

Lead In – Welcome to the church at Bethel, where we gather because of the gospel: Jesus in our place! To those watching online and our guests here in person – let our round of applause be a big welcome to you.

Some dates are forever etched into our memories.

July 4, 1776. December 7, 1941. September 11, 2001. For me, one of those dates is April 12, 1982—the day I entered the world. Every one of us has dates that mark our lives. Days we celebrate. Days we grieve. Days that changed everything.

God's covenant people also carried dates they would never forget.

Each year, during the month of Av (July–August), the Jewish people remember some of the darkest days in their history: the rebellion at Kadesh-Barnea, when Israel refused to enter the Promised Land; the destruction of Solomon's Temple by Babylon in 586 BC; and the destruction of the Second Temple by Rome in AD 70. For generations, these have been days of fasting, mourning, repentance, and remembrance.

Why remember such painful days? Because suffering forces questions that prosperity often silences.

What happens when God's judgment falls? Where is God's mercy when all we can see is His wrath? Have I brought this upon myself? Is this the consequence of my sin or the sin of others? Is there any hope when everything I love lies in ruins?

Perhaps those questions are not merely Israel's questions. Many of you have your own questions and dates.

The phone call that changed your family forever. The funeral. The diagnosis. The divorce papers. The day your child walked away. The day the dream died. Days you never wanted, yet days you cannot forget.

Jeremiah 39 brings us to one of those unforgettable dates in redemptive history—the day Jerusalem fell, the Temple was destroyed, and it appeared that every promise of God had collapsed. Yet even in the darkest day of judgment, God was not finished writing His story of redemption.

Where Glory Once Dwelt (Jeremiah 39:1-10)

So horrific were the exile and the destruction of the Temple that God's people have rehearsed them year after year. Jeremiah had warned this day would come:

"This is what the LORD says: I am about to hand this city over to the king of Babylon, and he will burn it. " (Jer. 34:2).

And it happened exactly as the Lord had said. We know little of Zedekiah's end except that he died in Babylon (Jer. 52:11), broken by the physical and emotional horrors inflicted upon him.

Jerusalem—the city where the glory of God once dwelt.

Now notice something in this passage that is both silent and deafening. It is Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, who pronounces judgment on Judah's king (39:5). Where is Yahweh?

The Lord declared this judgment beforehand (Jer. 34:2), yet in the account of Jerusalem's fall He is never mentioned. Even Jeremiah, whose prophecies are being fulfilled before our eyes, disappears from the narrative. It is as though the text itself is inviting us to ask, "Where is the Lord?"

That is precisely the point.

God is not absent, but He allows us to feel the silence of separation. He permits us to experience the weight of abandonment until we cry out, "Yahweh, where are You when I need You most?" Have you ever prayed that prayer?

And Jeremiah 39 ends with almost no answer. We are left sitting in the ashes, asking, "God, where were You?"

Sometimes I wish I could read someone's prayer journal from those days. What was Jeremiah feeling? How did God's people pray as the smoke still rose from the ruined Temple? By God's grace, we do not have to wonder. He has given us that prayer journal. It is called Lamentations.

Lamentations was written out of the destruction of Jerusalem. Jeremiah 39 gives us the history; Lamentations 3 gives us the heart. **Read Lamentations 3:1–18.**

Is this Jeremiah speaking? Most scholars believe so. Either way, this is the voice of a worshiper who has lived through the fall of Jerusalem—the city where the glory of God once dwelt. Yet this is more than one man's lament. The speaker gives voice to the entire covenant community (cf. Lam. 3:40).

Through five striking images, the worshiper describes his suffering as though it has come from the hand of Yahweh: a shepherd, a jailor, a wild animal, a hunter, and a torturer.

The Good Shepherd has not led him to green pastures but to **bitterness and poison** (3:5). He cries, "**He has walled me in so I cannot escape; He has weighed me down with chains**" (3:7). Then the pain deepens: "**He is a bear waiting in ambush for me**" (3:10). Again, "**He has made me a target for His arrows**" (3:12). Finally, "**He has ground my teeth with gravel**" (3:16).

