



“The Question: Will God Remember Us?” Lamentations 5

I’ve had multiple scenarios in my short life where I’ve forgotten something. And sometimes when I say that to someone older than I, they say, “You’re too young for that.” I still remember about ten years ago when I was looking for my car keys. I had things in my hand. They weren’t in my pocket. Where were they?! And then I realized that my mouth was holding them. I definitely felt too young (or idiotic) to have made that mistake.

Since then, I’ve had other types of things I’ve forgotten. There have been occasions when I’ll get a text from Tracy saying, “Did you remember to pick up the kids?” Oh no! I have to go NOW! Even within the last year, I got a call from the school saying one of my kids was waiting for me to pick him up. Poor child was waiting for almost an hour. But as soon as I got the call, I left!

Remembering these things called me to action. This is the same idea that we get as we come to a close in our study through the book of Lamentations. In Lamentations 5, the Poet starts off with the word “Remember.” Now, from a Hebrew perspective, he’s not simply saying, “Reminisce with me, God.” He’s not saying, “Call something to mind so that you can be aware of it.” God knows all things. The word “remember” here is a word that is a call to action. When my wife texts me and says “Remember you need to pick up a child!” That is not only a call to remember. It’s a call to action! So it is with the word remember here. The Poet asks God to “look and act.”

Now, our question could be, “What does the Poet want God to look at?” Well, the context of the book of Lamentations is that the people of Jerusalem and Judah are lamenting over the desecration of Jerusalem. God has left the Temple. He is no longer blessing them with his presence or even promises of protection. And then, the nation of Babylon has taken over. Babylon has murdered and ransacked the city while also taking people into captivity. God’s people are in the dust, wallowing in despair.

Does God see? Well, yes. But will he respond with compassion? Well, that’s the question, isn’t it? Remember the big question Lamentations asks? Is God just *and* compassionate? The answer is given in the book at the center of the center poem (in chapter 3). Great is his faithfulness! But, the people don’t see it yet. The Poet’s eyes of faith say God is faithful. But the people’s physical eyes see destruction. So they lament. They lament the pain. They lament the circumstances. They lament the suffering. They lament that God has turned against them. They lament over their sin.

And so we see in this book of Lamentations a sobering and encouraging example of what it means to sorrow over pain, suffering and sin while also learning how to wait on the Lord in the midst of all of this. What we see in the progression of the poems is the Poet’s call for the people to call on the Lord for

mercy, to turn from their sins and to lay themselves at God's feet for compassion. And chapter 5 concludes all of this, leading us to hope that God will respond.

Now, before we read further in the chapter, I do want to state a couple things that would be noticeable to the Hebrew reader. First, this poem does not follow the acrostic pattern of the previous four poems. Those poems all had their lines begin with a letter from the Hebrew alphabet. And even while chapter 3 is longer, it maintained alphabetical order. This poem doesn't have that and it doesn't follow the same poetic rules as the previous poems – except it is still 22 verses. So, the Poet maintains consistency in terms of lines, but doesn't in other ways. There's speculation as to why he does this, but it seems the most obvious reason is that the Poet is laying everything out there and can't contain himself. This is his final plea and he's longing for the Lord to respond to the pain. The second point is that this poem is a corporate lament. The Poet is using third person plural throughout this poem. He's speaking on behalf of the people as though he is the people. The lament isn't just a lament of one man. It's a call to the nation to cry out to the Lord and a call to the Lord to not merely change circumstances but to recognize the *people*.

Now, in verse 1, he calls on the Lord to *remember*. Verse 1 says, "Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us; look, and see our disgrace!"¹ Again, in remembering, he's not asking God to call something to mind that he's forgotten. He's asking God to *act* and *respond* with compassion. So, as he does in other poems, he lays out the pain...again. By the way, if you've sat here for every sermon during Lamentations, you might be at a point where you will say, "I've already heard this. Can't we move on?" If you have that response, you're probably not alone. I think many of us in the western world do not know how to lament and don't know how to allow people to sorrow. In Job's day, his friends were silent for a *week* before they spoke up! A week! Yet we truly do struggle with someone (or a people group) lamenting and struggling for a period of time. This book reminds us that we have a lot to learn about lament – and we have a lot to learn about empathizing with those who do lament, too.

So, this morning, I think the big question is **Will God Remember?** And the Poet calls God to look at and respond to at least four things: **Judah's national disgrace, their social disgrace, their mourning and their prayer.**

But before we go any further, let's pray together.

