

LAMENTATIONS



Following the fall of Jerusalem and the horrendous things that took place there, believers try to understand what had happened. They are not complaining; they see the ruins as deserved punishment for their many excesses and constant rejection of God's warnings. Yet, they know that the Lord loves his people: they believe this, feel it and proclaim it.

When the exiles returned to Jerusalem, they might have gathered to pray together on the ruins of what had been the temple, and taken turns with these laments. Later they continued yearly to pray them on the date of the catastrophe, and much later the Church adopted the custom of using them in the days she remembers the death of Jesus.

In the Lord's Passion, the believer sees the sum total of the suffering and anxiety of humankind. These poems help us to look with the same compassion on the suffering of Christ and the suffering of the destitute. They will help us to unite the vision of universal pain with the sense of human sinfulness and responsibility.

A Jewish tradition attributes these poems to Jeremiah. They do seem to manifest a spirit very similar to his.

First lamentation

1 ¹How forlorn the city lies,
once teeming with people!
How like a widow is she,
once mistress of the nations!
A princess among the cities,
she has now become a slave.

²She spends her nights weeping,
drenching her cheeks with tears.
Who is there to comfort her
among all her lovers?
All her friends have betrayed her
and have become her enemies.

³Humiliated, exhausted,
Judah has gone into exile
but she finds no rest among the
nations
where she sojourns;
her pursuers have overtaken her
where there is no way of escape.

⁴All roads to Zion are in mourning;
no one comes to her feasts.
Her gates are deserted,
her priests groan,
her virgins grieve.
What bitter anguish she suffers!

⁵She is at the mercy of her foes
who enjoy prosperity and power.
Yahweh himself has made her suffer
for all her iniquity.

Her children, driven into captivity,
take the lonely road to exile.

⁶Gone from the daughter of Zion
is all her majestic splendor.
Her rulers, like harts
that find no pasture,
have fled helplessly
before the oppressors.

⁷Jerusalem recalls her days
of wandering and affliction,
her people fell into the hands of her foes
and there was no help.
Haters gloated over her downfall
and laughed at her destruction.

⁸Greatly has Jerusalem sinned;
she has become as a thing unclean.
Honored before,
but now despised by those who have
seen her naked,
she herself groans in dismay
and turns her face away.

⁹Her filth clings to her skirt.
She gave no thought to her doom,
and so her fall came suddenly,
with no one to offer comfort.
“Look, O Yahweh, upon my misery,
for my enemy has overcome me.”

¹⁰She has seen how the enemy
has laid hands on her treasures.
She has seen how the nations
have defiled her Sanctuary—
those people you have not allowed
to come into your assembly.

¹¹All her people groan
as they search for bread;
just to keep themselves alive,
they give their jewels for food.
Look, Yahweh, and mark
how I have been despised.

¹²All you who pass by,
look and see.
Is there any calamity
like this, inflicted on me

by Yahweh on the day
of his burning anger.

¹³From above he sent a fire
down into my very bones,
he ensnared my feet
and threw me down,
and left me in pain
the whole day long.

¹⁴He bound my sins into a yoke
and fastened them together,
then set them upon my neck
and caused my strength to fail.
Yahweh gave me into the hands
of those I cannot withstand.

¹⁵Yahweh has spurned
the bravest of my fighters;
he has summoned an army
to crush my young warriors.
Yahweh has trodden in his wine
press
Judah's virgin daughter.

¹⁶This is what I weep about,
what makes my tears well up.
No one is near to restore my spirit,
no one at hand to console me.
My children are desolate,
for the enemy has triumphed.

¹⁷Zion stretches out her hands,
but there is no one to give comfort.
Yahweh has decreed for Jacob
that his neighbors become his foes.
As an unclean thing among them
has Jerusalem become.

¹⁸Yahweh acts justly,
for I have defied his order.
Listen, all you peoples,
and see how I suffer.
My young men and maidens
have all gone into exile.

