

# 1

## The death of Jerusalem

*Please read Lamentations 1:1–11*

**H**ow'. That is the opening word of the book of Lamentations. But it is not the 'how' of questioning ('How? How so? How can this be?') but the 'how' of surprise and agony ('How! How terrible! How awful a state of affairs!'). As Jeremiah reflected upon the fall of Jerusalem he was absolutely overwhelmed. The destruction of any city has some effect upon you. It is a familiar sight on television news pictures—buildings brought down to the ground or else perched in various half-collapsed precarious positions, roofs caved in, debris everywhere, and no signs of life to be seen. It all looks so poignant, so tragic, so desperate. It is difficult not to be moved, even though, as I say, the sight is so familiar now, that the danger arises of familiarity breeding contempt.

But when it is your own city, the place, maybe, where you were born or converted or married, a place of family background or

childhood associations, a place of rich and fond memories, a place that for one reason or another you have in your heart—then it is a very different matter. Things take on a whole new perspective and weight of feeling.

The destruction of any city in Judah would have grieved Jeremiah, but the fact that it was Jerusalem—Zion, the city of God, chosen by Him to dwell in—well, that was, as they say, something else. Right from the start, therefore, the theme of the book is established: the terrible and unthinkable disaster that had overtaken the southern kingdom of Judah and its famous capital Jerusalem. It seemed to be the death of Jerusalem—an event which to many would have seemed as unlikely as that the sun should drop out of the heavens, for, surely, come what may, they thought, Jerusalem was exempt from all danger.

The tragedy is set before our eyes very vividly in these verses, and has as its main features an abandoned city, a deserted sanctuary and a sinful people.

### **An abandoned city**

One stark image is piled upon another in verses 1–3 and the result is tremendously powerful.

The city is *deserted* (1:1). Once it had been bustling with life, full of people, throbbing, vibrant, colourful, as religious, business, commercial and family life flourished. It had not only its resident population, but was the city to which the tribes went up (Psalm 122:4) and was visited by great and small from all the nations. Yet now it has become like a ‘ghost town’—a strange, quiet and empty place. ‘How deserted lies the city, once so full of people!’ The emphasis of the whole expression is one of solitariness, of being left completely on your own,

abandoned on every side. Much later, a Roman coin was struck to commemorate the victory of Titus Vespasian over Jerusalem in AD 71, which represented the Emperor Vespasian on one side and, on the reverse, a woman (symbolizing Jerusalem, the daughter of Zion) sitting on the ground under a palm tree in a mournful attitude, surrounded by a heap of arms and shields. The inscription on the coin reads *'Judea capta'* ('Judah taken'). That coin could equally well evoke the scene Jeremiah is recording here.

The city is *bereaved* (I:I). 'How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations!' How eloquent bereavement is of sadness, loneliness and despair. Cities have traditionally been described as the mothers of their inhabitants, with the king as the husband and the princes as children. Once the king is gone, the city is widowed and orphaned. Furthermore, the condition of the Eastern widow is a pitiable one: her hair is cut short, she casts aside all her ornaments, eats coarse food, fasts and is considered all but an outcast in her late husband's family. So this image of the widow would have struck an immediate chord in Jewish minds. All Jerusalem's literal husbands and children have gone; all her life has expired. Behind this lies the rich biblical imagery of God as the Husband of His people ('For your Maker is your husband', Isaiah 54:5), but Jerusalem no longer enjoys the presence of her Husband. The sense of the presence of God with them, of God delighting in His people—all the raptures of fellowship with the living God are currently things of the past, though the little word 'like' (or 'as') 'a widow' implies that Jerusalem has not lost her Husband utterly and for ever, but is only parted from Him for a period. There is in that one word a foreshadowing of reunion.

