves. Leave justice and vengeance to God alone.

3:64-66 - The author's need for revenge on those who tried to kill him reaches its climax. He calls upon God to pay them back for what they deserve. He curses them and asks God to pursue them and destroy them. He wants God to kill them for the harm they caused him.

Grief limits our perspective. It narrows our focus down to our situation and keeps us from seeing the larger picture. In *3:43-51* the author laments how God has pursued them in his anger and how they have suffered because of it. He calls upon God to hear their cries for mercy. Yet in *3:52-66* when he laments about a personal attack upon him by his enemies he is more than ready for God to show no mercy or pity to those who tried to kill him. In *3:40-42* he counseled his people to examine their hearts and confess their sins to God so that he will forgive them. Now he doesn't want the Lord to forgive what his enemies did to him he wants God to punish them! Grief is intensely personal in nature. It causes us to be self-focused because it takes all our mental, emotional and physical strength to process our grief and get through it. We need to understand that because of this grief can easily lead us to lose perspective. In our pain and sadness we can ask God to do things we would never ask him to do otherwise. But like the author we need to bring those feelings for revenge and harm to God and not try and act upon them ourselves.

Chapter 4:

4:1 - Chapter 4 is also an acrostic poem in the same style as the first three chapters of *Lamentations*.

In the midst of calamity and grief the material wealth of Jerusalem no longer had the same meaning as when times were better. Gold and gems are worthless in the face of starving children. What good is the wealth of the world when there is no food and people lie dying? Death has a way of showing us a truer perspective on life. It helps us see what is most important to us and what in the end is irrelevant. In the face of death worldly wealth is meaningless.

The unexpected benefit of grief is the perspective on life and on what is most important in life that it brings. Material things, that our culture says are most important, are shown to be shallow and temporary. Grief leads us to value relationships and the things that last. In the end only our memories and our relationship with God and with the people who know him will follow us into eternity. None of the material things we have accumulated here on earth will be with us in heaven.

4:2-4 - Jerusalem's children, which the people valued above the finest of gold, now are like clay pots. The children go hungry and starve to death. The famine was so great in Jerusalem that mothers have stopped nursing and feeding their young. There is no food and the children beg for bread but no one gives them anything. The suffering is so great that adults have stopped caring for their children. They have been de-valued. The Jews are a broken people. Their grief and suffering have caused them to abandon that which they have valued most highly, their sons and daughters. Instead survival has taken over the whole population. People only think of themselves. Self-sacrifice for the sake of others has disappeared.

Grief can make us very self-focused. However, the author is speaking here about the horrible nature of their suffering that has led the Jews to abandon their children. After the fall of Jerusalem it made their grief worse because of what they had done. It is famine, suffering and hunger that has driven the people to do this not grief. When we grieve it is difficult to think about and sacrifice for others because we are so focused on our own pain. That is no excuse however for abandoning our responsibilities to those we love and the people around us. Grief may force us to need a break from our responsibilities in order to recover but it does not give us license to do so.

4:5 - The rich and powerful in Jerusalem have fared no better than the poor in the face of the siege of the city and the famine that resulted from it. Death is the great leveler of the human race. As *Ecclesiastes* shows us both rich and poor, weak and powerful all come to death in the end. And for the rich and powerful all their wealth and influence dies with them. The poor man gives up his struggle and pain. The rich give up all they have accumulated and it goes to someone else. All human beings must die someday. It is the fact of our existence and leads us all to question if there is anything after death. God's Word gives us the answers we seek about life and death, pointing us to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ and eternal life with him.

4:6-8 - The author laments that the punishment for the Jews is worse than for Sodom. At least Sodom was destroyed in a moment whereas Jerusalem was made to suffer through a siege, famine and then the sack of the city and its aftermath. The implication is it was not fair. Did he believe their sins did not fit their punishment? Is he questioning God's justice here? Certainly Sodom is the greatest example of wickedness in the Old Testament (see *Genesis 19*) and served as a warning to peoples everywhere that God would only tolerate sinful behavior in a people so far.

