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## Lamentations-Job: God's Path Through Pain - Lesson 1.

Lamentations and Esther: What God's People Do When the Bottom Drops Out of Life.

### I. Introduction.

In this segment of our course, we look at two books that come from the time of the exile. One is Lamentations, the other is Esther. Lamentations is from the year that Jerusalem fell, 586 B.C., or we believe it is at least close to that time; whereas, Esther is one of the last biblical books, the story about a people who did not return from exile, who did not follow the lead of Zerubbabel or Jeshua or Ezra or Nehemiah. Looking first at Lamentations, we will see a reaction to the destruction of Jerusalem; and then turning later to Esther, we will see how the Jews, who did not return from exile, survived and enjoyed God's blessing.

### II. Lamentations.

Lamentations is a book that has in it basically what its name suggests, it has laments. Lamentations is a poetical book; the whole book is poetry. It is five chapters worth of rather elaborate, rather lengthy poems that bemoan the terrible tragedy that was represented by having Jerusalem the capital of Israel, the city that David had captured from the local Canaanites and had made to be the centerpiece of his empire, the city that God had caused His name to dwell in, in fulfillment of His promises in the book of Deuteronomy, the city where Solomon had built the temple, where the people of God had worshiped for so many centuries, which as of 586 B.C., lay in ruins.

#### A. Structure of Book.

The five chapters of the book of Lamentations are really five individual poems, because they are each structured a little bit differently but they all are talking about the same kind of thing. In addition to their being poetic in general, they also have a special feature; that is, they are acrostic. Now acrostic poetry is the kind of poetry that goes through the alphabet. An acrostic poem starts with A and tells you something that begins with the letter A, and then the next verse perhaps starts with B and tells you something that begins with the letter B, and so on. An acrostic would be a little like this: Awful was the time when our city was destroyed; Bad were those days in which we lived after the siege and the conquest and the death of so many of our loved ones; Crummy was our existence as a people in those hard times. (Continuing down through the alphabet.)

#### B. Hebrew Pattern.

Now, of course, in Hebrew, which the book of Lamentations was written in, you go through the Hebrew alphabet. It has twenty-two letters in its alphabet, not twenty-six like English. There are twenty-two parts to each chapter of the book of Lamentations. In the case of the first two chapters, you get three poetic couplets making up each verse. The first part of the first poetic couplet of the three starts with a new letter of the alphabet, so all of the poetic couplets that make up verse 1 or chapter 1:1 start with the Hebrew equivalent of the letter A. The one A at the beginning covers for all three. The same thing with verse 2: the Hebrew equivalent of the

letter B begins that rather long verse, and all three couplets follow after that one instance of the letter B, and so on. It is an acrostic pattern in which you end up with twenty-two verses.

The same essential pattern comes with chapter 2. Then in chapter 3, the acrostic actually triples. So what happens now is that there are, again, three poetic couplets making up each section of material, but three of them each begin with the Hebrew equivalent of the letter A, and the letter B, and so on. In chapter 3, you have sixty-six verses because you have A, A, A and B, B, B and C, C, C, and so on. With chapter 4, there is a slackening of the intensity of the acrostic. In chapter 4, it is still going through the Hebrew alphabet, but now there are only two couplets, two poetic groupings, in each verse. And with chapter 5, the last chapter of the book, there are twenty-two verses still, but now not even in alphabetical order. It is no longer A, B, C, D, E, F. It is now A and G and W and L; it is all mixed up.

### C. Structure Parallels Emphasis.

Thus, what we observe is that the book in its structure parallels the book in its emphasis. What is that emphasis? It is going through all the miseries that God has brought upon the people of Judah, and specifically upon the city of Jerusalem and its inhabitants. So the woes, the trials, the sufferings, the hardships, the discouragement, the despair, all of that is described in verse after verse, kind of through the alphabet, telling you how bad it was. It reaches a height in chapter 3, a kind of intensity where there is the triple acrostic pattern. Then it begins to lessen off and drop in chapter 4, where it is just two couplets per verse; and then by chapter 5 the book kind of dies out in a whimper. There are twenty-two verses suggesting the total number of letters in the alphabet, but not even in alphabetical order. It is as if the city of Jerusalem and its people are so tired, so weary, so drained of their strength, that they can hardly even gasp out the miseries that they experienced.

