

# Lamentations

Review

# Framework

- There are two voices
  - The voice of the poet
    - He has undergone God's judgment
    - He remains faithful
    - He offers counsel to Jerusalem and the congregation
  - The voice of Jerusalem
    - Is in the midst of its affliction
    - Speaks in a voice that we may relate to
    - We should take comfort from this voice, but probably not advice

# Features

- Poem 1 – Desolation
  - Describes the forlorn nature of Jerusalem after its destruction and exile
- Poem 2 – Destruction/Disregard
  - Describes the unleashing of God's wrath
  - And his disregard for things he once cared for
- Poem 3 – Despair and Devotion
  - The individual describes the punishment he has received directly from God
  - But he also professes hope and advocates for repentance
- Poem 4 – Devaluation
  - The language focuses on how great things were, and how dreary they are now
- Poem 5 – Desperate Plea
  - The congregation lifts up an extended plea to God

# Interplay

- Poem 1 was is half poet, half city
  - The poet speaks about the current state of Jerusalem
  - The city speaks on its own behalf
    - It ups the ante on what has happened to it
    - It admits its rebellion, but does not offer repentance
- Poem 2 is mostly the poet, with a short response from the city
  - The poet urges the city to cry out to God (vs. 19)
  - The city does as the poet urges
- Poem 3 is the poet responding to Jerusalem's anguish with the story of his own experience
  - He offers counsel on where to go from here

# Poem 3

## Despair and Devotion

# Speakers

- It can be difficult to identify the voice(s) speaking in this poem
  - The entire poem is in first person (either singular or plural)
  - First person before has signified the voice of Zion
  - It is difficult to make sense of the poem if the speaker is Zion
  - I will take the speaker for the entire poem to be the poet
    - The same voice that speaks in the first half of poem 1 and most of poem 2

# Coherence

- For most of Lamentations, the main question we have to answer is what should we take away from the book
- Here though, we must first answer how this poem coheres before we move on
  - The movements between the sections can be difficult to fit together logically
- Several theories are available for how to read the poem coherently:
  - The passages of hope were inserted at a later (post-exilic) date
  - The poem's organization is concentric/chiastic
  - The poem is designed to reflect the inner turmoil and emotional contradiction inherent in experiencing intense grief
  - The poet is a person who has gone through intense suffering and come through with his faith intact, and he now counsels the congregation

# Outline

- Poet's Lament (1 – 20)
- Hope in God's goodness (21 – 33)
- Poet's Counsel (34 – 42)
- Address to God (43 – 66)
  - Complaint (43 – 54)
  - Hope in God's justice (55 - 66)



# Poet's Lament (1-20)

- The poet spends the first third(ish) relating how God has dealt with him
- The language is similar to poem 2:
  - Active, wrathful, planned
  - From vss. 1 – 17 (17 lines), 14 lines have at least one active verb of something God has done to the poet
  - I have seen affliction under the rod of his wrath (vs. 1)
  - He is a bear lying in wait (vs. 10)
- Though it is clear who the poet is talking about, God is always mentioned as “he” until vs. 18

# Poet's Lament

- God has made his way crooked (vs. 9, cf Ecc. 7:13)
- There is language that the poet compares his experience to Zion's:
  - He bent his bow and set me as a target (3:12, cf. 2:4)
- There are elements of shame, not just destruction
  - I have become a laughingstock (3:14, cf. 2:15)
    - This feels more personal than Zion's shame in ch. 2
  - He has made my teeth grind on gravel (3:16)
    - This may also be an allusion to Gen. 3

# Hope In God's Goodness (21-33)

- Now God is named frequently
- This section is an incredible statement of hope
  - Particularly given its proximity to the poet's heart-wrenching lament
- The poet claims that God "does not afflict from his heart" (3:33)
  - The poet will claim twice in this poem that God has shut himself off from prayer (vss. 8, 44)
  - God tells Jeremiah (Jer. 7:16) not to intercede for the people
  - Consider that God is a softie for a repentant person:
    - This is Jonah's complaint!
    - Remember Cain's cry of despair and God's response
    - How about the people in Judges
  - God's command to Jeremiah is so that he can carry out the judgment he needs to
  - Consider Isaiah's ministry, which is designed to blind the people
  - Paul brings this back up in Rom. 9-11 speaking to its purpose of attaining a greater