He remembers the glory of the princes of Judah, the sons of the kings. They were resplendent in their royal robes and their complexions reflected the pampering they received as members of the royal house. Now they are dead, burned in the fires that destroyed the city.

4:9-11 - The author continues his lament over the destruction of Jerusalem. Those who were slain by the sword are better off than those who were left because they died quickly while the survivors are left to waste away from the famine that plagued the city during the siege and after its fall. It appears people died both before and after the sack of the city from hunger. The implication of his description is that the Babylonians made little effort to alleviate the famine in Jerusalem after they took the city. If people had surrendered they were taken captive but those who did not surrender were left to starve.

He describes again as he did in 2:20 the phenomenon of mothers eating the bodies of their dead children for food in order to survive. This is more than metaphor; he is reporting an actual horrific practice by the women of Jerusalem during the siege. The people resorted to cannibalism in order to survive. The Law of Moses did not expressly forbid cannibalism but there were strict laws prohibiting eating anything that was found dead and holiness laws about touching the dead and leaving people unclean. These plus the natural abhorrence to eating the dead found in most cultures would have been strong incentives not to engage in eating the dead. The fact that people did, especially mothers eating their own children, speaks to the terrible desperation and hunger of the famine in Jerusalem during and after the siege.

The author believes God has given full vent to his anger over Judah's sins. When the Babylonians set fire to the city he viewed it as God burning the city down to its foundations. The Lord has destroyed them.

If there is a more general lesson here it is that in grief it is common to feel that the suffering we are undergoing is more than what our sins deserve. God must be angry with us because of what we are going through. We need to be careful however and not link the suffering we experience with God punishing us for our sins on this side of the cross of the Lord Jesus. God will discipline us for our sinful choices in order to correct us, but the destruction of Jerusalem because of Judah's sin is something that happened under God's covenant with Israel at Mt. Sinai. It is too easy for us to fall into the trap of thinking our pain is God's punishment when it is simply the normal pain that we experience when we suffer a loss. It is not punishment at all. It is grief and it is common to all human beings in all cultures across all human history. Even Jesus experienced it. See *John 11* and the raising of Lazarus. God made us to feel grief when we suffer a loss. He feels it too and so in grief we reflect his image in us.

4:12-13 - Other peoples who knew about Jerusalem did not believe that God would allow Jerusalem to be destroyed. The author says it was not only a shock to the Jews it was a shock to the world. Then he gives the reason. Judah's spiritual leaders had sinned, her prophets and priests. They had shed blood in the city and God determined to punish them. The shedding of blood probably refers to child sacrifice to the pagan idol Molech at the altar of Topheth in the Valley of Hinnom, on the southern side of Jerusalem. Jeremiah speaks against it several times in his prophecy. See especially *Jeremiah 7 & 19*, where Jeremiah references Topheth and calls the Valley of Hinnom the Valley of Slaughter. The author says the priests and the court prophets shed the blood of the righteous which could also refer to people who were faithful to Yahweh but opposed the king's policies and rebellion. They tried to kill Jeremiah several times but the Lord protected him. Others were not so fortunate.

Spiritual leaders carry greater responsibility than others. God holds them accountable for their actions and the actions of their people. When they sin and rebel not only are they punished but the whole people who followed them are punished. That is what God did to Judah. The priests and prophets led the people astray and God punished the Jews as a people.

4:14-16 - The spiritual leaders have lost their standing in Judah because of the Lord's judgment against them. They have shed blood and now their clothes are defiled by blood. People tell them to go away because they are unclean. They are afraid of them. They try and find somewhere to go but no one wants them or cares for them. The Lord himself has judged them and he has removed his protection from them. They have broken his covenant relationship and now must bear the consequences of their actions. The priests are no longer honored and the elders no longer revered.

