Most probably written by Jeremiah.

Five chapters – five poems – bulletin note.

Lament. To mourn out loud. Funeral eulogy.

Let’s read Jer. 52:1-30 Destruct of J by Neb and Babyl.

Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

I reckon that 95% of the times that you ask someone, ‘How are you?” the answer is “Fine, thanks,” or “Yeah, doing well,” or something like that. But occasionally someone will show you a nasty rash on their arm or they will tell you that there has been a death in the family, or something of that nature. And this can be quite unexpected and shocking.

Well, unexpected and shocking, and in the most brutal way possible, is probably a good way to describe the Book of Lamentations. And this is because of its description of a destroyed Jerusalem and the Jews in exile. You see, the OT makes much of the Jews as God’s chosen people:

* He miraculously delivered them from Egypt and settled them in the Promised Land.
* He gave them His covenant Law and priests and prophets and kings, including King David, the man after God’s own heart.
* He gave them **Jerusalem** around about 1000BC and ordered that His temple be built there. And then He came down in the glory cloud to live in the temple. So Jerusalem was called the City of God or Zion. And **Psalm 48** gives us some idea of how Jerusalem was viewed: “*Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God! His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King*.”

But now fast forward 400 years and imagine a traveler who once lived in Zion meeting someone who has been there recently. And the traveler asks, “So, how is Zion?” with the expectation that he will hear something like what we just heard from Psalm 48. But instead he is given the Book of Lamentations. And I am sure you can imagine the look of shock and horror and then the tears of sorrow and confusion as he reads these poems about a destroyed Jerusalem and the Jews in exile. In his mind or out loud he asks, How can this be? Why has this happened to us?

And these are **questions** that are often asked in times of national disaster. But they are also the same questions many people ask in times of personal disaster: Why does God allow such terrible suffering? Why has this happened to me? And behind these questions there are two basic assumptions: The first is that God is supposed to be only nice and the second is that we human beings are good and do not deserve to suffer.

Well, as we study the Book of Lamentations together, we are going to discover answers to these questions in relation to the destruction of Jerusalem. And those answers will reveal that the basic assumptions behind the If there is a God, how come He allows such suffering? question are quite mistaken.

And the answers come to us from a woman we shall call **Lady Zion**.

If you are the daughter of a Duke or a Marquess or an earl, you may use the title ‘Lady’ before your first name. It means you are of noble birth. And perhaps the most famous example of this that we know of was Lady Diana Spencer.

Well, in Lamentations, the City of Jerusalem or Zion is personified, which means, boys and girls, that it is described as though it were a person. And as you can see from v1, the person is female; Jerusalem is spoken of as “she.” And she is described in v1 as a Princess and called in v6 “the daughter of Zion.” So we are going to call her Lady Zion.

And as we travel through the 5 poems of Lamentations we shall hear from Lady Zion and from someone who speaks *about* Lady Zion, a kind of **Narrator** or story-teller, if you will.

In your ESV Bibles, for example, you will see that the last part of v9 is in quotation marks, as is the last part of v11 and the rest of the chapter – that is Lady Zion speaking. The pronouns in those sections are me, my, and I. But the rest of vv1-11 are a *description* of Lady Zion from our Narrator – we read of “she” and “her.”

And as we hear *about* Lady Zion and as we *listen* to Lady Zion herself, we will learn that:

1. **God** is really, really **angry**.

2. **Man** is really, really **bad**.

3. And **grace** is really, really **powerful**.

And it is the second of those truths – that man is really, really bad – that is to the fore in chapter 1. And when we say that man is really, really bad, we mean that he is morally corrupt and wicked. And the theological word we use to describe this is depravity.

So here in the first of five poems in Lamentations, we see that **a Tale of Destruction Reveals the Extent of Man’s Depravity**. And we see this as we consider **an Agonized Description of Lady Zion’s grief** and then as we hear **the grief-stricken cry of Lady Zion**.

