

Dr. Leslie Allen, Lamentations, Session 11,

Lamentations 4:1-22

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This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Lamentations. This is session 11, Lamentations 4:1-22.

We come in this video to Lamentations chapter 4 and a basic question we need to ask is how does it fit into the book as a whole? And answering that question is not at all obvious.

What's it doing here? And we could make out a good case to say chapter 4 is unnecessary and at least it's out of place. And there are two reasons one could come to that conclusion. In chapter 3, implicitly and explicitly all the way through, the topic has been prayer, prayer, you need to pray, and the mentor has been urging them to engage in prayer and giving the reasons why they should pray.

That's what Lamentations 3 is all about, and he's offered his own prayers as an inducement, as a role model, that male role model as a parallel to the female role model of Zion in chapters 1 and 2. So that's what chapter 3 was saying, and chapter 5 follows on very naturally from chapter 3. It's a response, they do pray, they do pray. So, chapter 5 looks very much like the next piece of the jigsaw. So, what is chapter 4 doing there? And then 2, as we were reading through chapter 3, we were finding there was a movement to contemporary suffering in the post-war period.

Chapters 1 and 2 were very engrossed with memories of the siege, but now there's contemporary suffering in this post-war period, in this time of occupation by an enemy. And those references that we had in chapter 3, which leave behind that whole siege situation, are very much in line with chapter 5 because chapter 5 isn't hardly engrossed at all with questions of the siege; it's talking about the post-war occupation of Judah. All right, so chapter 5 follows naturally from chapter 3. But how about chapter 4? It moves back to where we were in chapters 1 and 2. It reverts to siege conditions in the fall of Jerusalem, and past memories are relived.

And so, what are we to make of chapter 4? And here's how I see it. The congregation was not ready to move on to chapter 5. The mentor had been grooming them and urging them, you've got to pray. They weren't ready to pray.

Overall, the principle is that the grieving process has its own timetable, and we cannot determine in advance how long anybody is going to grieve or, from another point of view, what aspects will come into their grief and feature largely. Eventually, in chapter 5, the congregation will reach that turning point in grief that the mentor is longing for. But they're not ready yet, and the mentor respects that delay.

He stays with the congregation, and he waits for them to catch up with him. And so there we are. We're back in chapters 1 and 2. We go over similar ground because that's what the congregation needs to do.

One of the saddest interviews I've ever had as a chaplain with a patient was on a psychiatric unit. The patient was a woman, a wife, who had been through a bad experience. And now she was suffering from severe depression.

I asked, Does your family give you support? Well, she said, my in-laws tell me to get over it. They don't know what it's like, and they don't want to know. How about your husband? I asked.

Sometimes, he sides with me, and sometimes, he sides with them. Oh, how very sad. Oh, for a family that understands.

Oh, for friends who understand, who could have clustered around this poor woman and given her the support she needed. Oh, for empathic or sympathetic people around who can share that burden. The mentor in the Book of Lamentations is somebody like that, thank God.

I hope that we are like that if the need arises. Certainly, the mentor goes back in chapter 4 to rehearse their grief. He goes back to where the congregation still was.

That was the present need. And he can wait with them to move on to a more positive stage. In this connection, I think of Jesus going to the Garden of Gethsemane.

And I think of the disappointment that he experienced. What do I mean? Well, in Matthew's account, in verse chapter 26, he asked Peter, James, and John to stay with him. Stay awake with me, he says.

I am deeply grieved. We know what happened. They fell asleep.

And how disappointed Jesus must have been in losing their support. And there will be people near us who say or would like to say, please stay awake with me. Please be present with me.

I am deeply grieved. And I hope we won't let them down. I hope that we will take an example from the mentor.

He stays where the congregation is. And he, not happily perhaps, but he does go back with them in spirit to chapters 1 and 2. That means we have a funeral lament again in verses 1 through 20. And it's indicated in standard ways.

We have that basic how. In fact, it occurs twice here. We haven't had it twice before.

And remember, it's a scream. It's a shriek. Echa! Echa! And so, he enters into their suffering.

