

# **Dr. Leslie Allen, Lamentations, Session 1, Introduction, Part 1**

© 2024 Leslie Allen and Ted Hildebrandt

Welcome to this series of videos on lamentations. I want to start with a reference to 7 and 11 and its role in American history. We know it as the anniversary of that terrible day in 2001 with the destruction of the World Trade Center towers.

I refer to that event because there's a sort of parallel in ancient Jewish history, and that's what lamentations is all about. There's a special day in the Jewish religious calendar. It's called a holy day.

And in terms of the Jewish calendar, it's the ninth day of the fifth month. If you look at a present-day Jewish calendar, you will see that that translates into Sunday, July 22nd this year. And if you pass by a synagogue, you will see the doors open and a service going on.

That service is the anniversary, 5-9, a sort of counterpart to 7-11. That was the day way back in 586 BC when the temple was destroyed, immediately after the fall of Jerusalem, after an 18-month siege at the hands of the Babylonian army. And so, this anniversary commemorates that tragic fact.

Then, in subsequent history, we probably know that the second temple was destroyed in AD 70. And so, this holy day on the ninth day of the fifth month also celebrates that, the destruction of two temples. Still, it is something that causes great grief to Jewish saints.

Lamentations is very closely associated with that anniversary. So closely that at the service, the book of Lamentations is read out. And so that book lives on for Jewish believers, which is far different from what happens where we Christians are concerned.

So often, it's ignored. I remember once I was teaching Lamentations, and a lady at church asked me, what are you teaching? I said, Lamentations. Oh, she said, I don't read that book.

That's a terrible book. And you know how it is. You're dumbstruck, and you don't know what to say.

And afterward, I should have said, I realized, yes, it is a terrible book. But it's a book for terrible times, and sometimes, we have to go through terrible times.

And then that's when we need the book of Lamentations. But as I say, it's comparatively unknown in Christian circles, not one that is regularly read. And there are just a couple of verses in chapter 3 that are known as the basis of a famous hymn, great is thy faithfulness.

But apart from that, there'd be only silence if you asked anybody in the pew what Lamentations was all about. But we need to rediscover its value. We need to appreciate its worth.

We need to see that it's God's gift to the church and the synagogue. But this is not easy. Lamentations lives in a world of its own.

And what we have to do in these first two videos is to try and get inside that world and see how Lamentations ticks, as it were. We have to realize what the background to Lamentations is, what its contexts are, literary context, historical context, what its setting is at a particular time of history, the traditions that lie behind Lamentations that Lamentations can draw on and make good use of because they were known to those who were grieving there. So, as I say, Lamentations lives in its own world.

Perhaps we can start by asking what the place of lamentations is in the biblical canon? And that's easier asked than answered because in the Hebrew Bible, what we call the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible antedates our Christian canon of the Old Testament. There, we find Lamentations in an unexpected place because the Hebrew Bible is divided into three parts: the law, the prophets, and the writings. In the middle of the writings are lamentations.

And it has four companions. There were five scrolls that sit together in the writings. There's Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Esther.

What unites them all is that they are all used and read out at festival times or on holy days. And so, there's a natural grouping to put in this last section after the prophets. Ruth, for instance, was read out at the Feast of Weeks, the Song of Songs read out at the Passover, Esther at the Feast of Purim, and Lamentations on this holy day, the ninth day of the fifth month.

So that's the Hebrew answer. That's the Jewish answer to the place of Lamentations in the canon. But when we come to Christian canon, we have to realize there was a great reshaping and there was a great need to integrate somehow the Old Testament with the New Testament.

This was done by putting the prophets last. So, the prophets look forward, and the New Testament looks back. Appropriately, Matthew is placed as the first book and the first gospel because it so often looks back to the Old Testament.

And so, a bridge was built between Old Testament and New Testament. And the prophets are taken as looking forward to the time of Christ and the time of the church. But what do you do with the Writings? They had to be put back before the prophets here and there in a suitable place.

