

Lamentations: A Commentary

Old Testament New European Christadelphian Commentary

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PREFACE

This commentary is based around the New European Version of the Bible, which is generally printed with brief commentary on each chapter. Charities such as Carelinks Ministries and the Christadelphian Advancement Trust endeavour to provide totally free copies worldwide according to resources and donations available to them. But there is a desire by many to go beyond those brief comments on each chapter, and delve deeper into the text. The New European Christadelphian commentary seeks to meet that need. As with all Divine things, beauty becomes the more apparent the closer we analyze. We can zoom in the scale of investigation to literally every letter of the words used by His Spirit. But that would require endless volumes. And academic analysis is no more nor less than that; we are to live by His word. This commentary seeks to achieve a balance between practical teaching on one hand, and a reasonable level of thorough consideration of the original text. On that side of things, you will observe in the commentary a common abbreviation: “s.w.”. This stands for “same word”; the same original Greek or Hebrew word translated [A] is used when translated [B]. This helps to slightly remove the mask of translation through which most Bible readers have to relate to the original text.

Are there errors of thought and intellectual process in these volumes? Surely there are. Let me know about them. But finally- don't fail to see the wood for the trees. Never let the wonder of the simple, basic Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and His Kingdom become obscured by all the angst over correctly interpreting this or that Bible verse. Believe it, respond to it, be baptized into Him, and let the word become flesh in you as it was so supremely in Him.

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LAMENTATIONS

Lamentations Chapter 1

Lamentations 1:1 How the city sits solitary, that was full of people!- Jeremiah was Judah's representative; that is a key to understanding Lamentations. As Jerusalem sat alone, or "solitary", so had he and so did he. Earlier, Jeremiah is rebuked for his attitude of resenting that he "sat alone" and had kept away from the "assembly" of the rejoicers (Jer. 15:17,19); and so we are to assume that he said these things in resentment that he had had to stand alone amongst men. He resented how he "sat alone" (Lam. 3:28); yet this is the very term used of how Jerusalem was to "sit alone [solitary]" (Lam. 1:1). He was her representative, and yet he seems to have resented that. He was after all being representative of those who had hated him and tried to kill him. As Jeremiah wrongly lamented his own 'sitting alone', so he ought to have perceived that he should not have lamented Jerusalem's likewise. The book of Lamentations reveals Jeremiah, an undoubted man of God, in his lowest moments, as Jerusalem was at her lowest moment; just as the book of Job reveals Job at times. And yet the whole book is made up of five carefully structured acrostic laments, with each verse beginning with a consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The chapters only vary in length because the verses have different lengths. So Lamentations is not simply the pouring out of random emotional grief. It has been written up, under inspiration, and the acrostic structure was presumably to help assist memorization of it. And yet so much of it is negative, and reveals Jeremiah charging God wrongfully and contradicting statements from God revealed in the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah's momentary lapse of faith was representative of that of his people after the fall of Jerusalem. But the idea is that the book progresses through the stages of grief and anger to genuine repentance and desire for restoration; and Jeremiah invites Judah to follow his example as their representative.

I suggest that the reason the book was inspired and was designed to be memorized was that it comes to a climax in Lam. 5:16-21. And the point is that there we have here a total confession of sin, and appeal for God to turn them to Himself (Lam. 5:21) and restore His relationship and Kingdom with Judah as before (Lam. 5:21). But the path there was a jagged graph; see on Lam. 3:40. Throughout the book of Jeremiah, and often in Ezekiel, I have made the point that so much hinged upon whether Judah repented after Jerusalem fell. If they did, then the new covenant would have been accepted by them, and the promises of the restored Kingdom would have come true. They generally did not repent, but it was Jeremiah's heartfelt desire that they did, following his own example. And so he wished them to identify with his feelings of anger with God, his struggle with God, his confusion... and thereby to be led to this conclusion of the matter in repentance and desperate appeal for restoration. But it seems Judah got caught up in the early stages of grief, never moved on from them, and failed to follow through to this confession of sin and appeal for restoration which we have in Lam. 5. The last verse of the book (Lam. 5:22) appears starkly out of context with the immediately preceding verses, with their appeal for restoration and confession of sin: "But You have utterly rejected us; You are very angry against us". I suggest this is purposeful, because this is as it were Judah's response to the book and the appeal to repent and appeal for restoration. They remained caught up in their grief and refused to repent and return to God because they considered He had removed Himself too far from them. And so the great prophetic potentials for a repentant Judah, described in such detail in the book of Jeremiah, didn't then come about; although the prophecies are reapplied and rescheduled to fulfilment in the last days.

Jeremiah was commanded not to make lamentation for the punishment of his people (Jer. 16:5). But he did, and God inspired the record of them in Lamentations, and because they are inspired words, He spoke through those words to all subsequent generations, wishing His people to work through their grief about the fall of Jerusalem as Jeremiah did; going through all the stages, even of anger with God, to come to the confession of sin and earnest desire for the restoration of the Kingdom with which the book concludes. Even within Jeremiah, what begins as Jeremiah's cry from the heart often merges into God's- Jeremiah begins lamenting in Jer. 8:18, and then we find Yahweh becomes the speaker in Jer. 8:19. Jeremiah's conflicted emotions can be read as his having a too positive view of Israel, and his book of lamentations could therefore be read as a statement of protest at God's judgments. But it could also be that Jeremiah was so in tune with God's thinking that these struggles at the amount of suffering brought upon Judah were also God's. The struggles within Jeremiah would therefore reflect God's changes of mind and feeling about judging His people were endlessly "kindled together", just as they were reflected in Hosea's oscillations of feeling concerning Gomer; see on Hos. 11:8.

She has become a widow, she who was once great among the nations! She who was a princess among the provinces has become a tributary!- The idea of God being destroyed in the destruction of His people (see on Jer. 6:26) may be the basis of the descriptions of Zion as being left widowed (Lam. 1:1; Is. 54:1-8). We ask the question- if she was a widow, who died? Her husband, God, was as it were dead. The very idea of the death of God is awful and obnoxious. But this was and is the depth of God's feelings at His peoples' destruction. But it could be that here we have Jeremiah in the utter depth of depression, feeling his God was dead. Earlier, in his own prophecies, he had

spoken forth God's perspective; that Judah had been as a whore, never really loving Him and endlessly going off with other men (the surrounding nations and their idols), and thereby they forsook Yahweh and broke the marriage covenant. But here Jeremiah feels that Israel are a forsaken widow whose husband has died. He describes her as a gracious princess; when actually God through himself had described her repeatedly as a whore. And so the Lamentations begin with Jeremiah at rock bottom, as were all Judah. He felt God was dead. But we see him progress onwards from that, through the various stages of grief, to the begging for forgiveness and restoration at the very end of the book.

Lamentations 1:2 She weeps bitterly in the night, and her tears are on her cheeks- The phrase is only used in Num. 14:1, of Israel weeping all night when they were told they were not to enter the promised land because of their lack of faith. And this was their fault, not God's.

Among all her lovers she has none to comfort her: all her friends have dealt treacherously with her; they are become her enemies- This is one of many cases of self-justification in Lamentations (Lam. 1:2,19; Lam. 2:14; 4:13; 5:7), which contradicts the prophetic position, whereby blame is placed upon Judah, whereas now Jeremiah laments the situation as if Judah is being hard done by. In this case, for having lovers at all, in her unfaithfulness to Yahweh (Ez. 16,23 etc.).

Lamentations 1:3 Judah is gone into captivity because of affliction- The same word is used of Jeremiah's affliction (Lam. 3:1,19); he was setting himself up as Judah's representative in the hope they too would pass through his pattern of depression, the stages of grief, and then repentance and begging for the restoration of the Kingdom which we find at the end in Lam. 5:16-21. See on Lam. 1:1.

And because of great servitude- This was the exaggeration of depression. For Judah were not abused in Babylon, nor were they put to slave labour as they were in Egypt; rather did they prosper so much that most didn't want to return at the restoration. They preferred life in Babylon. Jeremiah had himself explained that because they had served idols, therefore they were to serve Babylon (s.w. Jer. 25:6,11). Their "servitude" was therefore but the extension of their own choices. He had himself urged Zedekiah and the people to willingly serve the Babylonians in recognition of their own sins (s.w. Jer. 40:9); it was their refusal to do so that had resulted in their servitude in exile. As we all do in depression, Jeremiah was unbalanced here, focusing upon one aspect of a situation which he had himself recognized as absolutely legitimate.

She dwells among the nations, she finds no rest- This was written therefore at the end of Jeremiah's life when the exile was established, as he faced his own death in Egypt. He too as Israel's representative (:1) dwelt among the nations. But again his depression leads to exaggeration; there is no evidence that the Jews were moved around the Babylonian empire, making them find no rest. He himself had urged them to build houses in Babylon and settle down there. Being restless was a result of breaking the covenant (s.w. Dt. 28:65) which Jeremiah had repeatedly accused them of doing. They were suffering far less than their iniquities deserved. They refused to repent and in that sense they had no rest to their souls. If they had accepted the yoke of Babylon, then they could have rested in their own land (s.w. Jer. 27:11).

All her persecutors overtook her within the narrows- This alludes to the overtaking of Zedekiah as he fled Jerusalem; he was representative of his people. But as Jeremiah well knew, in another part of his brain, Zedekiah's shameful flight and capture was completely his fault for not responding to Jeremiah's pleas to him.

Lamentations 1:4 The ways of Zion do mourn, because none come to the solemn assembly- This again is a very positive take on the gatherings held in the temple. Ezekiel was shown in vision how the priests and elders were solemnly worshipping idols within the temple. And so God said that He "hated" their "solemn assemblies" (s.w. Is. 1:14). Yet in depression, Jeremiah laments that these "solemn assemblies" were no more (Lam. 1:4; 2:6). It was in fact better that none came to them.

All her gates are desolate, her priests do sigh: her virgins are afflicted, and she herself is in bitterness- See on :13. The "ways of Zion" were "desolate" because the curse for breaking the covenant was that Israel's "ways" would be "desolate" (Lev. 26:22 s.w.). Jeremiah multiple times used the word for "desolate" as the judgment which was to come; because "they [Judah] have made it desolate... the whole land is [will be] made desolate" (Jer. 12:11). But now he faces the reality of what he had so often preached, he finds it unbearable. For "afflicted", see on :12.

Lamentations 1:5 Her adversaries are become the head, her enemies prosper; for Yahweh has afflicted her for the

multitude of her transgressions: her young children are gone into captivity before the adversary- These terms are all allusive to the curses for breaking the covenant (Dt. 28:44); Judah could have been the head of her adversaries had she been obedient to the covenant (Dt. 28:13). And Jeremiah recognizes this, on one hand, and yet laments that the curses have come true.

Lamentations 1:6 From the daughter of Zion all her majesty is departed: her princes are become like harts that find no pasture- It was these very princes who had persecuted Jeremiah and sought to kill him (Jer. 37:15; 38:4,25,27) as they did other prophets (Jer. 26:21). It is to Jeremiah's spiritual credit that he did not rejoice at all in the fall of his enemies but rather shared God's broken heart for the lost and the evil.

They are gone without strength before the pursuer- Another allusion to the princes fleeing Jerusalem with Zedekiah, only to be pursued, overtaken and slain. And Jeremiah finds this tragic and grieves for it. Only a heart with true love in it could come to these feelings.

Lamentations 1:7 Jerusalem remembers in the days of her affliction and of her miseries all her pleasant things that were from the days of old. When her people fell into the hand of the adversary, no one helped her; the adversaries saw her, they mocked at her desolations- The lack of help from Egypt and the nations to whom Judah had prostituted herself was quite clearly because Judah ought to have trusted in Yahweh and not them. So many times Jeremiah had predicted that Jerusalem would be mocked by her. We learn from this that it is one thing to preach a message, but quite another to actually see it come true. Jeremiah's ministry had begun with the warning that his prophetic words would have within them the power of great destruction, and he had been promised Divine psychological strengthening for his ministry. But he seems not to have wanted to make use of that.

Lamentations 1:8 Jerusalem has grievously sinned; therefore she has become as an unclean thing; all who honoured her despise her, because they have seen her nakedness: yes, she sighs, and turns backward- She turned backward in shame, but her nakedness was apparent. Jeremiah had used this very figure, with the crudest of language, in Jer. 13:22,23 (see notes there). Jerusalem had been a whore and was to be judged as one, naked before her lovers. But now it actually happened... Jeremiah balked at the seriousness of sin, and how judgment really does come for sin.

Lamentations 1:9 Her filthiness was in her skirts; she didn't remember her latter end; therefore is she come down wonderfully; she has no comforter: see, Yahweh, my affliction; for the enemy has magnified himself- As noted on Jer. 13:22,23, Judah had behaved as the worst harlot, with no thought to her future. And now that future had come. On one hand, Jeremiah saw perfectly that the situation was because of their sin; and yet he struggled with seeing the judgments actually come. And he asks Yahweh to see his affliction. Again, this reflects his love for his people, that he should feel afflicted for those who had refused to hear his message. And yet he feels there is "no comforter", despite surely being aware of Isaiah's prophecy that Yahweh would comfort Zion at the restoration (s.w. Is. 51:3,12 "I, even I, am He that comforts you"; Is. 66:13 "so will I comfort you"; Is. 40:1; 49:13; 52:9). "Comfort" is the same word as "repent"; and God had said that He would repent (s.w.) if Judah repented (Jer. 18:8; 26:3). The real problem was that Judah had not repented, and Jeremiah refused to factor that into his feelings; see on Lam. 2:13.

Lamentations 1:10 The adversary has spread out his hand on all her pleasant things- This is the language of rape, the rapist spreading out his hand upon the victim. See on :8,9,10.

For she has seen that the nations are entered into her sanctuary, concerning whom You commanded that they should not enter into Your assembly- Jeremiah sees this as tragic, and yet he was fully aware that Judah had placed Gentile idols in Yahweh's holy place (Jer. 32:34).

Lamentations 1:11 All her people sigh, they seek bread; they have given their pleasant things for food to refresh the soul: look, Yahweh, and see; for I am become abject- Their "pleasant things" in :10 refer to their private parts. Jeremiah appears to excuse their prostitution by saying they did it because they were hungry. And yet his own prophecies had clarified that they were unlike whores who sold their bodies for money, but they even paid men to sleep with them. His feeling so abject was partly because of his refusal to face up to how sinful Judah had really been. But he reasons with all the obsessiveness of depression that they had prostituted themselves just to refresh (s.w. return or repent) their soul. Quite clearly they could do this through repentance and not sin. But he was utterly taken up with lamenting the judgments which had come and chose not (at this stage) to consider that all this was

because of their sins.

Lamentations 1:12 Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look, and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which is brought on me- The extent to which Jeremiah's heart bled for his people is reflected in Jer. 9:1-3. He wished he had more moisture in his body, so that he could weep both day and night for Judah- and yet he goes on to describe them as proceeding from evil to evil in an ever downward spiral, shooting lies everywhere... Everyone is special, nobody is like anyone else. This is how God sees His children, and we should reflect this perspective. It is this which will make us arrestingly different from the people with whom we daily walk. We will cry out with Jeremiah: "Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?", unmoved and lost as they are in their own petty issues (Lam. 1:12). Everyone is special, nobody is like anyone else. This is how God sees His children, and we should reflect this perspective. It is this which will make us arrestingly different from the people with whom we daily walk.

With which Yahweh has afflicted me in the day of His fierce anger- The same word for how the people were "afflicted" (:4,5). Jeremiah was to be representative of Judah (see on :1).

