

# Gloom, Doom and Hope

by Pastor Patrick Curley

## Chapter 4: Equal Time

After hearing some of the richest Gospel in the whole of Scripture in chapter three, we may be tempted to leave Lamentations at that. But two chapters remain in this poem. A prayer for restoration closes in chapter five but to get there in a fair way, we must return to the dire images that Jeremiah puts forth regarding God's just judgment on His people's sin. It is a judgment, as we will see, that no one escapes. Rank has no privilege against the wrath of God.

This lamentation is "the same, same but different", as they say in Thailand. It uses disastrous, even horrific, images to portray Jerusalem's fall at the hand of God. We saw that before in chapters one and two. What is different is the way that the various classes of the population are recognized. Some of that came out in chapter two but in four it is the very structure of the poem. And again, the fact that it is a well deserved judgment is put forth once more albeit more forcefully. There is the growing hope that Israel will not perish forever. Hopefully the judgment will end soon and be redirected at Israel's enemies that seem to have the upper hand at the moment and have taken public delight in Israel's suffering.

The opening verses tell of the sad lot for the several different classes of the population. Jeremiah uses a figurative image to portray Judah's fall. He compares it to tarnished gold and scattered sacred stones. Some see especially in the latter example a reference to the destruction of the Temple. It may be in the background of thought but as it is not mentioned elsewhere more explicitly, it is safer to see it merely as a metaphor of precious things losing their value. Such was the case for the once glorious city of Jerusalem. The illustration then carries over to the sons of Zion, the princes who now walk the empty streets just as filthy and emaciated as everyone else. They are unrecognizable compared to their former self, once "purer than snow". Those who once were carried about in scarlet caravans now grovel in manure piles. Starvation has come to all. They, like all Judah's citizens, are lower than the wild animals who, at least, provide simple sustenance to their young. V. 9 puts it into perspective: it would have been better to be among those killed in the initial conquest than be one of the few facing a slow death by starvation. And then v. 10, the travesty of the situation illicit cannibalism from mothers who cook their own children. Such actions would in themselves be of the grossest forbidden acts by God's Law; yet now they are daily occurrences. Sin begets sin. Sin begets death and suffering. The Lord has fully poured out His wrath on Jerusalem and its people (v. 12) "kindling a fire" to burn her down and with it the foundation, too. His Word is not to be taken lightly. God will have to start over with His people to build them up again.

The second part of the poem focuses on the prophets and priests. We've heard them before but now they are explicitly charged as the root of the sin. They shed the blood of righteous ones. There was a conspiracy between the political power and religious authority to maintain their prestigious positions in society. The people were complicit as well as they merely complained and sat idle waiting for a solution to arise from other human sources (e.g. another nation to come to their aid- v. 17). Justice and true worship were ignored and abandoned. Any who attempted to change the corruption and

confront the spiritual malaise were charged with capital offenses and put to death. Especially those charged with maintaining God's mercy, the prophets and priests, God regarded them no more. They wandered like lepers neither accepted in their own society or by any other abroad.

This fourth poem ends with a glimpse of hope once more. It isn't with the same vigor we see in the Psalms that change from lament to great joy in a short span, but it is hope nevertheless. In the Psalms there was always the conviction that God would not renege on His covenant with Israel. Thus, happy days would eventually return after God had duly chastened His erring people. In Lamentations, that confidence has been shaken with just cause. But God does keep His promises. Zion's guilt is at an end. V. 22, "The punishment of your iniquity, O daughter of Zion, is accomplished." Grace can now begin to flow. And the "Edomites", emblematic of Israel's' foes, will get their comeuppance.

#### For Our Further Discussion

1. We have a long standing tenet in America of the separation of Church and State. Luther spoke similarly when he distinguished the kingdoms on the left and right. What abuses arose in Judah when neither were acting according to their proper responsibilities?
2. Have things changed significantly in our modern time since that of Jeremiah's to make our charge as God's faithful people less our responsibility?
3. What would Jeremiah say to those who think the solutions to our national troubles lie in the wisdom and planning of men?