And he expresses for themselves that verbal sounding of grief. And then two, verses 1 to 20, have got the marks of a series of reversals of contrasts. You've got the good old days, and you've got the bad days now.

A series of abnormalities. These reversals are told in the form of short stories and snatches of narrative all the way through the chapter. And so, let's make our way through this funeral lament.

First of all, verses 1 and 2 seem to stand alone as the first sort of narrative: how the gold has grown dim, how the pure gold has changed.

The sacred stones lie scattered at the head of every street. Now, there are metaphors there. Then, in verse 2, we come to the reality, the real situation behind the metaphors.

The precious children of Zion, worth their weight in fine gold, how they're reckoned is earthen pots, the work of a potter's hands. And this is speaking of lack of respect for human worth. There's a feeling of worthlessness that pervades the congregation.

And this was something that Zion verbalized in one of those prayers in the middle of chapter 1, was it? Speaking of her worthlessness. I am worthless. Yes, verse 11, look, O Lord, and see how worthless I've become.

And worse than regarding other people as worthless is feeling that this is what one is: worthless. And this is spoken of the people as a whole. And so, we have this factual situation in verse 2, the precious children of Zion.

We go back to that personification of Zion. As in an earlier chapter, her children are, in fact, the congregation. Those who are meeting in the ruined temple court are the children of Zion.

And so, she's speaking of her own children. And it's interesting that there's a frame, an overall rhetorical frame, in chapter 4, that it begins, well at least in verse 2, with this personification of Zion, coming back to what we were seeing in chapters 1 and 2. And it ends on that same note. In verse 22, we mention daughter Zion, daughter Zion.

Now, perhaps we should go back and talk more generally about the chapter before we come to those detailed references. Chapter 4 is very much like chapter 2, but it lacks the strong emotion that we have there, that Zion and the mentor brought to the situation. But there is a deep sympathy that's being shown by the mentor.

We have my people. In verse 3, my people have become cruel. In verse 6, the chastisement of my people.

In verse 10, the destruction of my people. And this is something again that's taken over from chapter 2, and in fact chapter 3. In 2.11, the destruction of my people. And that was picked up in 3:48, and my eyes flow with rivers of tears because of the destruction of my people.

And so, there's this deep empathy there, this poignant empathy in speaking of my people. And then, looking at verses 17 through 20, the mentor seems to have become personally involved in this particular episode because it speaks in terms of we and us and our. And so, the message is, I'm standing with you in spirit, and I've been involved in this crisis, too.

Then we need to say that this chapter, in general, is an acrostic poem, like chapters 1, 2, and 3. But it's shorter than what we've had before because the stanzas are not three lines. They're only two lines. So, we have 22 two-line stanzas in line with the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. And we don't have the three-line stanzas that we had in chapters 1, 2, and 3. And so there are 44 lines, only 44 lines.

If we glance over the whole of Lamentations, we see a gradual shortening. Chapters 1 and 2 each had 67 lines, and Chapter 3 had 66 lines.

Chapter 4 goes down to 44 lines. Chapter 5 goes down to 22 lines. And there seems to be a gradual movement towards literary closure by abbreviating as you go on and making the poems shorter.

Notice I say a literary closure, not a psychological closure, which you never get in Lamentations, but a literary closure. It's his way of slowing down, of coming to an end, by shortening each poem in turn. And so, yes, we do have verses 1 to 20, and we're looking through that Funeral Lament.

We saw that basic fact in the first episode, we might say, in verse 2, which refers to the people as a whole and their sense of worthlessness. It picks up the metaphor. You've got the good old days mentioned there.

They were important people. They had a sense of their value and their worth. They were like gold, pure gold.

They were like sacred stones, precious stones that were kept in the temple as a treasury, as often happened in the ancient Near East. But now, what are they? They're just clay pots, just like clay pots have died a dozen, and they don't count for anything anymore. And so, there's this sense of not counting and being worthless.

And so there we are. That's the people as a whole. But then, after that, in most cases, it's talking, it's narrowing down to different groups within the people and engaging in a Funeral Lament about each section of the community in turn.