Lamentations 1:13 From on high has He sent fire into my bones, and it prevails against them- Jeremiah parallels "me" and "them". He felt the burning of Jerusalem as a burning of his very bones. Such was his identity with a sinful people; see on :1. And such was his spirituality that there is never a hint of satisfaction in seeing those who had rejected and persecuted him getting their totally just deserts.

He has spread a net for my feet, He has turned me back- We sense here an anger with God, as if God had set a trap for him into which he had innocently fallen; and he says this in the midst of very strong identification with his people. It's as if he like the Jews of Ez. 18 felt that God had deceived him and his people. And yet Jeremiah had so clearly warned them of the judgment to come. It was hardly a trap for the unsuspecting and uninformed. Such anger with God was expressed by Job, and yet at the end of the book God says that Job only spoke what was right about Him. It's as if God accepted the cranky words of depression, and saw the anger with Himself as just part of the grieving process. The important thing was to move through the process stage by stage. And the end point in this grief was repentance and zeal for restoration (Lam. 5:16-21). Jeremiah's path was intended to be that of all the people whom he represented.

He has made me desolate and faint all the day- The physical "desolation" of the land would be matched by the internal, psychological desolation of the priests (s.w. "astonished"; Jer. 4:9). Jeremiah felt the same as the other priests; he was desolated / astonished (s.w.) at the desolation of Jerusalem (Lam. 1:4,13). We can read this as meaning that he as the righteous totally identified with the wicked; or that he was too identified with the wicked priests, and felt like them when instead he should have perceived that this was exactly the astonishment of the priests which he had prophesied in Jer. 4:9.

Lamentations 1:14 The yoke of my transgressions is bound by His hand; they are knit together, they have come up on my neck; He has made my strength to fail: the Lord has delivered me into their hands, against whom I am not able to stand- The anger with God of :13 now starts to mellow as increasingly Jeremiah recognizes his personal sins. He doesn't yet repent in so many words, but he does recognize his sins. This was the path Judah and the exiles were intended to likewise take, coming like Jeremiah to recognize that they had no strength; and that somehow, God was in all this- for "the Lord has delivered me into their hands".

Lamentations 1:15 The Lord has set at nothing all my mighty men in the midst of me; He has called a solemn assembly against me to crush my young men: the Lord has trodden as in a wine press the virgin daughter of Judah- Instead of feeling that God was dead (see on :1), Jeremiah now accepts that God has done the judgments, He had trodden the wine press. "My young men" may mean that his own personal male children had been killed in the invasion (also implied in :16). But it could be that he considered the young men of Judah as his children.

Lamentations 1:16 For these things I weep; my eye, my eye runs down with water- In Ez. 24:23 Judah is commanded not to weep but to lament beyond tears and all external mourning; they would mourn internally for their sins (s.w. Ez. 33:10). We wonder why Jeremiah wrote Lamentations, which appears to be a record of his external mourning. Whilst the book was inspired by God, at times Jeremiah there appears to be lamenting in a way inappropriate. He 'wept' (Lam. 1:16), whereas in Ez. 24:23 Judah were told not to externally weep. He did not take on board the idea that there was to be no mourning or weeping externally, but rather deep internal recognition of their sins. It seems the Jews were not obedient to Ezekiel's command not to externally weep but to internally mourn their own sinfulness; the same word for "weep" is used of how they did weep by the rivers of Babylon (Ps. 137:1).

Because the comforter who should refresh my soul is far from me- He feels there is "no comforter", when he implies there ought to have been. That comforter was God. Yet he says this despite surely being aware of Isaiah's prophecy that Yahweh would comfort Zion at the restoration (s.w. Is. 51:3,12 "I, even I, am He that comforts you"; Is. 66:13 "so will I comfort you"; Is. 40:1; 49:13; 52:9). "Comfort" is the same word as "repent"; and God had said that He would repent (s.w.) if Judah repented (Jer. 18:8; 26:3). The real problem was that Judah had not repented. And yet Jeremiah appears to blame God for not being present as comforter. This all sets us up for the climax of the book in Lam. 5:16-21, when Jeremiah confesses sin and looks for restoration. And there are plenty of moments before then in the Lamentations when he comes closer and closer to that final realization, which for us too is the end point of the path of every depression and struggle with God.

My children are desolate, because the enemy has prevailed- Perhaps Jeremiah's children were literally killed. Or maybe even in his depression and anger with God, he still manifested God; God's children were his children. But in that case, the enemy as it were prevailed [Heb. 'was stronger'] over God, whereas finally at the restoration, God shall prevail over His enemies (Is. 42:13 s.w.).

Lamentations 1:17 Zion spreads forth her hands; there is none to comfort her- As explained on :16, God was there to comfort- if they repented. But in the obsession of his depression, Jeremiah focused on just one part of the picture. There was none to comfort her; but that was because she would not repent and accept His comfort.

Yahweh has commanded concerning Jacob, that those who are around him should be his adversaries- Jeremiah appears here to be slipping back into the common mindset, that a nation's god would support them and save them always. But Yahweh had a huge moral dimension to Him, which the pagan gods didn't. He called for enemies to come upon His people.

Jerusalem is among them as an unclean thing- And therefore, the implication is, Yahweh was not protecting them. But so often Jeremiah had previously lamented the unclean state of Jerusalem.

Lamentations 1:18 Yahweh is righteous; for I have rebelled against His commandment: please hear, all you peoples, and see my sorrow: my virgins and my young men are gone into captivity- This rebellion could refer to the words previously recorded in this lament, but they could also be a reference to Jeremiah's historical failure at the time of Jer. 15. In Jer. 15:15, Jeremiah asks for vengeance on his persecutors, and in Jer. 15:18 accuses God of deceiving him. God's response is to ask him to repent of this, so that he can resume his prophetic work: "If you [Jeremiah] return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me [prophetic language]. If you utter what is precious, and not what is base, you shall be as my mouth" (Jer. 15:19). Perhaps Jeremiah had this incident in mind when he commented: "The Lord is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word" (Lam. 1:18). This indicates that at least in Jeremiah's case, he was not irresistibly carried along by the Spirit in some kind of ecstasy, having no option but to speak God's word. His speaking of God's word required that he shared the essentially loving and gracious spirit / disposition of his God. I have argued on :1 that the Lamentations are a path through depression and the various stages of grief; beginning with Jeremiah's statement in :1 that God was effectively dead, the Lamentations progress to the final repentance and wholehearted plea for the restoration in Lam. 5:16-21. But there are points during the 'journey' when Jeremiah does repent, and this is an example. But he quickly moves on from his confession of sin to lament again the present reality- that the young people had gone into exile.

Lamentations 1:19 I called for my lovers, but they deceived me: my priests and my elders gave up the spirit in the city, while they sought themselves food to refresh their souls- Jeremiah laments the situation as if Judah is being hard done by. Judah should never have had lovers, for this was unfaithfulness to Yahweh as Jeremiah himself has earlier made clear. This is one of many cases of self-justification in Lamentations (Lam. 1:2,19; Lam. 2:14; 4:13; 5:7), which contradicts the prophetic position, whereby blame is placed upon Judah. The priests and elders had been condemned by Jeremiah for their extreme wickedness, and their death in the city by famine had been explicitly predicted by Jeremiah. The reason of course was because they had sinned so badly and impenitently. So Jeremiah's confession of sin in :18 is soon drowned out, within his mind, by the sheer pain of the punishment for it, which he still feels to be unfair. And this is how repentance seems to go in practice; rarely is it just a momentary confession. There are waves and cycles to it, whereby we return time and again to our own self-justification and sense that the punishment for sin is disproportionate. This is the significance of the book ending with the confession of sin in Lam. 5:16-21 which is not then followed by another cycle of complaint at God's judgments of sin.

Lamentations 1:20 See, Yahweh; for I am in distress; my heart is troubled; my heart is turned within me; for I have grievously rebelled: abroad the sword bereaves, at home there is as death- Jeremiah seemed to imagine that all the exiles were taken away to be slaughtered. That was true of some of the elders, but the exile generally was not to

death camps. But clearly whilst these things were not totally true for him, he felt so totally identified with his condemned people that he speaks exactly as he imagined they felt.

Lamentations 1:21 They have heard that I sigh; there is none to comfort me; all my enemies have heard of my trouble; they are glad that You have done it: You will bring the day that You have proclaimed, and they shall be like me- Here we have Jeremiah totally absorbed with the feelings of the exiles, absolutely united with them in representation. Again we note the complaint that there is no comforter, when in fact there was- if they would repent and accept God's comfort. Is. 40:1,2 speaks a message of comfort to the exiles: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God". But [in full allusion to this prophecy], the exiles were like Rachael who refused to be comforted over her loss (Jer. 31:15); they claimed they found "none to comfort" (Lam. 1:2,16,17,21). But they were like Rachel who refused to be comforted, although the verses previous to that in Jer. 31 invite Israel to be not like Rachel but as the young woman who takes a tambourine and goes forth rejoicing in what God could do for her in restoring her. But they were willfully refusing the comfort of God's repeated word of hope and restoration. They didn't grasp the plain teaching of the prophetic word because they didn't want to- it demanded too much of them, and a giving up of the comfortable Babylon life. Hence Is. 43:19 laments: "I am doing a new thing: now it springs forth [in the decree to return to Zion?], do you not perceive it?". And do we "not perceive it?" time and again in our own lives, as to the potentials God is opening up?

Lamentations 1:22 Let all their wickedness come before You; do to them, as You have done to me for all my transgressions: for my sighs are many, and my heart is faint- Jeremiah's heart was "faint within me" both before (Jer. 8:18) and after (Lam. 1:22) the destruction of Jerusalem. He was so sure that the prophetic word would be fulfilled, that he even felt as if it had come true before it did. It was the heart of Judah which was faint (Is. 1:5), and Jeremiah identified totally with their feelings in sorrow with them. He eagerly asks God to judge the Babylonian confederacy for their sins. Yet there are many chapters in Jeremiah where he had prophesied that this would indeed happen, although as noted there, there was always an appeal and hope for their repentance. But Jeremiah is still at the stage of anger, with God and with any perceived instrument He had used.

Lamentations Chapter 2

Lamentations 2:1 How has the Lord covered the daughter of Zion with a cloud in His anger! He has cast down from heaven to the earth the beauty of Israel, and hasn't remembered His footstool in the day of His anger- It was Jeremiah who was angry (see on Lam. 1:22). But he seems to transfer that anger onto God, and he implies that this Divine anger was too fierce and therefore unmerited. Despite having so often himself demonstrated why God's anger was appropriate and deserved. He was focusing on just one part of the whole picture and obsessing about it. Which is typical depressive behaviour. The cloud between God and Israel was the cloud of their own sins. And Israel had used her "beauty" for prostitution and unfaithfulness to Him. Israel had refused to serve Him, preferring the service of idols and the Gentiles; and so they were hardly His footstool.

Lamentations 2:2 The Lord has swallowed up all the habitations of Jacob, and has not pitied- Jer. 16:5 had explained why God appeared to have withdrawn His pity. The reason was that God's covenant, referred to as "kindness and mercy", was broken; they were not at peace with Him. And so they should not be pitied in their death. And yet although the covenant was broken by Israel, and God broke His side of it in response to that... He in fact still treated them as His covenant people. This is not to say that God is not serious about His statements. He is; but His love, grace and pity is displayed as the more extraordinary, in that it leads Him to break the words and threats spoken in justifiable and understandable wrath. For the same Hebrew phrase "loving kindness and tender mercies" is used again by Jeremiah in Lam. 3:22, where he reflects that these have not been withdrawn from God's people, even though Zion is now in ruins. Again we see a progressive movement in Lamentations through the stages of grief, and towards an understanding that God does love and pity His people, but they had precluded the experience of this by refusing to repent. This is why the climax of the lamentations is in the confession of sin, wholeheartedly and without any self-justification, which we have in Lam. 5:16-21.

He has thrown down in His wrath the strongholds of the daughter of Judah; He has brought them down to the ground- Yet it was Jeremiah who had specifically "thrown down" Jerusalem and her fortifications through his prophetic word; see on Jer. 1:10, where the same word is used. His lament is therefore at best an indication that like us, he failed to realize the huge potential in God's word that he was preaching, and the eternal consequences which arise from someone hearing it.

He has profaned the kingdom and its princes- But they had profaned themselves; and the princes were those who had conspired to kill Jeremiah (Jer. 37:15; 38:4,25,27) as they did other prophets (Jer. 26:21). It is to Jeremiah's spiritual credit that he did not rejoice at all in the fall of his enemies but rather shared God's broken heart for the lost and the evil.

Lamentations 2:3 He has cut off in fierce anger all the horn of Israel; He has drawn back His right hand from before the enemy- Jeremiah was willfully ignorant of the obvious truth of Ps. 75:10: "I will cut off all the horns of the wicked, but the horns of the righteous shall be lifted up".

He has burned up Jacob like a flaming fire, which devours all around- "Burned up" is used of how Babylon "consumed" Jerusalem with fire (Neh. 2:3,13 etc.). The people and their land were to be "consumed" by the fire which was contained in the words Jeremiah spoke (Jer. 5:14,17). But all who devoured / consumed them would be "held guilty" (Jer. 2:3; 10:25; 30:16). And yet in depression, Jeremiah lamented that the fire had consumed (Lam. 2:3; 4:11), when it was His own words which had been that devouring fire. His lament was therefore tantamount to a statement of regret that he had been used as the vehicle for this devouring fire.

Lamentations 2:4 He has bent His bow like an enemy, He has stood with His right hand as an adversary, has killed all that were pleasant to the eye: in the tent of the daughter of Zion He has poured out His wrath like fire- see on Lam. 3:13. Jeremiah appears now to be more angry with God than with the Babylonians, who had literally bent their bows and destroyed the temple. Jeremiah himself had been full of God's wrath and had poured it out upon the people in his prophetic words (Jer. 6:11). And now he apparently laments that, as if he was almost negating his own prophetic calling. It's as if he had then been on God's side, but was now too much on the side of his sinful people. What had once been deep within him he now as it were distances himself from.

Lamentations 2:5 The Lord has become as an enemy, He has swallowed up Israel; He has swallowed up all her palaces, He has destroyed his strongholds; He has multiplied in the daughter of Judah mourning and lamentation- The image of swallowing up portrays God as a beast, angry and judgmental upon His own people. It was the beast of Babylon who "swallowed up" Israel (Jer. 51:34 s.w.). The palaces, the great houses of the wealthy in Jerusalem, had

been built on the back of abused labour, as Jeremiah had pointed out; and those houses were destroyed because offerings to idols had been made upon their roofs (Jer. 19:13).

Lamentations 2:6 He has violently taken away His tent, as if it were just in a garden; He has destroyed His place of assembly: Yahweh has caused solemn assembly and Sabbath to be forgotten in Zion- This again is a very positive take on the gatherings held in the temple. Ezekiel was shown in vision how the priests and elders were solemnly worshipping idols within the temple. And so God said that He "hated" their "solemn assemblies" (s.w. Is. 1:14). Yet in depression, Jeremiah laments that these "solemn assemblies" were no more (Lam. 1:4; 2:6).

And has despised in the indignation of His anger the king and the priest- "Despise" is usually translated "provoke". Jeremiah was really hurt and provoked by the opposition of his family (Jer. 23:17); and in that again he manifested Yahweh, who was likewise provoked by Israel (s.w. Dt. 31:20; 32:19). So Jeremiah seems to have forgotten all that and appears to object to God being provoked by His people; even though he had earlier lived out the same feelings of being provoked by the same group. Again we have the impression that now he is out of step with Yahweh, and yet even in this, he is manifesting the unreasonable pity of Yahweh for His condemned people.

