

LAMENTATIONS

INTRODUCTION

The Judahites had been able to think of themselves only as God's chosen race. As such, they felt that they would always experience good things. God had made covenants of blessing with them, but these were conditional. Blatant disobedience would mean that the pleasurable aspects of blessing would be replaced by punishment. The fulfillment of the promises of blessing could always skip a few generations of disobedient Israelites.

The books of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles describe the moral decline of the kingdom of Judah (in spite of prophetic warnings) that would lead to its defeat and captivity (see 2:17). When King Zedekiah rebelled against the Babylonians, to whom Judah was subject, Nebuchadnezzar came against Jerusalem (2 Kin. 24:20). While he was besieging it, the people inside were starving. When he breached the wall, Zedekiah and the soldiers managed to escape (2 Kin. 25:4). But they were soon taken captive. Nebuzaradan, Nebuchadnezzar's official, destroyed most of Jerusalem, burned the temple, and carried all but the poorest people into exile (2 Kin. 25:8-12).

The poems of this book seem to have been composed during and after the time in which all this was happening. These poems are especially heartrending when they contrast the former blessings and strengths of Judah with the chaos and suffering their sin had brought on them. The chosen, favored people had lost everything and were in a hopeless position. Everything of significance had been destroyed. But the poems also describe the ministry of Jeremiah, sent again as a prophet to speak about the changed circumstances of God's people. He helped them to give the necessary expression to their grief and to comfort them in it. He also encouraged them to think about the hand of God on them in punishment and helped them to submit penitently to the judgment they deserved until it had passed (3:28-33). Only after the people were completely humbled would they be able to think of restoration.

Laments were typically composed as poetry in the ancient world. Jeremiah had already written some (see Jer. 7:29; 9:10, 19), and so had other prophets. See Ezek. 19:1-14; Amos 5:1-3. But this book contains the longest and best known of such poems. There are five poems. The first four are acrostics, or poems in which each stanza begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. These were probably acknowledged as special artistic achievements in those days. A number of the Psalms are acrostics. See Psalms 25, 34, 37, and 119. This device may have assisted memorization, but it also seems to indicate here that the poet was expressing all his feelings from *Aleph* to *Tau*, or as we would say, from A to Z. He was working through every grief, hurt, and fear, and was opening up completely to both man and God.

The fifth poem is not an acrostic, probably because it is a personal prayer, which could have made the material unsuitable for the acrostic form.

There is little systematic arrangement of subject matter throughout the book as a whole, except for a possible climax in chapter 3 and a progressive conclusion in the final two chapters. But this is, after all, the nature of grief. It waxes and wanes, goes away, and returns again unexpectedly.

Lamentations features six major themes, all linked with the concept of suffering:

1. Their Suffering Was the Result of Their Sin. This strong theme is acknowledged in each chapter (as in 1:5; 2:14; 3:42; 4:13; 5:16). By the time the poems were written, this was obviously fully accepted. Even the Babylonians acknowledged the fact (Jer. 40:3). They knew that their suffering had not come upon them by chance. It was due to the wrath of God provoked by their sin (2:1). He was dealing with their spiritual condition, and they were supposed to take it personally.

2. Their Suffering Was Seen as Coming from God Rather Than from Men. The Babylonians were no more than an instrument in His hands. The fact that He was the ultimate cause is brought out throughout the book. No less than forty-four verses refer to this fact—an average of 1 out of every 3.5 verses. A few examples are 1:13, 15; 2:1, 4; 3:1,37, 38.

3. Their Suffering Could Direct Them Toward God. The prophet is constantly conscious of God, of His purposes, and of His dealings with His people. There is no indication here of suffering resulting in a total abandonment of God or an eradication of His principles from their minds.

4. Suffering, Tears, and Prayer Belong Together. They were encouraged to pour out their hearts to God, to weep before Him, and to tell Him all the details of their pain, grief, and frustration.

Each chapter, except chapter 4, ends with a prayer. But then the whole of chapter 5 is a prayer, as though making up for this lack. The prayers are both detailed (2:20, 21; 5:1-10) and emotional (1:20, 21; 3:48-51). They contain the language of grief and repentance (1:20; 3:40-42), and are an indication that it is entirely appropriate to pray like this when the occasion demands it.