And so, in verses 3 and 4, it speaks about children who suffered starvation, and they couldn't be nursed at their mother's breasts anymore because the mother wasn't producing milk. She wasn't being fed enough. And they couldn't be fed with solid food.

There wasn't the solid food to go around. And there's this terrible situation. Verses 3 and 4, even the jackals offer the breast and nurse their young.

But my people have become cruel, like the ostriches in the wilderness. The tongue of the infant sticks to the roof of its mouth for thirst. The children beg for food, but no one gives them anything.

And so, we have that tragic situation, suffering children. And very often in TV adverts, we're confronted on the screen with suffering children who need help. Will you give money to help these children? And that's a very strong argument.

And so, these poor children, nursing at the breast in ancient Judah, it would take place during the first three years of a child's life. And so, it was an important aspect of their being sustained. But no nursing in this way and no feeding.

And ironically, it's as if the people are cruel. They weren't, really. But ironically, it looks like that.

Why don't they give them anything? Well, the truth is, there wasn't anything to give. But there's this figurative contrast in two ways. Even the jackals offer the breast and nurse their young.

But these seem to be less than animals, these women. How can they do it? My people, it's as if they're cruel. And they're like the ostriches in the wilderness.

And this is a piece of folklore. And in fact, we have it spoken of in the book of Job. Job chapter 39 and verses 14 through 16.

It talks about the ostrich. And it's saying in verse 13 that the ostrich's wings flap wildly, though its pinions lack plumage. It leaves its eggs in the earth and lets them

be warmed on the ground, forgetting that food may crush them and that a wild animal may trample them.

It deals cruelly with its young as if they were not its own. And so, there's this picking up of this bit of folklore about the ostrich here. And it looks as if the people are being cruel.

But that's just the appearance. And we know that's not really so. But ironically, that's how it seems.

And then, in verse 5, you come to another little scenario. Those who feasted on delicacies perish in the streets—those who were brought up in purple cling to ash heaps.

And here's another contrast of what should be and what is. Rich people were now impoverished. They'd gone from riches to rags.

And they had no food. And there's this terrible downward mobility that they have suffered. And they're rich no longer.

Their bank accounts are no longer there. And so, there's this frightening situation that society can suffer the reversal in this way. Rich people clinging to ash heaps.

Those had been brought up to wear purple, which was expensive clothing. And then the next episode, in verses 6 to 8, we'll come back to verses 7 to 8 rather. We'll come back to verse 6 later.

It speaks about civil leaders who normally would be treated with great respect and honor. The civil leaders had suffered. 7 and 8, her princes were purer than snow, whiter than milk.

Their bodies were more ruddy than coral, their hair like sapphire. Now, their visage is blacker than soot. They're not recognized in the streets.

Their skin is shriveled on their bones. It has become as dry as wood. And, of course, this is the physical effect of starvation, and even these people who were high in society and important for running society, even they had suffered the physical effect of starvation.

And their visage has turned blacker than soot. And this is actually a physical phenomenon: if you are starved, your skin changes color. It becomes a dark, purplish shade.

And this was what happened with these civil leaders, these princes. In verse 8, second part, their skin is shriveled on their bones. It's become as dry as wood.

It reminds us of pictures that one can see of concentration camp prisoners who've been starved and overworked over the years. This was the sort of situation, but in this case, it was caused by the siege and starvation that had been involved there. And then, in verse 10, we come again to the mother's relationship with their children.

And we'll look at verse 9 a little bit later. The hands of compassionate women have boiled their own children, and they became their food in the destruction of my people. Perhaps this is the most horrifying of all, that these children who died of their starvation, their corpses weren't buried, but they were used as food.

And horrifying as that is, it's even more horrifying in an ancient religious context, where corpses were regarded as unclean. But these corpses were just taken as so many carcasses of an animal and used for food. And this is not unparalleled.

I was reading recently about the siege of Leningrad in the Second World War, the siege of these Russians in the hands of the Germans. And that lasted much longer than the Jerusalem siege, which is only 18 months. This was a 900-day, 900-day siege.