¹⁹I cried for help to my lovers,
but they betrayed me.
My priests and my elders
perished in the city
they sought anything to eat,
but finally they had to die.

Is 63:2

Jer
13:17;
14:17Jer
30:14

Dt 32:35 ²⁰Look, Yahweh, upon my distress:
all within me is in anguish.
My heart recoils within me:
I know that I have been rebellious.
See, outside, the sword that kills,
and within, death that stalks.

Am 5:18 ²¹People have heard my moaning
but no one comes to comfort me.
My foes have known of my suffering,
they rejoice at what you have done.
Hasten the day you have proclaimed,
that they may be even as I am.

²²Let their evil come
before you, and deal with them
as you have dealt with me
on account of my sins.
Great indeed is my groaning.
How sick at heart I am!

Second lamentation

2 ¹Oh, how Yahweh in his anger
has despised the daughter of Zion!
Israel's glory he has flung
from heaven down to earth;
unmindful of his footstool
on the day of his wrath.

²Without pity Yahweh has shattered
in Jacob every dwelling.
He has torn down in his anger
the ramparts of Judah's daughter.
He has thrown her rulers and her king
to the ground, dishonored.

³He has cut down in his anger
the horn of Israel's might.
He has withdrawn his right hand
at the approach of the enemy.
In Jacob, he has blazed like a fire,
he has devoured all around.

⁴Like an enemy he has bent his bow,
his right hand steadying the arrow.
All our pride of manhood he slew
as he took his stand as a foe,
pouring out fury like fire
upon the tent of Zion's daughter.

⁵The Lord has become an enemy
who has laid Israel in ruins.
He has destroyed all her palaces
and laid waste her fortresses.
He has multiplied the tears
of the daughter of Judah.

⁶Yahweh has wrecked her dwelling,
laid waste her place of meeting.
He has made Zion forget
her appointed feasts and Sabbaths;
he has spurned in his fierce wrath
king and prophet and priest.

⁷The Lord has rejected his altar,
has forsaken his Sanctuary.
He has handed over the walls of her
tower to the enemy,
whose triumphant shouts are heard
in the temple of Yahweh.

⁸Yahweh resolved to tear down
the ramparts of Zion's daughter.
He stretched out the measuring line,
and did not relent from bringing ruin.
He made both wall and rampart mourn,
till, together, they crumbled down.

⁹Her gates have sunk into the ground;
broken and removed are their bars.
Her king and rulers
live in exile among the nations.
No more message for their prophets,
no more visions from Yahweh.

¹⁰The elders of the daughter of Zion
sit in silence upon the ground,
their heads sprinkled with dust,
their bodies wrapped in sackcloth,
while Jerusalem's young women
bow their heads to the ground.

¹¹With weeping, my eyes are spent;
my soul is in torment
because of the downfall
of the daughter of my people,
because children and infants faint
in the open spaces of the town.

¹²To their mothers they say,
"Where is the bread and wine?"
as they faint like wounded men
in the streets and public squares,
as their lives ebb away
in their mothers' arms.

¹³To what can I compare you,
O daughter of Jerusalem?
Who can save or comfort you,
O virgin daughter of Zion?
Deep as the sea is your affliction,
and who can possibly heal you?

¹⁴Your prophets' visions
were worthless and false.
Had they warned of your sins,
your fate might have been averted.

Ezk
24:21

Dt 28:36

Jer 6:26

Ezk
13:10

But what they gave you, instead,
were false, misleading signs.

¹⁵Passersby shudder;
some clap their hands at the sight;
others wag their heads at the fate
of the daughter of Jerusalem.
“Is this the city that was called
the loveliest, the joy of the world?”

¹⁶All your enemies open wide
their mouths against you;
they gnash their teeth, they hiss,
they crow: “We have destroyed her!
This is the day we have waited for;
we have lived to see it happen.”

¹⁷Yahweh has accomplished his purpose;
he has fulfilled his word
which he decreed in the days of old;
he overthrew you, without mercy.
He made your enemies joyful
and gave them power to crush you.