5. Prayer Should Always Look for Some Ray of Hope. It should never be completely given over to sorrow. After the detailed descriptions of suffering and sorrow in the first two and one-half chapters, a new understanding seems to surface in 3:21-24. Here the poet speaks about hope, and about God's mercies, compassion, and faithfulness. It was a realization that a manifestation of God's discipline did not mean that His love had ceased. When the discipline had accomplished His purpose, the circumstances would change (3:31, 32). God may have been using Babylon, but that did not mean that they were His elect or that He favored their cruel methods (3:34-36). The future held a vindication of Israel over their enemies (3:58-66).

6. Their Responsibility Was to Submit to Their Sufferings Patiently. Their sorrow had to be accepted in patience, with the realization that it would end when God's will had been accomplished (3:26-32).

(Spirit Filled Life Bible's Introduction to Lamentations, Paul B. Watney)

Lamentations 1:1-22

Jerusalem was populous but is now depopulated, v. 1. She was full of her own people who replenished her, and full of the people of other nations who resorted to her, with whom she had profitable commerce, but now her own people are carried into captivity, and she *lies deserted*. The *chief places of the city* are not now, as they used to be, *places of concourse*. *How like a widow is she!* Her king who was as a husband to her is gone; her God has departed from her; she is emptied of her children, is solitary and sorrowful as a widow.

Jerusalem had dominion but is now in subjection. She had been *great among the nations*, greatly loved by some and greatly feared by others. Some made her presents, and others paid her taxes; so that she was really *queen among the provinces*. But now she has not only lost her friends and *lies deserted*, but has lost her freedom and *has become a slave*; she paid tribute to Egypt first and then to Babylon. Sin brings a people not only into solitude, but into slavery.

Jerusalem used to be full of mirth has now become full of grief. Jerusalem had been a joyous city, where the tribes went to rejoice before the Lord: she was *the joy of the whole earth*, but now *bitterly weeps*, she weeps *at night*, in silence and solitude; *at night*, when others rest, her thoughts are intent on her troubles. Her head is a *spring of water*, and her eyes a *fountain of tears*, so that she *weeps day and night* (Jer. 9:1); *her tears are continually upon her cheeks*.

Those who were separated from the heathen now *dwell among the nations*; those who were a distinct people are now a mingled people (v. 3): *Judah has gone into exile*, out of her own land into the land of her enemies, among those who are aliens to God and the covenants of promise, with whom *she finds no resting place*. *"Her children have gone into exile, captive before the foe*; those who were to have been the seed of the next generation are carried off; so that the land is likely to be still desolate for lack of heirs." Those who dwell among their own people, a free people, and in their own land, would be more thankful for mercies if they would but consider the miseries of those forced into strange countries.

Those who used to conquer are now conquered. *All who pursue her have overtaken her in the midst of her distress* (v. 3); so that her people unavoidably fell *into enemy hands*, for there was no way to escape (v. 7). Everywhere *her foes have become her masters: her enemies are at ease* (v. 5).

Those who had been a dignified people, on whom God had put honor, and to whom their neighbors had paid respect, are now brought into contempt (v. 8); *All who honored her before despise her*. They have vilified themselves by their sins: *The enemies have triumphed over them* (v. 9). *Sin is the reproach of any people*.

Those who lived in a fruitful land were ready to perish for lack of necessary food (v. 11): *All her people groan* in despondency and despair. There was *no food for the people of the land* (Jer. 52:6), and in their captivity they had much ado to get bread, Lam. 5:6. *They barter their treasures for food to keep themselves alive*, or (as the margin is) *to make the soul come again*, when they were ready to faint away.

(The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, Matthew Henry)

Give an account of the miseries of the Jews presented here.

Who has afflicted them and for what reason are they being afflicted?

Lam. 1:8, 12, 14, 17, 20 Lam. 2:17

Who had Israel relied on in the past?

Lam. 1:19

Lamentations 2:1-22

A very sad representation is here made of the state of God's church, of Jacob and Israel, of Zion and Jerusalem: but the emphasis in these verses seems to be laid all along on the hand of God. The grief is that God appears angry with them: it is he who chastens them, and chastens them *in his displeasure*.