Can you hear the anguish? "**Lord, it feels as though You are against me.**"

Lamentations gives us permission to pray that honestly. It teaches us that faith does not require pretending our pain is smaller than it is. The God who invites our worship also invites our deepest grief.

Just when it seems that all **hope** has been extinguished—even **hope** in the Lord—something changes. **Read Lamentations 3:19–27.**

At the lowest point of his despair, something remarkable happens. In the darkness, the worshiper finally speaks the covenant **name of God (3:18)**. He turns again to Yahweh—the very God whose hand he believes has brought him into this suffering.

In verse 17 the sufferer **forgot** what prosperity felt like. Now he **remembers** only affliction, homelessness, and bitterness. Yet in the midst of those memories, he prays for God to **remember** him. Throughout Scripture, when God "**remembers**," He does not merely recall information. He *acts*. He *hears* the cries of His people and *responds* with covenant mercy and redemption. "**Remember me in paradise.**"

Because the Lord heard, this happens. "**This.**" Perhaps the most important word in this entire passage is the smallest one: "**Yet this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope.**"

The word is placed first for emphasis. Surrounded by ashes and loss, the worshiper deliberately turns his mind toward one unshakable reality.

What is the "**this**" that restores hope? "**Because of the Lord's faithful love (3:22)**"

Steadfast love. Mercy. Faithfulness.

These are not random virtues. They are **covenant words**, rooted in the very character and name of God. The circumstances have not changed. Jerusalem still lies in ruins. The Temple is still destroyed. Yet hope is reborn because the worshiper remembers who God is before he remembers what he has lost.

So, what do you do when it feels as though the glory of God has departed from your life? When the prayers seem unanswered, the diagnosis remains, the marriage is still broken, or the grief refuses to leave?

You **wait**. "It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD" (Lam. 3:26).

But the question still lingers: Where is God?

Is it not striking that the "man of affliction (3:1)" in Lamentations is never named? Perhaps that silence prepares us for another Man who would bear affliction. The Lord Jesus Christ, though without sin, willingly entered our judgment. He bore our griefs. He carried our sorrows. He endured the wrath we deserved. And in the deepest darkness, on a hill called Golgotha, He entrusted Himself to the promises of His Father.

The **Temple** fell because of sin. But on the cross, the true **Temple** was destroyed and, on the third day, raised again.

Because Jesus lives, the ashes of Jerusalem are no longer the end of the story. Judgment does not have the final word. God's covenant love – mercy– and faithfulness does.

What do you do when it feels as if the glory of God has departed? How can you go on when you can only cry? You cry out to Jesus.

That is why one of the Church's most beloved hymns is born from the tears of Lamentations.

Lam. 3:22 Because of the LORD's faithful love we do not perish, for his mercies never end. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness! ²⁴ I say, "The LORD is my portion, therefore I will put my hope in him."

The words that once sustained a broken remnant now sustain every believer who has discovered that God's **mercy** is greater than our **sin** and His **faithfulness** stronger than our **suffering**.

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth, Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide; Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, Blessings all mine and ten thousand beside.

Great is thy faithfulness, Great is thy faithfulness, Morning by morning new mercies I see. All I have needed thy hand hast provided; Great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me.

Exegetical Notes

So horrific were the events of the exile and the destruction of the Temple that they are recorded at least three times. 39:1-10 Verses 1-2, 4-10 are a duplicate or adaptation of 52:4-16 = 2 Kgs 25:1-12.

Judgement/When bad things happen

In view of the content of the book as a whole the reader can introduce God language in speaking of what happens in w. 1-10. But it is important to note that God is never mentioned in this narrative of Jerusalem's fall (or in vv. 11-14 and 52:4-16, though the introduction to the latter text does speak of God's anger in 52:3). Somewhat strangely, neither Jeremiah nor the fulfillment of the word of God he announced is mentioned either

The absence of God language in this text (see also at 37:6-10) corresponds to the use of both God and the Babylonians as the subject of various verbs of destruction and exile throughout the book. The language used for God's judgment conforms to the language used for the Babylonians (see Introduction for a list of the parallel expressions). The latter are the instrument God uses to accomplish a judgmental purpose and so the kind of political/military activity engaged in by the Babylonians becomes associated with God. God does not act alone, but through means. That God does not control the Babylonians is evident in the fact that they are judged for exceeding their mandate (25:12-14; 50-51).

