

## Devastated, and without a comforter Lamentations 1

Lamentations 1 divides neatly into two halves: verses 1–11 and 12–22.

In verses 1–11, the main voice is that of a reporter or narrator – traditionally believed to be the prophet Jeremiah. The reporter describes the horrific fate that has befallen Jerusalem, which is personified as a woman. These verses, which read like a news release, describe Lady Zion's reversal of fortunes and the humanitarian crisis left in the wake of immense violence. While these first 11 verses belong to the reporter, Lady Zion's voice is heard twice as she cries out in anguish to Yahweh/God, imploring him to at least 'look'.

According to the report, the battered, robbed and raped Lady Zion has been abandoned by her 'lovers' and betrayed by her 'friends' (v. 2). Now there is no one to comfort her. Though she is not a widow, her isolation leaves her *like* a widow (v. 1). Even though she is still in a covenant relationship with Yahweh, in reality she deserted him long ago. Bored with Yahweh, she took many 'lovers'. Yet now that disaster has befallen her, she is alone, for her 'many lovers' did not really love her. The kings of foreign nations, with whom she entered covenants in breach of her covenant with Yahweh, were just using her, exploiting her for their own ends. When her enemies overpowered her, and when the 'nations' forcefully entered (Hebrew *ba* = sexually penetrated) her sanctuary (v. 10), not only did her so-called friends and lovers not help her, but they actually exploited her vulnerability and joined in the attacking, raping and looting. There is no one to comfort her.

**Read:** Lamentations 1:1–11. (*If you are in a group, employ two readers: one voice for the reporter/narrator, and the other – preferably a female – for the anguished Lady Zion in verses 9c and 11c.*)

### Discuss:

- When Lady Zion cries out in verses 9c and 11c, she only asks one thing from Yahweh. What is it?
- To what does Lady Zion indirectly appeal as she attempts to convince Yahweh that he should *look* at her and *see/consider* her plight?
- What do you think Lady Zion is *hoping* to achieve? (Yes, there is *hope* in this plea.)

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In verses 12–22, the main voice is that of Lady Zion. She has cried out to God, pleading with him to *look* and *see*, but received only silence in return. So now she turns to the passers-by and pleads with them for their attention. Maybe they will comfort her. While verses 12–22 belong to Lady Zion, the reporter/narrator does interject once (v. 17), just to confirm that he (possibly Jeremiah) is a witness to what Lady Zion is describing.

While verses 1–11 present the reporter's perspective, verses 12–22 give us the victim's perspective as Lady Zion describes her suffering, humiliation, shame and abandonment. She is overwrought and consumed with anguish, not primarily on account of the violence inflicted on her own body, but on account of her children – children she has lost to war, famine and captivity. She is a mother grieving for her lost children and there is no one to comfort her for her lovers have abandoned and deceived her (vv. 2b, 19a) and her friends have betrayed her and become her enemies (v. 2c).

After appealing to the passers-by (v. 11) and warning the nations (v. 18), Lady Zion cries out to Yahweh again (vv. 20–22), pleading that he *look* at her, *see* her distress and *consider* the enemy's gloating. She challenges Yahweh to punish the enemy's sins just as he has punished hers. She wants Yahweh to exercise his righteous indignation and justice equally, without discrimination, so that her enemies might duly be punished for their sins.

**Read:** Lamentations 1:12–22. (*If you are in a group, employ two readers: one – preferably a female – for the distressed lady Zion, and another for the reporter in verse 17.*)

### Discuss:

- Although Lady Zion is covenanted to Yahweh, she also has 'many lovers' (vv. 2, 19). Do you think Christians and churches might, at times, similarly abandon God for 'lovers' in the world? What might this involve in practice?

- The attributes of God that ensured covenant curses would fall upon rebellious, unfaithful, unrepentant Lady Zion – that is, his righteousness, justice and covenantal faithfulness – are the very same attributes that give Lady Zion grounds for *hope* that Yahweh will punish her enemies and restore her. Considering this, do you think Lady Zion’s appeal in verse 22 is an expression of hate or hope, futility or faith? Explain.
- Have you ever experienced a situation where you had to suffer alone – helpless and without a comforter? How did that feel?
- What difference does it make to have someone see and acknowledge your pain?
- What difference does it make to have a comforter?

**Task:** List some contemporary cases of Christian persecution – cases where specific Christian individuals or Christian groups are enduring war, appalling persecution, severe repression and/or other serious threats to their life and liberty. Note specifically what the believers are facing – for example, crippling discrimination in employment, physical violence, displacement, imprisonment, torture, pogroms with looting and raping and killing, ethnic-religious cleansing, engineered famine and threat of genocide.<sup>1</sup> Now pick one case and try to imagine yourself in that situation.

- What emotions might you be feeling?
- What confused thoughts might be flooding your head?
- How might Satan be tempting you to abandon your Lord?

**Discuss:**

- In theory, do you think severely persecuted, war-ravaged and traumatised believers might appreciate and *need* our witness (seeing), our support (comforting) and our prayers (advocacy before God)?
- In practice, how do we do this?
- How can we give ‘witness’ to persecution?
- How can we ‘support’ the persecuted?
- How can we ‘intercede’ for the persecuted?

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When the Apostle Paul was imprisoned in Rome, he lamented to Timothy that all the believers in Asia (modern-day Turkey) turned away from him; all, that is, except Onesiphorus, who was ‘not ashamed’ of Paul’s chains (2 Tim 1:15–16).

It seems that the believers in Asia had decided that it was not in their interests to associate with Paul now that he was a prisoner. Maybe they did not want to risk guilt by association. Maybe they did not want the burden of caring. Maybe they didn’t want anything to dampen their joyous celebrations. Maybe they didn’t want anything to threaten their denial of the reality of persecution.

**Discuss:**

- Ask yourselves (individually, as a group, as a church): ‘What sort of Christian am I?’ We who are the ‘passer-bys’/observers of Lamentations 1:12 – *are we* ‘fair-weather friends’? Do we embrace other Christians when they come bearing good news as beacons of victory, but distance ourselves from Christians when they are needy and distressed? In Galatians 6:2 we are called to ‘Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.’
- How can we ‘bear one another’s burdens’?
- What is ‘the law of Christ’? (cf. Mt 22:34–40)
- How might we apply this verse – that is, put it into practice?

P.S. I can assure you, that if you will take on the burden of the suffering church, you will *not* compound your own burdens; rather, you will *displace* them, and God will bless you.

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<sup>1</sup> For contemporary cases, see the Religious Liberty Prayer Bulletin <http://rlprayerbulletin.blogspot.com.au>.