Lamentations 2:7 The Lord has cast off His altar, He has abhorred His sanctuary; He has given up into the hand of the enemy the walls of her palaces: they have made a noise in the house of Yahweh, as in the day of a solemn assembly- As explained on :6, the feasts and holy place had been abused by Judah. They had made it no longer a "sanctuary", a holy place, but rather a profane place. Jeremiah himself had made that point in his prophecies (e.g. Jer. 7:11-14). But he chose, in his depression, to hold on to the old narrative, as we all do- in this case, that the temple site was holy space, and God had been wrong to allow the Gentiles to enter and profane it. But Isaiah as well as Jeremiah had often demonstrated that the holy place was within human hearts, and not any more to be understood in physical terms. Because the holy space had been made unholy by Israel. Jeremiah had taught in Jer. 7:12 and often that they were wrong to consider the temple a sacred space which somehow automatically preserved them from any prosecution for their sins. They had been reminded that God doesn't operate sacred spaces like that. God's earlier sacred space in Shiloh had been destroyed because of the wickedness of the people, and the Jerusalem temple was not going to be any different.

We note here and in :8 Jeremiah's particular concern for the walls of the temple being destroyed, the wall of Zion (:8). But Ez. 23:14 says that they had used those walls to portray images of their idols. Jeremiah surely knew this. He was intent upon seeing just one aspect of a picture, repeating to himself a narrative which was seriously incomplete to the point of being wrong; and that was what his people were also doing.

Lamentations 2:8 Yahweh has purposed to destroy the wall of the daughter of Zion- The evil purposed need not have come about- if they repented. The "purpose" of God is therefore open ended and sensitive to human repentance. Jer. 18:8; 26:3; 36:3 use the same word to say that God will "repent of the evil that I purposed to do to them"- if they repented. They did not. And despite knowing all this, Jeremiah seems to lament the execution of the evil purposed.

He has stretched out the line, He has not withdrawn His hand from destroying- "Not oppressed [the poor]" in Ez. 18:17 is literally 'to turn back the hand from'. God did not turn His hand back from destroying Jerusalem (Lam. 2:8 s.w.) because the people of Judah and those already in exile had not responded to Ezekiel's call to 'turn back their hand' from oppressing the poor. Their attitude to their poor brethren was to become God's attitude to them. And that is taught by the Lord Jesus in His parables as being the principle by which we too shall be judged.

He has made the rampart and wall to lament; they languish together- The Biblical record contains a large number of references to the frequent tears of God's people, both in bleeding hearts for other people, and in recognition of their own sin. And as we have seen, these things are related. Consider:

- "My eye pours out tears to God" [i.e. in repentance?] (Job 16:20)
- Isaiah drenches Moab with tears (Is. 16:9)
- Jeremiah is a fountain of tears for his people (Jer. 9:1; Lam. 2:8)
- David's eyes shed streams of tears for his sins (Ps. 119:136; 6:6; 42:3)
- Jesus wept over Jerusalem (Mt. 23:37)
- Blessed are those who weep (Lk. 6:21)
- Mary washed the Lord's feet with her tears (Lk. 7:36-50)
- Paul wept for the Ephesians daily (Acts 20:19,31).

We have to ask whether there are any tears, indeed any true emotion, in our walk with our Lord. Those who go through life with dry eyes are surely to be pitied. Surely, in the light of the above testimony, we are merely hiding behind a smokescreen if we excuse ourselves by thinking that we're not the emotional type. Nobody can truly go through life humming to themselves "I am a rock, I am an island...and an island never cries". The very emotional

center of our lives must be touched. The tragedy of our sin, the urgency of the world's salvation, the amazing potential provided and secured in the cross of Christ...surely we cannot be passive to these things. We live in a world where emotion and passion are decreasing. Being politically correct, looking right to others... these things are becoming of paramount importance in all levels of society. The passionless, postmodernist life can't be for us, who have been moved and touched at our very core by the work and call and love of Christ to us. For us there must still be what Walter Brueggemann called "the gift of amazement", that ability to feel and say "Wow!" to God's grace and plan of salvation for us.

Lamentations 2:9 Her gates are sunk into the ground; He has destroyed and broken her bars: her king and her princes are among the nations where the law is not; yes, her prophets find no vision from Yahweh- It was little use lamenting that Israel were now amongst those who didn't live by Yahweh's law; for they had despised that law, and broken it completely- bearing in mind that it was the marriage contract between God and themselves. The silence of Yahweh through the prophets is unsurprising. And yet God had spoken at length through Jeremiah as a prophet. But here he seems to mentally associate himself completely with the people in their unGodly self lamentation.

Lamentations 2:10 The elders of the daughter of Zion sit on the ground, they keep silence; they have cast up dust on their heads; they have clothed themselves with sackcloth: the virgins of Jerusalem hang down their heads to the ground- see on Job 2:12. The elders here are of Zion rather than of Jerusalem, so perhaps the priesthood is in view. Jeremiah had frequently denounced them, and they had plotted his death. But now his heart bleeds for them- perhaps because as a priest he was related to them. Their grief for the loss of their temple was real enough. But they treated it as a mere talisman; Jeremiah had almost mocked their attachment to it earlier, in Jer. 7:4 Don't trust in lying words by saying, Yahweh's temple, Yahweh's temple, Yahweh's temple, are these". But now he feels so heartbroken for those who thought and felt like that. His identification at this time is completely with the people and not with the Divine, prophetic perspective. And yet it was this identification with them which led him to spurn the good life in Babylon and instead choose to live and die with the impenitent people in Egypt. We too are caught between our natural identification with humanity, and our knowledge of their sin and rejection of God's ways.

Lamentations 2:11 My eyes do fail with tears, my heart is troubled; my liver is poured on the earth, because of the destruction of the daughter of my people, because the young children and the infants swoon in the streets of the city- This and :12 appear to refer to the sufferings of the people during the famine in the siege, which Jeremiah himself had prophesied several times. His ministry had begun with the assurance that his words would have the power of destruction; and he had been psychologically strengthened for that ministry. But now the reality of what he preached swamped him to the point of apparent regret he had had anything to do with this destruction. The obvious, glaring point is that the people had willfully ignored all his appeals for repentance, had despised God's patience and grace- and so this had come because of that.

Lamentations 2:12 They ask their mothers for grain and wine, whilst they swoon as the wounded in the streets of the city, with their soul poured out into their mothers' bosom- We must remember that Jer. 7:11 and several times in Ezekiel have convicted the people of offering their children as sacrifices to idols in Yahweh's temple. The tragic picture painted here of suffering children and distressed parents must be balanced by that fact; a society who allowed that to happen and trusted in those idols was now receiving an appropriate judgment. But Jeremiah struggles with this. He focuses on the narrative formed by his own gut reactions, rather than the prophetic word he had himself uttered.

Lamentations 2:13 What shall I testify to you? What shall I liken to you, daughter of Jerusalem? What shall I compare to you, that I may comfort you, virgin daughter of Zion? For your breach is great like the sea: who can heal you?- The broken earthen bottle which was smashed couldn't be made whole again- apparently (Jer. 19:11). But the miracle of grace was that like the useless burnt vine branch of Ez. 15 and the marred linen girdle buried by the Euphrates, the smashed bottle, like Ezekiel's dry bones vision, could be made whole again. The stripes upon the suffering servant could 'heal' Israel (s.w. "made whole", Is. 53:5). Jeremiah had preached as much, that being made whole again was possible (Jer. 3:22; 30:17; 33:6 s.w.). The rhetorical question of Lam. 2:13 "Zion... who can heal you / make you whole again?" (s.w.) had its answer in Yahweh. But we could read this as Jeremiah in depression appearing to have lost faith in the healing promised in Jer. 30:13, for here he laments amongst the ruins of Jerusalem

that Zion is without a healer.

Jeremiah earnestly wishes to comfort them, and is frustrated that he cannot- despite surely being aware of Isaiah's prophecy that Yahweh would comfort Zion at the restoration (s.w. Is. 51:3,12 "I, even I, am He that comforts you"; Is. 66:13 "so will I comfort you"; Is. 40:1; 49:13; 52:9). "Comfort" is the same word as "repent"; and God had said that He would repent (s.w.) if Judah repented (Jer. 18:8; 26:3). The real problem was that Judah had not repented, and Jeremiah refused to factor that into his feelings; see on Lam. 1:9.

Lamentations 2:14 Your prophets have seen for you false and foolish visions; they did not expose your sin to ward off your captivity, but have seen for you false oracles and causes of banishment- There were many false prophets at the time of Jeremiah and Ezekiel; when in fact the true word of prophecy could have 'turned away' the captivity, if the exiles and the people left in Judah had responded to it (Lam. 2:14). Indeed it could have been that Zedekiah returned as "the prince" of the restored kingdom; see on Ez. 12:12. Ezekiel prophesied to the exiles in Babylon of what was going to happen to the Jews still in the land, exactly so that the exiles' repentance might avert those in the land suffering further. An ameliorated program of judgment and events would have been possible if they had repented.

This is one of many cases of self-justification in Lamentations (Lam. 1:2,19; Lam. 2:14; 4:13; 5:7), which contradicts the prophetic position, whereby blame is placed upon Judah, whereas now Jeremiah laments the situation as if Judah is being hard done by, with the masses suffering because of their false prophets- when Jeremiah himself has earlier said that the masses were as guilty as the false prophets, who only taught what the people wanted to hear.

The whole exile and return need never have happened- the prophecies of this need not have come true in the way they did, for even before the Babylonian invasion, Judah had been offered the prospect of eternally remaining in their land, if they repented (Jer. 7:7). And after it happened, Jeremiah commented: "Your prophets... did not expose your sin to ward off your captivity" (Lam. 2:14 NIV). It could have been 'warded off' by the peoples' repentance. Note how Jeremiah, himself a prophet at the time, so wishes to take the blame upon himself for not pleading more powerfully with the people. Perhaps we will have similar feelings when the time of tribulation breaks forth in the very last days.

Lamentations 2:15 All that pass by clap their hands at you. They hiss and wag their head at the daughter of Jerusalem saying, Is this the city that men called The perfection of beauty, The joy of the whole land?- Jeremiah had foretold this (Jer. 19:8; 22:8), but now he seems stunned to see it happen. And yet he was so certain of the fulfillments of the prophecies that he often speaks in the past tense of those things which were yet future. The hissing and mocking was because Jerusalem had been praised in David's psalms (e.g. Ps. 48:2; 50:2) as the joy of the whole earth and perfect in beauty. Those Psalms of David were well known; for David after the Bathsheba incident had vowed to preach the good news of Yahweh's grace to the entire world. He had done so through his Psalms. His music ministry had been successful; the nations knew the songs about Zion being the joy of the whole earth and the perfection of beauty. And so they mocked it as it lay in ruins.

The Lord's Bible mind would have found some sort of encouragement from those who mocked Him. For the Lord was so clearly bearing the judgment of Israel's sins: "All who pass along the way clap their hands at you: they hiss and wag their heads at the daughter of Jerusalem" (Lam. 2:15). And note too Jer. 48:27 (LXX 31:27): "Is Israel a laughing stock? Was she caught between thieves that you wag your head?". This is exactly the Lord's position, between thieves, and mocked- but by Israel. These prophecies imply it was the Gentiles who would mock Israel; thus by treating the Lord as they did, they declared themselves to be no longer God's people but Gentiles.

Lamentations 2:16 All your enemies have opened their mouth wide against you; they hiss and gnash the teeth; they say, We have swallowed her up; certainly this is the day that we looked for; we have found, we have seen it!- But Jeremiah earlier had portrayed these enemies as the "lovers" of Judah, to whom they had desperately prostituted themselves. They had sought their help against Babylon, making exclusive covenants with each of them, promising to worship their gods in the Jerusalem temple. And then the lovers realized that they were not the exclusive love of Judah, and therefore in anger turned against her and joined the Babylonians in destroying the temple which symbolized her adultery and unfaithfulness, both to God and man. But here again, Jeremiah is seeing things only from the perspective of what is immediately before his eyes; all he saw was these people as angry, exalting enemies. He shut his mind to the reasons why and the background. He is really a case study of man in depression.

Lamentations 2:17 Yahweh has done that which He purposed; He has fulfilled His word that He commanded in the days of old; He has thrown down, and has not pitied: He has caused the enemy to rejoice over you- The purpose of God to do these things had been expressed by Jeremiah himself. But he somehow distances himself from that,

saying that this was stated "in the days of old". He imagines that it was the curses of Moses which were coming true. And that was long ago; and likewise he must have seen his own words of judgment as uttered as it were in another life, in olden days. He had forgotten his own prophetic mission.

He has exalted the horn of your adversaries- "Exalted" is the Hebrew word which forms part of the name "Jeremiah", 'Yah will exalt'. Jeremiah in depression is as it were mocking his own name, which he had assumed meant that Yahweh would finally exalt Israel, when now it seemed He was exalting her enemies. For "thrown down", see on :2.

Lamentations 2:18 Their heart cried to the Lord: wall of the daughter of Zion, let tears run down like a river day and night; give yourself no respite; don't let the apple of your eye cease- Here we see a movement towards a more spiritual pole after the self absorption of the previous verses. But he doesn't yet make explicit that the crying to the Lord should be in repentance, not simply for relief from present suffering. Jeremiah wanted his grief to be reflective of the grieving prayer of the remnant to their God: "Cry aloud to the Lord! O wall of daughter Zion! Let tears stream down like a torrent day and night! Give yourself no rest, your eyes no respite!" (Lam. 2:18 RSV). His grief really was and is to be the pattern for others. Doubtless it influenced the Lord Himself, who wept over Zion (Lk. 19:41), inevitably holding Jeremiah in His mind.

Clearly there is an allusion to Jer. 14:17 "You shall say this word to them, Let my eyes run down with tears night and day, and let them not cease". This could be read as an invitation to repent in tears, in the desperate hope God may yet change His intended judgment; hence LXX "Let your eyes shed tears day and night, and let them not cease: for the daughter of my people has been sorely bruised, and her plague is very grievous". But there is an ambiguity in the text, whereby apparently God is the one who is mourning night and day. Perhaps this is purposeful; they were to mourn as He did, seeing the coming judgments from His perspective, rather than from the human perspective of considering them as just a tragic misfortune. Jeremiah himself entered into this, for he wept night and day for Zion. But here in Lam. 2:18, Jeremiah appears to ask the remaining Jews in Jerusalem to pray night and day; and yet there too, the grammar is ambiguous. For he may be saying there that they had already done this. The truth was they had not, Jeremiah had done so, but contrary to what he hoped, God was not prepared to accept his tears of repentance and mourning as theirs (see on Jer. 14:11).

Isaiah had prophesied that God would not rest until Zion be restored. Watchmen would be set upon Zion's walls who would give Him no rest until the walls be rebuilt (Is. 62:1,6,7). At this time, Zion was felt by God to be the "apple of his eye" (Zech. 2:8). This prophesy started to be fulfilled straight after the Babylonian invasion when Jeremiah urged the desolated people to pray: "O wall of the daughter of Zion, let tears run down like a river day and night: give thyself no rest; let not the apple of thine eye cease" (Lam. 2:18). The prayerful remnant gave *themselves* no rest; and thus was fulfilled the prophecy that *God* would have no rest. Sincere prayer according to God's will meant that there was a strange mutuality between the Father and those who prayed to Him. Both He and they considered Zion to be the apple of their eye; and thus the prayers were ultimately answered and Zion was restored.