The city is *subjected* (I:I). One moment she was 'great among

the nations'. Time was when Judah was ruler of countries like Moab and Edom. They and others were her vassals. She was either greatly loved or greatly feared. Nations took notice of her. Some gave her presents and some paid taxes to her, especially during the flourishing period of the Jewish kingdom under Kings David and Solomon. But things are different now. The 'queen among the provinces has now become a slave'. Matthew Henry remarks, 'But now the tables are turned; she has not only lost her friend and sits solitary, but has lost her freedom too and sits tributary; she paid tribute to Egypt first and then to Babylon.'

The city is *emptied of all joy* (1:2), having been deserted and left comfortless, without a friend in the world. 'While others are deriving refreshment of body and mind from their sleep, Jerusalem is wide awake, crying and sobbing with grief, harassed by the prospect of nocturnal terrors, and deprived of all human comfort.' The night-time weeping does not, of course, exclude weeping during the daytime as well. But night is mentioned because (don't we know it?) that is the time when grief and sorrow tend to be felt at their heaviest and drive sleep far away.

Who are 'her lovers'? The description refers to nations with whom Jerusalem made alliances, 'the human support on which Jerusalem foolishly and presumptuously believed she could rely, especially all those nations whose friendship she had so often preferred, instead of trusting in Jehovah'. As such it would embrace the likes of Egypt, Edom, Moab, Ammon, Phoenicia, Tyre and Sidon. But where are they now? 'Among all her lovers there is none to comfort her. All her friends have betrayed her; they have become her enemies.'

There is an awful irony built in here. Not only had her former lovers and friends abandoned her, but some had even sided with

Babylon in assaulting her. It is the way of the world. Jerusalem was described in Psalm 48:2 as ‘the joy of the whole earth’, but now her joy has been turned into lamentation and mourning. We are reminded of Jeremiah’s own expressive lament: ‘Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people’ (Jeremiah 9:1). Verse 2 opens with (literally) ‘weeping she weeps’. This verbal form accords with the phrase ‘Tears are upon her cheeks.’ This is not past grief that has been got over and which time has healed, but present grief, present bitterness, present agony, present heartache which is continually drawing forth fresh tears which are running down her cheeks. Her whole face is never free from them (cf. Jeremiah 9:18–19). In this verse, Jeremiah’s lament over Jerusalem becomes also very much Jerusalem’s lament for herself. Yet she can neither comfort herself nor are there any to comfort her. And surely there is here an indirect reference to the loss of *the* Comforter.

Just reflect on something here. How welcome and appropriate it is, whenever we are burdened with grief, to have friends drawing alongside us with whom we can share our sorrows, and who will weep with us and apply the consolations of God’s Word to us (meditate upon 2 Corinthians 1:3–4 in this connection). But when we are as Jerusalem became, with no friends supporting us any longer, when no one feels for us and, worst of all, when those we thought were our friends, who once courted us and who gave us the impression that they would stand by us at all times and never let us down, abandon us and do indeed let us down—then our sorrow and sadness become much more grievous and heavy to bear. But take heart, believer; we have one Friend ‘who sticks closer than a brother’ (Proverbs 18:24). The Lord Jesus Christ is the believer’s Friend, and He is ‘the same yesterday and today and for ever’ (Hebrews 13:8).

But Oh, my friend!  
My friend indeed,  
Who at my need  
His life did spend!

(Samuel Crossman).

Rejoice in this friendship. Do not grieve Him, and remember that ‘Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God’ (James 4:4).

The city is *exiled* (1:3) in the land of her enemies who neither know God nor care anything about him. The nation that once was separated from the heathen now dwells among them. The sombreness of ‘Judah has gone into exile’ can be felt. Judah stands here, of course, for the population not merely of the city of Jerusalem but of the whole kingdom. God’s people are a special people, a distinctive people, a holy people; but now they are mingled among those who worship idols, those who are ‘excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world’ (Ephesians 2:12).

It seems that the impossible has happened. And, not surprisingly, ‘she finds no resting place’—no joys, no consolations, no sense of being at home, no blessed assurance of the favours of God. All is exactly as Moses predicted: ‘Then the Lord will scatter you among all nations, from one end of the earth to the other. There you will worship other gods—gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known. Among those nations you will find no repose, no resting place for the sole of your feet. There the Lord will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart.

