

## **Dr. Leslie Allen, Lamentations, Session 2, Introduction, Part 2**

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This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Lamentations. This is session 2, Introducing Lamentations, Part 2.

We come now to our second video. In the first we were looking at the place of Lamentations in various respects in relation to the ancient world and especially we saw that there was a tradition of a secular funeral lament. And we were saying that this was going to become very important as we study the book of Lamentations. What I want to do now is to look at another aspect of Israelite culture and another aspect of tradition that relates to crisis.

Apart from the funeral lament, there was a prayer tradition, and there was very much an emphasis on Lamentations. There are two needs for the congregation to get through their grieving. First of all, there's the secular lament.

They have to work through their grief psychologically, slowly but surely. But there's also a spiritual necessity: they have to turn to God in prayer. Throughout Lamentations, there's this call to pray, and very often, it's associated with Zion, this personification of the city.

She prays, and really, she's a role model for the congregation to follow. And what Zion does, the congregation is being told they must eventually do, too. Glancing through Lamentations to see this emphasis on prayer, we find in chapter 1 at the end of verse 9, and at the end of verse 11 Zion suddenly breaks in with a prayer. Then she carries on in chapters 20 to 22 with more prayer, and it's all grievance.

It's very much an emphasis on grievance. There's a grievance that Zion must express in prayer. And we shall look at this aspect of prayer in due course.

And then, in chapter 2, verses 18 and 19, the Lord urges Zion to pray. Zion, you must pray. Implicitly, this is urging the congregation who are listening that they, in turn, must pray if they're to work through their grief.

And so, Zion does pray. And 2:20 to 22, it's a prayer of grievance again. And this is a most obvious prayer.

Life is unfair. You turn to God. This shouldn't be.

God, do something about it. Help us. We're suffering in this way at the hands of enemies, and we want you to intervene.

Then in chapter 3, we find at the beginning of the chapter and at the end of the chapter, there are two sort of testimonies. Actually, they take the form of prayer. And in 3:1 through 16, there's a testimony of prayer that's concerned with guilt.

And it's very much a sense of repentance that underlies that prayer. But then at the end of chapter 3, in verses 52 to 66, it's a prayer of grievance, a testimony of grievance. In chapter 3, it's not Zion speaking, but once again, the congregation is being told how they, in turn, should react.

They need to come to God in prayer. We shall see this as we come to chapter 3. Then, staying in chapter 3, there's a call for prayer in chapters 3, 40, and 41. This, too, centers on guilt.

There's something wrong before God that must be put right. And then, at the end of chapters 3:3, 42 to 47, there's a sample prayer. The sort of prayer the congregation should be praying.

And that, too, is a prayer of guilt. It's a prayer of repentance for what they've done wrong in God's sight. And then finally, finally, in chapter 5, we find that much of the chapter consists of prayer.

But now it's a communal prayer. And now it's the congregation taking their turn. And they're responding to all these various calls to prayer that have been issued in those first three chapters.

And they respond with their own prayer. And so, a lot of the significance of chapter 5 is that this mission of prayer that Lamentations is engaged in is at last accomplished in chapter 5. But there's also something else in chapter 5. We were talking over that secular lament. And that, too, appears in chapter 5. The congregation, in turn, engages in that funeral lamenting in the whole middle part of chapter 5, verses 2 to 18.

They are grieving, grieving over their losses. That, too, is a mission in the book of Lamentations. The congregation must grieve.

They must lament with their own grief and work it through in their own way. And they do that in chapter 5. And so, two missions are accomplished when we get to chapter 5. The mission of grief and prayer. Now, and so there's this, there's a prayer tradition in times of crisis.

We've seen how the book of Lamentations picks up that tradition and uses it. But let's talk now about that tradition itself. Oh yes, and we were saying that there was a double tradition.

There's a need for a secular lament on the one hand, and there's a need for a spiritual lament on the other in the form of prayer. And this, this reminds me that there's a parallel of sorts in African-American culture. African-American culture is very much involved in suffering.

But it expresses it in two ways. On the one hand, it can express itself in terms of blues songs, singing the blues. And they are secular.