Lamentations landed after Jeremiah because there was an ancient belief that Jeremiah had written Lamentations. There's not much value to that belief. The book is actually anonymous, and we need to respect its anonymity and not try to force an author upon it, as in the King James Version, where the letter to the Hebrews is called the letter of Paul.

And now nobody believes that anymore. And that was a false assumption. But Lamentations lands up in the middle of the prophets and that's appropriate because we shall see that one tradition that Lamentation draws on is a prophetic tradition.

That prophetic tradition would have been known to the first hearers of Lamentations and would have been of value to them in explaining their suffering. When we talk of the canonical significance of Lamentations, there's another way of looking at it. The relationship between Lamentations and two other books in the canon.

Lamentations leans on Deuteronomy chapter 28, and we find that there are quotations from Deuteronomy 28 in Lamentations. For instance, in chapter 1 in verse 3, speaks of no resting place, and that for people who know Deuteronomy 28, that comes from verse 65. Lamentations 5 talks of being the head literally.

The enemies becoming the head and that is a reminiscence of Deuteronomy 28 and verse 44. And then the ending of verse 5 there in Lamentations 1 speaks of the exiles going away as prisoners and that's an echo of Deuteronomy 28 verse 41. Lamentations 2.20 speaks of eating the fruit of their wounds and that comes straight from Deuteronomy 28 verse 53.

And that is very important. These would be clues that would be picked up. It may be at the first service involving Lamentations, there was also a reading of Deuteronomy 28 which would reinforce those references.

But it means there's interpretation because those verses in Deuteronomy 28 are taken from a section that speaks of disobedience to the law, disobedience to the covenant Torah and that's the reason why punishment is to befall Israel. And so this gets picked up and it's a clue, it's a clue. It's a hint that there's more in this than meets the eye.

This is more than a human situation. There's a divine human situation involved there and there's a hint at meaning. And then two, looking forward, there's a portion in the

book of Isaiah that seems to deliberately reflect Lamentations and to reverse it and to turn bad news into good news.

For instance, Lamentations 4:15 is spoken to refugee exiles who are not welcomed anywhere they go among any nations. And the nations say, depart, you're unclean, depart, don't touch them, they're unclean. And then in Isaiah 52:11, the word to the exiles about Babylon is, depart from Babylon, touch no unclean thing, you're going home.

And so, there's this reversal, and the words are picked up but now reversed. Bad news turns into good news. In Lamentations 4:17, we read about our eyes, and we were watching, and it's in a negative context; there is no salvation scene.

But Isaiah 52.8 speaks of your watchers and seeing something eye to eye. And what do they see? God was returning to Zion and ready to bring them back to Zion. And so once again, in that portion of Isaiah, what we call Second Isaiah, which belongs to the exile period of the exile and was written after Lamentations, it wants to pick up and reverse in terms of good news, that bad news in Lamentations.

And then, too, Lamentations 1 says again and again that Zion has no comforter, no comforter. In Second Isaiah, we find several times, in Isaiah 49 and Isaiah 51, that God is going to comfort Zion. And so, from a canonical point of view, we see this backward look, and Lamentations doesn't know, but there is implicitly a forward look, and we can look through Second Isaiah's eyes and see a reversal of that tragedy, which at the time seemed to be complete.

And so, those are some words on the place of Lamentations in the canon of the Hebrew Bible in the Old Testament. Let's think now of the place of Lamentations in history. If we were to ask, why did Berlin fall in 1945? We could give a simple answer, but really, we need a much more complicated answer.

And we would have to go back as far as the First World War and see the antecedents of that need on Germany's part for war to break out again. And then we would have to go back further to the 19th century, to the antisemitism in Austria as an extra reason contributing to Germany's history and eventually history's downfall. And so it is with Lamentations that it comes at the end of a long period of history, and it all fits together in a jigsaw type of way.

Lamentations was written during the period of the exile, 586 to 538 BC, and more probably in the early part of the exile. A study has been made of the Hebrew language used and it fits in between pre-exilic books and post-exilic books in a very neat way. It's starting to change the language into a post-exilic form, but it is only just starting.