And there again, the main problem was starvation for those who were locked up within the city. And what happened was that there was a black market, a black market of human flesh, of people who had died of starvation. Now, there's one fascinating word in verse 10: compassionate.

The hands of compassionate women had boiled their own children. They became their food in the destruction of my people. And what does that compassion mean? Well, it's often taken as women who used to be compassionate and showed all compassion to their children, but now, no longer.

But I suspect that they're still compassionate. And what do I mean? Well, those little children had died. As I said before, little children would be the first to die.

And their bodies don't have the stamina to stand up to attacks of different kinds, including lack of food, that adults can bear more easily. Teenagers and adults can bear more easily and at least endure and live on. But the children died first and the rest of the family survived.

And I think that compassion is exercised towards the rest of the family to prolong their lives and to prolong the wife's lives and the mother's life in looking after the rest of the family. And so, she has this tension, this tension, how far should she go as

a wife and mother? It's my job to cook the food. How far should I go? And she realized, ultimately, in her compassion, she has to use those dead bodies for food so that the family should survive.

A terrible tension for these wives and mothers to cope with. Verse 11, we'll look at a bit later. But then verse 12 is a different type of worry.

We've had physical problems of different kinds that are linked with the siege. But now there's a theological problem, a very burning theological problem. And it's broached in verse 12.

The kings of the earth did not believe, nor did any of the inhabitants of the world, that foe or enemy could enter the gates of Jerusalem. The fascinating thing about this verse is that it's an echo of a song of Zion. A sort of reverse echo of the song of Zion.

Psalms 76 is one of the songs of Zion in the book of Psalms. And at the end there, well, verses 11 and 12, make vows to the Lord your God and perform them. Let all who are around bring gifts to one who is awesome, the one who cuts off the spirit of princes, who inspires fear in the kings of the earth.

There, we have this situation in which foreign kings admired Yahweh. Along with that came an admiration for Zion, the city of God. And so that admiration and that respect, this is what causes the reaction in verse 12 here in Lamentations 4. The kings of the earth did not believe, the kings of the earth, that same phrase, nor did any of the inhabitants of the world, that foe or enemy could enter the gates of Jerusalem.

Why? Because it was a basic tenet of Zion theology that Zion was impregnable. You couldn't get past its gates if you were an enemy because God was there, and God would always protect Zion. We saw this issue earlier in the book, and it emerges again as a burning theological and religious problem.

This old expectation was so firmly ingrained in pre-exilic thinking that they had to give it up. It didn't apply anymore and they could see before their eyes that this seed was going on and on and on and God was not coming to their help. And so, the kings say, we can't believe it's true.

And this was something the congregation itself was thinking and this is a common first response to loss. Can't believe it's true. And so there is this shock and this denial that it's ever happened.

But it has happened, and you know it's happened. In your mind you know it, in your heart you don't accept it, but you have to accept it. And so, verse 12, the tragic end of Zion theology.

They need a new set of expectations, and in chapter 3, the mentor has been trying to gloom them afresh, to think afresh. Here's a valid expectation and it's going to lead you on and forward and beyond your present situation. But you're still grieving.

You're still grieving. Then 13 through 16, there's another section of society, Jerusalem society, which is mentioned here. And it is for the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests who shed the blood of the righteous in the midst of her.

Blindly, they wandered through the streets, so defiled with blood that no one was able to touch their garments. Away, unclean people shouted at them, away, away, do not touch. So, they became fugitives and wanderers, and it was said among the nations that they would stay here no longer.

Well, verse 13 lays the blame for the end of Zion theology on the stewards of that Zion theology, and that was the priests and those prophets. Remember, we were speaking of them before, the Shalom prophets who said everything's going to be all right, and they happily allied with the priests in their assurance that Zion theology would get them through. And here in this section, we get the degradation of priests and Shalom prophets, and they're the ones on whom the blame at their door, that blame is laid.

And so, we read of their suffering now. And it said they shed the blood of the righteous in the midst of her, which is very strong language. You get a lot of strong language in chapter four that we've got to carefully explain.