You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life' (Deuteronomy 28:64-66).

The word for 'distress', at the end of verse 3, has the sense of 'straits' or 'extremities'—narrow places from which escape is impossible, or circumstances of life from which no escape can be found. (Compare David's testimony in Psalm 116:3.) What a contrast, too, between the lovers and friends of verse 2 and the pursuers of verse 3. Judah and Jerusalem had become a sitting duck, a target for all her enemies.

### **A deserted sanctuary**

In verses 4-6 the picture gets worse, not better. From the earlier viewpoint of her political and international state, the focus now turns to Judah and Jerusalem's spiritual and ecclesiastical condition, the poverty of the latter being ultimately of far greater importance than the former.

Look first at verse 4. For a start, 'The roads to Zion mourn.' The Authorized Version has 'the ways of Zion', but 'the ways/roads to Zion' gives the clearer sense. What is in mind is not the streets of Jerusalem herself but the roads or highways leading up to Jerusalem from outside. The city of Jerusalem was situated on Mount Zion, and whether you approached it from the north, south, east or west you always went *up* to Jerusalem. These roads used to be thronged with happy and expectant worshippers singing the praises of God: 'That is where the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, to praise the name of the Lord according to the statute given to Israel' (Psalm 122:4). Whether at the daily sacrifices or at the seasons of the great festivals each year, they were busy with the pilgrims lifting up their voices in the songs of ascents (Psalms 120-134). But now these same roads are empty, 'for no one comes to her appointed feasts'. All is

silent and still. Not a footstep or voice can be heard. Everything about these roads has become dismal and sad and looks unkept and overgrown. Latterly those feasts had been neglected and profaned anyway, so that God had spoken some hard words about them (Isaiah 1:11-17).

This melancholy picture continues in the second part of the verse: 'All her gateways are desolate.' Do you remember how God speaks of His love for 'the gates of Zion'? (Psalm 87:2). That refers to the gathering together of the people of God to worship Him and give Him the glory, and the meeting of God with His people. But no more. As for the literal gateways to the city, there is nothing doing there either. The merchants no longer sell there. The people no longer gather there. The elders no longer dispense justice there. The 'priests groan'. There is nothing for them to do any more, for the sanctuary has been abandoned; the services, ceremonies and sacrifices have ceased; everything has closed down. And 'her maidens grieve', for their music, singing and dancing are no longer required either, and gone are their prospective husbands. The whole place 'is in bitter anguish'.

Pause again for serious reflection. What a sad sight is a dispirited ministry, pictured here in the groaning priests! Do you ensure that your own minister's 'work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you'? (Hebrews 13:17). Are you an encourager of the ministry? I do not mean primarily by speaking encouraging words (though there is a place for that, if the glory of God is the aim), but in coming to worship with a prepared and expectant heart, sitting under the ministry, with an open Bible, in a devoted and concentrating spirit, and being not only a hearer of the Word but a doer of it as well. Do you pray for your minister? Do you bless God for him? Do you acknowledge that in the sovereign providence of God,



despite all the man's failings and imperfections (which perhaps in many cases are remarkably like your own), he has been set apart for the work and you have not? (This is, dare I say it, a very necessary acknowledgement in these days when evangelicalism is invaded with the spirit that insists that almost anyone in the membership of the congregation can do the minister's work better than the minister himself.) Do you support him generously as he seeks to give himself wholeheartedly and self-denyingly to the work of God, including the care of your eternal soul?