And so, linguistically it fits very well in that period that it's talking about. If we try and examine the history of Israel and Judah in that earlier period, which culminated in the fall of the Northern Kingdom, Israel and then the Southern Kingdom, Judah, it's part of a long story. And it's far departed from those glorious years of David and Solomon, where you could speak of an Israelite empire.

What happened was, and the reason for it was for the eventual downfall, was that the basic fact of geography that Syria and Palestine were a land bridge between Africa and Asia. And so often, there was a clash between two powers, two great national powers in Mesopotamia on the one hand and Egypt on the other. And often, they were fighting over that land bridge.

There's a Korean proverb that when the whales struggle, the shrimp's back is broken. In Korea's case, it was Japan and China fighting over Korea, and Korea lost out in the middle there. And where this land bridge was concerned, Syria to the North and the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom were the heirs of this proverb: when the whales and the big fish struggle, the shrimp's back is broken.

What happened in the eighth century was that Assyria in North Mesopotamia turned its eyes to the West. Before, it had only been interested in raids on Lebanon and getting word about its temples and great buildings. But in 745, there was a new Assyrian King who was the Napoleon of the ancient world, Tiglath-Pileser III.

And he cast his eyes on Syria and that whole land bridge, which included those two kingdoms now, the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Now, no one likes to be part of an empire. And the 20th century is very much eloquent of that fact.

In colonies and dependent nations have a spirit of rebellion, and they strive for independence. And this was so in the Northern Kingdom and in the Southern Kingdom too. And in the 730s, there was the so-called Syro-Ephraimite War where Syria and the Northern Kingdom realized the danger from Assyria.

And they said we need a coalition. We need a military coalition, but we aren't sufficient with our armies, great as they are, we need Judah's armies as well. And they put pressure on Judah, join us in this anti-Assyrian coalition, or we shall all lose our freedom.

Judah thought itself safe in its mountainous area and refused to do so. But it was very much aware that war would break out between Syria and Israel on the one hand and Judah on the other, and Judah would lose. So, what did it do? Well, King Ahaz of Judah had a masterstroke, but it meant that he sold the farm, as it were, because he appealed to Tiglath-Pileser, come and help me; I'm being victimized.

And, of course, that gave a great political reason, a good moral reason, one might say, for the Assyrians to come and conquer Syria and turn it into provinces, and the same with the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and Judah became a vassal kingdom. And so, it lost out, it very much lost out. And there was that same spirit of rebellion, and looking to Egypt, perhaps Egypt will help us, Egypt will come to our aid, and so there's an alliance with Egypt made.

The Assyrian Empire has now become the Babylonian Empire, and Nebuchadnezzar attacks Judah. In 597, Judah falls for the first time, and there's the deportation of leading members of the community to Babylon, and in 586, Judah falls again, and there's that second exile. And that's where Lamentations steps in, and Lamentations is post-586, after the fall of Judah, after the fall of Jerusalem. We use those phrases casually, but it meant the loss of everything.

It meant the destruction of the temple, and so that great tradition that went back to Solomon's temple was lost. It meant the end of the monarchy, the Davidic monarchy, which Judah hoped would last forever, and so it was a terrible time. It meant a complete ending of Judah, no longer a vassal nation but simply a sub-province in the Babylonian Empire.

And so many were exiled to the east, but a number were left, and those who were left behind are the ones for whom Lamentations was meant. And so we've looked at this historical event as a purely historical phenomenon, but now we must go on to ask, what's its place in theology? What's its place where the divine plan that the Old Testament is concerned with? What's its place there? At the end of 2 Kings, we find a secular description of, in all its terrible details, the fall of Jerusalem and what it means, but interspersed with it, and there's one verse that turns to theology. 2 Kings 24, 20, Jerusalem and Judah so angered the Lord that he expelled them from his presence.

This was not merely a historical phenomenon. This was a theological phenomenon. It had to do with the breakdown of the relationship between Israel, now only in the form of Judah, that relationship between Israel and Yahweh, the God of Israel, and very much that epic history from Joshua through Kings, all the way through, it speaks of God's people as abandoning covenant standards of the Mosaic law and ignoring the warnings of the pre-exilic prophets.