The ostracizing of Judah's spiritual leaders was a direct result of their sin and God's punishment of them. In grief, even though we have done nothing wrong, people can often feel ostracized like the spiritual leaders of Judah. Many people in our culture do not know how to deal with someone in grief. They are uncomfortable around a grieving person and don't know how to respond to the sadness, depression and tears. Often the result is the grieving person is isolated or left alone. A grieving person often feels as if there is something wrong with them as if they have done something horrible and are being punished for it. Even though their isolation is not the result of God's judgment and punishment the results feel the same and are difficult to bear. It takes understanding people and family members to include the grieving person in fellowship in order to guard against this isolation. As a practical matter it is often difficult to be around a grieving person. They can be self-focused, depressed, and lethargic. The waves of sadness and tears that come with grief are unpredictable and often happen at the most inopportune times. It can be embarrassing for other people around them if they do not understand grief and what it does. All these things can make the grieving person feel like a pariah and in order to avoid being a burden to others they will isolate themselves. This isolation, whether self-caused or as a result of others being uncomfortable around them, is not healthy for someone in grief. We need others with us, especially when we are grieving and sad. Jesus understood this which is why he invited Peter, James and John to go with him in the Garden of Gethsemane the night he was betrayed and arrested. It is difficult but we need to push ourselves to seek and find fellowship when we are grieving.

4:17-19 - Judah was under God's judgment. They had trusted in other nations like Egypt to help them rather than repent and return to God and his covenant. They looked for help from the nations around them but no one would stand with them against the might of Babylon. God had decreed Judah's fall and there was nothing they could do to stop it. Their end as a nation had come. The Babylonian army was far more powerful than Judah's and crushed the fortified cities of Judah in their campaign against Jerusalem until none were left. Then they laid siege to the city, breached its walls in July of 586 and destroyed it. They pursued King Zedekiah and his entourage down into the Jordan Valley where they captured him, took him to Nebuchadnezzar who put him in chains and took him to Babylon where he died.

God's judgment had come upon a sinful nation and the only thing they could do was accept it and go through it. When our sin has caused us and others we love around us grief we must bear that grief and go through it. The hardest part is seeing someone we love caught up in

the consequences of our sin. We feel trapped and are unable to do anything to keep those we care about from being hurt by what we have done. It is painful to bear.

4:20-22 - The official theology of the Jewish leaders, the priests, court prophets and the king and his officials, said that because they had the Lord's temple and a king from David's line, Jerusalem was protected. God would never allow it to be taken. He would protect the Lord's anointed just as he had in *Isaiah's* day in the 700's B.C. when Sennacherib of Assyria had laid siege to Jerusalem and the Lord had defeated the Assyrian army with a plague. He had delivered Jerusalem once and he would do so again. The fallacy was the leaders had forgotten about their part of the Lord's covenant which was to be faithful to him. They thought they could live and do as they pleased and God would still deliver them. They were wrong. The true prophets of God kept warning them again and again but they would not listen. The final kings of Judah were taken into exile and put in prison. Jehoiachin was finally released many years later. Zedekiah, the last king, died in prison in Babylon. Their sin God did not excuse.

The Edomites, the descendants of Esau who lived south and east of Judah in the modern day Jordanian highlands, were allies with Babylon in the siege and sack of Jerusalem. Jeremiah prophesies against them in *Jeremiah 49*. The little book of *Obadiah* is written against Edom for helping the Babylonians and pronounces judgment upon its leaders and people. *Psalms 137*, written during the exile, mentions the Edomites and calls upon God to take vengeance upon them for what they did. That is what the author of *Lamentations* is asking God to do in 4:21-22. The Edomites celebrated when their enemy's city, Jerusalem, fell. Their day will come as well. The Jews were forced to drink the cup of the Lord's wrath against them. Someday the people of Edom will experience the same thing. The author knows the Lord will not be angry with the Jews forever. He will remember his covenant and restore them. He will bring them back from exile. The Lord will not do that for Edom. Their sin and wickedness will be exposed and judged by the Lord.

The desire for vengeance against those who have hurt us in our grief is a common theme in *Lamentations*. The author expresses that again here against Edom. If one had to put what he says into modern language one would say, "You'll get yours!" It is not uncommon to feel such feelings in grief. The way to deal with them is to take them to God like the author of *Lamentations* does here.

Chapter 5:

5:1-7 - Chapter 5 is the only chapter in *Lamentations* that is not in the acrostic poetic form. It is written in simple Hebrew parallelism. It concludes the book and summarizes many of the themes the author has used. It puts emphasis not only on Judah's plight after the fall of Jerusalem but also on her sins and confessing them, pleading with God to restore them.