¹⁸Cry out to the Lord, O wall
of the daughter of Zion!
Oh, let your tears flow
day and night, like a river.
Give yourself no relief;
grant your eyes no respite.

¹⁹Get up, cry out in the night,
at the beginning of the watches!
Pour out your heart like water
in the presence of the Lord.
Lift up your hands to him,
for the lives of your children,
who faint with hunger
at the corner of every street.

²⁰Look, Yahweh, and answer:
Why have you treated us like this?
Why must women eat their little ones,
whom they have nursed in their arms?
Why must priest and prophet be
slaughtered

in the Sanctuary of the Lord?

²¹In the dust of the streets
lie the young and the old,
both virgins and young men—
all fallen by the sword.
You have killed on the day of your fury;
you have slaughtered without mercy.

²²As for a feast day, you bade
terrors to come from every side.
There was, on the day of your anger,
neither fugitive nor survivor.
My enemy has murdered
all whom I bore and reared.

Third lamentation

3 ¹I am a man who has known
calamity from the rod of his wrath.

²He has driven and brought me
into darkness, not into the light.

³He turns his hand against me alone,
all the day long, again and again.

⁴He has worn away my flesh and skin;
he has broken all my bones.

⁵He assails me and surrounds me
with tribulation and bitterness.

⁶He leaves me to dwell in darkness,
like those who have long been dead.

⁷He has walled me in without escape;
he has weighed me down with chains.

⁸I could not even cry for help,
for he has stopped my prayer.

⁹He bars my way with stones
and left me helplessly alone.

¹⁰Like a bear lying in ambush,
like a lion waiting for its prey,

¹¹he lunged at me, tore me to pieces,
and left me alone and helpless.

¹²Then he drew his bow
and aimed his arrow at me.

¹³He pierced my sides
with arrows from his quiver.

¹⁴I have become a laughingstock,
a topic of songs for all the people.

¹⁵He has sated me with bitter food;
he has made me drunk with worm-
wood.

¹⁶He has broken my teeth with gravel
and thrown me down in the ashes.

¹⁷He has deprived my soul of peace,
till I have forgotten happiness.

¹⁸Now I say, “Gone are my hopes
and all my confidence in Yahweh.”

¹⁹Recalling my affliction and home-
lessness is wormwood and gall.

²⁰Thinking it over and over
makes my soul downcast.

²¹But this, when I ponder,
is what gives me hope:

²²Yahweh’s love abides unceasingly.

His compassion is never consumed;
²³every morning it is renewed.
 And his love remains ever faithful.

²⁴“My portion is Yahweh,” says my soul.
²⁵“On him shall I rely.”

²⁵Yahweh is good to those who hope
 in him,
 to souls who search for him.
²⁶It is rewarding to wait in silence
 for Yahweh’s salvation.
²⁷It is good for man to bear the yoke
 from his yOUTH.

²⁸Let him sit alone in silence
 when Yahweh fastens the yoke on him.

²⁹Let him put his lips to the dust
 there may still be hope.

³⁰Let him offer his cheek to be struck;
 let him be overwhelmed with insult.

³¹For it is not forever
 that the Lord rejects man.

³²In the abundance of his love
 he punishes, but has compassion.

³³For he does not willingly abase
 or afflict the human race.

³⁴To trample underfoot
 the prisoners of the land,

³⁵to deny a man his rights
 in the presence of the Most High,
³⁶to deprive people of justice—
 the Lord does not approve of this.

³⁷Who can command and execute
 what the Lord has not willed?

³⁸From the mouth of the Most High
 come all things, good or bad.

³⁹Why then, should mortals complain
 when punished for their sin?

⁴⁰Let us search and examine our ways
 and return to Yahweh.

⁴¹Let us lift up our hearts and hands
 to God in heaven, and say:

⁴²We have sinned and rebelled,
 and you have not forgiven us.