They were rebels against God. And so, there were two rebellions going on which led to the fall of Jerusalem, and there was the historical fall, rebelling against King Nebuchadnezzar, but also there was a theological rebellion against God himself. And so, God was behind the Babylonian army.

Nebuchadnezzar was the tool of Yahweh in his invasion of Judah and the capture of Jeremiah. And so, there's very much this echoing of this epic history which ends so

tragically at the end of 2 Kings. But there's also an alignment with the pre-exilic prophets because we shall find that Lamentations looked back to what they were saying as well in its vocabulary.

And in this alignment, looking back to those pre-exilic prophets, we find warning after warning about the collapse, the coming collapse of first the Northern Kingdom and then the Southern Kingdom because God's people had gotten out of touch with God. And so very much, Lamentations has its place in Old Testament theology and wants to pick up the literary traditions that it encountered. Let's ask now, what was the place of Lamentations in its culture? Well, Israel was one of those peoples that were in the Mediterranean area and they very much wore their hearts on their sleeves over against the stiff upper lip of us Northern Europeans and those descended from them.

They were emotionally very expressive and outwardly demonstrative. I've heard it said that Italy is divided into North and South. And in the South, people are always crying out Mamma Mia in a very excited way.

Whereas Northern Italians much more have a stiff upper lip. And Israel was like, if that's true, Israel was like Southern Italy. Grief, for instance, and Lamentations are full of grief.

Lamentations reflects grief in behavior, and that's part of its ancient culture. And there were mourning rites and there were mourning songs, which one engaged in. And this is something which is perhaps alien to us.

We formerly had perhaps had traditions of grieving and mourning, but they're much less evident now. I remember being brought up in England and having my mother die in 1947. And there were rituals one had to go through beyond the funeral.

All the drapes in the windows in the front of the house had to be kept closed. And if you use those rooms, you put the electric light on. And the men wore a black band around their sleeves.

And I wore to school, not my school tie, but a black tie for a long time. And this is what one was expected to do. But those traditions have lapsed now.

And people do not want to be confronted by grief and are embarrassed by it. There's a saying, laugh, and the whole world laughs with you. Weep, and you weep alone.

And that's tragically true, I think, in Western civilization today. But in ancient times for Israel, there was very much an engaging in set rites in which you engaged when you grieved and when you mourned and when you were terribly upset. And so, for instance, there were laments.

There was what we call a funeral lament. And this was a secular lament. When somebody died, you engaged in mourning.

And it wasn't a religious affair. It was a secular affair. You were engrossed in your human loss.

And the best example, a very long example, which illustrates this, comes in 2 Samuel chapter one, when Saul and Jonathan die. And David laments over Saul. He still feels a loyalty to that king.

He laments over Jonathan, the crown prince, and David's best friend. In the second half of 2 Samuel, chapter one, we have this long funeral lament. And it's called in verse 17, a lamentation, a lamentation.

The Hebrew word is *kinah*, a lamentation. Strikingly, our English term lamentations is a translation through Greek of that same Hebrew term. The name is called after this secular funeral lamenting.

And we shall comment on that at a later point. So, we have this *kinah*, this secular funeral lament, no mention of God at all, but purely operating on the human level. And it's marked by a refrain: how the mighty have fallen.

And the mighty, of course, are these great military heroes, Saul and Jonathan. But that word *how*, we need to look at because it's a very expressive term. And that English exclamation *how* doesn't really do justice to it.

It's like a scream or a shriek. It's *eich, eich*. Imagine three times in this lament, *eich*.

And there's that anguish there. That word expresses anguish, which doesn't come over in our English rendering. I've written a commentary on Lamentations called *A Liturgy of Grief*.

And as part of that, I provided my own translation. And when in lamentations, in our normal renderings, we get *how I render how terrible that is*, which is a bit wordy and clumsy, but it brings out the emotional nature of that word. But strictly, it's a shriek or a scream.

*Eich!* All right. And so, and we move on. We find in Jeremiah chapter nine that there's a reference to this secular human lament as well.