And here, these priests and Shalom prophets, prophets of peace, bore the ultimate responsibility for all that happened because they hadn't prepared the people, they hadn't brought the people to repentance, and they felt no need of it. No, trust in God, not to do with us, our righteousness, or his filthy rags. It's God. God's going to bless, and God's going to say all is well. All will be well. And so, they bear the ultimate.

It's as if they themselves have shed the blood of the righteous in the midst of her. They've been responsible for good people dying in this war and in this siege. And then, it goes on to speak of their suffering.

Blindly, they wandered through the streets, so defiled with blood. As it goes on, we seem to be thinking especially of the priests and of a contrast with their normal situation because they would endeavor to keep pure and clean, and they wouldn't touch blood, for instance. But here, they become defiled with blood.

There was bloodshed around, and they couldn't keep the blood off their garments. And so, they're unclean themselves. They're defiled with blood, and no one was able to touch their garments.

And so away, unclean people shouted at them. Away, away, don't touch, don't touch them, they're unclean. And we find the irony of these priests, the most clean and pure for all their lives so far.

Now they've suffered degradation. And so, the priests are very much in view here. They became fugitives and wanderers. They tried to escape to neighboring nations, but the other nations didn't want them.

They shall stay here no longer. And so, these priests who had been at the top of the social heap, one might say, and so much value, these people, now they're refugees, they get turned away, turned away. Then, verse 17 talks of another type of problem and the fall short of another expectation.

And this was a military expectation. Oh yes, we didn't look at verse 16 because that's still talking about these priests. No honor was shown to the priests, no favor to the elders.

No, I don't think it's elders. Elders is old people and you always have the problem in translating the Hebrew. Is it elder or is it an old person? And I think here it's old people.

No honor was shown to the priests, no favor, even to the aged priests, even to the aged ones. You would expect that to happen, but this is a social reversal that old people are just ignored even though they are priests. But then verse 17, the people's lack of a military ally and the disappointment that had been felt.

Our eyes failed ever watching vainly for help. We were watching eagerly for a nation that could not save. And there was hope in this fighting against Babylon, this rebelling against Babylon.

We've got Egypt on our side. We've got a treaty, a military treaty with Egypt, and they're going to come and help us out and drive the Babylonians away. And ironically, they did for a short time.

There are a few verses in Jeremiah that says that. Yes, for a little while, that siege had to be suspended and the army had to go down to the southern part of Judah to face an Egyptian army. But the Babylonians won and so the Egyptians fled and so back they came, the Babylonians, back to resume that siege after a short time.

And so, there's this people's lack of an ally. If only Egypt comes to our help. If only we've got this military alliance.

Oh, please let them come. And they turned out to be a broken reed, a broken reed. That's a phrase that's used by the Assyrians at a time when Judah was looking for; no, it's a time when an Assyrian envoy was addressing the Jerusalem leaders in 2 Kings 18 and verse 21.

And he said, see, you are relying now on Egypt, that broken reed of a staff, which will pierce the hand of anyone who leans on it, such as Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to all who rely on him. And this had come true now. It had come true once more.

And Judah was finding that it didn't help to have less military alliance. They lost even so. We will come back to verse 18 and verse 19 and we'll look on to verse 20.

And here's a very tragic verse. And once again, it's an old venerable expectation which is dashed to the ground. It's the end of royal theology.

Verse 20 says the Lord's anointed, the breath of our life was taken in their pits, the one of whom we said, under his shadow, we shall live among the nations. Zedekiah, the last king. And he was the scion of the Davidic dynasty.

And he was the last Davidic king. And there had been promises that that monarchy would last forever. There would always be a king reigning on the throne of Jerusalem.

And Judah believed that. Judah firmly believed that. But now, that expectation had come to a halt with the capture of the king.

And we're told the story. We're given the historical background in 2 Kings and chapter 25 and verses 4 and 5. The main fighting, the siege operations from the Babylonians' point of view tended to be on the north and northwest of the city and the gates around there. And though there were Babylonian troops around Jerusalem, around the walls of Jerusalem elsewhere, they tended to be less guarded.

And there were other gates that perhaps you could slip out of. There was a southeastern gate, which the king, the royal party, and some of the army thought we could slip through there. And what we can do, we can make our way east to the Jordan and we can get over.