Time was when God's delight was in his church, and he appeared to her as a friend. But now he is angry with her, and appears against her as an enemy. To those who know how to value God's favor nothing appears more dreadful than his finger; corrections in love are easily borne, but rebukes in love wound deeply. It is God's wrath that *has burned in Jacob like a flaming fire* (v. 3), but it was their sin that kindled this fire. God is such a tender Father to his children that we may be sure he is never angry with them but when they give him cause to be angry. Now he is an enemy to them; at least he is *like an enemy*, v. 5. *Like an enemy he has strung his bow*, v. 4. He stood with *his right hand* stretched out against them, and a sword drawn in it *like a foe*. God is not really an enemy to his people, no, not when he is angry with them and corrects them in anger. But sometimes he is *like an enemy* to them, when all his providences concerning them seem in outward appearance to have a tendency to their ruin. But, blessed be God, Christ is *our peace*, our peacemaker, who has slain the enmity.

Time was when God's church appeared very bright, and considerable among the nations; but now *the Lord has covered the Daughter of Zion with a cloud* (v. 1), a dark cloud, through which she cannot see his face; *a thick cloud* (so the word signifies), a *black cloud*, not such as that under which God conducted them through the wilderness, or that in which God took possession of the temple and filled it with his glory: no, that side of the cloud is now turned towards them which was turned towards the Egyptians in the Red Sea. He *turned back their right hand*, so that they were not able to ward off the blow which was given them. What can their right hand do against the enemy when God draws it back, and withers it, as he did Jeroboam's?

Time was when Jerusalem and the cities of Judah were strong and well-fortified. But now the Lord has in anger *swallowed them up*. They are so totally ruined that they seem to have been *swallowed up*. He has *swallowed up all her palaces* (v. 5), though those were stately, and strong, rich and well-guarded. He has destroyed not only their dwelling places, but their *strongholds*. Thus has he *multiplied mourning and lamentation for the Daughter of Judah*, when they saw all their defense departed from them. This is again insisted on, v. 7-9. He has *handed over to the enemy the walls of her palaces*. The walls of palaces cannot protect them, unless God himself is a wall of fire around them. Whatever desolations God makes in his church, they are all according to his counsels. But, when it is done, he has *stretched*

out a line, a measuring line, to do it exactly and by measure: this far the destruction shall go, and no further.

Time was when their government flourished, and the balance of power was on their side; but now it is otherwise: *He has brought the kingdom and its Princes down to the ground in dishonor*, v. 2. They had first dishonored themselves with their idolatries, and then God dealt with them as with dishonorable things. No marvel that the king and the priest, whose characters were always deemed venerable and inviolable, are despised by everybody, when God has, *in his fierce anger, spurned both king and priest*, v. 6. The crown has fallen from their heads, for *her king and her princes are exiled among the nations*, prisoners among them (v. 9), and treated as the lowest, without any regard for their character. It is just with God to debase those by his judgments who have by sin debased themselves.

Time was when the ordinances of God were administered in their purity, and they had those signs of God's presence with them; but now that part of the *beauty of Israel* was gone which was indeed their greatest beauty. The ark was God's footstool, under the mercy seat, between the cherubim; this was of all others the most sacred symbol of God's presence (it is called his *footstool*, 1 Chron. 28:2; Ps. 99:5; 132:7): there the Shechinah rested, but now he *has not remembered his footstool*. The ark itself was allowed, as it should seem, to fall into the hands of the Babylonians. Of what little value are the signs of his presence when his presence is gone!

Their false prophets cheated them, v. 14. This was a thing which Jeremiah had lamented long before, and had observed with a great concern (Jer. 14:13): *Ah, Sovereign Lord, the prophets keep telling them. You will not see the sword*; and here he inserts it among his lamentations. Their visions were all their own imagination, and it is most likely that they themselves knew that the visions they pretended were counterfeit. The people set them up, told them what they should say, so that they were *prophets after their hearts*. Prophets should tell people of their faults, should show them their sins, that they may bring them to repentance, and so prevent their ruin; but these prophets knew that would lose the people's affections and contributions. Therefore *they did not expose your sin*; though that might have been a means, by taking away their iniquity, to turn away their captivity.

Their neighbors laughed at them (v. 15): *All who pass your way clap their hands at you. Is this the city* (they said) *that was called the perfection of beauty?* (Ps. 1:2). How is it now the perfection of deformity! Where is all its beauty now?