Will God remember Judah or has he cast them off completely? In recounting many details of Judah's and Jerusalem's suffering, the Poet is essentially saying, "God, will you *not* respond in compassion when you see *this*? Look at our disgrace!" By the way, the wording of the Poet calls people back to the times of Israel's enslavement in Egypt. In those days God heard their cry. He "remembered" them and rescued them. The phraseology here seems to suggest that if part of their story in the past included God remembering and responding, then wouldn't it then make sense that God will remember and respond again? So, look at our disgrace, Lord! And, what is the disgrace that he wants God to see? First, we see:

1. Look at our national/economic disgrace (vv. 2-10).

Let's read verses 2-10 together:

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), La 5:1.

² Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, our homes to foreigners. ³ We have become orphans, fatherless; our mothers are like widows. ⁴ We must pay for the water we drink; the wood we get must be bought. ⁵ Our pursuers are at our necks; we are weary; we are given no rest. ⁶ We have given the hand to Egypt, and to Assyria, to get bread enough. ⁷ Our fathers sinned, and are no more; and we bear their iniquities. ⁸ Slaves rule over us; there is none to deliver us from their hand. ⁹ We get our bread at the peril of our lives, because of the sword in the wilderness. ¹⁰ Our skin is hot as an oven with the burning heat of famine.

The reason I say “national/economic disgrace” is because we see in these verses that the people are essentially poverty-stricken and enslaved in a land that was once their own, but is not turned over to strangers.

The phrasing in verse 2 of “inheritance,” “strangers,” and “foreigners” all trace back to Israel’s exodus when God promised them an inheritance of land where they would no longer be strangers and exiles. In this land, they had the covenantal relationship with God. They were God’s people living in God’s land as their inheritance. Now, God even stated that these people were the ones who possessed the inheritance. That doesn’t mean that God didn’t have a provision for strangers and foreigners to take part of the blessings of Israel. God called Israel to care for the foreigners. But, foreigners generally missed the blessing because they didn’t share in being a Jew by birth nor did they have the land promises given to them.

But now in the days of Lamentations, there’s been a horrific role reversal. The stranger and foreigner don’t simply live in the land, they possess it! They control what’s taking place. The nation is theirs. But how can this be? How can Judah’s inheritance be given to someone else? Think of this, Ventura. Imagine you get invited to a reading of some wealthy person’s will and in the reading of the will, it says that you receive the person’s mansion, along with \$1 million. Can another person in the room legally declare the mansion theirs?

So, how can it be that Judah’s inheritance is taken from them? It’s their inheritance! God promised them the blessings of the land. These are confusing days. But they’re not only confusing. It’s all very painful because the strangers and foreigners (also known as Babylon) are brutal. Because of them, children have lost their fathers. Mothers have become like widows. That’s an interesting wording. I’m sure women had their husbands die, but here it says they have become like widows. I think what that means, given the context, is that even if their husbands were still alive, they couldn’t care for their wives and children. The economy has tanked completely. Water, which would have essentially been free for the taking is now something they must pay for. Wood from their own land now must be purchased.

These things were prophesied by God in Deuteronomy. God said that if his people lived in disobedience, the social and economic life would suffer as part of their consequence for turning from him. In Deuteronomy 28:33-34, we read God saying through Moses, **“³³ A nation that you have not known shall eat up the fruit of your ground and of all your labors, and you shall be only oppressed and crushed continually, ³⁴ so that you are driven mad by the sights that your eyes see.”**³

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), La 5:2–10.

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Dt 28:33–34.

The nation rejected and spurned God. They were warned for centuries. They refused to listen. And, by the way, we should pick up on the irony in these verses. The very people God called Israel to care for: the widow, the orphan and the foreigners – are many of the people they neglected and ignored. Now, they have become the widow, orphan and foreigner.

Not only this, but their humiliation from Babylon is so bad that in verse 5, we see that Babylon was always behind their backs watching them and forcing their labor. But in desperation, Judah is going to enemy nations to get some type of reprieve. But of course, they won't find it. In verse 8, we see that slaves rule over them and they have a tight grip on them. This reminds me of the words from Ecclesiastes 10:5-7, "**5 There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, as it were an error proceeding from the ruler: 6 folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place. 7 I have seen slaves on horses, and princes walking on the ground like slaves.**"⁴

Now, in verses 9-10, we see more desperation. It seems to say that they go out to find food in the wilderness, but their enemy is even there. They can't escape and they can't find food for themselves. They're weary and desperate. As I think about the pain they're experiencing, I think of countries that have been torn by war. The price of bread is astronomical. Children are begging. Parents have nothing to offer. People work, but for what purpose? When an economy is shot, the people are practically dead. One commentary I was reading this past week says, "There are peoples in the world today who could answer (like Lam. 5) with depressing details of the struggle for water supplies and heating fuel, of inflated prices for basic foods, of the constant harassment of army checkpoints, of dangerous and difficult travel, and suffocating military presence. That is what Judah experienced under Babylonian occupation in the immediate aftermath of the fall of Jerusalem" (Wright, p. 152). Get this in our minds. Don't forget that the Babylonian captivity was *real*. People genuinely suffered horrifically.