And we've got a military alliance with Ammon. And the Ammonite king will be glad to take us in as refugees. So that was the plan.

And it sounded so good. And what actually happened? Well, 2 Kings 25 verses 4 and 5. The king, with all the soldiers, fled by night by way of the gate between the two walls of the king's garden. However, the Chaldeans were all around the city.

So, there they were going out through the southeastern gate where there weren't so many Babylonians. And the few that were around, they could dodge those in the darkness. And they went in the direction of the Arabah.

And that's the Jordan Valley because they hoped to get into the Transjordan and into a place of safety in Ammon. But the army of the Chaldeans pursued the king and overtook him in the plains of Jericho on the west side of the Jordan. All his army was scattered, deserting him.

Then they captured the king and brought him to the king of Babylon at Riblah. Riblah was the headquarters in Syria, and that was where Nebuchadnezzar was.

And he sent his army with a three-star general down to Jerusalem. Who passed a sentence on Zedekiah. And they slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes.

And they put out the eyes of Zedekiah. So, the last thing he saw was his sons being killed by the Babylonians. And they bound him in fetters and took him to Babylon as a blind exile.

And so that's the story. It was a well-known story for the congregation, who knew that it had happened in their post-war situation. And so, this is the end of royal theology.

And that is so tragic. Zion theology and royal theology were very much parallel and twin items. Psalm 2 says, on Zion I have set my king, God says.

And so, this is so tragic. So tragic. The Lord's anointed was taken in their pits.

There was an ambush. And there it was. He fell into a trap.

The one of whom we said, under his shadow we shall live among the nations. We're safe. He guarantees safety for us among the nations.

And it's a verse that reminds me very much of a parallel verse, if you like, in Luke 24 and verse 21. Remember that pair who were walking on the road to Emmaus. And they didn't know that Jesus was risen.

And this stranger comes in the darkness alongside them. And they're talking to him. And they don't recognize it's Jesus.

But they've got this sorry story. And in verse 21, it's the saddest of all. They have to say, but we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.

We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel. And there's very much that feeling that one gets about Lamentations 4 and verse 20 at this particular point. Well, now, overall, in this chapter, we've had this funeral lament going through, which is centering along the lines of grief and losses.

Losses of so many different kinds. And here, the mentor recognizes the need to grieve. One had to grieve more on the lines of chapters 1 and 2. That was what the congregation needed.

They couldn't do without it. There's been grief over the losses and changes for the worse in so many areas of life. Social groups and social expectations have all been suffering in so many ways.

And so that's where we are. There are a few verses that we left out as we went through. And some that we can look at again from a different angle.

First of all, there's an accent on suffering, an accent on suffering, on physical suffering. In verse 4, those children who were suffering, and it makes you almost want to cry as we read it, so far away as we are from the situation, the tongue of the infant sticks to the roof of its mouth for thirst. And the children beg for food.

But no one gives them anything. They have nothing to give. And so, the suffering of children is expressed in a very poignant way.

And then in verse 6, we're going to come back again to verse 6, in fact, but we'll comment now. The chastisement of my people has been greater than the punishment of Sodom, which was overthrown in a moment, though no hand was laid upon it. This is harking back to that old story in Genesis about Sodom and Gomorrah being overcome by earthquake and fire, all in a moment.

And contrasted with that is the agonizing slow deaths for the people of Judah in their siege conditions. And there's this contrast that at least it was comparatively easy. It was over in a moment for Sodom, but not for us.

We keep on suffering and suffering and suffering. And then in 18 and 19, that victimization, we didn't look at this text before, but this is another group of people who tried to break out and, well, during the siege, and then people who tried to break out, two groups. They dogged our steps so that we could not walk in our streets.

Our end drew near. Our days were numbered, for our end had come. In 19, our pursuers were swifter than the eagles in the heavens.

They chased us on the mountains. They lay wait for us in the wilderness. And there are two situations.

One is within the siege. Part of siege warfare was to build wooden wheeled siege towers, which were higher than the gates and walls. And enemy archers would climb to the top of these towers.