Their enemies triumphed over them, v. 16. Those who wished ill to Jerusalem now *open their mouths*, indeed, they widen them; they *scoff and gnash their teeth* in scorn and indignation. *"We have swallowed her up*; it is our doing, and it is our gain; it is all our own now. Certainly *this is the day we have long waited for; we have lived to see it; we have seen it; aha! so would we have it.*"

Their God, in all this, appeared against them (v. 17): *The Lord has done what he planned*. What God devises against his people is intended for them, and so it will be found in the result. When he gave them his law through Moses he told them what judgments he would certainly inflict on them if they transgressed that law; and now that they had been guilty of the transgression of this law he had executed the sentence of it, according to Lev. 26:16ff., Deut. 28:15.

(The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, Matthew Henry)

Who has cheated the Israelites? Who in the end is to be blamed?

Jer.14:13 Lam. 2:14

What is the remedy for their situation?

Lam. 2:19

What were some of the things happening to the families causing them to be in such a lamenting state?

Jer. 14:1-20 Lam. 2:4, 12, 20-22

Lamentations 3:1-66

The title of the 102nd Psalm might very fitly be prefixed to this chapter—*A prayer of an afflicted man. When he is faint and pours out his lament before the Lord.* The prophet complains,

1. That God is angry. This gives both birth and bitterness to the affliction (v. 1): *I am the man who has seen affliction, and has felt it physically, by the rod of his wrath.* God is sometimes angry with his own people; yet it is not as a sword to cut off, but only as a rod to correct; it is to them *the rod of his wrath*, though grievous for the present, in the end advantageous. By this rod we must expect to see *affliction*, and if we are made to see more than ordinary affliction, we must not quarrel, for we are sure that the anger is just and the affliction mixed with mercy.

2. That he is in the dark. Darkness is put for trouble and perplexity; this was the case of the complainant (v. 2): *"He has driven me by an unaccountable chain of events, into darkness rather than light, the darkness I feared and not into the light I hoped for."* And (v. 6), *He has made me dwell in darkness, dark as the grave, like those long dead, who are quite forgotten.*

3. That God appears against him as an enemy. *"Indeed, he has turned against me (v. 3), as far as I can discern; for he has turned his hand against me again and again, all day long. I have been punished every morning,"* Ps. 73:14. When God's hand is turned against us, we are tempted to think that his heart is turned against us too. *"He was to me like a bear lying in wait, surprising me with his judgments, and like a lion in hiding; so that whichever way I went I could never think myself safe."* *He drew his bow, v. 12. He has made me the target of his arrows, and he pierced my heart with arrows from his quiver, giving me an inward wound, v. 13.*

4. That the Jewish state may be fitly compared to a man wrinkled with age (v. 4): *"He has made my skin and my flesh grow old; they are wasted and withered, and he has broken my bones. He has filled me with bitter herbs, a bitter sense of these calamities, v. 15."* *He has mingled gravel with my bread, so that my teeth are broken with it (v. 16). He has trampled me in the dust, or (as some read it) he has fed me with ashes.*

5. That he is not able to discern any way of escape (v. 5): *"He has besieged me, like a besieged city. Where there was a way open it is now quite closed up: He has surrounded me on every side with bitterness and hardship; I vex and fret, and tire myself, to find a way of escape, but can find none, v. 7. He has walled me in so I cannot escape.* I am chained; and as notorious malefactors are double fettered, so he *has weighed me down with chains. He has also (v. 9) barred my way with blocks of stone, with a stone*

wall, which cannot be broken through, so that *my paths are crooked*; I traverse to and fro, but am still turned back." So (v. 11), "*He dragged me from the path*; ruined my projects. He has *mangled me*; and *left me without help*, has deprived me of all comfort in my own soul."

6. That God turns a deaf ear to his prayers (v. 8): "*Even when I call out*, as one in earnest, who would make him hear, yet he *shuts out my prayer*. Sometimes God seems to be angry even against *the prayers of his people* (Ps. 80:4), and their case is deplorable indeed when they are denied the comfort of acceptance.

7. That his neighbors make a laughing matter of his troubles (v. 14); *I became the laughingstock of all my people*, to all the wicked among them, who made one another merry with the public judgments, and particularly the prophet Jeremiah's griefs.