Troubles are all kinds of, and they are verbalized. No mention of God, no mention of religion. But the blues are very much a counterpart to secular laments in the Old Testament and in the ancient Semitic world.

But there was another resource that African-Americans can use. And these are spirituals, what we used to call Negro spirituals. Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones.

And these are religious, essentially religious. And make use of religious themes. Songs about slavery and the problems of being black.

These are woven into sort of prayers and religious texts in those African-American spirituals. And so, there's a parallel in this double resource in African-American culture. This is a parallel to what we find in the culture underlying Lamentations.

But let's go back to that prayer tradition. And we find that in the psalms, very many of the psalms are, in fact, lament prayers. Prayers brought to God about problems.

In fact, of the 150 psalms, 65 are laments, nearly half of them. And it's tragic how when, in our Christian usage, we echo the psalms, we don't use the lament psalms very much. It's much more important in the book of Psalms than in our own liturgies and our own personal use.

And those prayer laments fall into two types. 25% of them are prayers on behalf of the community, which is suffering at the hands of their enemies. And quite a few of those laments are communal, but just 25%.

But 75% are individual prayer laments. And they reflect a crisis that an individual has of sickness or of social alienation. And you can always tell the difference between communal laments on the one hand and individual laments on the other because the first type speaks of we and us and our, whereas the second type speaks of I and me and my.

And so there, for instance, where sickness is concerned, Psalm 102, verses 3 to 11, is very much concerned with sickness. Very often it's a question of personal enemies,

and quite a few psalms speak in those very terms. There's a typical content that we find in a prayer lament, and this is going to be important as we read laments.

There was a set tradition as to how you composed a psalm lament. And we could look at Psalm 142, which is a nice model of the sort of thing, the sort of pattern that we find reflected in the prayer, the individual prayer lament this is. And so it starts out with an initial request in verses 1 and 2. Normally it's in prayer language of speaking directly to God.

Here, it's in third person, and then changes to the second person. With my voice I cry to the Lord. With my voice I make supplication to the Lord.

I pour out my complaint before him. I tell my trouble before him. And then, in chapter 3, it moves to the second person's address.

When my spirit is faint, you know my way. And so, after that initial request, we have the problem explained. What's the crisis? What's wrong? And you tell God what the crisis is.

In the second half of verse 3 and in verse 4, we have a description of the crisis. It's brought to God, spread out before God. In the path where I walk, they've hidden a trap for me.

Look at my right hand and see. There's no one who takes notice of me. No refuge remains to me.

No one cares for me. How tragic. Nobody cares.

Very much a sense of aloneness there. So, an initial request, the crisis explained. Faith is affirmed.

There's always an affirmation of faith in these prayer laments. And in 3a, when my spirit is faint, you know my way. I know you.

I can trust you to help me when things go wrong, in other words. And then in verse 5, I cry to you, O Lord. I say you are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.

Once again, I know I can turn to you to help me. Then, it moves on to a cluster of petitions. There are little prayer statements in verses 6 and 7. Give heed to my cry, for I'm brought very low.

Save me from my persecutors, for they are too strong for me. Bring me out of prison so that I may give thanks to your name. And there we are, that cluster of petitions.

And lastly, there's the promise of praise. I'll praise you if you answer my prayer. So that I may give thanks to your name, at the end of verse 7. The righteous will surround me, for you will deal bountifully with me.

The righteous will crowd around congratulating me, saying, God has helped you, and I will praise God for it. And these are prayers of persuasion. Very much presenting the problem, urging God to intervene and help, and explaining exactly why help is needed.

What did one expect to happen? Well, on the human plane, one expected that a prayer would be answered. And an answer to prayer, for us, is a sort of a metaphor for things changing. And the problem of no longer being around and being a worry.

But an answer to prayer was more literal in the Old Testament context. And an answer from God is expected. Delivered by a temple prophet or priest who could speak in the name of God.

And give assurance, yes, your prayer is going to be answered. And that didn't mean the crisis was over. The one who prayed would go back, leave the temple, go back home.

But the assurance was that God was going to deal with this problem. And so you would go out with faith, having been given this answer. And in the book of Lamentations, we find very much a literal reflection of that.