# The Poet's Counsel (34-42)

- It is somewhat unclear when this section begins
  - Clearly in place by vs. 40
  - I think it works best if the previous two stanzas (34-36, 37-39) are also included
  - They serve as a preamble to the call for action
  - They call out actions of which Israel had consistently been guilty
- The poet gives an expression of God's sovereignty
  - Nothing can happen unless God has commanded it
  - Their destruction did not just happen because God forgot about them
  - It is his active choice to judge their sin
  - And they should not complain, because they are being justly punished

# The Poet's Counsel

- The poet calls for collective action
  - He includes himself in that
  - Though he is counseling Judah as a nation, he does not exempt himself from their experience or responsibility
- This is the first time we have a call for repentance
- The cry in vs. 42 is a bit odd given the poet's previous statement of trust
  - Perhaps it is not a cry of despair, but a realistic look at how things currently stand
  - God has not forgiven because Judah has not yet returned
  - But there is future hope for his forgiveness

## Address to God (43-66)

- The poet transitions to addressing God directly in vs. 42
- The whole section may be a continuation of the prayer recommended in vs. 42
  - Whether it is or not, the whole thing is an address to God
  - So he is suggesting it by virtue of writing it
- There are two major sections
  - Complaint (43 – 54)
  - Expression of hope in God's justice (55 - 66)

# Complaint (43-54)

- There have been addresses to God in poems 1 and 2
  - Those felt more like a description of what is happening
  - This feels more like an underlying complaint that
    - What is happening is not just (or has gone too far)
    - God can (and should) make it stop

## Hope in God's Justice (55-66)

- This mirrors the lament in 1 – 20
- This shows a marked difference between the addresses to God in poems 1 and 2
  - Poem 1 was an admission of rebellion
    - But with a request that others be made as miserable as Judah
  - Poem 2 is a cry for relief from the horrors of siege
    - But with no admission of guilt or repentance
  - This is an expression of hope and trust in God's justice
    - It sounds like many psalms of lament



# Poem 5

## A Desperate Plea

# Not Getting It

- The congregation lifts up its complaint to God about what has happened to it
- As we have seen before, some of the complaint seems not to be completely self-aware
- Inheritance has been turned over to strangers; home to foreigners (2)
  - Deut. 6:10-12: And when the Lord your God brings you into the land that he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—with great and good cities that you did not build, and houses full of all good things that you did not fill, and cisterns that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant—and when you eat and are full, then take care lest you forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

# Not Getting It

- We have become orphans, fatherless, our mothers are like widows (3)
  - Where was your concern for these very things when the prophets told you to take care of them
- We have given the hand to Egypt and Assyria (6)
  - That's the problem!!
- Our fathers sinned, and we bear their iniquities (7)
  - You sinned and are being punished for it
  - Multiple generations had prophets who begged a generation to turn from the sins of their fathers
- Slaves rule over us (8)
  - Remember you were slaves in Egypt

# Progress?

- There is an admission of sin in 5:16
  - There seem to be some signs that they are starting to grasp the magnitude of their sins
  - The admission comes right after “the crown has fallen from our heads”
    - There may be some acknowledgment of a causal connection
  - “For this our hearts have become sick”
    - This could be looking forward to vs. 18, because Jerusalem is desolate
    - It could also be looking backward to the admission of sin
  - The crown falling is compared to God’s throne, which endures forever (19)
    - This could be an admission that only in God is surety found
- There is no outright admission of guilt leading to repentance and a request for forgiveness
  - But it is perhaps a step in the right direction

# Cliffhanger

- The congregation offers a final, desperate plea
  - They do want to be restored to God
    - Though again, there is no mention of reform, just of wanting restoration
  - But their plight is so awful they are unsure if God has completely disowned them
- This makes sense if we view the poet as a counselor to the congregation
  - The poet has been through these things and has persevered
  - He has encouraged the congregation to repent and return
  - The congregation is in the midst of the testing of their faith
  - They are unsure if their repentance will do any good
  - And so we see them where they are
    - Lifting up imperfect complaints, wondering if God will take them back

# The Rest of the Story

- God had already promised that he would not be angry forever (Jer. 3:12)
- We know how God fulfilled that promise
  - In the return from exile
  - Ultimately in God becoming flesh himself to deal with humanity's sinfulness
- At some point you will probably find yourself in both these situations
  - Comforting/counseling someone who is in desperate grief and doubt
  - The person who is in desperate grief and doubt