Lamentations 2:19 Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the watches; pour out your heart like water before the face of the Lord: lift up your hands toward Him for the life of your young children, that faint for hunger at the head of every street- Uplifted hands spoke of intense prayer. It is fitting that the Lord died with hands and arms lifted up above his head, rather than spread out in a crucifix form, seeing that uplifted hands is a symbol of God's promises being confirmed (Ez. 20:5,6,15; 36:7; 47:14), as well as intense prayer (Lam. 2:19; 1 Tim. 2:8; 2 Chron. 6:12,13; Ps. 28:2), which Christ was engaged in on the cross (Heb. 5:7).

And yet the intense prayer was for the lives of their children, rather than in repentance. As the Lamentations progress, the desire to pray to God becomes more focused upon repentance, and comes to a climax at the very end in Lam. 5:16-21. Jeremiah had a lot to say about children in his prophecies, especially about the way the people offered their infants to the idols, and the way in which Zedekiah's refusal to repent would lead to the suffering of innocent children. Although Jeremiah is getting 'warmer' by appealing for prayer to God, he is still not asking for the repentance toward God which was so essential. But as the Lamentations progress, that will come.

Lamentations 2:20 Look, Yahweh, and see to whom You have done thus! Shall the women eat their fruit, the children that are dandled in the hands? Shall the priest and the prophet be killed in the sanctuary of the Lord?- This seems a placing of false guilt on God. The Jeremiah prophecies have repeatedly stated that judgment was really but an extension of the things they themselves did. They had offered their children to Gentile idols, and so their children would be slain by the Gentiles. The women were driven to eating their children in the famine, but they had earlier sacrificed their children to Baal. The prophets in view were the false prophets, who were responsible for teaching Judah to sin; and who had tried to murder Jeremiah. Jeremiah flips back into seeing things solely from the point of

view of human tragedy, without factoring in all the background which he himself had been preaching for some years.

Lamentations 2:21 The youth and the old man lie on the ground in the streets; my virgins and my young men are fallen by the sword: You have killed them in the day of Your anger; You have slaughtered, and not pitied- This had been the specific fate predicted by Jeremiah for their choosing to listen to false prophets rather than to him (Jer. 14:16). But now the people were cast out in the streets of Jerusalem, Jeremiah, the true prophet, laments as if this judgment is somehow unreasonable. I feel that whilst the human tragedy was enough to make anybody cry "Too much!", Jeremiah is here out of step with the God who had inspired him to make just this prophecy in places like Jer. 14:16.

Lamentations 2:22 You have called, as in the day of a solemn assembly, my terrors on every side; there was none that escaped or remained in the day of Yahweh's anger: those that I have dandled and brought up has my enemy consumed- Perhaps Jeremiah lost his own children, hence his bitterness. But he could still be understood here as being totally identified with his own people, feeling their suffering as if it were his very own. Although in a sense he goes too far in this, his sense of identity with his sinful people is in another sense commendable. Seeing he had suffered so much from them and very nearly died at their hands, his love and identity toward them is a reflection of a truly spiritual heart. The terrors on every side were God's judgments on the people for how they had treated Jeremiah. Jer. 20:10 "Terror everywhere (GNB) / on every side" is one meaning of "Magormissabib" in Jer. 20:3. The terror to come upon Judah was partly because of their defamation of Jeremiah, who had spoken God's word to them. And yet now it comes, Jeremiah feels that there are terrors around *him* on every side, so deep was his sense of identity with his people. See on :21.

Lamentations Chapter 3

Lamentations 3:1 I am the man that has seen affliction by the rod of His wrath- The same word is used of Judah's affliction (Lam. 1:3); he was setting himself up as Judah's representative in the hope they too would pass through his pattern of depression, the stages of grief, and then repentance and begging for the restoration of the Kingdom which we find at the end in Lam. 5:16-21. See on Lam. 1:1.

Lamentations 3:2 He has led me and caused me to walk in darkness, and not in light- Lam. 2:21,22 have revealed a peak of identity between Jeremiah and his sinful people, who had tried to murder him previously. Although he appears to go too far in justifying his people, his identity with his people reflected God's identity with them even in their suffering for disobedience. Walking in darkness rather than light is the language of condemnation, and is used in John's letters in that sense. He was identified with Israel even in their condemnation, and in this looks forward to the intensely representative work of the Lord Jesus.

Lamentations 3:3 Surely against me He turns his hand again and again all the day- Jeremiah personalizes the suffering of Israel; he really felt he was the one being judged and condemned. See on :12.

Lamentations 3:4 My flesh and my skin He has made old; He has broken my bones- What follows is based upon Jeremiah's experience in the dungeon. But he seems to have reapplied those feelings to how he felt as the representative of God's people in their condemnation and suffering at the hands of their invaders; see on :19. Just as his lamentations were originally written to lament the death of Josiah, but he has extended and reapplied them to his grief for Zedekiah and Jerusalem (2 Chron. 35:25). He applies his lament for himself in the dungeon to how he laments for himself as the subject of Divine condemnation at the hands of the Babylonians. Even though he was personally innocent and didn't unduly suffer from the Babylonian invasion. In all this we have a window into the nature of the feelings of the Lord Jesus as He died on the cross, the death of a criminal, thereby tasting death for every sinful man- whilst personally innocent.

Lamentations 3:5 He has built against me, and surrounded me with gall and travail- Building against could refer to the building of bulwarks against the wall of Jerusalem (s.w. Dt. 20:20), as if Jeremiah feels as if he is Jerusalem. But the same words are used of how Jeremiah had been given God's word, in order to build against as well as destroy (Jer. 1:10). He felt torn between identification with God's word, and identification with his sinful people and his pity for them. "Gall" was specifically the judgment for Israel's sins (Jer. 8:14; 9:15) and for the false prophets (Jer. 23:15)- the very ones who had plotted to murder Jeremiah. But now he identifies himself even with his worst enemies in pity for them.

Jeremiah's deep identity with his people in their sinfulness and suffering for it all points forward to the Lord's identity with us, bearing our nature and on the cross totally identifying with sinners. Therefore His sufferings on the cross have connections with the punishments for Israel's sins (e.g. being offered gall to drink = Jer. 8:14; Lam. 3:5). Israel were temporarily forsaken by God because of their sins (Is. 49:14; 54:7), and therefore so was Christ. Christ was chastened with the rod of men "and with the stripes of the children of men", i.e. Israel (Is. 53:5; 1 Pet. 2:24; Mic. 5:1), in His death on the cross.

Lamentations 3:6 He has made me to dwell in dark places, as those that have been long dead- And in this case, a priest like Jeremiah would feel ritually unclean and separated from God. It was the Lord's intense identity with us as sinners which likewise led Him to genuinely feel forsaken by God (Mt. 27:46). These feelings were in the first instance Jeremiah reworking his feelings when in the dungeon; see on :4. Perhaps that dark place felt like a tomb, and maybe dead bodies were thrown into it.

Lamentations 3:7 He has walled me about, that I can't go forth; He has made my chain heavy- Jeremiah was kept it seems in a cabin in the wall of the dungeon, and in chains. This would have been the basis for his feelings of being walled about. As he sees Judah going into captivity in chains, he recalled the time when he was in chains. Thus he reapplied his feelings in the dungeon to how he now felt as he saw Judah taken captive; see on :4.

Lamentations 3:8 Yes, when I cry, and call for help, He shuts out my prayer- The only way to eat in the dungeon would have been to have food lowered down, and seeing the city was suffering famine, chances of survival were slim. The pit in which there was no water (Jer. 38:6) would have reminded him of Joseph's experience (Gen. 37:24),

and he may well have looked therefore towards some miraculous deliverance. His thoughts at this time are here in Lam. 3, where he wrote in his mind a prayer or psalm about it, but now reapplies this to his feelings for Israel. But he felt his prayers were shut out by the covering placed upon the dungeon (Lam. 3:8,53), and he was enclosed within hewn stone (Lam. 3:9)- what the dungeon walls were made of. It was presumably a sewer, with excrement falling before his face. He therefore felt he was in a living death and burial, surrounded by gravel stones as if in a grave (Lam. 3:16). His enemies mocked him from above (Lam. 3:14), pouring water that was probably excrement upon him (Lam. 3:54; as the dungeon was a sewer), his teeth were broken from the beating and perhaps from the descent into the dungeon (Lam. 3:16), and he felt bitter with God rather than full of faith and hope in deliverance (Lam. 3:15). But then his faith revived, reflecting how God had still not destroyed Judah by His great grace (Lam. 3:22), and therefore every day he survived until morning he saw as God's grace to him, in which he could hope (Lam. 3:23). He realized he was Judah's representative; for they too were to be sent forth from Babylon, the pit in which there was no water (Zech. 9:11). And this gave him hope; just as God's great grace to Israel historically should be basis for our hope. And so again we see his totally identity with Israel; God would not hear their prayers, having told Jeremiah not to pray to Him for them; and he feels that is true for himself personally, such was his identity with his people.

Lamentations 3:9 He has walled up my ways with cut stone; He has made my paths crooked- The cut stone was what he would have remembered from being in the dungeon; see on :8. The Jews had made their own paths crooked or perverse (s.w. Jer. 3:21; 9:5). But now Jeremiah seems to blame God for their sin as well as the judgment for it; see in :11. This total taking of their side is in one sense wrong, but yet it indicates the amazing identity of the Lord Jesus and even God Himself with impenitent sinners. For at the exile, God's heart bled for His sinful people, as Jeremiah's did, despite their impenitence.

Lamentations 3:10 He is to me like a bear lying in wait, as a lion in secret places- Babylon and the nations are portrayed as the beast waiting to pounce upon Judah in judgment. Jeremiah clearly sees that God is behind them, and appears more angry with God than he does with those Gentile nations. But he repeatedly refuses to see Israel's sin as the root cause for all this. See on :46.

Lamentations 3:11 He has turned aside my ways- As in :9, Jeremiah blames God for their sins. He recognizes that Israel's way had turned aside from God (s.w. 'revolted' Jer. 5:23; 6:28; Ez. 6:9), and he identifies with them in that, feeling he has personally turned aside. But he wrongly blames God for it. It is this nadir of spirituality which serves to highlight the wonderful climax of the book in Lam. 5:16-21 when he comes to total confession of sin and desire for restoration, taking full guilt for sin without blaming God or circumstance.

And pulled me in pieces; He has made me desolate- Continuing the likeness of Yahweh to a lion in :10. But Jeremiah was treated very well by the Babylonian lion; he was given preferential treatment and offered a good retirement package in Babylon. But he as it were ignores that, and focuses upon his identity with God's people who had been torn apart by the lion.

Lamentations 3:12 He has bent His bow, and set me as a target for the arrow- Again as in :3, Jeremiah is intensely personalizing Judah's suffering. He feels he himself is mere target practice for God, and is the sole target for God's wrath; and yet as noted on :33, he does move on from this. This is typical depressive feeling; that the sufferer alone is suffering. And yet Jeremiah arrived in that position because of his deep identity with God's people. Depression is at times caused by identification with others who are suffering; internalizing their situation can be a factor in personal depression. It was so with Jeremiah; and yet he comes to this position from a basic love for the people.

Lamentations 3:13 He has caused the shafts of His quiver to enter into my kidneys- Notice how Jeremiah's bowels were turned for his people, because he felt that *he* had shared in their sin. The arrows of God entered into *his* kidneys, and this is why he so cried out in pain. But God's arrows were against a sinful Judah (Lam. 2:4). Yet Jeremiah so identified with them that he felt they had entered *him*; and this is why he could cry out in the way he did. Even though he hadn't rebelled, he felt that because they had, so had he, as he was so identified with them. He reached such a level of grief through identifying himself so closely with those for whom he grieved. Time and again, the descriptions of his personal suffering and grief are expressed in the terms of the very sufferings which he had prophesied as coming upon a sinful Israel. And so with us, if we feel and show a willful solidarity with the people of this world, with our brethren, then we will grieve for them. If we maintain the selfish, modern detachedness from them, then we will never have a heart that bleeds for them. Jeremiah could so easily have shrugged his shoulders and reasoned that Judah had had their chance; and it wasn't on his head. But he didn't. His attitude was that he had to

seek the sheep until he found it.

There are intentional parallels between Jeremiah and Judah; he was their representative, as well as God's representative to them; just like the Lord Jesus. Jeremiah was afflicted (Lam. 1:9; 3:1) as Judah (s.w. Lam. 1:3,7); Built against (:5), as Jerusalem was "built against" by the invaders, Jer. 52:4; he "Waxed old", i.e. prematurely aged (:4), as the heavens and earth of Judah were to "wax old" (s.w.) and pass away (Ps. 102:26; 50:9; 51:6). Jeremiah felt his prayers were not heard (:8), as Judah's weren't. They "Hedged me about, that I cannot get out... inclosed my ways" (:7,9), just as Judah "Therefore, behold, I will hedge up [s.w.] your way with thorns, and make a wall, that she shall not find her paths" (Hos. 2:6). "He was unto me as a bear" (:10), as "I will meet them as a bear" (Hos. 13:8; Am. 5:19); and "As a lion", as God was to Judah through the Babylonians (Jer. 5:6; 49:19; 50:44 etc.). God bent His bow against him (:12), as against Judah (Lam. 2:4 s.w.). "Mine affliction and my misery" (3:19) are the same words in Lam. 1:7 "her affliction... her miseries". He drank gall (3:5,19), as Judah had to (Jer. 8:14; 9:15; 23:15). There were none to comfort him (Lam. 1:21), as none to comfort her (Lam. 1:9). He bore a yoke (Lam. 3:27), as Judah bore the yoke of condemnation by Babylon (Jer. 27:8,12).

And so Jeremiah feels that he himself has committed Israel's sin along with them: "*We* have transgressed and have rebelled" (Lam. 3:42). He feels that God will not hear *his* prayer (Lam. 3:44), even though this was only true for the people and not for Jeremiah personally. In this he looks forward to how the Lord Himself genuinely felt forsaken by the Father, even though He Himself was never forsaken.

Lamentations 3:14 I am become a derision to all my people, and their song all the day- Jeremiah has been identified so closely with the people, as demonstrated throughout this commentary so far. But this is the more noteworthy because he achieves this even although that people mocked him continually. He loved those who mocked him, and loved to the point of total self-identification with them.

Lamentations 3:15 He has filled me with bitterness, He has sated my thirst with wormwood- When in the dungeon, which is the basis for this chapter, Jeremiah was at the mercy of his tormentors for food and water. And they lowered down to him water with wormwood. The Lord too was offered such bitter drink on the cross.

Lamentations 3:16 He has also broken my teeth with gravel stones; He has covered me with ashes- This gives the impression of a living death, as if the ashes of the funeral pyre and the gravel of the grave had been poured upon his body. Jeremiah didn't die, neither in the dungeon nor in the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem. But he felt as if he had. He thereby as it were "tasted death for every man" as did the Lord, so intense was his identification with his people (Heb. 2:9).

Lamentations 3:17 You have removed my soul far off from peace; I forgot prosperity- GNB "I have forgotten what health and peace and happiness are". Jeremiah had only known peace and prosperity before his prophetic call. So he seems to be complaining about and resenting his entire prophetic call.

Lamentations 3:18 I said, My strength is perished, and my expectation from Yahweh- Jeremiah appears to be alluding to Prov. 10:28; 11:7, using the same Hebrew words as there; with the implication that he is now amongst the condemned, who are left without hope- in contrast to the righteous, whose hope doesn't perish. He so identified with his condemned people that he absolutely felt a personal, condemned sinner; and perhaps there was something of that in the Lord's desperate cry "Why have You forsaken me?"; see on Mt. 27:46.