### D. Six Elements of Hebrew Lament Poetry.

But as we said, this is a lament, and in the Hebrew Bible, a lament is not hopelessness. A lament is not a pattern in poetry in which you just say "we are gone, we are done, and we are through." A lament is actually a special type of poem that takes you through suffering but also expresses hope. In a lament, there are six elements: (1) There is the address; that is, you are praying to God. This is a kind of a prayer, the book of Lamentations. God is the one addressed. (2) There is the complaint. This is the section where the miseries are described. In Lamentations, ninety-five percent of the material is a complaint; it is describing in all kinds of ways, kind of ringing in the changes on the ways that the people suffered in the siege and the fall of the great city of Jerusalem from 588 to 586 B.C. (3) Then there is an expression of trust. All these laments have some expression of trust in them. Where God can be trusted, He has been faithful; and therefore the implication is that He will be faithful again. There is a hope factor, in other words. (4) There is also a plea for deliverance. Lamentations is asking God where are You? Will You help us? Will You come to us? Will You please work out your plan on our behalf? We have suffered so much at the hands of our conquerors, the Babylonians. (5) There is, as well, the word of assurance. Sometimes it is brief, sometimes it is lengthy, and there is, indeed, assurance in the book of Lamentations. In the midst of all the descriptions of sufferings, you do not want to slip by and miss the encouragement. (6) Then there is finally the

testimonial. There is the commitment to praise God in the future, to honor Him, to thank Him, and to bless Him for the deliverance He will provide.

#### E. Rapid Change in Topics.

One interesting feature of laments in the Bible (and we have many of them in the book of Psalms, and some of them in the Prophets, and here a whole book devoted to that particular poetic style) is that the laments move from one element to another without warning. So you can go from the address to the complaint part, or from the trust to the deliverance plea, or from the assurance to the praise part, without warning. The writer does not say, "Now having spent some time talking about the great suffering, let us talk about the hope that we have in the Lord." No warning is given; it just comes. It comes in the same way that a commercial comes when you are watching a TV program. People in ancient Israel were used to those changes and expected them in the same way that we are not shocked when we are watching a drama on television and somebody is suddenly advertising popcorn. It does not bother us, and we are used to that kind of interruption. They were used to the rapid transitions that are found in a book like Lamentations.

#### F. Examples of Rapid Transitions.

At the height of the misery, at the height of the portion that we call the complaint portion of the lament in chapter 3, we can read words like this: "Like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in hiding, he dragged me ("he" being God and "me" being the city personified in this poem) from the path and mangled me. He left me without help. He drew his bow and made me the target of his arrows. He pierced my heart . . . I became the laughing stock of all my people; they mock me in song all day long. He has filled me with bitter herbs and sated me with gall (a reference to something that the Psalms also mention in terms of the way it can seem that God has abandoned someone, and of course that language also is applied to Christ in the New Testament). He has broken my feet with gravel; he has trampled me in the dust. I have been deprived of peace; I have forgotten what prosperity is."

This is the language of the people of Judah and of Israel, and of Jerusalem, its capital, the capital of that people personified for us. "I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall (again that language). I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope (sudden transition to trust and assurance): Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, 'The Lord is my portion; therefore, I will wait for him.' The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord."

#### G. Yet All is not Lost.

Then after that, verse after verse, chapter after chapter of misery, we must remember it is not a hopeless pattern. It is a pattern in which those who suffer are invited to express their sadness and their sorrow. Thus, a book like Lamentations serves for us as a kind of example of the way that one can be honest with God. One can bring before God one's complaints, what one really feels in suffering. When things are tough, you can tell God. But, it is not because you think He

will not help you that you go on and on about what you are experiencing; it is precisely because you know He is the only one you can turn to with any hope.

