

## And the People Prayed Lamentations 5

In the course of bearing witness to Lady Zion's plight, the reporter became her advocate and comforter (Lam 1 and 2). As a fellow sufferer and survivor, he testified that doubt and despair could be overcome through hope in the LORD who is faithful to all his promises (Lam 3). And despite their present reality of immense hardship under foreign occupation (Lam 4:1–20), a prophetic voice has promised the people that God *will* answer their prayers – punishing their enemies and restoring Zion (Lam 4:21–22). Now the people respond by bursting into prayer.<sup>1</sup> And while Lamentations 5 is mostly complaint, what matters is that the people are praying. *They* are talking to God; the channels of communication have been opened. *This* marks the beginning of healing.

**Discuss:** When you have suffered strained relationships with family, friends or colleagues, has healing ever occurred in the absence of communication? Why do people stop talking and what makes them talk again?

The community opens their prayer *not* with a polite word delivered with sweet tones, *but* with an urgent, passionate, desperate plea. '*Remember, O LORD, what has befallen us; look and see our disgrace!*' (v. 1). Their intention is not to impress God so that he will say, 'Hmm ... what a nice prayer', but to elicit a response!

The peoples' pain is overwhelming and what emerges from their lips is raw emotion. Echoing the plea of Lamentations 2:1 and 3:19, the community implores Yahweh to *remember* (i.e. to *not* forget) them. Echoing the pleas of Lady Zion in Lamentations 1:9c, 11c, 20 and Lamentations 2:20, they implore Yahweh to *look* and *see*. It is not that God the omnipresent Spirit cannot see them; it is just that he is behaving *as if* he is unaware of their plight. For surely (so the reasoning goes) if Yahweh was seeing, then he would be acting?

**Discuss:** Is it necessarily true that if Yahweh sees, he acts? Might God be waiting? Waiting for what?

Hoping to prompt God into action on their behalf, the community appeals to Yahweh to *look* and *see* their disgrace/humiliation (v. 1). They then describe their disgrace in detail in 17 consecutive verses of complaint upon complaint (vv. 2–18). Their inheritance (land) has gone to the enemy (v. 2) and they have been left like orphans (v. 3). No longer in control of their own land, their occupiers make them pay for water and firewood (v. 4). They are constantly pursued (v. 5) and have to beg for aid (v. 6). They suffer for the sins and failing of their leaders (v. 7); they are subjugated and no one is coming to their rescue (v. 8). They risk their lives to search for food (v. 9) and suffer the effects of famine (v. 10). Their women are raped (v. 11) while their leaders and elders are tortured, executed and humiliated (v. 12). Men are forced into hard labour (v. 13). Life, as they knew it, has ceased (vv. 14–15). That which they exalted and gloried in – their prosperity and material glory, or 'crown' – has failed (v. 16a). They acknowledge their sinfulness (v. 16b). Their plight leaves them faint and without vision/hope (v. 17). Mount Zion, the holy mountain of the Most High, is desolate except for wild dogs (v. 18).

**Read:** Lamentations 5:1–18.

What we have here is a concise description of the horrors of war. Human beings are capable of the most incredible cruelty. When desensitised to violence and brainwashed to hate a de-humanised 'enemy', human beings will commit unspeakable acts. Many victims of war survive the unimaginable: loss of family, property and security; repeated pack-rapes and physical violence; raging hunger and thirst; barbarism, shocking cruelty and brutal forced labour. The situation described in Lamentations 5:2–18 would be familiar to many. For multitudes of Christians in this present day, it is their reality.

**Discuss:**

- If this was *your* present reality, what might you want from God?
- What might you want from your brothers and sisters in the global church?

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<sup>1</sup> Lamentations 5 is a communal prayer.

**Task:** make a list of countries where Christians are this day suffering great trauma (See the Critical Prayer Requests (CPR) and/or Religious Liberty Prayer Bulletin). *Pray* for them now.

**Task:** From now on, watch the evening news with a fresh appreciation of what suffering entails. Cultivate compassion. Be sensitive to the Holy Spirit (1 Thess 5:19). *Pray* for the victims.

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The closing verses reveal the internal, spiritual struggle faced by suffering believers universally. They rise up in praise and worship – ‘You, Lord, are sovereign and eternal’ (v. 19), before falling back in confusion – ‘so why do you leave us like this for so long?’ (v. 20).

Note: the people are not questioning God’s justice, nor are they doubting God’s sovereign power. Their question is simply: *why so long?* The Judeans clearly understand that their punishment is taking place *within* the covenant and does *not* mark the end of it. They are expecting/anticipating an end to their suffering! Like the valiant man, they clearly believe that unlike divine wrath, which passes, ‘the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end’ (Lam 3:22). Consequently, ‘the Lord will not cast off forever, but ... will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love’ (Lam 3:31–32).

Then we have the most controversial of endings in verses 21–22:

*Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored!  
Renew our days as of old –  
unless you have utterly rejected us,  
and you remain exceedingly angry with us.*

The difficulty lies with the Hebrew word *kî'im* (literally: ‘for if’) commonly translated as ‘unless’ (v. 22). Actually, there is no consensus on how *kî'im* should be translated. If it is translated ‘for if’, then the ending is left unresolved: that is, we have an ‘if’ but no ‘then’. The translation of *kî'im* as ‘unless’ leaves the end in doubt, implying that Yahweh will only restore them if he hasn’t actually rejected them or if he isn’t still angry with them. And considering that Lamentations makes it clear that Yahweh *has* rejected them and *is* angry with them, such a reading tends towards hopelessness! Maybe they did feel that hopeless. But maybe not!

Other commentators maintain that *kî'im* could be translated ‘even though’:<sup>2</sup>

*Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored!  
Renew our days as of old –  
[even though] you have utterly rejected us,  
and you remain exceedingly angry with us.*

This is the voice of the unfaithful wife who skipped out into the world only to find that the world was not such a great place after all. For when she was attacked and raped, her ‘lovers’ abandoned her and her ‘friends’ betrayed her (Lam 1:2). And so she returns to her ever-faithful, loving husband to plead her case. Despite the fact that this rejected, abandoned and betrayed heartbroken husband *has* utterly rejected her and *is* exceeding angry with her, she makes her appeal: ‘Please take me back,’ she implores, ‘that our relationship might be restored, even though you have rejected me and are angry with me.’ In life, the traumatised woman might then repeat her plea: ‘Please take me back.’ Interestingly, when Lamentations is read aloud in traditional Hebrew liturgy, verse 21 is repeated after verse 22. And so Lamentations closes with Judah’s suffering, traumatised people knocking on Yahweh’s door. And knowing Yahweh – that can only be a good thing!

**Pray**, suffering believer, **pray**. Whether you are at fault or not, just **pray**.

Do not let shame, anger, confusion or tears keep you from the one who faithfully and steadfastly loves you.

**Church:** pray that the Holy Spirit will draw suffering believers into prayer – into communion with their faithful God and only Saviour, whose love for them is everlasting (Rom 8:28-39).

**Close in prayer.**

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<sup>2</sup> Robin A. Parry, *Lamentations*, The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids MI, 2010, p. 156.