Lamentations 3:19 Remember my affliction and my misery, the wormwood and the gall- See on :1. He had likely been given gall to drink as this was the punishment for false prophets (Dt. 29:18; Jer. 23:15). And yet in the judgment of Jerusalem, Jeremiah so pitied those who did this to him that he feels as if he has drunk the gall which they were to drink, such was his identity with them (see on :5). Thus he reapplied his dungeon experiences to his grief for Jerusalem; see on :4. GNB gives "homelessness" for "misery"; as if he felt his own uncertain residency, living temporarily at Gedaliah's house, was a way of fellowshiping the homeless exiles. Jer. 40:6 observes: "Then went Jeremiah to Gedaliah the son of Ahikam to Mizpah, and lived with him among the people who were left in the land". It is repeatedly emphasized that Jeremiah "lived... among the people". Even though he lived in Gedaliah's house in relatively luxury, his living is described according to how Jeremiah perceived it- he lived "among the people" (also Jer. 40:1; Jer. 39:14). And this of course is an example to us, wherever our lot be cast. In this manner we from relative luxury and stability can fellowship and identify with those who are literally homeless and exiles.

Lamentations 3:20 My soul still remembers them, and is bowed down within me- The referent of "them" is unclear.

If the suggestion on :19 is correct, then it would refer to the homeless exiles, with whom Jeremiah identified through his far less radical homelessness. Or the reference could be to his former peace and prosperity noted on :17.

Lamentations 3:21 This I recall to my mind; therefore have I hope- The referent of "this" would seem to refer to the grace of Yahweh which he comments upon in :22. Jeremiah had previously been looking only negatively at what he "remembered"- a former life of peace and prosperity (:17,20). But now he recalls to mind Yahweh's many graces toward him. And again we have a lesson here for us in depression. We can focus solely upon the past losses, the negatives; but we can also choose to remember all the past graces. We have some power over what we recall to mind. And Jeremiah, who had been saved from death in the dungeon and other plots on his life by divine grace alone, had many "graces" he could remember.

Lamentations 3:22 It is because of Yahweh's graces that we are not consumed, because His compassion doesn't fail- See on :21. Jeremiah was commanded not to make lamentation for the punishment of his people (Jer. 16:5). But he did, and God inspired the record of them in Lamentations, and because they are inspired words, He spoke through those words to all subsequent generations. The reason for this was that God's covenant, referred to as "kindness and mercy" in Jer. 16:5, was broken; they were not at peace with Him. And so they should not be pitied in their death. And yet although the covenant was broken by Israel, and God broke His side of it in response to that... He in fact still treated them as His covenant people. This is not to say that God is not serious about His statements. He is; but His love, grace and pity is displayed as the more extraordinary, in that it leads Him to break the words and threats spoken in justifiable and understandable wrath. For the same Hebrew phrase "loving kindness and tender mercies" is used again by Jeremiah in Lam. 3:22, where he reflects that these have not been withdrawn from God's people, even though Zion is now in ruins. See on :39.

Lamentations 3:23 They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness- The fact life goes on morning by morning is itself a huge example of God's grace (:21) and faithfulness. In the dungeon, existence was a daily struggle. The fact Jeremiah was alive each morning was evidence to him of God's grace, and he recalls this to mind and applies it to the suffering of Judah. The fact some of them remained alive was evidence enough of His faithfulness. Remember that in the context, Jeremiah has been accusing God of unreasonably rejecting him and Judah. But now he sees that whilst there is life, there is no simply hope- but also the actual experience of God's faithfulness and grace every morning. See on :39.

Lamentations 3:24 Yahweh is my portion, says my soul; therefore will I hope in Him- Jeremiah was a priest, and the priesthood were promised that although they would have no "portion" or inheritance, yet Yahweh was their portion (s.w. Num. 18:20; Dt. 10:9). Jeremiah returns to his basic, core spirituality. He had lost his peace, stability and prosperity (:17). But he shouldn't have focused on those things, because his relationship with Yahweh was his real portion. And he therefore had hope that in the restored kingdom, he would receive an eternal inheritance. Jeremiah was identified with Israel, and they were to be a nation of priests. They had lost their physical inheritance, so that they might become a nation of priests who had Yahweh as their inheritance. Here we see how the Father was working through their loss of their natural inheritance. And Jeremiah is emerging from his depression in appreciating this.

Lamentations 3:25 Yahweh is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul that seeks Him- Jeremiah reflects that in the dungeon, he had waited for Yahweh, and been delivered. Instead of focusing solely upon the losses, the tragedy of the invasion... he now turns towards the concept of waiting for Yahweh, and hoping in Him. But he confesses that the waiting and hoping will only be for the one who seeks Yahweh. Jeremiah is yet to come to the unconditional repentance which is the climax of the book in Lam. 5:16-21, but he is edging towards it by reflecting that the "hope" for those who "wait" for Yahweh is only for those who seek Yahweh. Isaiah's prophecies of a restored Kingdom for the exiles were for those who "wait for Him" (s.w. Is. 40:31; 49:23). And Jeremiah was surely aware of those prophecies.

Lamentations 3:26 It is good that a man should hope and quietly wait for the salvation of Yahweh- Jeremiah had so far in Lamentations been implying that he expected Yahweh to act immediately to save Judah from their tragedies. But now he recognizes that it is good to have to wait for that salvation. He still hasn't stated clearly that Judah must repent, and their condemnation [from which they needed salvation] was solely due to their sins. But he is edging

closer to it.

Lamentations 3:27 It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth- Jeremiah realizes that his own sufferings had led him to wait and hope in Divine salvation, especially when he was in the dungeon awaiting death. And he realizes that his personal path must be Judah's. He had literally carried a yoke in the acted parable of warning Judah to submit to the yoke of Babylon (Jer. 27:2). And Judah were now themselves beneath that yoke, which was a figure of servitude to the Gentiles in Jer. 2:20. And he realized that it had been spiritually "good" for him. So instead of lamenting the exile, he was beginning to see a long term purpose and blessing in it.

Lamentations 3:28 Let him sit alone and keep silence, because He has laid it on him- Jeremiah may have himself in view here. See on :27. He considers such sitting alone as "good". Earlier he had been rebuked for his attitude of resenting that he "sat alone" and had kept away from the "assembly" of the rejoicers (Jer. 15:17,19); and so we are to assume that he had said these things in resentment that he had had to stand alone amongst men. He had resented how he "sat alone"; yet this is the very term used of how Jerusalem was to "sit alone [solitary]" (Lam. 1:1). He was her representative, and yet he seems to have resented that. He was after all being representative of those who had hated him and tried to kill him. As Jeremiah wrongly lamented his own 'sitting alone', so he ought to have perceived that he should not have lamented Jerusalem's likewise. But now he seems to have learnt his lesson, and sees his aloneness as "good".

Jeremiah sat in silence in the ruins of Zion just as the condemned Jews were to (Jer. 25:37 s.w.), totally identified with his sinful and judged people, in response to how there was to be no funeral wailing for the dead but rather, silence (Ez. 24:17).

Lamentations 3:29 Let him put his mouth in the dust, if so be that in this case there may be hope- Here Jeremiah edges closer towards the concept of repentance; for putting the mouth in the dust surely implies some regret. But GNB "We should bow in submission, for there may still be hope" would continue the allusion to the need to bear the yoke of the Babylonians in :27,28, and thereby come to the ultimate freedom of God's restored Kingdom in Israel.

Lamentations 3:30 Let him give his cheek to Him who strikes him; let him be filled full with reproach- Without yet appealing for unconditional repentance, Jeremiah edges yet further towards it. For to be smitten on the cheek was the sign of reproof for some kind of wrong doing; and he urges Judah to give their cheek to God to strike, and to allow themselves ["let him be..."] to filled with shame. For it was from this basis that they could come to a position of waiting for the Lord in hope. When the Lord Jesus was smitten on the cheek we see how He absorbed the spirit of these things.

Lamentations 3:31 For the Lord will not cast off forever- Yahweh 'cast off' Judah (Jer. 12:7; 23:33) but only because they had cast Him off (Jer. 15:6 s.w.). And yet God did not cast off His people (Jer. 33:26); Jeremiah personally was persuaded that God would not cast off His people for ever (Lam. 3:31). He will show them mercy as if He had not cast them off (Zech. 10:6); this reversal of their casting off was to be through the repentance of the exiled community (Lev. 26:44). But even this didn't happen, and yet God still did not cast them away (Rom. 11:2). His love and grace was such that He holds on to them. This desperate holding on to His people is seen in the experience of every person who joins God's people through baptism into Christ. They may indeed be cast off ultimately, but that is because they cast Him off, and wrestled against His insistent desire to keep hold of them eternally.

Lamentations 3:32 For though He cause grief, yet He will have compassion according to the multitude of His graces- "Grief" or 'to grieve' here is the same word for in :33, where Jeremiah moves on from simply lamenting the "grief" to appreciate that this was not done willingly; and he now realizes that at best there is a paradox, in that God causes grief and yet at the same time is the God of all grace. And somehow His compassion will be revealed. Previously in the Lamentations, Jeremiah has seen only one part of the picture- the immediate suffering. But now he moves on to realize that there is another side to the dialectic, and that is God's grace. "Compassion" is the word used of what would be revealed when the exiled Israel repented and returned to God (s.w. Dt. 30:3). Jeremiah is moving towards the conclusion that radical repentance is required to release that revelation of compassion.

Lamentations 3:33 For He does not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men- This is a marked improvement from his earlier tone of criticism toward God. He had earlier complained that God was but an archer, using him for His target practice (:12). But now he recognizes that the ever present 'gracious' side of God means that we can never conclude that suffering is inflicted willfully by God nor in any merely capricious sense.

Lamentations 3:34 To crush under foot all the prisoners of the earth- Instead, the restoration prophecies speak of Yahweh's releasing of the prisoners (s.w. Zech. 9:11,12; Ps. 68:6; 69:33; 79:11; 102:20). And yet Judah were prisoners, and apparently crushed. But Jeremiah begins to see that this is not to be man's last end. The prophecies of restoration, uttered by himself too, spoke of freedom for the prisoners. They were not to be always imprisoned, let alone crushed. Jeremiah is speaking here firstly of his own experience of prison- he had not been crushed there, but released. And his path was to be Israel's. But this is not to say that exiles were not crushed; the word is used about their crushing in Is. 57:15. But Jeremiah was coming to see that this was part of a bigger picture. He had used the same word of how a repentant Judah would be humbled or crushed, and then the suffering would end (Jer. 44:10). They were not willingly crushed nor need they remain crushed; for salvation and restoration was and is part of God's essential purpose and personality.

Lamentations 3:35 To turn aside the right of a man before the face of the Most High- The idea is that when men come before God's face to be judged, God will not pervert their "right" or 'sentence'. This is parallel with :36- God will not "condemn a man unjustly in his judgment" (LXX). Jeremiah is rapidly moving away from his depressive focus upon just one part of the picture- i.e. the immediate suffering before his eyes. He accepts that God is just and will not bring condemnation for the sake of His own ulterior motives. Jeremiah is also recognizing that all the suffering was a result of a judgment given by God- and it was a right judgment.

Lamentations 3:36 To subvert a man in his cause, the Lord doesn't approve- LXX "condemn a man unjustly in his judgment". As explained on :35, Jeremiah is now realizing that the judgments which Judah were experiencing were just. God would never condemn unjustly.

Lamentations 3:37 Who is he who says, and it comes to pass, when the Lord doesn't command it?- The obvious complaint a reader would make to Jeremiah's earlier lamentations, his complaining about the judgments, is that they had all been prophesied by none other than Jeremiah himself. He had almost disassociated himself from his prophetic past. But now he reflects that the evil being experienced had all been spoken by Yahweh ahead of time. It was all within a tightly controlled Divine program.

Lamentations 3:38 Doesn't evil and good come out of the mouth of the Most High?- As noted on :37, Jeremiah is now accepting what to us the readers is glaringly obvious- the tragedy he has been lamenting had all arisen from the prophetic words which he himself had spoken. The evil came from Yahweh's mouth or word. And Jeremiah is driven to the same conclusion as the restoration prophecy of Is. 45:5-7- that both good and evil are alike from Yahweh. In his depressed state, he had seen only the evil as coming from Him. But now he starts to see a wider picture.

Lamentations 3:39 Why does a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins?- He had learnt in the dungeon that just to be alive is a sign of God's grace. And the more we appreciate and understand the function of our own bodies, the more we will likewise accept that our existence every moment is but by God's grace. This has been the force of Jeremiah's conclusions in :22,23. And so a living man should not complain. And Jeremiah moves again closer to the final truth he will arrive at in Lam. 5:16-21; here he recognizes that the judgment is a punishment for sin, and anyone left alive after it had no reason to complain about anything. This may be a helpful tool in coping with depression. The "living man" whom he challenges may well be himself.

Lamentations 3:40 Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to Yahweh- I have argued that the book of Lamentations begins with Jeremiah bitterly complaining that God is as good as dead (see on Lam. 1:1), with him looking solely at the tragedy before his eyes, and progresses to a climax of unconditional repentance in Lam. 5:16-21. But the progression is a jagged graph. There are increasingly points at which he does recognize that the sufferings are directly due to Judah's sins, he increasingly sees that there is a future hope and the God of judgment is also a God of grace. And he vaguely implies that repentance is needed, but always quickly returns to accusing God of unreasonable behaviour. And now in these verses he does speak clearly of the need for repentance. But his appeal for repentance here is still tinged with a cynicism, that God will not hear and has not listened (:42), and that He still lacks pity (:43), and has put a barrier between human prayer and His response (:44). Jeremiah has yet to come to the appeal for unconditional repentance with which the book climaxes.

And so in likely allusion to the descriptions of God searching and trying our hearts in the Psalms, Jeremiah says that Judah should "search and try our hearts"- we should seek to know ourselves as God does. David's invitations to

God to search and try him (Ps. 17:3; 26:2; 139:23) imply he has done so himself (cp. Ps. 77:6). God now searches and tries the hearts, and will [at judgment day] give every man as his work shall be (Jer. 17:10 cp. Rev. 22:12). The spirit of man is [i.e. is intended to be] the candle which God also uses for His examination of men (Prov. 20:27); there is thus a link intended between our self-examination and the way God looks at us. His judgment must be ours. As sin is condemned by Him, so we should examine ourselves to the point of self-condemnation.

Lamentations 3:41 Let us lift up our heart with our hands to God in the heavens- As noted on :40, this appeal for repentance is still far from unconditional. Sacrifice was now impossible because the temple had been destroyed. But as a priest, Jeremiah surely had in view how that instead of 'lifting up' the heave offerings of animal sacrifice, the people were instead to grab hold of their own hearts and lift them up to God, and they could lift them as high as heaven. This is surely consciously alluding to how David realized that sacrifice and offering was not what God was essentially looking for, but rather broken, repentant and contrite hearts (Ps. 51:16,17). We marvel at how God worked through the loss of the temple to bring His people more fully to Himself.

Lamentations 3:42 We have transgressed and have rebelled; You have not pardoned- As noted on :40, this apparent appeal for repentance is tinged with the self justification which robs 'repentance' of its real power. To say 'OK let's repent, OK we sinned... but God, You didn't forgive us, and so [by implication] all this grief came upon us unfairly'... is to miss the point. Repentance axiomatically requires a declaration that God is right and we are wrong, our sin is inexcusable, His judgment is right, and only by utter grace can we now be saved. David learnt all this very well at the time of his great repentance. Jeremiah has alluded to it in theory (see on :41), but he is still far from grasping the real spirit of David. And our repentance is often so similar. It's why repentance in practice seems to end up a process, rather than the one time act that it is intended to be.