And, in the midst of the Poet's depressing picture of Jerusalem, he states in verse 7: ⁷ Our fathers sinned, and are no more; and we bear their iniquities.⁵ Some people look at these verses and think the Poet is saying, "We're innocent and we're paying for our ancestor's sins." But if we look further in this poem and also keep the other poems in mind, we know that the people knew they sinned as well. I think this reference is more-so highlighting the fact that the sin has gone on and on and on and on for generations. So, I agree with Christopher Wright who said, ". . .yes, the present generation is indeed bearing the full weight of punishment for the sins of many generations, but *not* as innocent victims of someone else's sin. **When the axe of God's judgment fell, it had to fall at some particular moment. That may seem, from one point of view, unfair. But seen from another perspective – most especially in view of the warning after warning from prophet after prophet – it is a remarkable testament to the patience and grace of God that the axe had not fallen long before**" (Wright, p. 153).

So the Poet calls God to *remember* their national disgrace. The inheritance has been taken. And where God once freed them from slavery and gave them manna, water and quail in the wilderness, they have returned to becoming foreigners and slaves – starved in a land that is their own. Will God have compassion? Will he remember? But the Poet doesn't stop here. He goes on to call God to

2. Look at our social disgrace (vv. 11-14).

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ec 10:5–7.

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), La 5:7.

Look at verses 11-14 with me: ¹¹ Women are raped in Zion, young women in the towns of Judah. ¹² Princes are hung up by their hands; no respect is shown to the elders. ¹³ Young men are compelled to grind at the mill, and boys stagger under loads of wood. ¹⁴ The old men have left the city gate, the young men their music. ⁶

The Poet acknowledges the national and economic disgrace, but he goes on to state that the Babylonians didn't simply effect the economy and enslave them. They utterly shamed all the people. You can't get past the revolting wording of verse 11. I know there are children here, but I have to read the words: women are raped. It makes me want to throw-up yet this seems to be a reality in war in all eras. Why would they do this? One woman named Kathleen O'Connor writes that this was "a weapon of insult and destruction against the entire people . . . **a tactic of humiliation and subjugation of the men who should protect [the women]. It attacked the nation's 'purity' . . . and it attempted to eradicate the bloodlines of the people**" (as quot. in Wright, p. 154).

Babylon disgraces the women in the towns and they also go into the palace and disgrace the princes. It's not known what "hung up by their hands" means, but it seems to be some sort of physical torture and/or shaming. Then, moving from princes, the elders are disrespected. Those men who provided wisdom and direction are no longer able to be heard. And now, the young men are left to work painstaking jobs at the mill. This was probably not a reference to grinding of mills in homes, but instead the larger grinding that animals would have done. Since the animals are taken, they have to do the animal's share. So, the men stagger under the loads.

Verse 14 then says that the old men left the city gate and the young men left their music. The idea is that the older generation was wise and would leave hope for the younger generation. But with the older generation gone, with no hope, the younger generation doesn't rejoice. All we have in Judah are the raped, tortured and overburdened. No joy is found. Only the groaning lament. Will God remember? Will he look with compassion? The Poet calls God to see the national/economic disgrace as well as the social disgrace of every person. But he doesn't stop. He calls to God, asking him to

3. Listen to our confession (vv. 15-19).

In verses 15-19, we hear how *everyone* in Judah feels. Whether young or old, male or female, prince or pauper. We have a confession of pain and a confession of sin, but we also find here a confession of God's greatness. Let's read the verses together: ¹⁵ The joy of our hearts has ceased; our dancing has been turned to mourning. ¹⁶ The crown has fallen from our head; woe to us, for we have sinned! ¹⁷ For this our heart has become sick, for these things our eyes have grown dim, ¹⁸ for Mount Zion which lies desolate; jackals prowl over it. ¹⁹ But you, O Lord, reign forever; your throne endures to all generations.⁷

Since everything looks hopeless, there's no joy. Their dancing has turned to mourning. In verse 16 where it says that the crown has fallen from their head, this could refer to King Zedekiah and his children. Meaning that they have no king. Or, it could be saying that their status as the crown jewel nation has been taken away from them. They're no longer a chosen, special nation among the nations.