8. That he was ready to despair of deliverance: "You have not only taken peace from me, but *I have been deprived of peace* (v. 17). *I have forgotten what prosperity is*; it is so long since I had it that I have lost the idea of it. I have been so inured to sorrow and servitude that I know not what joy and liberty mean. *My splendor is gone and all that I had hoped from the Lord* (v. 18); I can no longer entrust myself to God as my support, even my God is inexorable."

9. That grief returned on every remembrance of his troubles, and his reflections were as melancholy as his prospects, v. 19, 20. *My affliction and my transgression* (so some read it), my trouble and my sin that brought it upon me: this was *the bitterness and the gall in the affliction and the wandering*. It is sin that makes the cup of affliction a bitter cup. The captives in Babylon had all the miseries of the siege in their mind continually, and *wept when they remembered Zion*; indeed, they could *never forget Jerusalem*, Ps. 137:1, 5.

We must not quarrel with God for any affliction that he lays on us at any time (v. 39): *Why should any living man complain?* From the doctrine of God's sovereign and universal providence he draws this inference, *Why should any living man complain?* The sufferers in the captivity must submit to the will of God in all their sufferings. Shall a *living man complain when punished for his sins?* We are sinful men, and that which we complain of is the just *punishment of our sins*; it is far less than our iniquities have deserved. Then let us not complain; instead of repining, we must be repenting; and, as an evidence that God is reconciled to us, we must be endeavoring to reconcile ourselves to his holy will.

We must set ourselves to answer God's intention in afflicting us, which is to bring sin to our remembrance, and to bring us home to himself, v. 40. *Let us examine our ways and test them*. Let conscience be employed both to search and to try. *Let us test our ways*, that by them we may test ourselves, for we are to judge of our state not by our faint wishes, but by our step, not by one particular step, but by our ways, the ends we aim at, the rules we go by, and the tenor of our lives to those ends and those rules. When we are in affliction it is the proper time to *give careful thought to our ways* (Hag. 1:5), that what is amiss may be repented of and amended for the future, and so we may fulfill the purpose of the affliction. We are apt, in times of public calamity, to reflect on other people's ways, and lay blame on them; whereas our business is to *examine and test our own ways*. "Let us *return to the Lord*. We have been with him, and it has never been well with us since we forsook him;

let us therefore now return to him." Our hearts must go along with our prayers. We must *lift up our hearts and our hands*, as we must pour out our souls with our words. Praying is lifting up the soul to God (Ps. 25:1) is to *our Father in heaven*; and the soul that hopes to be with God in heaven forever will, by frequent acts of devotion, be still learning the way there and pressing forward in that way.

(The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, Matthew Henry)

What is the sad complaint given in Lamentations 3?

Ps. 73:14 Ps. 80:4 Ps. 102

What is it that keeps their hearts from being completely broken?

Lam. 3:21-24 2 Cor. 4:9

Several times in the past the people complained that God had not pitied them in their situation (Lam 2:17, 21). **Show how they correct themselves in this chapter and look at their situation in a different light?**

Lam. 3:25-26 Zeph.3:5

When God caused this grief does He delight in seeing their calamities?

Lam. 3:31-33

When will the grief upon them cease?

Lam. 3:48-50, 57-60

Lamentations 4:1-22

The elegy in this chapter begins with a lamentation of the sad change in Jerusalem. The city that was formerly as *fine gold* has lost its luster; it has become dross.

The temple was laid waste, which was the glory of Jerusalem and its protection. And some understand the gold (v. 1) to be the *gold of the temple*, the fine gold with which it was overlaid (1 Kings 6:22); when the temple was burned the gold was sullied. *The sacred gems* were brought down by the fire, and thrown about *at the head of every street*; they lay mingled among the common ruins.

The princes and priests, who were in a special manner the *sons of Zion*, were abused, v. 2. Israel was more rich in them than in treasures of gold and silver. But now they are broken as *pots of clay*. They have grown poor, are brought into exile, and made humble and despicable.

Little children were starved for lack of bread and water, v. 3, 4.

Persons of rank were reduced to poverty, v. 5. Those who were well-born and well-bred, being stripped of all by the war, are *destitute in the streets*, have not a bed to lie on. As sometimes the *needy* are *raised from the ash heap* (Ps. 113:7), so there are instances of the *wealthy* being brought *to ash heaps*.

