

## LESSON SIX

# Lament Over the City



### Main Idea

The destruction of the constructed environment is cause for lament.

### Focus Scripture

Lamentations 5:1–22, Luke 23:26–31

### Opening Prayer

God of the tabernacle and temple,  
buildings can stand only if they are built on a strong foundation.  
As we study, may our faith be strengthened  
into an unshakable foundation  
on which we can build our lives.  
Amen.

### Before You Begin

- Name cities that have been destroyed. What caused their destruction?
- What issues and situations are a cause for lament in your city or town?

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## Lamentations 5:1–22

- <sup>1</sup> Remember, O LORD, what has befallen us;  
look, and see our disgrace!
- <sup>2</sup> Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers,  
our homes to aliens.
- <sup>3</sup> We have become orphans, fatherless;  
our mothers are like widows.
- <sup>4</sup> We must pay for the water we drink;  
the wood we get must be bought.
- <sup>5</sup> With a yoke on our necks we are hard driven;  
we are weary, we are given no rest.
- <sup>6</sup> We have made a pact with Egypt and Assyria,  
to get enough bread.
- <sup>7</sup> Our ancestors sinned; they are no more,  
and we bear their iniquities.
- <sup>8</sup> Slaves rule over us;  
there is no one to deliver us from their hand.
- <sup>9</sup> We get our bread at the peril of our lives,  
because of the sword in the wilderness.
- <sup>10</sup> Our skin is black as an oven  
from the scorching heat of famine.
- <sup>11</sup> Women are raped in Zion,  
virgins in the towns of Judah.
- <sup>12</sup> Princes are hung up by their hands;  
no respect is shown to the elders.
- <sup>13</sup> Young men are compelled to grind,  
and boys stagger under loads of wood.
- <sup>14</sup> The old men have left the city gate,  
the young men their music.
- <sup>15</sup> The joy of our hearts has ceased;  
our dancing has been turned to mourning.
- <sup>16</sup> The crown has fallen from our head;  
woe to us, for we have sinned!
- <sup>17</sup> Because of this our hearts are sick,  
because of these things our eyes have grown dim:
- <sup>18</sup> because of Mount Zion, which lies desolate;  
jackals prowl over it.
- <sup>19</sup> But you, O LORD, reign forever;  
your throne endures to all generations.
- <sup>20</sup> Why have you forgotten us completely?  
Why have you forsaken us these many days?
- <sup>21</sup> Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored;  
renew our days as of old
- <sup>22</sup> unless you have utterly rejected us,  
and are angry with us beyond measure.

### Notes on the Text

The book we call Lamentations is a collection of five poems. The fifth and final poem (Chapter 5) follows the traditional format for communal lament: address to God, complaint, statement of trust in God, deliverance.

Verse 1: This poem, the shortest of the five, is spoken by the people. Notice the use of *us* and *our*.

Verse 16 and 20: In verse 16, the people acknowledge their sin as the source of the situation. In verse 20 they challenge God, demanding to know why God seems absent.

Verse 22: Verse 21 would be a strong ending to these poems. God's renewal in the midst of chaos and suffering is the point of lament. As it happens, though, verse 21 is not the last word. The final word is verse 22, a verse that communicates despair—that God will have rejected the people once and for all with no opportunity for redemption or renewal.

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### Luke 23:26–31

**<sup>26</sup> As they led [Jesus] away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. <sup>27</sup> A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. <sup>28</sup> But Jesus turned to them and said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. <sup>29</sup> For the days are surely coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.’ <sup>30</sup> Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us’; and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ <sup>31</sup> For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?”**

### Notes on the Text

Verse 27: Luke's Gospel is the only Gospel that includes this interaction between Jesus and the women. Women, both named and unnamed, are featured prominently in Luke's Gospel.

We don't know specifically who these women are. They might have been friends and followers of Jesus. They might have been professional mourners like those mentioned in 2 Chronicles 35:25 and Jeremiah 9:17.

Verse 28: Remember the other times in scripture when women wept for their children.

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Why do you think Jesus didn't want the women to cry for him?