All this pain has caused them to say, "Woe to us, for we have sinned!" These words are actually beautiful words. When you understand these words from a biblical perspective, you recognize that they

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), La 5:11–14.

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), La 5:15–19.

are the beginning of repentance. Many prophets used these words. Isaiah called out “Woe is me.” Why? Because he was unclean and dwelt with people who were unclean. What happened after he said “Woe is me?” God granted him forgiveness and cleansing. Think as well even in the New Testament. You have a Pharisee praying to the Lord in the temple and a tax collector. The tax collector calls himself a sinner. He knows he deserves judgment and he says, “Have mercy on me, a sinner.” Jesus himself taught in Matthew 23:12 that those who humble themselves will be exalted.

This is what we see here in this corporate lament. They’re not defending themselves. They’re not blaming God. They’re not saying, “If you’d just change our circumstances then we’ll follow you or we’ll be more prone to be obedient.” No. They say “We deserve this and even more.” On the ground of this type of confession throughout the whole of Scripture springs hope because repentance begins by recognizing and admitting your own sin and repentance confesses what you deserve. Repentance doesn’t argue with someone over your consequences. Repentance understands what you deserve. And repentance also then looks up to the Lord and calls to him for mercy – seeing him as your greatest need.

The confession continues to state the pain of the people. Their whole self is sick for the multiplicity of problems. Now, the Poet says that Mount Zion is essentially dead. You see, jackals are scavengers in desolate areas. Jerusalem is basically gone. Now, the Poet could be stating this simply to say Jerusalem is dead. But that’s not all he’s trying to say. In verse 19, he says, “**19 But you, O Lord, reign forever; your throne endures to all generations.**”⁸ The “But you, O Lord” contrasts with verse 18. Mount Zion is desolate. There, in Jerusalem, God said was his footstool. We’re told that Jerusalem was God’s “holy mountain.” It’s the city of God. Glorious things were spoken of Zion and now it’s been destroyed to the dust – a city left for jackals. Jerusalem is dead. But what about the God of Jerusalem? Jerusalem’s destruction did not dethrone God. God is God always!

Remember this, Ventura. When trials persist, God has never ceased to be God. He still, and always will be our only hope – the One to whom we can pray and know hears. So with these people in Jerusalem, there was hope to confess that God’s rule wasn’t ever dependent on whether Jerusalem existed. Yes, the Babylonians believed that their destruction of the temple and enslavement of Judah meant that they had conquered Israel’s God. But Judah knows better. Nebuchadnezzar, even in his rebellion, was God’s servant. To quote from Christopher Wright again, “. . . **behind the hammer of Nebuchadnezzar was the hand of YHWH. Israel’s God had destroyed his own temple?! Unthinkable to the Babylonians. Unthinkable to most Israelites who had never listened to Jeremiah. But no longer unthinkable to those being led in prayer by the Poet of Lamentations**” (Wright, p. 157).

God’s authority wasn’t limited to the land. God’s power wasn’t limited to the temple. And since he reigns forever and his throne endures to all generations, the people of Judah, even in their lament, can be confident that God will act justly towards all the earth – even the Babylonians. Now, the Poet concludes this final poem (and the book) by asking God to

4. Hear our prayer (vv. 20-22).

²⁰ Why do you forget us forever, why do you forsake us for so many days? ²¹ Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old— ²² unless you have utterly rejected us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us. ⁹

⁸ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), La 5:19.

⁹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), La 5:20–22.

If God reigns forever, then why does God forget them forever? The “Why” is a question of confusion. Also, keep in mind, it’s a question based in their feelings of experience. The pain doesn’t seem to let up. Clearly, they don’t believe God *must* forsake them forever because in verse 21, they ask God to restore them.

What’s so beautiful about the words of verse 21 is that the Poet says that the only way they could be restored is if God takes the steps first. The Hebrew is more literally rendered, **“Cause us to return, Lord, to you and we will return.”** They’re lost in their sin. They’re stuck in a pit. They’re utterly ruined. They’re at an end of themselves. Can they rescue themselves? No.