Persons who were eminent for dignity, perhaps for sanctity, shared with others in the common calamity, v. 7, 8. *Her Nazarites* are changed. These *Nazarites*, by reason of their temperate diet, especially the pleasure they had in devoting themselves to God, which made their faces to shine as *Moses'*, were *brighter than snow* and *whiter than milk*; drinking no wine nor strong

drink, they had a healthful complexion and cheerful countenance. But now *their appearance is disfigured* (as is said of Christ, Isa. 52:14); it is *blacker than soot*; they look miserable, partly through hunger and partly through grief and perplexity. *They are not recognized in the streets*; those who respected them now take no notice of them.

Jerusalem died a lingering death; for the famine contributed more to her destruction than any other judgment. Jerusalem dies by inches, dies so as to feel herself die. The iniquity of Jerusalem is more aggravated than that of Sodom, no wonder that the punishment of it is so. Sodom never had the means of grace that Jerusalem had. *With their own hands the compassionate women have slain and then cooked their own children*. The case was sad enough that they had not the means to feed their children and make food for them (v. 4), but much worse that they could find in their hearts to feed on their children and make food of them. The destruction of Jerusalem is a complete destruction (v. 11), an amazing destruction, v. 12. It was a surprise to the kings of the earth, and to *the world's people* who knew Jerusalem. They knew that it was the *city of the great King*, and therefore they thought that it was so much under the divine protection that it would be in vain for any of its enemies to make an attack against it.

The sins for which God brought this destruction upon them served to justify God in it (v. 13, 14): It is *because of the sins of her prophets, and the iniquities of her priests*. The particular sin charged against them is persecution; the false prophets and corrupt priests joined to *shed within her the blood of the righteous*. They not only shed the blood of their innocent children, whom they sacrificed to Molech, but the blood of the righteous men among them, whom they sacrificed to that more cruel idol of enmity to the truth and true religion. There is nothing that will make prophets and priests to be abhorred so much as a spirit of persecution.

The testimony of their neighbors convicted them of sin and to showed the equity of God's proceedings against them. They upbraided them with their pretended purity, while they lived in iniquity. *Men cry to them, Go away! You are unclean!* They all cried out shame on them, and could easily foresee that God would not long allow so provoking a people to continue in so good a land. The land would spew them out, as it had done their predecessors, and, when they saw the dispersed of *Jacob flee and wander about*, they told them of it. They said, *Now the Lord himself has scattered them*. They said, when they saw them expelled, *God no longer watches over them*, and how then can they help themselves? In this they were mistaken. God has not cast them off, for all this.

"We look on our case to be in a manner helpless. *Our end was near* (v. 18), the end both of our church and of our state." They looked for help from this and the other powerful ally, but to no purpose. Looking for that which never came (v. 17); they *watched for a nation* that frustrated their expectations. The persecutors overcame them (v. 18): *Men stalked us at every step, so we could not walk in our streets*. When the Babylonians besieged the city they raised their siege engines so high above the walls that they could shoot at people as they went along the streets. *They stalked them with the arrows from place to place. Their pursuers were swifter than eagles in the sky*, v. 19.

David's psalms of lamentation commonly conclude with some word of comfort, which is as life from the dead and light shining out of darkness; so

does this lamentation in this chapter. It is here foretold, for the encouragement of God's people,

1. That an end shall be put to Zion's troubles (v. 22). The troubles of God's people shall be continued no longer than until they have done their work for which they were sent.

2. That an end shall be put to Edom's triumphs. It is spoken ironically (v. 21): *Rejoice and be glad, O Daughter of Edom. The cup of trembling, which it is now Jerusalem's turn to drink deeply of, will be passed also to you.* The destruction of the Edomites was foretold by this prophet (Jer. 49:7ff.). *"The cup that will pass to you shall intoxicate you. You will be drunk, and at your wits' end, shall stagger and stumble, and then, as Noah when he was drunk, you will be stripped naked and expose yourself to contempt."*

(The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, Matthew Henry)

Describe the outward appearance of Jerusalem, the temple and the people at this time?

Particular sin is charged against whom in Lamentations 4:13-14?

Lamentations 5:1-22

The people of God, overwhelmed with grief, give vent to their sorrows at the throne of grace. *Remember what has passed, look and see what is present, and do not let all this hardship we are in seem trifling in your eyes, and not worth taking notice of, Neh. 9:32.* The one word in which all their grievances are summed up is *disgrace: Look, and see our disgrace.* As it was a disgrace, it reflected on the name and honor of that God who had acknowledged them as his people.