Jeremiah nine, 17 to 22. "'Consider, call for the mourning women to come. "'Send for the skilled women to come.



"Let them quickly raise a dirge over us "so our eyes may run down with tears, "our eyelids flow with water, "for a song of wailing is heard from Zion. "How we are ruined!" And it's that word, eich. And too, also, there is this word dirge is kinah, kinah.

All right. Interestingly, a reference to women. Because there was a class of women, professional women, and their job was to take part in lamentation and to lead a family when somebody dear to them was lost, to lead them in lamentation and to encourage them, to show them how to grieve.

And that's interesting because we shall find a woman appears in the book of Lamentations with this same role. And then Jeremiah 22 and verse 18, it's talking about the coming death of the king. It says, "They shall not lament for him, "saying, alas, my brother, or alas, my sister.

"They shall not lament for him, "saying, alas, Lord, or alas, His Majesty." We've dropped that word, alas, in ordinary speaking, but we recognize it as a sign of mourning. It's not that word eich anymore, but it's another word, hoy. And this is not a shriek or a scream; it's more a wail.

I remember I was in hospital a couple of years ago for observation for two days, and that meant I stayed overnight. In the room opposite me, there was an elderly African-American gentleman who was dying, and his daughter came to visit him. And he died during the night.

And there was a wheeling of trolleys and so on, and muted voices that we could hear. And the daughter evidently came. And when she saw her father, she started wailing.

Ah, ah! The nurses hurried her out to the waiting room outside the ward, but the whole ward was woken up by this wailing. And that hoy, this is the word, hoy! And it's not a shriek or a scream, but it's a wail, it's a wail. And so, there's this expressiveness in the voice of how you're feeling.

One might say a very healthy expressiveness, whereas we tend to keep it in, and we suffer more accordingly. Now, this secular funeral lament, it was also extended to other calamities. So, we don't ask, well, if there's a secular lament in Lamentations, who's died? No, we ask, what's the disaster? And for instance, in Ezekiel chapter 26, we find that there's a lament, a prophetic lament over Tyre, the great city of Tyre, and it's going to fall.

And there's a prophecy there's going to be a lament over Tyre. And so, the fall of Tyre, a parallel, one might say, to the fall of Jerusalem, but a lament features there. How you have vanished from the seas, O city renowned.

This is the future-looking lament. The coastlands by the sea are dismayed by your passing. And that word, kina, in verse 17, they shall raise a lamentation.

It's kina. The plural kina is the word that is the title of Lamentations in the Hebrew Bible. But it's extended to another calamity, the fall of a city.

And so, it is in Lamentations. And then, coming to Lamentations itself, we find at the beginning of chapter one, the beginning of chapter two, and the beginning of chapter four, we find that shriek or scream repeated there, but no longer as a monosyllable, eich, but now two syllables, which makes it even more terrible. Eich her! Eich her! Eich her! And so there's a lot of emotion in those first words of those first chapters, chapters one, two, and four.

Now, apart from a verbal expression of this secular funeral, lament extended to a number of other calamities as well; there were other mourning rites. And so, we find, for instance, in the book of Job, that Job's comforters come at the end of chapter two, and they raised their voices and wept aloud. They tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads.

And they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him because they saw his suffering was very great. So, a lot of demonstrative things are happening there. And we find that too, that Ezra is distressed at one point in chapter nine, and he says, verses three through five, when I heard this, I tore my garment and my mantle, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled.

Then all those who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered around me while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice. At the evening sacrifice, I got up from my fasting with my garments and my mantles torn and fell on my knees and spread out my hands to the Lord my God and said, he prayed. That's interesting because these morning rites are now the preliminary to a prayer.

We shall find that prayer plays a big role in lamentation. And then, Nehemiah, here's bad news. In Nehemiah 1:4, when I heard these words, I sat down, wept, and mourned for many days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

These two last cases are interesting because we've moved into the area of prayer, into a religious sphere rather than simply the secular sphere. In lamentations, the secular and the religious become combined.