In chapter 3, and verses 55 to 57. I called on your name, O Lord. You heard my plea.

Do not close your ear to my cry for help, but give me relief. You came near when I called you. You said, do not fear.

And there's that response, given through a temple prophet or priest. Which one is accepted by faith and would go away with the assurance. That all was not well at the moment, but all was going to be well.

And God was going to change that situation. And there's this same expectation in the Psalms. You don't find it reflected very often.

But it's definitely there in places. For instance, in chapter 12, there's a prayer of lament, in verses 1 to 4. And there's a response from God in the chapter, in verse 5. Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, I will now rise up, says the Lord.

I will place them in the safety for which they long. And there we are; we have incorporated that response. And we find a reflection of that answer in chapter 6 of the Psalms.

And verses 1 through 7 are very sad, presenting this prayer of lament. But then verses 8 to 9, 8 to 10 rather, they change their tune. And all is well.

My, it's wonderful. And what's gone on? Well, verse 8 says, depart from me, all you workers of evil, for the Lord has heard the sound of my weeping.

The Lord has heard my supplication. The Lord accepts my prayer. All my enemies shall be ashamed and struck with terror.

They shall be turned back and, in a moment, be put to shame. And there are two things happening here. One is the response, a reflection of the response through the temple priest or prophet.

And the other is the expectation that in the future the crisis was going to be resolved. And that problem with the enemies is going to be solved. These prayers of lament in the Psalms are not just interesting poems, but they're preserved there as models for sufferers to use.

And they're the provision of the temple staff and of God as an expression of compassion for those who are suffering. But we find that prayer tradition gets picked up in the book of Lamentations in various ways. Now, we've been looking generally at Psalms of Lament, and we looked especially at Psalm 142, and we looked at the expectation that you would get a literal answer from God through a temple officer.

But now we have to look at some specific laments in the Psalms that are important for Lamentations. And the first type is that there are Psalms of repentance. Not many, not many, but there are.

There's an individual one in Psalm 51, and there's a communal one in Psalm 106. These are confessions to God, and there's very much in them a need to be re-accepted by God and a recognition that that relationship has been broken on the social or individual level, and one needs to get back into a good relationship with God. And so there are penitential psalms, a few penitential psalms.

We find that this is a tradition that Lamentations clutches and holds onto and holds out to, that this, too, was necessary for these grieving people. There's an essential difference between those penitential psalms of lament and those other lament psalms because the first type that we saw was a situation in which God must act and bring salvation. But in the penitential psalms it's a situation in which the human

prayer must reach out and repent of patterns in their lives that violate their relationship with God.

So, there are different needs expressed in these two types. Both of these needs are expressed in the prayers in Lamentations. But then, thirdly, there are also prayers of lament in the psalms which are prayers of complaint to God about God.

And we don't read those, and we find them rather embarrassing perhaps. And our whole Christian tradition of prayer is that you're very respectful to God, and you submit to God, and God is always in the right, and you want God's will to be done, and you don't express your own point of view too strongly. But there's a different tradition.

There's a defiant tradition that comes out in a number of the psalms. In fact, one-third of the psalms complain to God about God. And these are more extreme prayers of lament in their expressions.

And they're both communal and individual prayers of lament. And what gives the game away is two questions that we find in these psalms. And one is, why? Why? And the other is, how long? For instance, we find in Psalm 74, which is a psalm of complaint to God about God.

We find in Psalm 74 verse 1, Oh God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture? And then in verse 11, Why do you hold back your hand? Why do you keep your hand in your bosom? You ought to be stretching out and helping us, but you're not. And then how long? Verse 10 in Psalm 74, How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile your name forever? And there's this protest. And I call these psalms prayers of challenge.

Prayers of challenge brought to God. And we shall find at the end of chapter 5 we find that the prayer takes this very form. And we might look again at Psalm 80.

8-0. And in verse 4, there, O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers? And then in verse 12, Why have you broken down our walls so that all who pass along the way pluck our fruit? And there is this protest against God because that's what it is. That is why it is not a child's reason to ask for information in an innocent way.