So the book ends in its kind of whimpering fashion at chapter 5 with these words: "You, O Lord, reign forever; your throne endures from generation to generation. Why do you always forget us? Why do you forsake us so long? Restore us to yourself, O Lord (there, the plea for deliverance), that we may return; renew our days as of old unless you have utterly rejected us or are angry with us beyond measure." Had God utterly rejected His people? Was He angry with them beyond measure? To those who did not know His Word, His promises, the words of hope and prediction of the future that He had given through His prophets, some might have thought so; but it was not that way at all.

Lamentations does describe for us the bitterness of suffering through the beginnings of God's great covenant punishment, the Exile, but it certainly was not the end. The book looks forward, in fact, with hope to the way that God, who does reign forever, whose throne endures from generation to generation, will respond to the plea: "Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may return; renew our days as of old." God had great things in store for His people. The year 586 B.C. was not the end of the history of Israel.

### III. Esther: Queen of Persia.

#### A. Setting.

Now then, we turn to Esther. Esther is from a time much later, a century and a half or more later, during the days of Xerxes, one of the kings at the end of the fifth century B.C. It was the desire of most Jews who had been taken into captivity by the Babylonians to return when they could. When the Persians gave them that opportunity, many did. Indeed, wave after wave of people returned; and as late as 70, 80, 90 years after the original captivity, we see people returning. We see them returning more than a century after the original captivity, led by people like Ezra and Nehemiah. But there were some who did not. They did not return sometimes out of callousness, sometimes because they no longer had the faith to return. Some Jews, in Babylonian captivity, did not return because they were doing so well; some had succeeded.

Jeremiah had been inspired to tell the people to "settle down, build houses, pray for the blessing of God on the towns and cities where you are exiled to, make friends there. You are going to be there for a long time." Some of them did that so well that when the time came to return to Judah they were not very interested, especially of course the generations that were born in Mesopotamia, in the territory of the Babylonian Empire. To many of them, Judah was something that their parents or grandparents had talked about, but was not a place where they were at home. They were growing up in their country, their part of the world, their region, and that region was one part or another of the Babylonian Empire, and then successively after 540 B.C. when the Babylonian Empire fell to the Persians, one or another part of the Persian Empire. The story of Esther tells us about such people. There were Jews in various locations within the Persian Empire and Esther is one of them; and her uncle, Mordecai, another key figure in this interesting, fascinating story, is another.

## B. A Too-Shy Queen?

The story begins in chapter 1 with a description of how King Xerxes is dissatisfied with his queen, Vashti. At a drunken-fest he wants to display her, to show her off to the crowd. She is offended and refuses. Is this because she is shy in public? No, probably because he wanted to display her in a debauched way, some kind of display with not all her clothes on or the like. She refuses and he and his drunken nobles say, "Hey, if women do this kind of thing, what will be next?"

So he is no great example, but the decision is made to find another wife. Now in the meantime, this king tries out a new woman every night, which was the system, not very admirable. He is no model for any of us to follow, but it was the system that he used. There was a sense in the ancient world that sexual prowess was somehow especially supposed to be manifested in kings. One way they could show they were fit to reign was by going to bed with a different woman every night. King Xerxes did that, and that was his practice.

Esther, a rather secularized Jew, was brought into the potential harem of the king and wanted to please the king. She wanted to be a success. So following the advice of the harem keepers, she, when her time finally came to spend her night with the king, impressed him and he liked her. He decided to make her his queen. She ends up in chapter 2 coming to be chosen as the replacement for, in the king's eyes, somewhat uppity Queen Vashti.