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**P**icture the cities you have seen. Broad streets. Shaded parks. Architecture old and new. Sidewalks filled with people. Stores and markets offering goods for sale and food to eat. How were you able to view the city? Perhaps you looked down on the city from a building's roof. The motion of vehicles below reminded you of the activity of a disturbed ant colony. There was a sense of movement and vibrancy. The city fairly shimmered with life.

Jerusalem was just such a city. It was a seat of government and commerce and religion. It was a trading hub and a travel destination. It was a city set on a hill,

literally. Pilgrims went up to Jerusalem to make their offerings at the Temple and to satisfy their religious obligations.

Our two readings discuss Jerusalem at different times in history and in different stages of destruction. In Lamentations, the city has been physically destroyed. The Babylonian army has entered, captured, seized, and razed Jerusalem. Jeremiah pulls no punches in describing what has happened. People are starving. Women are raped. The Temple is defiled. And the nation has been forgotten by God. The destruction is complete. The only question is what will happen next.

The people lament. They address God, present the situation of the destroyed city in all its horror, and ask God to help and restore the city. They protest the destruction. They question. They wonder if their faith is lost. As they look around them, they believe that the city they lived in is lost.

Jerusalem is not lost forever. The people captured by the Babylonian army return to Jerusalem and rebuild homes and the Temple. They plant vineyards. By the time of the Gospel of Luke, Jerusalem has been rebuilt, but it is not the same as it was in Jeremiah's time. In the time of the Gospels, Jerusalem is under the control of the Roman Empire. Herod serves as governor, and the temple officials are still nominally in charge of religious life for the Jews. But none of these powers are hospitable to Jesus and his followers.

When residents of Jerusalem hear Jesus' comments on his way to be crucified, about the destruction of Jerusalem, destruction is still decades away. Yet, Jesus tells them they should begin to lament now. Rome's siege and destruction of Jerusalem will repeat every horror of Babylon's siege: thirst, starvation, death, defilement, poverty, bloodshed. Weep for yourselves and your city, Jesus says.

It is hard to imagine an entire city coming to an end. Cities seem so big and solid that we think they will surely last forever. Rome is even nicknamed "The Eternal City." But cities are not eternal. They may be, to borrow the psalmist's phrase, "fearfully and wonderfully made," but they are made of materials that can crumble when assaulted by nature or human intention.

### Lamenting the Destruction of the City

The destruction of any city is cause for both individual and communal lament. Individually, citizens lament the loss of their homes and businesses—visible symbols of the life they have lived. For those whose work or birth has put them in places of prosperity, the destruction of the city causes a reversal. They protest the loss of personal possessions and, no doubt, the loss of family and friends.

Communally, however, the loss of Jerusalem was more than the sum of destroyed buildings and human life. Since the people had first settled in the land and Solomon had built the first temple in Jerusalem, the people understood that God lived in the Temple. To lose the Temple, to lose the city, was to lose God. The singers of Psalm 137 would claim a complete inability to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land: "How could we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy" (Ps. 137:4–6). The Temple in Jerusalem, where God lived, was destroyed and was

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The book of Psalms is in many ways a songbook or a poetry collection about Jerusalem in good times and bad. Psalms 84, 46, 48, and 122 are among the good times in the city. Psalm 102 calls on God to remember Zion.

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now too far away to make worship possible. The people cry out to God. Those still alive in what was left of Jerusalem also lament. They lament for the life they had known, for family and friends taken away to Babylon, and for the living of every day.

Jerusalem is not the only city that has faced complete destruction. Throughout history, cities are destroyed by people in power who refuse to give up their power and escalate conflict so that they can continue to oppress others. The inhabitants, or former inhabitants, of those cities lament every bit as fervently as Jeremiah and the worship singers of Psalm 137. Cities that have been physically destroyed around our world sit bleak and empty.

Destruction happens in more ways than simply physical destruction. A city's buildings may still stand, but the city can be fractured through a series of breaks that destabilize the city's foundations: trust erodes among groups of people, they refuse to cooperate with one another, issues of civic concern become contests between *us* and *them*. These fractures destroy a city every bit as much as physical destruction does. These fractures are every bit as much a cause for lament.