They acknowledge the disgrace of sin, *the reproach of their youth*, of the early days of their nation. It is a repentant confession of the sins of their ancestors, which they themselves had persisted in, for which they now justly suffered.

They represent the reproach they bear, in various particulars, which tend to their disgrace.

1. They are robbed of that good land which God gave them, v. 2. "It is turned to strangers; they dwell in the houses that we built, and this is our reproach."

2. Their state and nation are like widows and orphans (v. 3): *"We have become fatherless* (that is, helpless). Our king, who is the father of the country, is cut off; indeed, God our Father seems to have forsaken us; *our mothers, our cities, are now like widows, exposed to wrong and injury, and this is our reproach."*

3. They are put hard to it to provide necessities. Water used to be free but now (v. 4), *We must buy the water we drink.* Formerly they had fuel for the fetching; but now, *"Our wood can be had only at a price, and we pay dearly for every bundle."* But what must they do for bread? Some of them sold their liberty for it (v. 6): *"We submitted to Egypt and Assyria, have made the best bargain we could, that we might get enough bread. We got our bread with the peril of our lives".* They stole out of the city to fetch in some supply; they were in danger of being put to the sword, *the sword in the desert* it is called.

4. They are brought into slavery, and this is as much as anything their reproach (v. 5): *Our necks are under the grievous yoke of persecution*. The poor captives in Babylon *were weary and found no rest, no night's rest, no sabbath rest*. They would not be ruled by their God, and by his servants the prophets, whose rule was gentle and gracious, and therefore justly are they ruled with rigor by their enemies and their servants.

5. Those who used to be feasted are now famished (v. 10): *Our skin is hot as an oven, dried and parched too, feverish from hunger, from storms of famine* (so the word is).

6. All sorts of people were abused and dishonored. The *women were ravished, even in Zion, that holy mountain, v. 11*.

7. An end was put to all their gladness (v. 14): *The young men, who used to be disposed to mirth, have stopped their music*. It was so with the body of the people (v. 15): *Joy is gone from their hearts. Our dancing has turned to mourning*. This may refer to the joy of their solemn feasts, and the dancing used in them (Judges 21:21), which was not only modest, but sacred dancing.

8. An end was put to all their glory. The public administration of justice was their glory, but that was gone (v. 14). The royal dignity was their glory, but that also was gone: *The crown has fallen from our head, not only has the king himself fallen into disgrace, but the crown; he has no successor*. Earthly crowns are fading falling things; but, blessed be God, there is *a crown of glory that does not fade away, that never falls, a kingdom that cannot be moved*.

The people of God express the deep concern they had for the ruins of the temple, more than for any other of their calamities (v. 17, 18). "The people have polluted Mount Zion with their sins, and God has justly made it *desolate; jackals prowl over it as freely and commonly as they do in the woods*."

They comfort themselves with the doctrine of God's eternity (v. 19): *But you, O Lord, reign forever*. What shakes the world gives no disturbance to him who made it; whatever revolutions there are on earth there is no change in the Eternal Mind; God is still the same, and *reigns forever* infinitely wise and holy, just and good.

They humbly expostulate with God concerning the frowns of heaven they were now under (v. 20): *"Why do you always forget us, as if we were quite cast out of mind? You are the same, and, though the throne of your sanctuary is demolished, will you not be the same to us?"* Though we may not quarrel with God, yet we may plead with him (Jer. 12:1).

They earnestly pray to God for mercy and grace; "Lord, do not reject us forever, but *restore us to yourself; renew our days*," v. 21. Though these words are not put last, yet the Rabbis, because they would not have the book to conclude with those melancholy words (v. 22), repeat this prayer again, and so make these the last words both in writing and reading this chapter. This agrees with that repeated prayer (Ps. 80:3, 7, 19), *Restore us; make your face shine on us. Restore us from our idols to yourself, by a sincere repentance and reformation, that we may return*. If God by his grace renews our hearts, he will by his favor *renew our days*.

(The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, Matthew Henry)

How did the people of God who were overwhelmed with grief give vent to their sorrows?

Neh. 9:32 Ps. 80:3, 7, 19 Lam. 5:19-22