1. So first of all the **Agonized** **Description** of Lady Zion’s grief in vv1-11b.
   1. When you watch a news reporter who is at the scene of whatever it is they are reporting about, they usually just give us the dry facts. But occasionally, the reporter is so overcome by what they are reporting about that they break down in tears. And that is what Lamentations 1 is like. The first word of v1 in Hebrew doesn’t really have a direct translation in English. Alas! is probably as close as we get. But the “how” of v1 is really a combination of someone crying out, How can this be? and Why has this happened to us? with tears of bewilderment and baffled pain rolling down their cheeks. This is truly is an **agonized description**.
   2. And it begins in vv1-3 with a description of **reversal** or things turned upside down.
      1. “*How lonely sits the city that was full of people*!” It doesn’t even come close to what is described here but after the Christchurch earthquakes it was eerie walk or drive around a city centre that used to be full of buildings and people that was now empty because of destruction and death. And a Jew who was familiar with the crowds and the noises and the colours and the smells of busy Jerusalem at festival time would have found the pile of nearly uninhabited ruins that was the city of Jerusalem eerie to say the least!
      2. But Lady Zion is also described as being like a widow and a slave when once she was great among the nations and a princess among the provinces. So God’s chosen people have undergone a dramatic reversal of fortune.
      3. In v2, we read of Lady Zion’s **bitter tears**. And I hope there is not a man among us who is not deeply moved by the tears of a woman, especially a woman he loves. It should be that the tears of others stir our own emotions. So we should all be deeply moved by the tears of Lady Zion.
      4. And next we are told why she is crying. It is because none of her lovers comfort her and “*all her friends have dealt treacherously with her; they have become her enemies*.”
         1. Now, this theme of there being **no one to comfort Lady Zion** is repeated five times throughout chapter 1; v2, v9, v16, v17, v21. And the repetition of there being no one to comfort her is very deliberate. It is kind of like flashing neon sign that is meant to catch our attention. But we will come back to this later on.
         2. For now though let’s focus on Lady Zion’s **lovers**. You will see that she mentions them again, herself, in v19, where she says that she called out to them but they deceived her. So let’s think about this for a moment: We have the widow of v1 who is sad because her lovers are not there to comfort her?? So our obvious question is what about her husband? Why the mention of lovers?
            1. Well, “widow” would suggest that her husband is dead. But note that she is actually described as *like* a widow – a woman who once had a husband. And if we put our OT theology hats on, we remember that the relationship between Israel and God was a covenant relationship pictured as a marriage. So there was to be this exclusive relationship of faithfulness between God and the people; they were to be devoted to God alone. But is the OT a record of Israel’s exclusive devotion to Yahweh? Or is the OT a record of Israel worshipping other gods, again and again and again? It’s the later isn’t it.
            2. So the prophets repeatedly came to the people of Israel and accused them of prostituting themselves to the gods of Canaan, and warning them that though God was patient He would not tolerate this for ever.
            3. So the lovers of Lady Zion are the surrounding nations and their idol gods. And Lady Zion is like a widow, finally abandoned by God, her husband, because of her multiple lovers.
            4. And we know from the history of Judah that when Babylon was threatening to invade she made alliances with some of the surrounding nations. But when the time came, none of those nations honoured those alliances and Lady Zion was destroyed. So now she is lying there in the rubble with no husband and not even her ‘lovers’ are with her any more.
         3. Now I wonder if this scene reminds you of one of Jesus’ parables? Any guesses? **the prodigal son**. He got his share of the inheritance and left his father’s home and went away and spent all this money on reckless living and prostitution. And where did it get him? Where did he end up? Completely broke and completely abandoned by all those who were his best friends so long as he had money, and in the pig pen wishing he could eat the pig’s food.
         4. And you know, sadly, this same scene is repeated again and again, even today, often by young people. They don’t want to live according to God’s rules and boundaries. They want to enjoy the good life out there in the world. But you know where it leads, boys and girls and young people? It leads to a hospital bed or a prison cell or an STD clinic or bankruptcy and a life or lives in turmoil.
         5. Galatians 6:7 says, “*Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap*.” So already in these opening verses Lady Zion is saying, Man is really, really bad.
   3. Verses 4-6 are a description of Lady Zion **being emptied out**.
      1. Three times a year, all the men of Israel were to travel to Jerusalem for the major festivals. And the population of Jerusalem would swell, enormously. And in the days leading up to the festivals, the crowds would meet each other on the roads and sing the Psalms of Ascent together. But v4 tells us that “*the roads to Zion mourn, for none come to the festival*.”