### A Contemporary Lament for the City

#### "My City of Ruins"

Bruce Springsteen's song "My City of Ruins" was written in 2000 to benefit the city of Asbury Park, New Jersey (his hometown), as the city sought to revitalize itself. It has become a song of revitalization for the many people and places where

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he and the E-Street band perform. Springsteen's description is bleak. He contrasts blood red and the gray of a rainy day. He calls attention to boarded up windows and empty streets. In live performance he calls for the names of people who are missing—people who are missing from the band and from the lives of those attending the concert. As the song concludes, he prays for what he wants and needs: strength, faith, love, understanding. "With these hands, Lord, I pray for the strength, with these hands, Lord, I pray for the faith, Lord, with these hands, Lord, I pray for the love, Lord . . . Come on, rise up!"

Since the song's first performance, Springsteen and others have used the song to bring attention to other cities and nations in need: New York City after 9/11, the nation of Haiti and cities of L'Aquila, Italy, and Christchurch, New Zealand, after earthquakes.

## Practicing Lament

"The city" may be the subject that brings us closest to lament in corporate worship. In intercessory prayers, for example, we often mention public officials or situations facing the city in which the congregation lives. Prayers of Confession may acknowledge that we do not do all we can to change the things that are damaging the city in which we live.

One way to practice lamenting over the city is to borrow the form of the Lamentations passage. When we do that, we hear biblical language and our own words together. Think back to your list of issues in your town or city (or another city you love) that are cause for lament. Choose an issue or situation that is most meaningful to you. Craft a sentence that states what you want God to do about the situation.

You can borrow the structure of this passage and create your own lament over your own city.

- Begin with a **unison** call for God to remember: "Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us."
- Speak aloud the situations and issue.
- Between each issue, speak a **unison** refrain: "The joy of our hearts has ceased; our dancing has been turned to mourning, our hearts are sick."
- Recite the statements about how you want God to act.
- Conclude with a **unison** refrain: "Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored."

Take a moment to reflect on the experience of speaking these words aloud.

## Trusting in the God of Hope

### Matthew 5:14

**You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden.**

It might be more helpful to hear this verse this way: "You are like a city built on a hill. No one can hide a city on a hill. Be the light of the world!" "City on a hill" is sometimes used to describe San Francisco. Do you know of any other cities that are called "city on a hill"?

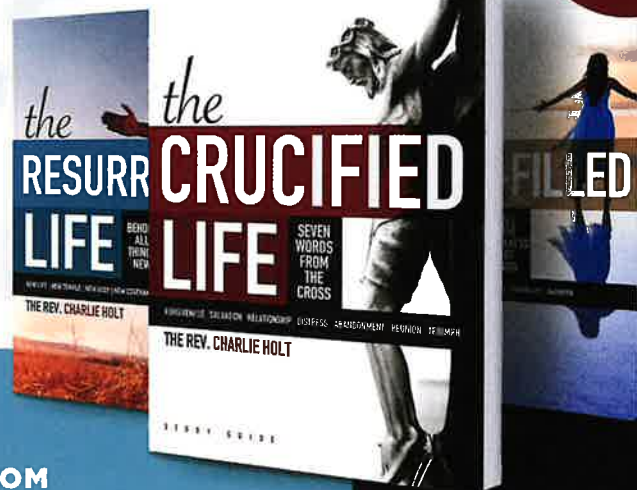
Even as we lament the fracture and destruction of cities, the biblical witness points us in two directions. As the psalmist states assurance that God will help Zion, Psalm 102:14 reminds God that “your servants hold its stones dear.” Even broken, our cities (towns, villages, hamlets . . . however you characterize where you live) are our homes, and we do hold their stones dear. We should also remember that in Jeremiah 29:5–7 God tells the exiles in Babylon:

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Celebrate all the ways the members of your congregation are working for the welfare of the city where you live. Think of people you know who have interest in particular programs: drivers for Meals on Wheels, hosts at a community homeless shelter, literacy tutors, volunteers in a prison ministry, and more. When you see those people, thank them for keeping the needs of the city before the congregation. If you are not currently involved in one of those ministries, perhaps now is a good time to consider getting involved.

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## Closing Prayer

God of all places,  
help us to remember that where your people are, there you are, too:  
in towns and cities, in villages and hamlets.  
May we build ourselves into your city, shining your light in the world.  
Amen.

## Practicing Lament

**Use this space to create your own lament.**