The author pleads with God to remember the Jews in their disgrace and grief. Foreigners and aliens have taken over the land God had promised to the Jews. Many are widowed, orphaned and fatherless because so many have been slain. The aftermath of the war has damaged the families of Judah severely. Water and wood to cook their meals is now expensive. Whether a black market has sprung up around the only good wells or the Babylonians are making the Jews pay to use the water is unknown. Whatever the reality, life is no longer as it was. Existence is now a chore every day to survive. Those who had been wealthy and never had to be concerned about where their next meal was coming from now experience the hunger and dread the poor do every day. Life for everyone is irrevocably changed.

Grief changes everything. When we suffer a loss nothing is ever the same again. As we go through the process of grief we gradually adjust and learn to do what we need to do to survive but the life we once had can never come back because the person we loved is now gone. There is a gaping hole in the pattern of our lives and we continually encounter that hole and have to adjust to it. Often that adjustment is very difficult to manage. It takes a long time to learn new ways to live without the person we loved and depended upon.

The author says the ones who pursue them are always at their heels and they can find no rest. The Jews submitted to Egypt and Assyria in order to survive even though God told them not to. Their fathers sinned and now the current generation bears their punishment. The sins of the parents have been visited upon the children. The reality was however, that the children were no better than their parents. They did not learn the lessons of the failure and rebellion of their parents. Instead they continued to repeat the same mistakes, so much so that the punishment their parents deserved for their rebellion the children also deserved. The beginnings of restoration come when we recognize our sin and the sin of preceding generations. The Jews in the exile began to understand how deep their rebellion had been against the Lord and how long it had been going on. The destruction of Jerusalem was the catalyst for a thorough moral inventory of their people. The great writing prophets like *Isaiah*, *Jeremiah* and *Ezekiel* helped them in that process as did books like *Kings* and *Chronicles*. *Lamentations* also contributed as it gave vent to the grief they felt over their plight and their sins.

One of the great lessons of *Lamentations* for us is that expressing our grief is one of the best things we can do to help ourselves deal with it. Those expressions of our pain, guilt, remorse and pleading for God to do something help us process the complex and intense feelings of grief. It also connects us to God at a time when God often feels very distant. Expressing our grief in writing or song as the author of *Lamentations* did engages our faith when we need it the most.

5:8-18 - In graphic detail the author describes the aftermath of Jerusalem's fall and the defeat of Judah by the Babylonians. Slaves rule over them. He could be referring to literal slaves but it is more likely he means slaves to Nebuchadnezzar and that is how he views the Babylonian officials who now govern Judah. Or perhaps the best interpretation is he is speaking figuratively of the Babylonians as slaves to their pagan gods. They are slaves to the idols they worship and now they rule over the Jews. There is no one to free the Jews from the Babylonian yoke. God has handed them over to them.

Even things like searching for food risk their lives because of the violence in the countryside. The sword in the desert could mean the Babylonian army or it could refer to rogue elements of the Judean army that survived Jerusalem's fall who have been violently attacking survivors. Ishmael's attack on Gedaliah, the Jewish governor after Jerusalem's destruction, at Mizpah and Johanan's retaliation on Ishmael are examples. Ishmael are examples of such violence. See *Jeremiah 41* for the details. The point is even the most basic need for survival, finding food was now risky. They suffer from fever and sickness because of the famine in the land.

Their women have been attacked and the men are no longer able to protect them. Princes have been tortured and punished and the elders of the cities and towns have also been punished. The occupying army of Babylon shows no respect to the elders of the Jews. They are now a conquered people who rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. The defeat and exile shame the Jews. The survivors are forced into hard labor by their captors. Normal life and the stability that came with it are gone. Common things like the elders sitting at the city gates handling disputes are

gone. The music of the young has stopped. Their joy over their lives and their city is no more. The sight of dancing for a wedding or some other celebration is absent from their streets. Cries of mourning have replaced it. The author says the crown has fallen from our head, meaning all the blessings that they have experienced from God have been taken away. They were God's chosen people but now they only experience the Lord's anger towards their sin. Their hearts are grieving over Jerusalem. Their eyes grow dim for Mt. Zion, meaning the memory of Jerusalem shining on its hills and Solomon's great temple is fading. Now the city lies desolate and jackals prowl the streets.