At the same time, the chapter speaks of more than judgment.

Alongside the judgmental activity are two accounts of saving activity, of Jeremiah (v. 11-14) and of Ebed-Melech (v. 15-18). See Fretheim, 534.

See also John 9:1-12. **John 9:1** As he was passing by, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

The events that led up to and followed 587 were traumatic for people like Zedekiah and Gedaliah as well as for Jeremiah and Baruch. They were traumatic for the entire Judahite community, in Judah itself, in Babylon, and in Egypt. And one of the functions of the work of Jeremiah and his curators and storytellers after 587 would have been to support people as they lived with their trauma. Paradoxically, they would have the capacity to help them live with their trauma simply by telling the terrible story, but also by enabling people to see that the catastrophe had been deserved (or at least it had

meaning) yet had actually turned out less terrible than Yahweh's threats warned, and by laying out Yahweh's promises (Goldingay, 63).

Jer. 39:1 In the ninth year of King Zedekiah of Judah, in the tenth month, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon advanced against Jerusalem with his entire army and laid siege to it.

In the ninth year of Zedekiah. According to the notation here and in the next verse, the siege lasted about a year and a half, from the winter of 587 B.C.E. to midsummer 586.

After a thirty-month siege that began on January 15, 588 BC, it all ends on July 18, 586 BCE; Jeremiah's predictions have come true. The city of Jerusalem is starved, broken, and dispirited; it only remains for the walls to be "broken through" (v. 2). Some fighting might continue to go on, but the situation is now hopeless and irretrievable (Kaiser, 447).

² In the fourth month of Zedekiah's eleventh year, on the ninth day of the month, the city was broken into.

9th of Av

In the fourth month on the ninth of the month. This is the ninth of Av, traditionally marked by Jews as a fast day to commemorate the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

Tisha B'Av, the ninth day of the Jewish month of Av, is recognized as the saddest day on the Jewish calendar. It is a day of mourning for tragedies across Jewish history, most particularly the destruction and loss of the first and second Temple and Jerusalem nearly 2,000 years ago.

- Traditional ways to observe – Reading the book of *Eicha*, or Lamentations, as a community. Lamentations express the anguish the Jewish people experience during the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

The Five Classical Tragedies (Mishnah)

The Mishnah lists five catastrophes that befell Israel on Tisha B'Av:

1. **The Sin of the Spies** – Israel rejected God's promise and refused to enter the Promised Land after believing the fearful report of the ten spies (Numbers 13–14), resulting in forty years of wilderness wandering.
2. **The Destruction of the First Temple (586 BC)** – The Babylonians destroyed First Temple, leading to the exile of Judah.
3. **The Destruction of the Second Temple (AD 70)** – The Romans destroyed Second Temple, ending the Second Temple period and scattering the Jewish people.
4. **The Fall of Betar (AD 135)** – The last stronghold of the Bar Kokhba revolt fell, crushing Jewish hopes for independence.
5. **Jerusalem Plowed Under (AD 135)** – After the revolt, Emperor Hadrian destroyed and rebuilt Jerusalem as a pagan city, largely barring Jews from entering.

³ **All the officials of the king of Babylon entered and sat at the Middle Gate: Nergal-sharezer, Samgar, Nebusarsechim the chief of staff, Nergal-sharezer the chief soothsayer, and all the rest of the officials of Babylon's king.**

Officials

Nergal-sharezer was the Sagar-Nebo (Simmagir was a Babylonian title or district, though NSV considers it a fourth name in the list); Sarsechim (= Nebushazban, v. 13) was the Rabsaris, a chief official of the court. A second person named Nergal-sharezer (= Nergalsharursur or Neriglissar) was the Rabmag (another Babylonian title); this name may refer to the same person as the first name on the list (only one person with this name is listed in v. 13). The last named was Nebuchadrezzar's son-in-law; he later was the king of Babylon (560-556 BC). Two of these persons are mentioned in v. 13, where still another name occurs (as well as in w. 9-10): Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard (the meanings given to the titles are educated guesses). See Fretheim, 530.