      2. And the description of being emptied out continues as we read in v4, “*Her priests groan (*because they have been killed or carried away*); her virgins have been afflicted.*”And I think we all know what horrors those words hint at for women in times of war. And in v5, that “*her children have gone away*.” So Lady Zion is utterly abandoned. There is a deathly silence that hangs over the ruins of Jerusalem.
      3. Verse 6 speaks of Lady Zion’s former majesty but all that is gone now. William Westmore Story is a sculpture artist. In 1879 he carved a statue which now resides in the Philadelphia Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. It is a statue of a woman who sits on a broken throne. Her shoulders are slumped and her face is full of anguish. Story called his sculpture, “Jerusalem in her Desolation.” Lady Zion in Lamentations was his inspiration.
      4. And again, this picture of Lady Zion emptied out because of war screams out, Man is really, really bad
   4. But it gets worse as we read the description of the **violation** of Lady Zion in vv7-10.
      1. Her foes gloat over her and mock at her downfall; she is filthy and despised because she is naked and violated. “*She herself groans and turns away*.” Now there are two things going on with this imagery:
         1. On the one hand, it was customary in Israel for a woman caught in adultery to be stripped of her clothes and then stoned to death. So Lady Zion is the adulterer who has been shamefully exposed.
         2. But this scene is also a horrifyingly accurate description of the aftermath of the crime of sexual assault. And sexual assault is a vile crime and an all too common part of war. It is another demonstration of the fact that man is really, really bad.
      2. But the violation of Lady Zion was material as well as physical. V7 speaks of the **precious things** that were hers from days of old and v10 tells us that “*the enemy has stretched out his hands over all her precious things, for she has seen the nations enter her sanctuary*.” The precious things are the treasures of the temple. And we read in Jeremiah that the temple was robbed of all its decoration and utensils and furniture by the Babylonians. So Lady Zion has suffered the twin violations of sexual assault *and* robbery.
      3. If you watch the news, you will have seen images of freshly bombed cities and looted museums and make-shift hospitals overflowing with the wounded and the dead in war-zones like Syria. They are desperately sad scenes that give us some idea what it means for a city to be violated, as happened to Lady Zion.
      4. And when people see scenes like this, it is understandable that they cry out: How can this be? Why has this happened to us? But for now our only response can be that Man is really, really bad.
   5. And finally in connection with the agonized description of Lady Zion’s grief, the first part of v11 describes a scene of **starvation**.
      1. In war, life can end with the slash of a sword or a gun shot or a bomb blast. And that is awful. But perhaps it is preferable to death by starvation. The section we read earlier from Jeremiah tells us that Jerusalem was under siege for 2 years! And eventually, “*the famine was so severe that there was no food for the people of the land*.” So what did they do when there was no food? We are not told in Jeremiah 52. But have a look at Lamentations 4:10.“*The hands of compassionate women have boiled their own children; they became their food during the destruction of the daughter of my people*.”
      2. Do you need anymore convincing that man is really, really bad?
   6. Now congregation, before we hear from Lady Zion herself, note very briefly some of the words used to describe Lady Zion – v1 – **slave**, v3 – **hard servitude**, v5 – **captives**, v7 – **afflicted and wandering**. Do those words remind you of anything from Israel’s history? That’s right! Israel, whom the Lord had rescued out of slavery and hard servitude and captivity in Egypt, and who was then taught powerful lessons through affliction and wandering in the wilderness *has* *learned* nothing! And she is right back where she started – in slavery and captivity in exile.
      1. But before you shake your head at Lady Zion in disgust, just ask yourself this: Am I quick to learn lessons as a result of my sin? Do I learn that sin has consequences and never go back to that sin again? Is that the story of your life? If I was telling your life story today, would it be a story of one glorious victory over sin after another? I know it wouldn’t be if it were my life story being told.
      2. So right now, in your heart, you should not be standing over Lady Zion, wagging your finger and tut-tutting at her wicked behaviour and thinking that she is getting just what she deserves. You should be lying next to her groaning and turning your face away in shame at your sin. You should be joining Lady Zion and confessing that I too am really, really bad.
      3. And if you **find that a little bit offensive** and hard to hear because you think of yourself as basically a good and kind person then you either don’t know what sin is or you are not being very honest. Good, by God’s definition, is absolutely perfect obedience, including both the outward act and the inward motive, done for the glory of God. And there is not a single human being who comes anywhere close to perfection; we are lawbreakers and sinners with morally corrupt hearts, even as we sit here in church! That is why Psalm 14:3 says, “*They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one*.”
2. So the agonized description of Lady Zion’s grief reveals the extent of man’s depravity: Man is really, really bad. And though we might be crying out, “Enough!”, there is more evidence to consider as we hear **the grief-stricken cry of Lady Zion** herself from vv11c-22.
   1. And the first thing we note in her cry is **Recognition**.