It's a cry of bewilderment and protest. And I have a personal example. I was at home from school with flu.

I'd just turned 11. And I was in my bedroom. My mother was in the next bedroom.

And she was very ill with heart trouble. And one of my older sisters had stayed away from work to look after her. And at one point, my sister came in and said, Our mother has died.

I've got to go out and phone the doctor to come. And so there I was. And what did I do when the front door slammed, and my sister went out? I punched my pillow and said, God, why did you have to let her die? And I knew nothing about the Psalms.

I knew nothing about these prayers of challenge in the Psalms. But it was instinctive that my Christian faith reacted in that way with that bewildered protest. Why? Why has it happened? And it was very much a protest against God.

And we're going to find this at the end of Chapter 5. That question why. And also, how isn't there, but it's very much implied as we shall see. And that how long is very much saying, Enough already.

We've had enough. We can't take any more. This must be the end.

Stop it. Stop it. And there's this turning to God very much in protest.

There's another tradition in the Psalms, which we shall only just mention at the moment and deal with later when we come to Chapter 3. There's a wisdom teaching tradition in the Psalms. A good example is Psalm 34, which you can read over. And it's a sort of a sermon, but it's based on wisdom teaching in the wisdom books, Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes.

And very much picking up that sort of teaching and running with it and turning it into a sermon. And the middle of Chapter 3 picks up that wisdom teaching tradition in the Psalms and makes use of it. And those wonderful verses in Chapter 3, they're part of that tradition.

It's a similar tradition. It has some different contents from wisdom, but this sermonic tradition is already represented in the Book of Psalms. And then, too, there's something of which most probably you will never become aware when you read the Book of Lamentations, but it's very much there underneath the surface.

You'll be reading Lamentations in English, but sometimes, when we read an English translation of the Bible, it cannot convey the full force of the original, and it lets us down in some particular ways. There's an Italian proverb, *traduttore, traditore*. The translator is a traitor, which means the translator can't fully bring out the full force of the original.

Now, what am I speaking of here? Well, what I'm saying is that in the Hebrew, it's very obvious when you look at the Hebrew text that most of the poems are



expressed in an acrostic form. They go all through the letters of the alphabet, one by one, and it's very striking. And so, for instance, in chapters 1, 2, and 4, you have 22 verses in reflection of the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet and in reflection of the fact that the first word, the first letter of the first word is the successive letters of the alphabet.

And it's very much part of a tradition, a literary tradition, to use an acrostic form. We have very few examples in Western literature, but I'll give an example, the only example I know that will make you smile, and that's a romantic song, a romantic song. A, you're so beautiful.

No. The second line, B, you're so beautiful. C, you're a cutie full of charm.

And the next time, I'll try to remember that first line. A, you're adorable. I've got it.

A, you're adorable. B, you're so beautiful. C, you're a cutie full of charm.

And that was popularized by Perry Como in 1947, so an older generation would be well aware of it. And that's the acrostic tradition used in song. And it means you're totally lovable, my beloved.

You're totally lovable. And to me, it speaks of totality, this use of the acrostic. It's also used in the Old Testament, not only in religious ways but also in secular ways.

For instance, in Proverbs 31, that final section, verses 10 to 31, is a poem about the good housewife, the good wife. And she's so wonderful. And it goes all through the alphabet in 22 lines, saying how wonderful she is.

She's a total wife, one might say. But it's also used religiously. Psalm 145 is a psalm of praise to God.

And that's an acrostic. And it goes all through the letters of the alphabet at the beginning of each line. And it's saying, God, you're totally praiseworthy.

Totally praiseworthy. And so, these are two examples. Now, Lamentations 1 through 4 picks up this tradition and applies it to this situation of crisis and grief.

And I believe it's pointing to totality. It's saying how total that grief is, how totally overwhelming that grief is. And it does so in chapters 1, 2, and 4. But in chapter 3, it moves beyond the grief.

It envisions a future, a happier future beyond grief. And so, it's still totality, but it's a new totality, that grief is not the end. It seems to be the end.

In chapters 1, 2, and 4, it is the end, so far as we know. But there's a reaching out to what lies beyond grief and a resolution of crisis. And so, there's this literary tradition.