Jer. 39:4 When King Zedekiah of Judah and all the fighting men saw them, they fled. They left the city at night by way of the king's garden through the city gate between the two walls. They left along the route to the Arabah.

Arabah

This is the north-south rift through which the Jordan runs. They are fleeing to the south, perhaps trying to reach Egypt.

⁵ However, the Chaldean army pursued them and overtook Zedekiah in the plains of Jericho. They arrested him and brought him up to Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon's king, at Riblah in the land of Hamath. The king passed sentence on him there.

Passed sentence/spoke harshly

Literally, "he spoke judgments with him." This translation understands the plural noun *mishpatim* to have an adverbial sense (Alter, 989).

Jer. 39:6 At Riblah the king of Babylon slaughtered Zedekiah's sons before his eyes, and he also slaughtered all Judah's nobles. ⁷ Then he blinded Zedekiah and put him in bronze chains to take him to Babylon.

The blinded Zedekiah was taken in fetters to Babylon.

It was a grim fulfillment of the words of Jeremiah on several occasions. We know nothing of Zedekiah's end except that he died in Babylon (52:11), perhaps not long after the physical and mental tortures inflicted on him (NICOT, 647).

⁸ The Chaldeans next burned down the king's palace and the people's houses and tore down the walls of Jerusalem. ⁹ Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guards, deported the rest of the people to Babylon—those who had remained in the city and those deserters who had defected to him along with the rest of the people who remained.

¹⁰ However, Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guards, left in the land of Judah some of the poor people who owned nothing, and he gave them vineyards and fields at that time.

instead of leaving the area of Judah vacant, Nebuzaradan leaves behind in the land some of the poorest people of that land, who up to this point in time have owned nothing. But he now gives them vineyards and fields. Hopefully, these newly gifted poor people will be sufficiently grateful that they will not engage in intrigues or revolts against Babylon and instead will act as a buffer between the newly acquired lands of Babylon and the military threats from Egypt. To these who had owned nothing, new opportunities are given, but for the moment, this is not a land of promise, as it had been described when Israel left Egypt for the promised land so long ago (Kaiser, 449).

In the midst of his great suffering, Jeremiah uses five images that capture his deep lament and hurt from the hands of Yahweh: shepherd, jailor, wild animal, deadly hunter, torturer (ESV, 853).

**Lam. 3:1 I am the man who has seen affliction
 under the rod of God's wrath.**
**2 He has driven me away and forced me to walk
 in darkness instead of light.**
**3 Yes, he repeatedly turns his hand
 against me all day long.**

The man

3:1-3 Verse 1 begins with an emphatic statement: "I am the man." The afflicted man has replaced the abandoned woman in the personification of Jerusalem-Judah. The word "affliction" (oni) appears three times in chapter 1 (w. 3,7, 9) and three times in this chapter as well (3:1, 19, 33).² The difference in chapter 3 is its direct association with God (ESV, 851).

Is this Jeremiah?

This commentary interprets the chapter as the voice of a male survivor who has experienced the horrors of Jerusalem's fall and destruction. The male voice balances the female voice of Zion in Lamentations I and the concern about Virgin Daughter Zion' in chapter 2. The speaker in Lamentations 3 is not just a representative of the people, although there is a communal voice in verses 40-47 (TOTC, 352).