Inside the gates, each gate had a plaza, a square, and a public square, and people might well be walking there. And the archers could take aim outside the walls, but they were higher than the walls and the gates, and they could take aim at the people in the public squares. And so there was this victimizing of the people, and that was terribly frightening.

Our end drew near. Our days were numbered for our end had come. And people knew even then, though the siege was going on, though the gates and walls were holding fast, it wouldn't last much longer.

And the end was very close now. And then in 19, this is fugitives. Perhaps it's still during the siege, or perhaps it's when the city falls, but they manage to flee the city like Zedekiah, but they're chased.

And the soldiers, foreign soldiers, realize they're there, and they chase them. They're swifter than the eagles in the heavens. They chased us on the mountains, lay and wait for us in the wilderness.

We couldn't escape. We couldn't escape. And so, an accident on suffering there, one poignant aspect.

There's another aspect that we need to look at. I want to sum it up with a sentence: Grief takes the color out of life. This is another type of loss, and it's a theme that runs through the first part of the poem.

In verse one, it was gold that had grown dim. A little problem with that because gold doesn't tarnish, but perhaps it was dirty, or perhaps it was thought as it is blackened by smoke from the burning down of Jerusalem. But that yellow gold, you can't see that yellow gold so clearly.

And then, in verse five, those who used to be dressed in purple, another color, go out. Now, implicitly, they're in rags. And then, in verses seven and eight, we've got varied hues brought before us.

They were purer than snow, whiter than milk. Their bodies, their pink-ready skin, were more ruddy than coral. Their hair like sapphire, blue black hair.

And so, you get these colored references, but it all fades into drabness as these people suffer. And so, one message is, one part of this suffering is that grief takes the color out of life. There's a book that I very much respect and I made quite a bit of use of in my own study of Lamentations.

It's actually more related to the Psalms, but to the Lament Psalms. Psalms of Lament by Anne Weems is a very powerful book.

And it gets its power from the fact that this woman author lost her son; I think it was the day after his 21st birthday. And there she was, her only son, he'd gone. And she lapsed into terrible grief.

She was encouraged by Walter Brueggemann to write poems on the lines of the funeral laments. And so, this is part of one of her laments. She calls it Lament Psalm 9. I'll just read part of it.

Oh God, the world has been drained of color. The music has been turned off. The silent shroud covers any grain, any green that remains.

All is gray and smells of death. And that's very much a summary of what Lamentations in that first part of the poem here wants to say. Grief takes the color out of life.

And then there are a few verses that we need to look at more closely. Do you remember in chapters one and two, there was an emphasis on meaning and interpretation. And it went beyond a normal funeral lament because it involved God.

And you had this theological movement, insertion of a theological point of view. And so here again, in chapter four, we find the issue of meaning and interpretation. Can we put any meaning on this grief? And the emphasis here is not merely a human phenomenon as we saw in chapters one and two, but God had a hand in it.

And there's an echo of, we're going to find an echo here of prophetic oracles of disaster. Remember that personal intervention of God. I am going to do something bad on those who have turned against me.

And we had that in chapter two, divine intervention in a negative form. And this is what we find perhaps implicitly in verse six with that mention of Sodom. We know and every reader knows that in the story, God is behind it.

The chastisement of my people has been greater than the punishment of Sodom. And very much, it's at God's hands. And that agonizingly slow-motion dying was at the hands of God.

And then in verse 11, we go back in spirit to chapter two, the Lord gave full vent to his wrath. He poured out his hot anger. He kindled a fire in Zion that consumed its foundations.

And if we were presented with just that one verse and asked where in Lamentations is it? We'd be inclined to say chapter two, but no, it's in chapter four. And there's this reference to anger there and wrath and this fire and how it fits in. There's a literary suitability of this, no food and they had to use dead children as their food.

Well, at least there was food somewhere and the fire had its own food that consumed the foundations of Zion. So, an ironic new mention of food, but the main point is that it's at God's hands. And then in verse 13, it was for the sins of the prophets and the iniquities of the priests and this retribution.