In proportion to the misfortune and humiliation of Judah is the success and prosperity of her enemies (I:5). 'Her foes have become her masters; her enemies are at ease', as was threatened if God's people were unfaithful to Him. 'The Lord will make you the head, not the tail. If you pay attention to the commands of the Lord your God that I give you this day and carefully follow them, you will always be at the top, never at the bottom' (Deuteronomy 28:13); but otherwise the opposite applies and their enemy 'will be the head, but you will be the tail' (Deuteronomy 28:44). So, as if the sorrows of God's people were not dark enough, things are made worse by the brilliant prosperity of their enemies. But 'This advantage on the part of her enemies had not happened by chance, nor by mere arbitrariness or unrighteousness on the side of God, but by an act of Divine rectitude in the punishment of Israel for their sins.' 'The Lord has brought her grief because of her many sins.' We shall see this in more detail from verse 8 onwards. The awful effect of exile is seen too in the splitting up of families, which is hinted at in the final part of the verse—children torn away from parents, families cast asunder. 'Her children have gone into exile, captive before the foe.'

But what is the worst thing to have happened? What has Zion lost which indicates just how bad things have become? Verse 6 tells all: Zion has lost her glory. 'All the splendour has departed from the Daughter of Zion.' She who is, by her very nature, 'all glorious ... within' (Psalm 45:13); she who is 'a crown of splendour in the Lord's hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God' (Isaiah 62:3); she whose name is Hephzibah (which speaks of God's delight in her) and Beulah, telling of God's marriage covenant with her (Isaiah 62:4)—*this Zion* has now lost all her beauty and glory. God had chosen her as a habitation for Himself. The psalmist records of Him that He 'is in her citadels; he has shown himself to be her fortress'; she is 'the city of the Lord Almighty ... the city of our God: God makes her secure for ever' (Psalm 48:3, 8). Surely it is this very presence of God Himself among His people and, not least, His manifesting of Himself in His felt presence and power as His people come before Him to worship Him 'in the splendour of his holiness' (Psalm 29:2) that constitutes, above all, the splendour of Zion. And so it would be true to say, in the present context, that the splendour departed from the Daughter of Zion when God forsook His people, allowed the temple to be destroyed and discontinued the ordinances of worship.

This is all underscored in the reference to 'her princes', which I take to refer to Zedekiah, King of Judah, and all his soldiers, who fled from Jerusalem but were recaptured within a few miles of the city, having failed to make good their escape (Jeremiah 39:1–7, 2 Kings 25:1–7). These men, who had been regarded as a vital part and parcel of the strength of Jerusalem, 'are like deer that find no pasture; in weakness they have fled before the pursuer'. Reading that, you cannot help thinking, by way of contrast, of that matchless picture in the 23rd Psalm of the Lord Jesus Christ. How quickly a startled and frightened deer takes to flight, but

He is the unfailing and unchangeable Shepherd of His people, leading and directing them, making every provision for them and never failing or forsaking them. How thankful we are for Him!

But why this alarming change? What could the covenant people of God have done to be in this appalling condition and position? That brings us to our next section.

### **A sinful people**

Coming to verses 7-II, we are reminded of Proverbs 14:34: 'Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people.' It has already been stated in verse 5 concerning Zion that 'The Lord has brought her grief because of her many sins,' and that says it all. It always does and it always will. The sequence is always so plain: the Lord our God is holy; His people have turned against Him; so He must punish sin. In a phrase, *the people are God-forsaken because they have become God-forsaking*. That principle always abides and applies. It is an invariable rule. Look at the way the people's sin is described: she has 'sinned greatly' (literally, 'sinned a sin') 'and so has become unclean' (v. 8); mention is made of 'her nakedness', for all to see (v. 8), and 'her filthiness' and 'her fall' (v. 9). What does all this mean? Let us look at it verse by verse.

Jerusalem has become *an object of derision* (I:7). There is a heart-rending contrast here. 'In the days of her affliction and wandering' draws from Laetsch the remark: 'They had loved to roam (Jeremiah 2:31)—now they are condemned to roam.' Jerusalem looks back and 'remembers all the treasures that were hers in days of old' (the times of Moses and Joshua, David and Solomon), but now 'in the days of her affliction and wandering', or 'unrest', the situation is very different. She is in enemy hands.