**Lam. 3:4 He has worn away my flesh and skin;
 he has broken my bones.**
**5 He has laid siege against me,
 encircling me with bitterness and hardship.**
**6 He has made me dwell in darkness
 like those who have been dead for ages.**

The word "bitterness" is used of poisonous plants in the OT ("gall" in v. 19; cf. Deut. 29:18; Ps. 69:21; Hos. 10:4). Perhaps the picture is that of God's building a paddock of poisonous plants around the sheep. The language of making the man to dwell in darkness recalls leading the sheep into darkness in Lamentations 3:2 (ESV, 853).

The progression is subtle but frightening: first God injures him, then he imprisons and poisons him before making him dwell in darkness, the home of the dead. We might say that this shepherd has led his sheep to the slaughter (ESV, 853).

Lam. 3:7 He has walled me in so I cannot get out;
 he has weighed me down with chains.
8 Even when I cry out and plead for help,
 he blocks out my prayer.
9 He has walled in my ways with blocks of stone;
 he has made my paths crooked.

Lam. 3:10 He is a bear waiting in ambush,
 a lion in hiding.
11 He forced me off my way and tore me to pieces;
 he left me desolate.
12 He strung his bow
 and set me as the target for his arrow.

Lam. 3:13 He pierced my kidneys
 with shafts from his quiver.
14 I am a laughingstock to all my people,
 mocked by their songs all day long.
15 He filled me with bitterness,
 satiated me with wormwood.

Lam. 3:16 He ground my teeth with gravel
 and made me cower in the dust.
17 I have been deprived of peace;
 I have forgotten what prosperity is.
18 Then I thought, "My future is lost,
 as well as my hope from the LORD."

Verses 17-18 return to the internal suffering of the man, only now with respect to his soul, not his stomach. He experiences a kind of anxious amnesia as he is robbed of peace, happiness, and endurance (ESV, 853).

Two things have died inside him: his "endurance" (Hb. "splendor, glory") and his "hope." The glory of the man, what gave him vitality in his inner man, has Perished —and so too has his hope "from the LORD." The prepositional phrase is significant for two reasons.

For a start, this is the first time that God is identified in the chapter. Up until now he has simply been an unnamed "he." The lack of identification heightens the estrangement, but now the identification heightens the irony. The man has received all these things from the covenant Lord, the one who swore by himself to be committed to his people (e.g., Gen. 22:16; Ex. 32:13).

Lord

The way out of such despair is given in the last word of verse 18, when the man reaches his lowest point in the dark. In the darkness of his despair, he names Yahweh, his covenant Lord, the one who brought him into the despair. In the moving words of a Rwandan believer after he lost family and home in the genocide that swept his country, "I never knew Jesus was all I needed until Jesus was all I had"* When we name God in the midst of the darkness of despair, the darkness begins to dissipate in the light of his presence. When we name God, we call upon his character of steadfast love and never-ending mercies, and we are not consumed —great is his faithfulness. All hail the power of Yahweh's name (ESV, 857)!

**Lam. 3:19 Remember my affliction and my homelessness,
the wormwood and the poison.**

Verse 19 introduces the turning point in the opening section, as the man makes his journey from the darkness of despair to the light of hope. In verse 17 he had forgotten happiness, but he does remember some things: his affliction and his wanderings, the wormwood and the gall. The ESV interprets the infinitive construct as an imperative ("remember"), suggesting that the man cries out to God to remember (ESV, 854).

Remember my affliction and my homelessness!' (see also Lam. 1:7, where affliction and wandering are applied to Jerusalem). It is a prayer to God. When God 'remembers', he pays attention to someone's plea and shows mercy in acts of redemption (see Exod. 2:24; Pss 25:6-7; 89:47, 50; 132:1). The poet urges God to remember the hardship he has suffered, expressed as the bitterness and the gall (TOTC, 356).

²⁰ **I continually remember them
and have become depressed.**
²¹ **Yet I call this to mind,
and therefore, I have hope:**

Lamentations 3:20 repeats the word "remember," only this time intensifying it with an infinitive absolute ("continually," or "surely"). These are things he cannot erase from his memory, and as a result his soul is "bowed down" in despair?

This, however, is not the only remembering he does. The afflicted man recalls something else in verses 21-24, which resurrects his dying hope.