In chapter 5, the acrostic form is dropped, but it's still 22 lines, 22 lines, in sort of memory of that acrostic tradition. As I say, we don't become aware that our ordinary English versions don't portray this acrostic form. But there is one that does, a Roman Catholic translation by Ronald Knox that was made in 1948.

And he produced his translation of the Old Testament. And true to the Hebrew text, he portrayed lamentations in an acrostic English form. And so, chapter 1, alone she dwells.

Alone she dwells is how it begins. And verse 2, be sure she weeps. Verse 3 begins, cruel the suffering.

Verse 4, desolate the streets of Zion. Well, it's very interesting, and it does reveal to the reader the acrostic form, but it becomes artificial. And the Knox has to import sentiments as he goes through to make it work.

I was reading a book by Eugene Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*. And he goes through that collection of five scrolls in the Hebrew Old Testament, including the Hebrew Bible, including Lamentations. He talks about the acrostic in a very interesting way.

He says, the acrostic is a structure for taking suffering seriously. Lamentations respects and repeats, rather, the acrostic form. It goes over the story again and again and again and again and again, five times.

He goes on to say the acrostic pattern maintains a posture of attention. The unthinkable is itemized. And then he also says, the acrostic organizes grief, patiently going over the ground step by step, insisting on the significance of each detail of suffering.

The pain is labeled, defined, and objectified. And that's so necessary. The author of Lamentations thought it was necessary to use this acrostic form.

And so, where we are, there's an intensity there in that acrostic form that we need to respect. We move on now to the psychological phases of grief, which in some cases are recognizable in Lamentations. Being human, we tend to work through grief gradually in a certain way, and certain elements tend to come to the fore.

And there are different phases. For instance, grief begins with numb shock. The news is overwhelming.

And strangely enough, this can happen if it's good news or if it's bad news. If you watch Antique Roadshow on the television and somebody brings in a dirty little pot the expert says, oh, this will go for auction for \$12,000. What's the response? No way! You're kidding! You can't accept it.

It's incredible. You can't take it in. But even more so, it happens when it's terribly bad news.

You can't take it in. Your mind cannot realize what's going on. And there is denial.

And that's very much the starting point. And I think the author of Lamentations was grappling with this problem that the people left behind in Judah. How could they handle this situation of 587? Everything they valued had been lost in so many ways. And it was just incredible.

Their minds couldn't get around it. And how could they get through it? And the author of Lamentations has devised a wonderful way of getting through it, bit by bit, step by step. But he's got to get beyond this numb shock and this denial that it's happened.

We must accept that it's happened and work through it. And then there's a need to recollect what happened and to relive it in one's mind. One might say, oh, if only I could forget it.

I can't forget it. Well, you mustn't forget it because part of the way forward is to recollect it, articulate what has happened, and recognize the range of loss. And this is very much what Lamentations wants to do.

Let's sit down and let's see what happened. Let's think it through. But it's not just thinking.

There's a need for emotional outbursts. I can't stand this. This is too much.

And those prayers of grievance that Zion indulges in. Oh, this is too much. I've suffered too much.

It's not fair. And in various kinds, ways, there are emotional outbursts. And that initial word, echah, that's an emotional outburst, which, as I said before, is very poorly represented by that innocent exclamation, how.

There's a need to articulate what the losses were and what has happened. One needs to immerse oneself in that suffering and think it through and express it, to express what one has lost, to express the pain. And this is what Lamentations is doing all the way through.

And there's a wonderful little poem by a poet called Ruth Feldman that expresses this. When the waters of loss rose, I built an ark of words, took two of every part of speech, and rode the flood. Isn't that beautiful? When the waters of loss rose, I built an ark of words, took two of every part of speech, and rode the flood.

There's this expression of what had happened, this articulation, telling the story. One needs to tell the story again and again. And then, too, there's a need to evaluate and, if possible, to find meaning in what's happened and to interpret what it means.

And this is very valid for Lamentations. It wants to find meaning, and it wants to find genuine meaning rather than any invented meaning. And it's very careful to try and do so, to evaluate and find meaning in this suffering, if one can.