## C. Threats.

In chapter 2 of the book, we read about a plot. This plot is overheard by Esther's uncle, Mordecai. It is a plot that some of the rather prominent individuals in the capital city of Susa had to kill King Xerxes, an assassination plot. Mordecai, aware of this, gets word to Esther about it. Esther agrees to intercede to prevent that from happening. Meanwhile, the plot thickens with the introduction of a character named Haman. This individual, Haman, is one of the king's nobles; he is very wealthy, thinks very highly of himself, and wants to be honored at all times.

The Jews felt that it was improper for them to bow down to various individuals because that would be showing allegiance to those individuals over God (by the time of Esther and Mordecai, that may have been more custom than deep religious sentiment). But Mordecai refuses to bow down, to get on ground with his face to the ground, and honor Haman when he passes by. Haman, noticing this and aware that Mordecai is a prominent Jew, decides that he is going to get back at all the Jews; he is not going to have that kind of thing. If this Jew can do that, the way to solve that is to get rid of Jews in general.

Haman begins to plot against the Jews. So you have, on the one hand, the plot against the king that is discovered by a Jew; and you have, on the other hand, a plot against a Jew by a prominent noble. Even though Mordecai, in effect, has saved the king's life, no particular reward is given him. The press of business in the empire is such that the king does nothing for Mordecai originally. Then as time passes, we know that Haman increasingly goes after Mordecai; and while that is happening, King Xerxes suddenly realizes that a huge amount of

time has passed. He has not done anything for the guy who discovered that plot and turned in the perpetrators so that they could be appropriately punished.

#### D. Rewards.

King Xerxes says in chapter 6, "We have got to do something for this guy Mordecai." And he begins to ask around, "What should we do for someone the king really has taken a delight in, someone who pleases the king?" Haman, in his self-centeredness, his arrogance, thinks, "It has got to be me. I am the one he is planning to honor." He suggests the kinds of honors that should be given to such a person, and then the king does them for Mordecai. Haman is furious and betrays himself as no real friend of the king, as an enemy of the Jews, and one who, in fact, has all along been in it for himself and not for the empire.

So he gets hanged in chapter 7 on the very gallows that he had caused to be built, thinking that they would be used for a public hanging of this man that in his obsession he had made his enemy, Mordecai. Now one of the things that Haman had managed to accomplish was an edict, an edict from the government that the Jews could be attacked, that the Jews were enemies. Now this was the kind of paranoia that can get going a lot of times, it was not just against Jews. There are many times in history where governments have joined in supporting the paranoia of people against one ethnic group or another. But in this case, Haman had stirred up hatred against the Jews in general and had gotten the government edict issued; and a difficulty was that in the law of the Medes and Persians, you could not revoke laws. They felt that if they were going to make laws, you could not just have them last for a while until some king decided he did not like them, and so those laws stood.

#### E. Edicts.

How then were the Jews to be protected if an edict had gone out that on a certain day their enemies could attack them? Well, the answer is you warn the Jews and tell them that it is coming and you allow them to arm themselves and be ready for the attacks. That is what we see described in chapters 8-9 of the book. The Jews triumph: they are ready for their attackers; they are on guard. All of those in the empire who hate the Jews take advantage of this edict, "If you would like to, go attack a Jew", are able to do in their enemies, and thus eliminate opposition for themselves, and have much greater security than they had in fact before the edict was issued in the first place.

This story is the origin of a Jewish festival that came over time to be celebrated called the Feast of Purim. In this feast, children even regard Haman as a sort of boogiemer and remember Esther and Mordecai. In chapter 10, where the book ends, Mordecai's successes and favor and elevation are described for us, along with those of Esther.

#### F. Conclusion.

One interesting factor about this book, it never even mentions the name of God. Not because God is not behind the event, not because God does not love His people and care for them, but because these Jews are quite secularized. They are not talking God's language as it were, but it does not mean that God does not love them. Yes, there are accommodations; yes, they are

fitting into the Persian Empire; and no, they are not among those who returned following the advice of the prophets. But they are still God's people. He still loves them and cares for them, wants His best for them, and protects them; and His protection is with them as the book of Esther draws to a close.