Lamentations 3:43 You have covered with anger and pursued us; You have killed, You have not pitied- See on :40,42. Jeremiah is appealing for repentance, but goes straight on to accuse God of being a pitiless murderer. The word for "pitied" is used in a word play in 2 Chron. 36:15,17. God had pitied His people by patiently sending prophets like Jeremiah to them. But because they despised that pity, they didn't want it, He sent upon them the Babylonians who did not pity them. And so in Jer. 15:5, Jeremiah had asked the rhetorical question: "For who will have pity on you, Jerusalem?". And the answer was, only Yahweh. But now Jeremiah has slipped back to seeing only part of the picture, focusing on the tragedy before his eyes; and this refusal to see a bigger picture leads him to charge God wrongly with being pitiless. When Yahweh's pity is one of the most recurrent themes of His self revelation. Truly God had threatened in Ez. 5:11: "Neither shall My eye spare, and I also will have no pity". But the wonder of God's grace was that His eye did spare and He did pity at the restoration (Ez. 36:21; Joel 2:18; Mal. 3:17 s.w.), just as His eye had spared them in the desert (Ez. 20:17). This reveals the emotion of God, His pity even for the spiritually weak, and how this triumphs over His judgment.

Lamentations 3:44 You have covered Yourself with a cloud, so that no prayer can pass through- As explained on :40, here and in :43 Jeremiah seems to be tingeing his appeal for repentance with the thought that God had cut Himself off from His people, and placed a barrier between Him and them through which repentance couldn't pass. This all sets the scene for the final unconditional confession and appeal for repentance and restoration by grace which we have at the end of the book in Lam. 5:16-21. Here Jeremiah appears to be almost sarcastic; the cloud of incense from the incense altar, which as a priest he was familiar with, represented prayer (Rev. 8:3,4). But Jeremiah is saying that this cloud has been used by God as a barrier through which prayer could not pass. So his appeal for repentance in :40,41 is far from absolute.

Lamentations 3:45 You have made us an off-scouring and refuse in the midst of the nations- Paul alludes to this in 1 Cor. 4:13, where he says that God made him and the apostles like this to "the nations" to whom they preached; and yet more specifically, Paul considers that they were off-scouring and refuse in the eyes of the Jews. It's as if he realized that Jeremiah was not quite correct here; for Israel had made themselves to be despised amongst the nations, to whom they had prostituted themselves. And so Paul is saying that the Gentile "nations" are as the Jews, and the true Jews are prophets like himself, the true and spiritual Israel.

Lamentations 3:46 All our enemies have opened their mouth wide against us- Jeremiah likens the Gentiles to a devouring beast, and yet He has called God just that (:10). He sees God as making Himself gross, in that He was manifest through those nations. And that is a deeply unfair take on the whole situation. Again, Jeremiah has slipped back to seeing only one aspect of the picture. As with Job, God may well have cut him some slack in this because he

was reasoning as someone who is the parade example of a man in depression.

Lamentations 3:47 Fear and the pit have come on us, devastation and destruction- Jeremiah initially wrote the lamentation of chapter 3 concerning his own enclosure in the pit / dungeon, in fear for his life. And yet he now reuses the material concerning Israel, his people with whom he was so identified; and yet apparently forgetting that he had been revived from that pit by grace.

Jer. 48:44; 49:5 describe condemnation as fear being brought upon people (as Job 3:25; Prov. 1:27), and Is. 24:18 and other passages speak of the condemned fleeing from “the noise of the fear”. “The fear” is almost a way of saying ‘the judgment of God’ (Lam. 3:47). The torment of the rejected will be their fear (1 Jn. 4:18). Psychologically, we need to get in touch with our own fears now, face our fears of condemnation eye to eye, and work through them- in repenting and coming to believe firmly in God’s gracious acceptance, living in the spirit of the true love which casts out fear. I know men and women who knew God and walked with the Lord, but now say ‘it means nothing to me’. They shrug when I nervously mention to them the reality of judgment to come- and I’m not very bold at bringing the conversations around to that issue, because it is just so fearsome and of such magnitude. They tell me that they’re indifferent. But somewhere deep within them, no matter what good actors they are before the stage of our human eyes, there has to be a deep and awful fear. And it is that fear which will be revealed and which will grip them in that final day. Perhaps the greatest mental torment of the rejected will be realizing how they could have been in the Kingdom of God; they will then perceive how great was the potential which they had had in the brief years of their mortality.

Lamentations 3:48 My eye runs down with streams of water, for the destruction of the daughter of my people- What he saw with his eye affected his mind / heart (:51). Let us not see the doom of others, the pain and suffering of another life, and walk on by not permanently moved. What we see should affect our heart- if we have a heart that bleeds. And a bleeding heart doesn’t merely bleed- it *does* something concrete, in prayer and action. Consider other examples of the bleeding heart of Jeremiah: “Mine eyes do fail with tears, my bowels are troubled, my liver is poured upon the earth [“my stomach is in knots”, the Net Bible], for the destruction of the daughter of my people; because the children and the sucklings swoon in the streets of the city” (Lam. 2:11). “For these things I weep; mine eye, mine eye runneth down with water... my bowels are troubled; mine heart is turned within me; for I have grievously rebelled” (Lam. 1:16,20). And this is the more impressive when we recall that it was his own people who had tried to murder him, and very nearly succeeded when he was cast into the dungeon. In this he reflects the amazing love of God for His people.

Lamentations 3:49 My eye pours down, and doesn’t cease, without any intermission- He considers his tears to be his prayer to God, begging for intervention (:50). God often considers our situation and feelings to be our prayer of intercession. Otherwise, the acceptability of prayer would simply be a reflection of our ability to verbalize. And some are better at this than others. His lack of "intermission" is alluding to the appeal of Is. 62:7 to give God no rest until He reestablish Jerusalem. But again he is pleading a Scripture without attention to the wider context- which is that the reestablishment would come when Judah returned to their God. And then they would be returned to their land and Zion would return to her glory. Jeremiah has so often made this point in his prophecies, repeatedly playing on the word *shub*, to return / repent.

Lamentations 3:50 Until Yahweh look down, and see from heaven- The aspect of repentance is still missing from all this emotional appeal to God. At this stage, Jeremiah is still asking God to respond to the tragedy simply for the sake of the tragedy. See on :49.

Lamentations 3:51 My eye affects my soul, because of all the daughters of my city- What he saw with his eye affected his mind / heart. Let us not see the doom of others, the pain and suffering of another life, and walk on by not permanently moved. What we see should affect our heart- if we have a heart that bleeds.

Lamentations 3:52 They have chased me relentlessly like a bird, those who are my enemies without cause- Jeremiah now reuses material from a previous composition about his feelings in the dungeon, but reapplies those feelings to suffering Israel with whom he so identified. Those who had chased Jeremiah without cause were the Jews. And now he parallels those Jews with the Babylonians, and himself with the Jews. He ought to have perceived that in fact the Jews who had so persecuted him were but receiving the same judgment which they had passed upon him. But he didn’t want to see that, because he in the end had a heart of love for his people; and that love manifested itself in a

sense of identity with them. See on :66.

Lamentations 3:53 They have cut off my life in the dungeon, and have cast a stone on me- See on :52. The rest of this lamentation directly concerns Jeremiah's experience in the dungeon, where he experienced a living death. His point is that he now saw those experiences as those of Judah; he identified with them even in their death. And thus he points forward to the Lord Jesus, who by God's grace tasted the death of a sinner for every sinful person; and yet was like Jeremiah resurrected from it and was personally innocent of their sins.

Lamentations 3:54 Waters flowed over my head; I said, I am cut off- Jeremiah in the dungeon felt as if he was dead; see on :54. His enemies mocked him from above (Lam. 3:14), pouring water that was probably excrement upon him, as the dungeon was a sewer.

Lamentations 3:55 I called on Your name, Yahweh, out of the lowest dungeon- The implication was that as Jeremiah had called upon Yahweh and been saved from the dungeon, so should Judah. But still Jeremiah is begging for divine intervention simply on the basis that the people were in dire straits. Still he is not emphasizing the need for unconditional repentance, and that was what would lead to the deliverance and restoration he so hoped for.

Lamentations 3:56 You heard my voice; don't hide Your ear at my breathing, at my cry- This implies that Jeremiah was literally about to die, or he felt he was; and his last breaths were in prayer. And he wished Judah to pray likewise; although still in the analogy, there is no place for their repentance, which was so critical.

Lamentations 3:57 You drew near in the day that I called on You; You said, Don't be afraid- We don't know whether or not Jeremiah heard a literal voice telling him not to be afraid; perhaps the voice of Yahweh was manifest in the voice of Ebedmelech, who would have removed the stone and called down to Jeremiah "Don't be afraid!". But Jeremiah is now seeing this as hopefully representative of the restoration prophecies which assured Jacob not to fear, because they would be restored (Is. 43:1; Jer. 30:10). And likewise Yahweh would 'draw near' to the restored Judah (s.w. Jer. 30:21).

Lamentations 3:58 Lord, You have pleaded the causes of my soul; You have redeemed my life- Jeremiah understood his prayer as having entered the court of heaven, although it was offered from the absolutely lowest point; death by thirst and starvation in a deep sewer. And there in heaven, his case was judged, and the decision given to redeem his life from that living death. And so Ebedmelech was motivated by God to rescue him. And Jeremiah clearly thought this was possible for Judah, if they likewise prayed. But he is carefully omitting the factor of repentance, which was so critical for Judah.

Lamentations 3:59 Yahweh, You have seen my wrong. Judge my cause- Jeremiah was the innocent suffering wrongfully, and he could rightly ask Yahweh to judge his case and deliver him by doing justice rightly. But the analogy with Judah breaks down; because they needed to repent, and were suffering less than their iniquities deserved, but rightfully. See on :58.

Lamentations 3:60 You have seen all their vengeance and all their devices against me- The motive for Jeremiah's persecution and consignment to death was a wrongful desire for revenge because he had faithfully spoken God's word. But the situation of Judah was not analogous, because they were being judged for *their* "devices" against God (s.w. Jer. 6:19). Jeremiah had asked to see Divine "vengeance" upon the Jews who threw him into the dungeon (s.w. Jer. 11:20). But now he did see it, and his prayer was answered, he likes to change around the analogy; Babylon was taking vengeance upon Judah wrongfully, so he implied; and he asks God to take note of that and change things. But his appeal for 'right' to be done by reversing the Babylonian victory is misplaced- only repentance and throwing themselves upon grace rather than any concept of vengeance could change things.

Lamentations 3:61 You have heard their reproach, Yahweh, and all their devices against me- Jeremiah had prayed that the Jews would suffer Divine vengeance for reproaching him (s.w. Jer. 15:15). But now he is asking for God to revenge the Babylonians for reproaching those same Jews. As explained on :60, his appeal for 'right' to be done by reversing the Babylonian victory is misplaced- only repentance and throwing themselves upon grace rather than any concept of vengeance could change things. The reproach against Israel was to be "everlasting" (s.w. Jer. 23:40). Only a desperate, repentant appeal to God's grace could change that, and not until Lam. 5:16-21 does Jeremiah finally advocate such an appeal.

Lamentations 3:62 The lips of those that rose up against me, and their device against me all the day- God not only heard the words spoken against Jeremiah, He even observed the lips of those who framed those words. This is how intensely He is sensitive to words; but see on :60,61.

Lamentations 3:63 You see their sitting down, and their rising up; I am their song- As noted on :62, God sees the lips of those who speak hard things, just as He sees the fingers which tap them on keyboards today. And He watched their sitting down and rising up, their body language. This is His sensitivity to His people, and Jeremiah is asking that God be likewise sensitive to the sufferings of Judah; but see on :60,61.

Lamentations 3:64 You will render to them a recompense, Yahweh, according to the work of their hands- These are the words of Joel 3:4,7; Obad. 15 about the works of Judah's enemies being rendered back to them. Jeremiah had prayed for this to be done to Israel; but now he asks for this policy to be applied to Israel's enemies. But see on :60,61. The truth was that Jeremiah had prayed for a recompense upon the Jews, and that was now happening before his eyes. And he was in vain seeking to backtrack and change things.

Lamentations 3:65 You will give them hardness of heart, Your curse to them- This is yet more evidence that God can work directly upon the human heart, even in response to the prayers of others for that. The climax of Jeremiah's imprecations against Israel was that they would be given hard hearts, and receive the curses for breaking the covenant. And indeed his prayer was heard. But now he was desperately trying (albeit in vain) to have his prayer reapplied to the enemies of Israel.

Lamentations 3:66 You will pursue them in anger, and destroy them from under the heavens of Yahweh- Yet Jeremiah in :43 has just complained that God had pursued His people at the hands of the Babylonians. Now Jeremiah's imprecation, uttered in the dungeon, had come true... he bitterly regretted it and resented God doing what he had asked. The lesson clearly is to be careful what we pray for, lest it come true. To be destroyed from under the heavens is what God wanted to do to Israel for their idolatry, meaning to disown them as His people (s.w. Dt. 9:14). That is what Jeremiah had prayed for his people when he was in the dungeon, and indeed they had broken the covenant and the curses for that were coming upon them (:65).

Lamentations Chapter 4

Lamentations 4:1 How the gold has become dim! The most pure gold has changed! The stones of the sanctuary are poured out at the head of every street- Gold by its nature is supposed not to tarnish; the precious stones in the sanctuary (presumably referring to those in the breastplate) were likewise supposed to be valued by their very nature, and not just poured out at the head of every street. The idea is that what was thought to have been inviolate, the temple, had been violated. The precious stones are parallel with the precious sons of Zion (:2), who were perishing at the head of every street (Lam. 2:19). The false prophets had taught that Jerusalem would not fall because God would never give up Zion. And it seems Jeremiah now laments that indeed the apparently inviolate had been violated. Again he appears to be identifying too strongly, or in an inappropriate manner, with his sinful people. For he was overlooking the fact that "at the head of every street" there had been idols (Ez. 16:24,31) and little sanctuaries for them. And now their children were perishing in those very same places. The appeal needed to be for repentance, but instead Jeremiah is still focusing totally upon the tragedy before him and lamenting it; without considering the bigger picture as to why it was happening.

Lamentations 4:2 The precious sons of Zion- There is a connection with how earlier God had told Jeremiah He would reject him, unless he brought out the precious from among the base (see on Jer. 15:19). And this he apparently failed to do, and so he laments it. See on :1.

Comparable to fine gold, how are they now esteemed as earthen pitchers, the work of the hands of the potter!- "Potter" translates the same word Jeremiah has used of how God as the potter or former has formed Israel in order to do His work (Jer. 18:2-6,11; 19:1,11; 33:2). According to Jeremiah's own parables, those who didn't respond to the potter's hands were to be broken. But now Jeremiah seems to object to this happening to Israel.

Lamentations 4:3 Even the jackals draw out the breast, they nurse their young ones: the daughter of my people has become cruel, like the ostriches in the wilderness- The idea is that the mothers had become apparently cruel and uncaring for their children, because the famine and thirst had led to them being unable to provide breast milk for their own children. Jeremiah seems to imply that this is an untenable situation for God to tolerate, since even the wild animals are able to feed their young. Again, as explained on :1, in his depression he is focusing upon just one aspect of a complex picture; and willfully overlooking the fact that these same women had sacrificed their children to Baal, and were the very ones who stubbornly claimed that worshipping the queen of heaven was preferable to Yahweh worship (see on Jer. 7:18; 44:17).