This

The word "this" (Hb. *zo t*) in verse 21 appears first in the bicolon to help maintain the strong contrast between verses 19-20 and 21-24 suggests that the word is also fronted for emphasis. The logical connectors are clear and tight: "Surely to remember my affliction is bitter, but this I also recall minding, and therefore I have hope." Hope rises from the ashes in which he has been made to cower.

Call/Recall

However, this requires effort on his part: the verb "recall" implies a conscious, deliberate-even determined —act of the will.

But what was the catalyst for this recall? Verses 22-24 reveal that his hope was given a chance of new life when he mentioned God's name for the first time in verse 18.

Lam. 3:22 Because of the LORD's faithful love
 we do not perish,
 for his mercies never end.
23 They are new every morning;
 great is your faithfulness!
24 I say, "The LORD is my portion,
 therefore, I will put my hope in him."

These verses unpack the "this" of verse 21, showing that hope springs eternal when it recalls the eternal God and his character. In essence, these verses unpack the "this" of 587 BC, the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of Yahweh's covenant people.

Love – Mercy – Faithfulness

God's steadfast love and never-failing mercies, as well as his faithfulness mentioned in the next verse, form a trilogy of covenant terms connected to God's name (cf. Ex. 34:6-

7). This is what the man recalls: the essential goodness of God's character, exactly what Moses saw on Mount Sinai (ESV, 854).

Faithful Love

The well-known Hebrew word *hesed* (great love) is used in the plural here. It refers to God's covenantal love, his deeds of kindness towards his people. This verse declares that God has not made a complete end to his people the plural we is used), despite their terrible plight, because he is still a God of compassion and loving kindness" (echoing Exod. 34:6-7).

**Lam. 3:25 The LORD is good to those who wait for him,
to the person who seeks him.**

²⁶ **It is good to wait quietly
for salvation from the LORD.**

²⁷ **It is good for a man to bear the yoke
while he is still young.**

Salvation

In Lamentations 3:1 the man introduces himself as a geber, a strong man, a champion-warrior who embodies Jerusalem-Judah and who also serves as a prophet distinct from the nation, providing instruction and mediation. He qualifies as the personification of Jerusalem-Judah's suffering because he himself suffers as one of the people-and yet, he is also distinct from the people. He suffers, it seems, at their expense, not his (ESV, 856). In all this we have a type of Jesus, the man of affliction who, though he knew no sin, experienced many of the things this man of affliction experienced. And yet, in the darkness of despair on the hill of Golgotha, Jesus called to mind—consciously, deliberately, actively —the promises of God in the Word of God. Each of his statements from the cross revealed that his mind was fixed on God. He learned through bitter experience that God was all he needed because God was all he had. God was his portion-the Lord was enough for him— and therefore he found hope (v. 24). And now, since Jesus made the journey from the darkness of despair to the light of hope through faith in his Father, we can also make that same journey through faith in him. All we need to do is call upon his name in the darkness. How sweet the name of Jesus sounds!

Illustrations

Historical Event	Jeremiah	Lamentations
Jeremiah warns Judah before the fall	Jeremiah 1–38	—
Babylon's final siege begins (588 B.C.)	Jeremiah 39:1; 52:4	Background to Lam. 2–4
Conditions worsen during siege (famine, starvation)	Jeremiah 37–38	Lam. 2:11–12, 19–20; 4:4–10
Jerusalem falls (586 B.C.)	Jeremiah 39:2–10; 52:6–16	Lam. 1–4 reflect this event
Temple burned	Jeremiah 52:12–13	Lam. 1:10; 2:6–7
Population deported	Jeremiah 39:9; 52:27–30	Lam. 1:3, 5, 18
Gedaliah appointed governor	Jeremiah 40	Probably after Lam. 1–4 begin
Gedaliah assassinated	Jeremiah 41	Possibly before or during Lam. 5
Jews flee to Egypt	Jeremiah 42–44	Lam. 5 likely reflects aftermath
Jeremiah's later prophecies in Egypt	Jeremiah 43–44	Lamentations already completed