      1. In v12 she calls on all who pass by to look and “*see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow*”? And she is not asking people to *compare* her sorrow with theirs and see that hers is the worst ever; what she is saying is that there is no suffering that could be worse for her. And this is so because of the reason for her suffering. In v5 the narrator said, “*The Lord has afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions*,” and in v8, “*Jerusalem sinned grievously*.” So in v12, Lady Zion says that her sorrow is a sorrow, “*which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of His fierce anger.*” Lady Zion recognizes that the Day of Judgment that God warned the people about for generation after generation has finally come. And she has no one to blame but herself. It is her own sin that has brought down on her the fierce anger of God.
      2. And as you read through verses 13-17, Lady Zion uses imagery from the **siege warfare** that she has just endured, speaking of fire and nets and prisoners being chained together and an assembly of young men being crushed. And while all this was done by the Babylonian army, Lady Zion recognizes that the Hand of the Lord was behind this as she repeatedly speaks of *Him* doing it and *the Lord* doing it and *the Lord* rejecting her and giving her over. And he did this to her because of, as she says in v14, her “*transgressions*.” And transgression, boys and girls, means wrongdoing or law-breaking or sin. Lady Zion recognizes that her suffering has come upon her because of her sin. Lady Zion recognizes that she is really, really bad.
   2. And this leads her, as we come to vv18-22, to **confession**. She says in v18a, “*The Lord is in the right, for I have rebelled against His Word*,” and in v20b, “*I have been very rebellious*,” and in v22b that the Lord has dealt with her “*because of her many transgressions*.”
      1. And confession is the right response to sin. **1 John 1:8-9**, which says, “*If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*.” The solution for sin is to confess it to God.
   3. But while Lady Zion confesses her sin, she does not ask for forgiveness or commit herself to repentance. Instead she switches, mid-prayer, from confession to **intercession** or perhaps even *warning* is a better word.
      1. In v18b, she says, “*Hear, all you peoples, and see my suffering*.” She calls on everyone to look and learn from what has happened to her. And then she speaks again of captivity and death and starvation, and in v20 of the death that the sword brings.
      2. But when we come to v21b, note her words, “*All my enemies have heard of my trouble; they are glad that you have done it. You have brought the day you announced;* ***now let them be as I am***.” What she prays is that the Lord may visit the same judgment of death and destruction on the surrounding nations that He has visited on her. But more than that she is praying that her example might be **universal**. What Lady Zion teaches here, in effect, is that the judgment she has endured for being really, really bad is deserved by every nation and every individual because they too are really, really bad. And unless they confess their sins and trust in Christ, they will receive judgment.
      3. Congregation, look again at **the second line of v9**. There our Narrator says this of Lady Zion, “*She took no thought of her future*.” She went through life telling herself that she could live as she pleased and she ignored the warnings of God about judgment. But now she has received the judgment she deserves and she calls on everyone to understand that because of our sin we all deserve God’s judgment.
   4. And the judgment God warns us about today is not invasion or exile but an eternity in hell. And you will remember that five times in this first poem Lady Zion has lamented the fact that she has no comforter. And you know what? There is perhaps no better description of hell than that – hell is a place where there is no comfort and no comforter, forever.
   5. For Lady Zion, comfort came, eventually. Her reference to no comforter points us to the poetry of **Isaiah 40** where we read these words, “*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins … Behold, the Lord GOD … will tend his flock like a shepherd*.” Jesus came to comfort His people.
      1. And this is brought out here in Lamentations 1; look again at **v12.** There Lady Zion asks, “*Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the Lord afflicted on the day of His fierce anger*”? And I would ask you to think about Lady Zion being despised and afflicted and abandoned and naked and having transgressions bound into a yoke and set on her neck and having no one to comfort her, and think if these words describe an even worse suffering that it is described in the Bible? Jesus was beaten and spat upon and stripped and crucified. And then He endured those three hours where the Father poured out His eternal wrath on Jesus, such that Jesus cried out, “*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*” And Isaiah tell us this about the suffering of Jesus. “*Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows … He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed*.”

So our response to Lamentations 1 should be to say, I am really, really bad. I deserve the Judgment and punishment of God. But I confess my sins and I believe that by the broken body and poured out blood of Jesus I have the complete forgiveness of all my sins. Have you done that? Will you do that today?

Be warned, if you do not, the devastation and destruction and despair of Lady Zion that is described in chapter 1 and that she speaks of herself give you some idea of the greater devastation and destruction and despair that awaits you in hell. Amen.