Lamentations 4:4 The tongue of the nursing child clings to the roof of his mouth for thirst: the young children ask bread, and no man breaks it to them- See on :3. 'Breaking bread' or 'eating bread' is simply an idiom for sharing in a meal (Is. 58:7; Jer. 16:7; Lam. 4:4; Ez. 17:7; 24:17; Hos. 9:4; Dt. 26:14; Job 42:11). 'Bread' is used for any food, just as 'salt' is used in the same way in Arabic. The way the Lord broke His bread with sinners, with anyone, is therefore evidence enough that the 'breaking of bread' is inclusive and not exclusive.

Lamentations 4:5 Those who fed delicately are desolate in the streets: those who were brought up in scarlet embrace dunghills- Jeremiah seemed to find it especially tragic that the royal family [once "in scarlet", the colour of royalty] and the formerly wealthy were so desolate. But these were the very classes whom he had singled out for particular condemnation in his earlier prophecies. Now those prophecies had come true, he seems to almost resent it. We notice the connection with Job losing his wealth and sitting in dunghills- he was representative of Judah, and it seems his story was rewritten under inspiration during the exile to make it relevant for them. But his captivity was turned when he repented without reservation; and that is the critical factor Jeremiah only fully accepts at the end of Lamentations.

Lamentations 4:6 For the punishment of the iniquity of the daughter of my people is greater than the sin of Sodom, that was overthrown as in a moment, and no hands were laid on her- The idea is that Sodom perished in an instant and not at the hands of cruel people. Jeremiah laments this- as if implying that he considered Jerusalem's sin to have been less than Sodom's, but her punishment was greater. And yet Ez. 16:48, which was a contemporary prophecy which Jeremiah likely knew, states clearly that Judah sinned far more than Sodom. Jeremiah had commented in Jer. 23:14 that God considered Jerusalem as Sodom. But now he appears quite out of step with God's assessment; because he simply will not adequately factor in Judah's sin and need for penitence.

Lamentations 4:7 Her nobles were purer than snow, they were whiter than milk; they were more ruddy in body than rubies, their polishing was as of sapphire- Yet it was the nobles whom Jeremiah had singled out for particular condemnation. They were not at all snow white in God's eyes; that could only come through repentance (Is 1:18). But Jeremiah likes to think they were like this despite their impenitence. AV and some manuscripts read "Nazirites". In this case, Jeremiah would be alluding to the idea that those who kept the Nazirite vow experienced great blessing in their health and bodily appearance; and Jeremiah laments that this is now not the case. And yet Daniel and his friends appeared more healthy than the other Jews because they refused to eat food and drink wine that had been part of idol worship; whereas it seems that Jerusalem and its religious classes at Jeremiah's time were almost wholly given over to idolatry. Jeremiah's path from thinking God was effectively dead (see on Jer. 1:1) to the total repentance at the end of Lam. 5 was not a smooth journey; it was a jagged graph. In Lam. 3:40-42 (see notes there) he has come to a very limited idea of the need for repentance, but now he has slipped back to being out of step with God because of his depressive insistence upon seeing only the immediate issues which were before his eyes, i.e. the suffering in judgment of God's people.

Lamentations 4:8 Their appearance is blacker than a coal; they are not known in the streets: their skin clings to their bones; it is withered, it has become like a stick- See on :7. This appears to speak of the situation during the famine which occurred during the siege- and this death by famine had been predicted by Jeremiah. This implies that Jeremiah was having these thoughts during the siege; for he speaks of the nobles suffering like this (:7), and it was they who were either slain or carried into exile once the city fell. So Lamentations provides us with another perspective upon the Jeremiah we meet in the book of Jeremiah, who appears to bravely speak God's word and adopt His perspective. The reality is that at the same time, he was deeply struggling with the words he was teaching, and more than questioning some of it.

Lamentations 4:9 Those who are killed with the sword are better than those who are killed with hunger; for these pine away, stricken through, for want of the fruits of the field- The present tenses suggest Jeremiah was composing this lamentation as he observed (or heard about in prison) the effects of the famine during the siege; see on :8. "The fruits of the field" would only be restored once Judah repented and entered a new covenant with God (s.w. Ez. 36:30). But Jeremiah appears to think that they had a right to those fruits anyway, without that repentance.

Lamentations 4:10 The hands of the pitiful women have boiled their own children; they were their food in the destruction of the daughter of my people- Jeremiah earlier had had much to say in condemnation of the women of Jerusalem, who had offered their own children to the idols, and who both before and after the siege insisted on worshipping the queen of heaven in preference to Yahweh (see on Jer. 7:18; 44:17).

Lamentations 4:11 Yahweh has accomplished His wrath, He has poured out His fierce anger; He has kindled a fire in Zion, which has devoured its foundations- The complaint that the foundations had been destroyed, when fire would typically only burn the edges and surface of a city wall, suggests Jeremiah is at a low ebb of faith that there could ever be restoration.

Both Yahweh and Israel are described as kindling the fire of judgment; He responded to what they had done (Jer. 11:16; 15:14; Lam. 4:11 cp. Jer. 17:4). Likewise as they had kindled fire on their roofs in offering sacrifices to Baal, so Yahweh through the Babylonians would set fire to those same houses (Jer. 32:29). Thus Israel were the ones who had kindled the fire of Yahweh's condemnation (Jer. 17:4).

Lamentations 4:12 The kings of the land didn't believe, neither all the inhabitants of the world, that the adversary and the enemy would enter into the gates of Jerusalem- The fortifications of Jerusalem were apparently legendary; and indeed it took the might of Babylon 18 months to breach them. But the great prophetic theme is that all human strength is to be brought down by Divine judgment. We note that the *eretz*, the land promised to Abraham, is effectively "the world" from the perspective of the prophets. The prophets have little to say about the rest of the planet- including Russia and the Anglo-Saxon world.

Lamentations 4:13 It is because of the sins of her prophets, and the iniquities of her priests, that have shed the blood of the just in the midst of her- As often noted, Jeremiah's path is a jagged graph- through depression to the final confession of sin without reservation at the end of Lamentations. Having been very insistent so far in this chapter that Jerusalem is suffering unfairly, and the suffering of her priests and leadership is particularly tragic, Jeremiah now does bluntly recognize that all this has happened because of their sins. They had tried to shed his blood, and had

succeeded in killing other prophets. They had shed the blood of children and other animal sacrifices- and the false prophets and priests who taught their false words were directly responsible for this.

And yet perhaps even these words of Jeremiah somewhat contradict the prophetic position, whereby blame was placed upon all Judah, every part of society; whereas now Jeremiah laments the situation as if Judah is being hard done by, suffering for the sins of the leadership. The blame is being unfairly placed by him just upon the priests and prophets; whereas Jeremiah himself has earlier stated that all Judah must carry the blame (see on Jer. 17:20; 22:2; 25:5; 37:2).

Lamentations 4:14 They wander as blind men in the streets, they are polluted with blood, so that men can't touch their garments- The tenses are unclear in the Lamentations because Jeremiah has brought together various feelings that he had at different times- before, during (:14,17,18) and after the siege (:19) and exile (:18,20). LXX has "her watchmen staggered in the streets"; the watchmen were the prophets of:13. The reference is to the descriptions of blindness as a punishment for breaking the covenant (Dt. 28:18; Jer. 23:12; Is. 29:9). They were polluted with blood already because of their attempted murder of Jeremiah and actual murder of other prophets, as well as those they sacrificed to the idols. Now, they are portrayed as wandering the streets covered in blood. That may have been literally the case, but they were covered in blood anyway in God's eyes. And this made them unclean.

Lamentations 4:15 Depart! they cried to them, Unclean! Depart, depart, don't touch! When they fled away and wandered, men said among the nations, They shall not live here any more- Translated this way, the paradox is developed that they who were now so covered in blood that nobody would touch them for fear of being made unclean (:14)- were the very ones who had condemned others as ritually unclean and had ordered them to get far away from them. Remember it is the priests who are being addressed here (:13). As they had driven away others for being unclean (when they themselves were unclean and covered with blood guilt), so now they were being driven away from their land as unclean. As Jeremiah so often demonstrates in his prophecy, condemnation was articulated in language which showed it to be but a continuation of attitudes and positions the condemned had already adopted in their lives.

Lamentations 4:16 The anger of Yahweh has scattered them; He will no more regard them- Not regarding them, not having them in His sight, means that He would permanently end relationship with them. But as noted on Lam. 4:15, this was but a reflection of how they had not regarded Him (s.w. Is. 5:12; 22:11). And yet by lamenting that Yahweh would not again have relationship with them, Jeremiah was overlooking the prophecies of restoration which he himself had given. His depression was such that at this point, he focuses only upon the present pain and will not look wider.

They didn't respect the persons of the priests, they didn't favour the elders- The "they" appears to refer to the Babylonian soldiers. But Jeremiah has given reason after reason as to why the priests and elders were not worthy of any respect and deserved only condemnation. But now he laments that, identifying so strongly with Israel again, after in :15 beginning to accept that they were suffering only what they themselves had in essence done in their days of opportunity. He sees their guilt- and then slips back to simply lamenting the situation as it was at that moment.

Lamentations 4:17 Our eyes still fail, looking in vain for our help- LXX "While we yet lived our eyes failed, while we looked in vain for our help". This may appear to contradict Jeremiah's feelings explained on Lam. 3:22,23,39, that to simply be alive is to know that God's grace continues to us, and finally His "help" shall be articulated to us, even if not in terms of immediate salvation. And again Jeremiah seems to be implying that they were looking to God for help "in vain". This is the mentality noted on Lam. 3:44, considering that God would not answer prayer. But Jeremiah was missing the point- that it wasn't simply prayer for immediate rescue which was required, but rather the prayer of repentance for forgiveness.

In our watching we have watched for a nation that could not save- A reference to Egypt, trust in whom was a large reason for their rejection by Yahweh. But Jeremiah appears to be writing here at the time of the siege or even after it, when Egypt was already no longer a viable help, having been crushed at the battle of Carchemish. And yet even then it would appear from Ez. 29:16 that they still vainly looked to Egypt for help, and the survivors of the siege fled there despite being warned not to. The attraction of trusting human strength rather than Yahweh was so great. Instead of watching or looking to Egypt they should have looked to and waited upon Yahweh.

Lamentations 4:18 They hunt our steps, so that we can't go in our streets: our end is near, our days are fulfilled; for

our end has come- The tenses are unclear in the Lamentations because Jeremiah has brought together various feelings that he had at different times- before, during and after the siege and exile. See on :14.

Jer. 16:16 suggests a total regathering of all who were in captivity as a result of fishers and "hunters" provoking the people to return to a restored kingdom. This didn't happen because the exiles preferred the soft life in Persia. The effort made wasn't responded to. Indeed Jeremiah later laments that the people were "hunted" after Jerusalem fell (s.w. Lam. 3:52; 4:18). He ought to have realized that the exiles were to be hunted back to the restored kingdom- if they responded. But in his depression, he focused only upon the negative, the glass half empty rather than half full.

Lamentations 4:19 Our pursuers were swifter than the eagles of the sky: they chased us on the mountains, they laid wait for us in the wilderness- A reference to the Babylonian cavalry, and particularly of their pursuit and capture of Zedekiah as representative of all Judah. As noted on :14, Jeremiah now seems to be writing from some time after the fall of Jerusalem. He has edited his thoughts together in these Lamentations. He was not pursued nor chased; but he so identified with his people that he felt as if he had been.

Lamentations 4:20 The breath of our nostrils, the anointed of Yahweh, was taken in their pits; of whom we said, Under His shadow we shall live among the nations- This sounds a far too positive take upon Zedekiah, whose demise was directly due to refusing to listen to Jeremiah's words from God, and his impenitence. But instead of accepting that, Jeremiah seems to now think his demise to be so tragic. The way Zedekiah is described as "the prince" in Ez. 12:12 lays the basis for the later prophecies about "the prince" in Ez. 40-48. Had the exiles returned and rebuilt and operated the temple system as required there, another individual called "the prince" would have arisen. Perhaps the blind, repentant Zedekiah could have returned from exile and become the prince figure; this would then solve the otherwise strange prophecy of Is. 42:19, that the restored community would have had a blind leader. Likewise the exiles could have lived under the shadow of a great leader in exile (Lam. 4:20), fulfilling the prophecies of Messiah as a great tree. But none of those involved lived up to their potential.

Lamentations 4:21 Rejoice and be glad, daughter of Edom that dwells in the land of Uz: the cup shall pass through to you also; you shall be drunken, and shall make yourself naked- As Edom rejoiced against Jerusalem in the day of her destruction (Ps. 137:7), so she is bidden sarcastically to rejoice because she would again be judged with Jerusalem's judgment. Edom is noted as dwelling in Uz to point up the connection with Job; the whole book of Job was rewritten and reapplied to the drama of the exile, and it involved people from the land of Uz [the friends] being rebuked and finally having the imputed righteousness of Job revealed to them.

Lamentations 4:22 The punishment of your iniquity is accomplished, daughter of Zion; He will no more carry you away into captivity: He will visit your iniquity, daughter of Edom; He will uncover your sins- But Zion was carried into captivity by God again, not least under the Romans, as well as by Antiochus, and she will be again in the last days. What was potentially possible was that Judah repented, returned both to God and Zion, and the Kingdom of God would have been reestablished in Israel- never again to be destroyed. That was the potential, but their lack of repentance precluded it. So Jeremiah's statement here appears to be his desperate hope that Zion's judgment had ended and now there would be restoration. But again, he refuses to factor in the aspect of their repentance.

Lamentations Chapter 5

Lamentations 5:1 Remember, Yahweh, what has come on us: look, and see our reproach- The invitation to "look" must be understood in the context of how Jeremiah has complained that God placed a cloud between Himself and His people, through which no prayer could pass (Lam. 3:44). And in Lam. 4:16 he has just stated that God was not looking at His condemned people. He said that in depression, just spot staring at the reality of suffering they were then experiencing. If it felt like God had permanently cast them off, then that was how he felt it was. But now he accepts that although God apparently will not look at them, yet He can be appealed to. But still he is asking God to simply take pity upon the tragedy of suffering people; he still must factor in the critical aspects of repentance and forgiveness.

Lamentations 5:2 Our inheritance is turned to strangers, our houses to aliens- To lose an inheritance was a major tragedy in the thought of those times. The loss of inheritance was not a tragedy unfelt by God. God was losing His inheritance in that He was allowing it to be consumed (Jer. 12:9), 'polluting it' (Is. 47:6). No man would ever spoil his own inheritance like this; but God did, such was His belief in the need to punish His people for their sins. And yet the metaphor of lost / spoilt inheritance reflects how painful this was for God, felt as a personal loss. The whole idea elicits sympathy for God in this tragic loss.

Lamentations 5:3 We are orphans and fatherless; our mothers are as widows- Again we note Jeremiah's intense identification with those who had suffered. For he speaks of "we" and "our", rather than of "they" and "theirs". Surely Jeremiah means to remind God of His special care for these categories in His law.

Lamentations 5:4 We have drunken our water for money; our wood is sold to us- Perhaps the Bedouin tribes took over Jerusalem after it fell, and sold water and firewood to the Jews. See on :9.