And so, it's not surprising then that when we look at the book of Psalms, we find a number of cases where there are morning rites in Psalm prayer laments. And there

are prayers to God explaining the problem to God and asking for his help. And mixed in with that, there are morning rites.

And so, for instance, in Psalm 69 verses 10 and 11, I humbled my soul with fasting. I made sackcloth my clothing. And in Psalm 35 too, we find in verses 13 and 14, as for me, when they were sick, I wore sackcloth.

I afflicted myself with fasting. I prayed with head bowed on my bosom as though I grieved for a friend or a brother. I went out about as one who laments for a mother bowed down and in mourning.

This is interesting, as with Job's comforters. It's an expression of empathy now that it wasn't your particular mourning but that you were engaged in others who were mourning. We shall see this phenomenon in Lamentations, too. And then in Psalm 45, verse 25, as an expression of sorrow, we sink down to the dust, our bodies cling to the ground.

And getting close to the ground, sitting on the ground, sitting, these are physical postures of mourning. And so, we shall have to ask if, in the book of Lamentations, there are cases there. And indeed, they are.

So, we'll just thumb through Lamentations, picking out here and there, and what do we find in chapter one and verse one. The city sits, the city sits. And if we hadn't looked at those mourning behaviors, we wouldn't have known.

That's a mourning way, a way of expressing mourning. In verse three, it says in our versions that Judah lives among the nations, literally sits among the nations. And those exiles away in Babylon were mourning, too, and they were sitting down.

And then in one two, there's a mention of weeping bitterly in the night with tears on her cheeks. And this crying, outburst of crying, this too is a gesture of mourning. In one 17, Zion stretches out her hands, but there's no one to comfort her.

And there's this gesture: please help me, please help me. And evidently, that's part of that mourning, right? You want empathy from other people, but it never comes. And so we're getting these physical manifestations of mourning.

And then in one 19, in one 20 rather, we find see, the word see, oh Lord, how distressed I am. My stomach churns, my heart is wrung within me. And there are psychosomatic effects of this grief, and it results in stomach pain, that grieving.

And so physical effects there. And then in two 10, we find the elders of daughter Zion sit on the ground in silence. And that's a mourning posture.

They put dust on their heads and put on sackcloth. And that, too, is mourning. And then two 11, my eyes are cement with weeping, my stomach churns, my bile is poured out on the ground.

There are weeping and also psychosomatic effects of this grief. You're so overwhelmed that your body itself is mourning. In three 28, we find reference to sitting, to sit alone in silence.

Three 48 to 51, we find an outburst of weeping. My eyes flow with rivers of tears. My eyes flow without ceasing, without respite.

And there again, there are these mourning rites. So, we see how demonstrative that civilization was. And this is essentially the place in the culture of Israel.

And it links up interestingly now. The fall of Jerusalem in Lamentations is combined with the personification of Jerusalem and the Jerusalem that's left behind, suffering Jerusalem. It's very much personified as a woman. We shall see when we come to chapters one and two.

There's an interesting illustration of that and a parallel of that in Mesopotamian city laments. We find there that the city engages in mourning, the citizens engage in mourning, and the goddess of the city engages in mourning. And the city has been destroyed wherever it was in Mesopotamia, a great city here and there. And the gods above have determined for no reason at all to destroy that city.

But there's one deity, the goddess of the city, who is back there mourning over the loss of her city. There's a sort of parallel with Lamentations, but now it's the personification of Zion itself. And we shall see that it stands for the city, a personification of the city and the suffering that it's befallen Jerusalem in the destruction caused by the invading army.

But we shall also find that Zion stands as a personification of the congregation. And there's speaking to Zion, telling Zion what to do, and Zion does it. And Zion has the role of being an example, an exemplar of what the congregation needs to do to get through that suffering.

And so, we find a parallel of sorts, not exact by any means, but there seems to be this wider tradition from Mesopotamia that has influenced Lamentations. And that's not surprising because it had been under Mesopotamian domination for so many years. Right, we shall stop there.

Next time, I want to discuss more of the traditions behind Lamentations. I also want to discuss grieving and the psychology of grieving and how it manifests in Lamentations. But for now, we will stop.