The calamity of 586 forever altered the Jews' lives. The things they used to value and put their hopes in were gone. Even the simplest things of life suddenly became difficult. They were overcome with sadness and regret. Grief can do similar things in our lives. The loss of a loved one is irrevocable. It cannot be undone and that loss often makes us re-evaluate what we held most important in our lives. We are overcome with sadness, regret, and remorse for our sins, especially if we had hurt the person we lost or their death was a result of our sinful behavior. God is the only one strong enough to give us the ability to deal with our grief and the ability to keep on living. It took the Jews a long time to recover from the destruction of their country and city. It takes us a long time as well. Unfortunately grief cannot be rushed or sidestepped. It must be gone through. With God's help we can emerge on the other side of grief whole and stronger for the experience.

5:19-22 - The author knows God is the only one strong enough to help him and his people in their grief and pain over Jerusalem's fall. God is eternal and does not change. Grief reminds us of the transitory nature of our existence; we are mortal. He expresses his frustration over God not hearing them and seeming to forsake them. Why has it taken so long for God to respond? Where is he? Then he prays that God would restore them to himself. He asks God to help them return to him and renew them as in the past. He knows God is their one and only hope for whatever life will look like going forward. Through the destruction of Jerusalem and their country the Jews had to face their sin and responsibility for the disaster. They are ready to admit their sin, repent and return to the Lord. That process continued and with the help over the next generation of people like *Ezra* and *Nehemiah*, the Jews did return to God. He allowed them to go back to Jerusalem and even rebuild the temple. God had not forgotten them. He had renewed them.

The last phrases of *Lamentations* express the lingering doubts of the author and his people. He believes God will restore them yet the pain and grief are so great one last time he wonders whether God has totally rejected them. What if he is angry beyond measure with us? Our prayers will go unanswered. We will always be a lost people without a country and despised by the nations.

The amazing thing about *Lamentations* is the honest expression of what grief does in us. Just when the author has affirmed his faith in the Lord and affirmed that the Lord will renew them again he has doubts and expresses the "what if" that is on his mind and heart. We do the same thing. We rediscover God's presence and power in our lives as we go through the grieving process. We know God is the Rock upon which we can count. We renew our faith and commitment to him and find his presence again. Then just as we do those nagging questions arise in us again. But what if God has forgotten me? What if he is really angry with me? What if just as I think I have found him again he turns away and I will lose him forever? When those questions arise we need to do what the author did; express them to God. Then re-affirm our faith in his unchanging love. God is for us and will not abandon us in our grief. We can count on his

character and nature. Our questions are uncomfortable and disturbing but as *Lamentations* shows us they are also very human and very normal.

Grief changes us. It raises difficult questions about God's fairness, justice, presence and love. When those questions surface we need to continue to express them to God and each time re-discover his comforting and steady presence. Whenever a new difficult situation happens in our lives as we recover from our grief the questions will come as well. At some point as God heals us we will discover that we face trying circumstances and the questions are no longer there. It has taken time but with God's help we know he is with us and the "what if" questions no longer plague us. We are whole again.

FINAL THOUGHTS:

I am continually amazed as I study God's Word about the new things I learn even after decades of study. I had read and studied *Lamentations* before but never through the eyes of someone who was grieving. As I read the book from that perspective suddenly insight after insight emerged. It is my hope that this commentary has helped you and taught you about God and about yourself. The Bible speaks to all of life and no topic is off limits. *Lamentations* may have been written to help the Jewish people deal with their national grief over the destruction of their nation and Jerusalem but as I have discovered, it speaks directly to people today. The lessons the author gives us are powerful tools God has provided us to help us process one of the most difficult yet profound of human experiences; grief over one we have loved and lost. I pray this commentary has been some small help in that journey. And I pray that you will be able to affirm along with the author: "*Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, 'The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.'*" *Lamentations 3:22-24*

With Hope,
Pastor Galen Doughty