Lamentations 5:5 Our pursuers are on our necks: we are weary, and have no rest- Again his depression leads to exaggeration; there is no evidence that the Jews were moved around the Babylonian empire, making them find no rest. He himself had urged them to build houses in Babylon and settle down there. Being restless was a result of breaking the covenant (s.w. Dt. 28:65) which Jeremiah had repeatedly accused them of doing. They were suffering far less than their iniquities deserved. They refused to repent and in that sense they had no rest to their souls. If they had accepted the yoke of Babylon, then they could have rested in their own land (s.w. Jer. 27:11). Jeremiah had advocated accepting this yoke; and yet again he seems somewhat out of step with God as he complains about it.

Lamentations 5:6 We have given the hand to the Egyptians, to the Assyrians, to be satisfied with bread- Jeremiah appears to be writing here at the time of the siege or even after it, when Egypt was already no longer a viable help, having been crushed at the battle of Carchemish. And yet even then it would appear from Ez. 29:16 that they still vainly looked to Egypt for help, and the survivors of the siege fled there despite being warned not to. The attraction of trusting human strength rather than Yahweh was so great. Instead of watching or looking to Egypt they should have looked to and waited upon Yahweh.

To give the hand was a metaphor for making a covenant agreement. Ez. 17:18 roundly condemns it as unfaithfulness to God. Yet Jeremiah appears to justify the way Judah had done this by saying that they did it "for bread" (Lam. 5:6), as if the famine sent by God to bring about their repentance was so severe that the alliances were not just for political and military protection, but for basic food. This was how low the one time beautiful prostitute of Ez. 16 had fallen; just "for bread" she made the agreements which meant that she had to have the idols of these people in the Jerusalem temple. Clearly these 'givings of the hand' were wrong, and yet Jeremiah laments as if they were somehow justifiable. But Ez. 17 clearly condemns them as immoral acts. For God as Judah's husband would surely provide her with bread. The lack of it was to bring her back to Him, but instead she responded by madly making more spiritually adulterous covenants. We too can respond to God's chastening hand either by total repentance and casting ourselves upon Him, or by madly seeking to get around His chastisement by yet further sin and unfaithfulness.

But perhaps here we have the beginnings of a sense of repentance; for now finally Jeremiah begins to look back at their spiritually adulterous covenants with the nations, and recognizes that their exile is due to that. See on :16.

Lamentations 5:7 Our fathers sinned, and are no more; we have borne their iniquities- In Ez. 16:56,63 we noted that God wished to stop Israel using certain proverbs. He paid attention to their sayings, their language, their

throwaway expressions. All language is significant to God, and He aimed to reform even the kind of language they spoke. Throughout Ez. 18, Ezekiel labours the point that they were not say any more that the children were suffering for the fathers' sins. This was not to be stated any more (Ez. 18:3). Not saying it any more was to be part of being in the new covenant- Jer. 31:29 had specifically stated this, contemporary with Ezekiel. Ezekiel is so labouring the point in Ez. 18, because he wants them to accept the new covenant in exile, and to live and speak according to it. And yet Jeremiah himself seems to say that God has in fact punished the children for their fathers' sins (Lam. 5:7). He was contradicting his own message in Jer. 31:29. We would therefore have in this an example of a man who in depression says things which are wrong, struggling with God, as Job did; and yet still finally accepted. Although this unjust complaint against God contributes towards the sense of unsatisfactory conclusion which we are left with in this final chapter, leaving us wondering whether Jeremiah's faith did in fact remain intact at the very end. This is one of many cases of self-justification in Lamentations (Lam. 1:2,19; Lam. 2:14; 4:13; 5:7), which contradicts the prophetic position, whereby blame is placed upon Judah, whereas now Jeremiah laments the situation as if Judah is being hard done by.

Lamentations 5:8 Servants rule over us: there is none to deliver us out of their hand- The servants who ruled over them on behalf of Babylon were the likes of "Tobiah the servant" (Neh. 2:10,19). It seems that they made the remaining Jews work for them as slaves and day labourers (:13). But this was exactly the abuse which they tolerated in their society even during the siege of Jerusalem; and it was exactly because they refused to release their servants and stop abusing them, that they became abused labourers and slaves (Jer. 34:17). So there was in fact a potential deliverer "out of their hand"; but that depended upon repentance, which is a theme Jeremiah is so loath to raise.

Lamentations 5:9 We get our bread at the peril of our lives, because of the sword of the wilderness- A reference to marauding Arab Bedouin bands. See on :4.

Lamentations 5:10 Our skin is black like an oven, because of the burning heat of famine- After the siege was over, Jerusalem was burnt and the survivors almost perished of hunger. But famine was a punishment for sin and breaking the covenant. The prophecies of judgment implied at times that none would survive. The fact some came out of the fiery oven of Jerusalem, albeit with blackened skin, was to be seen as a sign of God's grace- and yet Jeremiah laments it.

Lamentations 5:11 They ravished the women in Zion, the virgins in the cities of Judah- "Virgins" can mean simply 'young women'. Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Hosea have all presented Judah as a prostitute and unfaithful lover. She had made covenants of unique loyalty with the nations, undertaking to worship their gods. And then they discovered that she had made such covenants with multiple nations, and her temple in Jerusalem was full of the gods of her various lovers. She is therefore presented as a suffering the judgment of a prostitute, being burnt by fire; after having her skirts pulled above her head and being gang raped beforehand for good measure (Jer. 13:22,26 etc.). This is the shocking picture of her judgment which we find in the prophets. But Jeremiah so takes the side of his people that he presents this as meaning that she as an innocent, upright woman who was raped by some heartless beast.

Lamentations 5:12 Princes were hanged up by their hand: the faces of elders were not honoured- The judgment of the royal family and elders was a major part of Jeremiah's message. And yet he seems to lament that they were not more respected by their conquerors. On one hand, his almost fanatical taking of Israel's side, totally identifying with their feelings, represents the passionate love and pity of God for His condemned people. And yet on the other hand, Jeremiah appears to be out of step with God's own perspective on the princes and elders as expressed in His own word through Jeremiah. Perhaps in this we see Jeremiah revealing to us the deep tension within God Himself when it came to judging His people; see on Hos. 11:8.

Lamentations 5:13 The young men were made to grind at the mill; the children stumbled under the wood- Jer. 52:11 LXX says that the captive Zedekiah was put "in the mill", as if he was in hard labour, now blinded, exactly like Samson (Jud. 16:21), and as the young men were made to (Lam. 5:13). And the similarities continued, in that it seems Zedekiah likewise did finally repent. Perhaps the young men did likewise.

It seems that they made the remaining Jews work for them as slaves and day labourers (:8). But this was exactly the abuse which they tolerated in their society even during the siege of Jerusalem; and it was exactly because they refused to release their servants and stop abusing them, that they became abused labourers and slaves (Jer. 34:17). So there was in fact a potential deliverer "out of their hand"; but that depended upon repentance, which is a theme Jeremiah is so loath to raise.

Lamentations 5:14 The elders have ceased from the gate, the young men from their music- But there was great corruption in "the gate"; and the music of the young men was a reflection of their rejection of God. These young men and elders were those condemned in Am. 6:1-7: "Woe to those who are at ease in Zion... Those who put far away the evil day, and cause the seat of violence to come near; who lie on beds of ivory, and stretch themselves on their couches... who strum on the strings of a harp; who invent for themselves instruments of music, like David did; who drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the best oils; but they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph. Therefore they will now go into captivity with the first who go captive; and the feasting and lounging will end". So again we see Jeremiah in depression focusing just upon the immediate experience, without wishing to recall the wider context.

Lamentations 5:15 The joy of our heart is ceased; our dance is turned into mourning- That their joy should cease was specifically prophesied for their disobedience, in these very Hebrew words (Is. 24:8; Hos. 2:11). And yet Jeremiah laments it. But he surely saw the connection with these prophecies, and that his feelings of lamentation were in fact their fulfilment; and so this leads him to the obvious conclusion: that the real problem is Judah's sin, and they need to repent. As he lamented that the girls were no longer dancing but mourning, his thoughts were led to his own earlier words of Jer. 31:4,13- that a restored, repentant Israel would again dance, and when David repented, his mourning was turned into dancing (s.w. Ps. 30:11). And thus we come to the climax of the book, in the unreserved, unqualified repentance of the next five verses.

Lamentations 5:16 The crown is fallen from our head: woe to us! For we have sinned- As noted on Lam. 1:1; 3:40, Lam. 5:16-21 is the climax of the book of Lamentations. And the point is that we have here a total confession of sin, and appeal for God to turn them to Himself (:21) and restore His relationship and Kingdom with Judah as before (:21). The book of Lamentations begins with Jeremiah bitterly complaining that God is as good as dead (see on Lam. 1:1), with him looking solely at the tragedy before his eyes, and progresses to a climax of unconditional repentance in Lam. 5:16-21. But the progression is a jagged graph. There have been points at which he does recognize that the sufferings are directly due to Judah's sins, he increasingly sees that there is a future hope and the God of judgment is also a God of grace. And he vaguely implies that repentance is needed, but always quickly returns to accusing God of unreasonable behaviour; and as noted on Lam. 3:40-42, the appeals for repentance are very qualified and still accuse God of injustice. But now in these verses he does speak clearly of the need for repentance, without excuses, justification, reservation or qualification. The path of Jeremiah was intended by God and himself to be that of Israel; for he had so intensely identified with them throughout the Lamentations.

It was because of this that "the crown" had fallen and the royal family had been ended (s.w. Jer. 13:18; Ez. 21:26). This may appear obvious to us, but in depression and focus upon the immediate tragedy, it was not so obvious to Jeremiah. But now he grasps it.

Throughout the book of Jeremiah, and often in Ezekiel, I have made the point that so much hinged upon whether Judah repented after Jerusalem fell. If they did, then the new covenant would have been accepted by them, and the promises of the restored Kingdom would have come true. They generally did not repent, but it was Jeremiah's heartfelt desire that they did, following his own example. And so he wished them to identify with his feelings of anger with God, his struggle with God, his confusion... and thereby to be led to this conclusion of the matter in repentance and desperate appeal for restoration. But it seems Judah got caught up in the early stages of grief, never moved on from them, and failed to follow through to this confession of sin and appeal for restoration which we have in Lam. 5. The last verse of the book (Lam. 5:22) appears starkly out of context with the immediately preceding verses, with their appeal for restoration and confession of sin: "But You have utterly rejected us; You are very angry against us". I suggest this is purposeful, because this is as it were Judah's response to the book and the appeal to repent and appeal for restoration. They remained caught up in their grief and refused to repent and return to God because they considered He had removed Himself too far from them. And so the great prophetic potentials for a repentant Judah, described in such detail in the book of Jeremiah, didn't then come about; although the prophecies are reapplied and rescheduled to fulfilment in the last days.

Lamentations 5:17 For this our heart is faint; for these things our eyes are dim- The stress is upon "for this"- their sins (:16). Jeremiah's faint heart (Lam. 1:13 s.w.) was *our* heart; his sudden realization of sinfulness and repentance was to be a pattern for them. It was because of their sin that dimness had come upon them, and they could not see their way; specifically because they had not given glory to Yahweh in repentance (Jer. 13:16 cp. Josh. 7:19). And therefore repentance would give glory to Yahweh, and lift the dimness upon their hearts and eyes.

Lamentations 5:18 for the mountain of Zion, which is desolate: the foxes walk on it- Now he recognizes that the tragic desolation of Zion, with unclean animals wandering around it, was not so much due to God nor the Babylonians, as Jeremiah has previously lamented; but was essentially due to their sins (:16). The sanctuary would be "desolate" because of their sins (s.w. Lev. 26:31). And after a period of desolation there would be repentance and restoration (Lev. 26:35,43 s.w.). And so- 'let us repent right now if we want to see that restoration'. That was the glaringly obvious conclusion, and now Jeremiah grasps it. The unclean foxes wandered upon Zion because her prophets had been as foxes (s.w. Ez. 13:4).

Lamentations 5:19 You, Yahweh, remain forever; Your throne is from generation to generation- If God's rulership would be "forever", then He must rule or be king over someone. He must therefore always have a people; and so Jeremiah reasons that God should not forsake His people "forever". See on :20. Solomon had imagined that Yahweh would "remain forever" in the temple (s.w. 1 Kings 8:13). The temple was now in ruins, and so Jeremiah was driven to the conclusion that because Yahweh Himself would "remain forever", therefore He must indwell not a sacred space, but a group of people in whom He would dwell by His Spirit. And so He asks God in :20,21 not to delay, but to revive that people spiritually so that He might dwell in them. God's eternity was therefore of itself an implication that He would revive Zion (Ps. 102:12,13). Zion, however it might be redefined, would "remain forever" as God Himself would (Ps. 125:1). Jeremiah himself had taught earlier that if Zion repented, then like her God, her people would "remain forever" (Jer. 17:25; 25:5, also Ez. 37:25). But this remaining forever was related to entering the new covenant, and that required repentance; and it required an acceptance of a Messianic seed of David, whose throne like Yahweh's would be from generation to generation (Ps. 89:4 s.w.).

Lamentations 5:20 Why do You forget us forever, and forsake us so long time?- As explained on :19, this is more of a rhetorical question. Because Yahweh was to remain forever, and forever have a people; therefore He would not forget and forsake His people forever. The period between the fall of Jerusalem and this lamentation was hardly a "long time". Perhaps that was how Jeremiah felt, as every moment of desolation appeared to drag eternally. Jeremiah was urging God not to forsake and forget the people, but to take the initiative in spiritually reviving them (:21). Yet perhaps Jeremiah was inspired to use this term "so long time" because his words and feelings here were to be the template and prototype for Judah's final repentance, whenever that would be, perhaps a "long time" in the future.

Lamentations 5:21 Turn us to Yourself, Yahweh, and we shall be turned. Renew our days as of old- This is the climax of the Lamentations. The appeal is not just for Judah to repent as Jeremiah, their representative, had done. Recognizing how critical is repentance in the return and restoration, it is asking God to take the initiative and give the people repentance. There is again the play on the word *shub*; returning / repenting would be the basis for God's returning and restoring of His people. The new covenant involved an offer of God's direct working upon the heart of His people, turning them so that they repented (see on Jer. 31:19). Repentance itself [not just forgiveness] is therefore a gift (Acts 3:26; 11:18)- to those who want it, or for those who have the likes of Jeremiah praying for them to receive it. And those who accept the new covenant today experience this same gift of the Spirit. And now Jeremiah begs for this gift of the new covenant to be given to his people, so that the restoration of the kingdom as in the "days of old" can begin. "Renew" is also translated 'rebuild', and is used of the rebuilding at the restoration (s.w. Is. 61:4).

Lamentations 5:22 But You have utterly rejected us; You are very angry against us- This could be read as by the LXX in the past tense: "For thou hast indeed rejected us; thou hast been very wroth against us", as if it is yet another statement that God's judgments of them were just. But as explained on :16, it may be an intended juxtaposition with the preceding impassioned statement of repentance and begging for restoration; and the point would be that because they did not repent, God's rejection of them continued. Jeremiah's prophecies of gracious restoration were known by the exiles; but many passages in Isaiah, the Psalms (e.g. Ps. 137:7-9) and Lamentations indicate that the exiles had little conviction they would be fulfilled, considering Judah as "utterly rejected" by God, and just getting on with their lives in Babylon without any real hope in God's salvation. Considering the prosperity of their lives there, this was an all too convenient conclusion for them to draw. Once again we see that false interpretation of Scripture invariably has a moral subtext to it. And the belief that God is so angry with our sins that we have no real chance of revival... is attractive because it enables us to remain in our status quo, no matter how miserable it is. The conservatism of human nature makes this sadly so attractive to many people, as it was to Judah.