We’ve all had scenarios where we’ve been at the end of our rope and we’ve finally admitted that we cannot rescue ourselves. We’ve had to confess that we need someone else to help us. Maybe it was a financial struggle and if someone else didn’t get you out of it, you’d be in massive debt. Or maybe you have recognized it spiritually. You know you’re a sinner and you cannot appease God’s justice that is against you. Have you faced the reality that someday everyone will appear before the Sovereign Lord of the universe who reigns in the heavens? All thoughts, actions, wishes, intentions and words will be brought before the Judge and the Bible tells us that he will perfectly judge *everything*. In that day, no one will talk themselves out of the punishment they deserve.

If you have felt the weight of that, you may understand the concluding words of this lament. They ask for renewal and then they say, “unless you have utterly rejected us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us.”¹⁰ Personally, I think it would be a better translation to say “even though you have utterly rejected us. . .” The idea, I think, is that they’re saying, “Let us return to you Lord even though you have punished us.” Yes, they know they have received what they deserve. And they agree that they deserve what they deserve. But they’re saying, “But we will ask for compassion *from You.*”

Personally, I find this to be absolutely and tremendously encouraging to my soul. Did you notice that in these final words, they don’t simply say, “Give us back Jerusalem and let us have our rituals back.” They say, “Cause us to return to you.” Jerusalem, land, temple and so many other things they had were all pointers to their need for God himself. And now they finally say, “We get it. We need and want you, but we don’t know how to get to you. Come to us and bring us to you.”

Now, I know that Lamentations ends on this note. It doesn’t say something like “And God forgave them.” But we have to keep in mind the whole storyline of Israel and then what comes in the New Testament. Here we have people calling to God for mercy, knowing what they deserve. People who are lost and in need of God to find them and bring them to himself. What we discover in the Scriptures is that when Jesus came to the earth, he was born *the* King of the Jews. The crown that seemed to have fallen from Israel had come. And, in Zion, he experienced the justice of God that sinners deserved. On that day, Jesus (not the city of Jerusalem, but Jesus alone) took the wrath of God for myriads of people. He was forsaken. He cried out to God, “Why have you forsaken me?” And he did all of this in order to grant mercy to God’s people.

You see, Jesus came to this earth to seek and to save the lost. Jesus answered the prayer of Lamentations. God didn’t simply stay in Heaven, but the Father sent the Son to rescue the lost sheep of the house of Israel – and not only Israel but the whole world! And Jesus said that in his sacrifice, in

¹⁰ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), La 5:22.

taking our punishment, he restores us to God and he gives us new desires to actually want God and to follow him. Do you see how Jesus answers the lament? God *remembers* Judah – and the world, nations like Babylon!

But even more than this, Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf also secures us as then becoming children of God, and we receive an inheritance. We are no longer slaves to sin, but we are sons and daughters. Jesus will also give the land he promised to Israel and he will give us a New Heaven and New Earth! Because Jesus bore our iniquities, he gives us rest, an inheritance, promises; and ultimately, restoration with God himself! Is God gracious and compassionate? Yes! Jesus turns our mourning into joy! Have you embraced him? Do you see this glory? Do you trust Jesus?

Do you see how godly lament is good? The godly lament caused the people to confess that God is actually greater than anything or anyone else. Godly lament called their hearts to trust. We need this, too. In all our circumstances, living in this fallen world, we can lament; but let it be godly. Point your eyes to God. Lift your hands to his throne and trust him even in the pain. He's greater. He's more glorious.

Before I end here, I must say something important. The book of Lament, after written, was then later used by the Jewish people to never forget. Somewhat like a Holocaust museum's existence is intended to cause us to never forget. Lamentations was to tell the people that their sin is serious. Don't treat God like a lucky rabbit's foot and ignore God.

I think we, too, in our day need to heed this message. Actually, it's a message the apostle Paul says in Romans 9-11. In talking about God's tremendous grace that he has given to the world, he essentially states that the world is going to become presumptuous with God's gift of salvation and trample on Jesus someday. In that day, Jews will come back to Jesus. But the point Paul is making is, "Don't presume on Jesus." We have been given so much grace and with all that grace, many people now have come to ignore that God even will come and judge the world and punish sinners. People tend to mock God and mock what the Bible says. I fear for you if that is you. There is a day when you will meet God. Are you ready? Do you see your need for him? When looking at Judah, we see that the things they lived for could never satisfy. And the Poet finally confesses, "God, only you can satisfy." Do you see that today? Do you long to see that today? I pray so!

And, for those of us who do see Jesus as the satisfaction, what a way to enter into communion today! Here in communion, Jesus points us to him seeking him, bringing us to God while also reminding us of the great inheritance we have in him!

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