It's for this theological reason. And there's this guilt theme that comes out at this particular point with this particular specific group. And then in verse 16, the Lord himself has scattered them.

He will regard them no more. These are these priests and prophets, the NIV, that last phrase, God no longer watches over them. God protects them no more.

Right, so meaning, interpretation is very much imposed. It's not really grief, but there is also guilt in this reflection of God being at work. But then lastly, lastly, we haven't come to the end.

I've been talking about verses 1 through 20, but 21 to 22, oh my, that's quite different. There's a brave nevertheless, nevertheless. Here, we have a strong affirmation of faith, such as we have in Psalm laments.

Though we've had a funeral lament before, now we come to an element that belongs to the prayer laments in the Psalms, a strong affirmation of faith. And after all these negative reversals, there's a positive counter-reversal promised for the future in this affirmation of faith. Rejoice and be glad, O daughter Edom, you that live in the land of us.

But for you, the cup will pass. You shall become drunk and strip yourself bare. The punishment of your iniquity, O daughter Zion, is accomplished.

He will keep you in exile no longer. But your iniquity, O daughter of Edom, he will punish. He will uncover your sins.

And one commentator says this is the strongest expression of hope in the whole book. And that is so important. And it reaffirms the positive stance of chapter 3.

And it recalls hope. And so, it paves the way for chapter five. We have mentioned of Edom.

And Edom, sometimes in the Old Testament, is regarded as Judah's number one enemy. For instance, we find in Psalm 137, which is looking sadly back to the fall of Jerusalem, we find there, remember, O Lord, against the Edomites, the day of Jerusalem's fall, how they said, tear it down, tear it down, down to its foundations. And it goes on to complain about the Babylonians.

But the first blame is attached to the Edomites. And what is said there links very much with the book of Obadiah. And there's a whole tirade against Edom, Edom, Edom, and the part that Edom played in the fall of Jerusalem and its aftermath.

They joined forces; they were meant to be allies of Judah, but they joined forces with Judah. Well, you might say they were wise, and they were sensible, and they weren't going to hold out against an enemy that they couldn't withstand. But from Judah's point of view, there it was: they were gloating; you were gloating over your brother on the day of his misfortune.

And one terrible thing, when refugees fled east, the Edomites stood at their frontier, captured those refugees, and held them until the pursuing Babylonian army caught up with them and handed them over, just like that. And so there we are. Obadiah very much fills in the gap, one might say, where this verse is concerned. And so, it says, okay, laugh, rejoice, and be glad, but you won't have the last laugh.

You won't have the last laugh. And there's mention of the cup, it's a cup of wrath. Obadiah, again, 15 and 16, says that Edom is going to experience that cup of wrath.

And in Jeremiah 25, it's developed at great length, the cup of wrath. And you remember, it's picked up at one point in the Gospels; I think all three Gospels mention it, but we'll look at Matthew. Matthew 26, and verse 39, Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, going a little further, Jesus threw himself on the ground and prayed, my father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not what I want, but what you want.

And so that cup lives on in the New Testament, in the experience of Jesus. And then lastly, in verse 22, we get this contrast between the future of Zion and the future of Edom. And this is what I like to call traffic light theology.

When I'm riding my bike and have to stop at a traffic light, what am I looking at? I'm looking at the light at the crossroads. And when that turns red, I know it's going to be green for me. And I think that's wonderful.

It's turning red. And so, I should be zooming off in just a few seconds now. And so, the red light for Edom has been presented in verse 21.

And it's reaffirmed at the end of 22: your iniquity, O daughter Edom, he will punish, God will punish, and he will uncover your sins. But that means the green light for Zion. And that green light is spelled out.

Bad news for Edom means good news for Zion. And so, the punishment of your iniquity is accomplished. It's accomplished.

And he will keep you in exile no longer. Or, in the NIV, he will not prolong your exile. And so, after that drab and grim, most of this chapter four, we come to a positive statement.

And this lays a foundation for what we shall be reading in chapter five. And hopefully it's the last and successful inducement for the congregation to actually come to pray before God as the mentor had been urging.

This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Lamentations. This is session 11, Lamentations 4:1-22.