But as part of that finding meaning, one has to say goodbye to old expectations that no longer apply now that the crisis has happened, old assumptions, old beliefs that are no longer valid. And one needs to find in its place new expectations that are valid. And that, above all, is what Lamentations wants to do, to take the people through their suffering and say goodbye to a number of things, evaluating those losses.

But, in other ways, all is not lost, and there is a future beyond this grief, which is incredible as it may seem. And one needs to come... There are two things that one needs to come to. Ideally, one wants to come to closure.

And there are misconceptions about closure as if it's never happened. Well, there's never a point at which one thinks it's never happened. But here's a definition of closure, which is spoken in terms of bereavement.

It's not forgetting the person we've lost but placing that relationship somewhere inside us where it's comfortable so that we can carry on with our lives. There we are. It's not the all-obsessive occupation of our minds, always breaking news in our minds, but not forgetting the person we've lost, but placing that relationship somewhere inside us where it's comfortable.

We can accept it. Yes, it is bad, but we accept it so that we can carry on with our lives. But before that happens, very often there needs... I think usually there needs to be a turning point.

And if you read biographies and autobiographies of people working through their grief, it comes to that point. C.S. Lewis's great book on grieving ends on the note of a turning point where he's still very much grieving over the loss of his dear wife, Joy, to cancer, and he can't get over it for a long time. It's as if the dark night is still around

him, but he can see a little glimmer of light on the horizon as if dawn is going to come and a new day.

And how one defines this turning point is that the pain is felt as bad as ever, but a more positive future can be envisioned. And so there is a resolve in the direction of change. The pain is felt as bad as ever, but a more positive future can be envisioned.

And so there is a resolve in the direction of change. And that very much sums up the point we reach in Chapter 5. There's no closure in laments. There's still suffering.

There's a lot of grief there. And there's still a lot of pain, mental, spiritual pain being expressed in a variety of ways. But the fact that they could turn to God and they could pray to God with an expectation that prayer would do something is the turning point that they're ready to accept.

Grief is still very much there, but there's a looking to the future instead of, in Chapters 1, 2, and 4, looking only at the past as breaking news in one's mind. And so there we are. There are those phases that numb shock, I think, is only implied in Laments.

It's the need why Laments needs to be written to try and break this deadlock that it's so unacceptable and that one cannot move beyond it. But it does get expressed at one point in Chapter 4 and Verse 12. The kings of the earth did not believe, nor did any inhabitants of the world, that foe or enemy could enter the gates of Jerusalem.

This is posed not in the minds of the suffering Judeans but in the standpoint of the kings of the earth and everybody else in the world. Everybody was shocked. They couldn't believe it.

And this is a sort of a magnification of that numb shock which the Judeans were implicitly feeling that the author of Laments had to deal with. And I've got two examples of this numb shock that I've read in grief autobiographies. One, a mother after the loss of her unborn baby, the miscarried baby, her first baby.

She says I was an empty hole of a woman. I didn't yell or cry or anything. I was frozen like a block of ice.

Losing that baby ripped my heart to pieces. And there we are. There's that numb shock.

I was frozen like a block of ice. Last time, I was drawing a parallel of the fall and destruction of the New York buildings in 2001. One person who wrote about it was actually a grief counselor.

And she was very much involved in that situation. She wrote a book about it and said everyone around me wore the same numb look that I wore. We all looked pale and zombie-like as though we couldn't quite focus our eyes to my right, I was shocked to see one of the last remaining trade center buildings charred and black.

At street level was a grimy borders bookstore. Dirty posters were barely visible through the blackened windows. And there we are, pale and zombie-like.

And so, as the book of Lamentations opens, imagine it as being spoken to a congregation that are pale and zombie-like, not able to focus their eyes on what has happened. And this is the experience. All right, there, I think we shall stop.

And next time, we will be looking at the first half of chapter one, chapter one, verses one through eleven. And I want you to read those verses thoroughly and carefully. And the more you do so, the easier it will be to take in what I have to say about them next time.

Thank you.

This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Lamentations. This is session 2, Introducing Lamentations, Part 2.