⁴³Clothed in anger you have pursued
 us without mercy.

⁴⁴You have wrapped yourself in clouds
 so that no prayer can reach you.

⁴⁵You have reduced us to dust
 and refuse among the nations.

⁴⁶Our foes have opened wide
 their mouths against us.

⁴⁷Terror is our lot:
 pitfall, ruin and desolation.

⁴⁸Great is my grief over the downfall
 of the daughter of my people.

⁴⁹No respite, no relief,
 as my tears flow ceaselessly,

⁵⁰till Yahweh looks down
 from heaven and sees.

⁵¹My soul will grieve in torment
 for the women of my city.

⁵²Like a bird I have been hunted
 by my foes without cause.

⁵³They flung me alive into a pit
 and cast stones at me.

⁵⁴As the waters closed over my head,
 I thought I would never again live.

⁵⁵Out of the depths I called
 on your name, O Yahweh.

⁵⁶You heard; you have not been deaf
 to my cry for relief.

⁵⁷When I called, you even came near
 and told me not to fear.

⁵⁸O Lord, you took up my case
 and redeemed my life.

⁵⁹You have seen the wrong they did me,
 uphold my cause!

⁶⁰You have seen how resentfully
 they plotted to destroy my life.

⁶¹O Yahweh, you have heard the insults
 hurled at me, their insidious plots;

⁶²You have been aware of their
 thoughts,

their muttering against me all day long.

⁶³Look at them—sitting or standing—
 mocking me in their song!

⁶⁴Repay them as they deserve,
 according to their deeds, O Yahweh.

⁶⁵Harden their hearts;
 hold them under your curse.

⁶⁶Pursue and destroy them in fury
 from under the heavens, O Yahweh.

Fourth lamentation

4¹How tarnished the gold has become.
 The fine gold has lost its luster.

Mic 7:7;
 Ps 73:26

Jer
 15:17

Is 50:6;
 Mt 5:39

Is 63:7

Am 1:6

Am 5:7

Jl 2:12;
 Hos 6:1

Is 55:7

Jer 1:8

Why, the sacred stones lie strewn
at every street corner!

²Oh, the precious sons of Zion,
once worth their weight in gold—
but now reckoned no more
than earthen jars from a potter's mold!

Job
39:13

³Even jackals bare their breasts
to suckle their young,
but my people have become heartless,
like ostriches in the desert land.

⁴In thirst the infant's tongue
cleaves to the roof of its mouth.
Children are begging for alms,
but there is no one to help them.

⁵Those accustomed to fine food
now lie dying in the streets.
Those accustomed to wear purple
now lie destitute upon the ash heaps.

Is 1:9;
Ezk
16:46

⁶The punishment of my people
is greater than that of Sodom,
which was overthrown in an instant,
without a helping hand.

⁷Brighter than snow were their rulers,
even whiter than milk;
their bodies rosier than coral,
their beauty as radiant as sapphires.

⁸Now they look blacker than soot,
unrecognized in the streets.
Their emaciated form shows lack of food,
their skin shriveled and dry as wood.

⁹Better to have died by the sword
than to have perished in hunger.
The famine-stricken people perish,
and slowly, wretchedly, pass away.

¹⁰Once loving mothers, our women
have cooked their own children
and made them their food:
such has been the crash of my people!

¹¹Yahweh has given full vent to his
wrath;
pouring out his fierce anger.
He has kindled a fire in Zion,
which has consumed her foundation.

¹²Never had kings believed
nor the world thought possible
that the enemy could break
through the gates of Jerusalem.

Jer 5:31;
Ezk 7:23

¹³But this happened because of the
priests, who sinned,
because of the prophets who trans-
gressed,
shedding in her midst the blood of the just.

¹⁴They wandered like blind men,
groping through the streets,
so defiled with blood
that none could touch their garments.

¹⁵"Go away!" people cried at them.
"Do not touch us! You are unclean!"
They became fugitives wandering about,
but even the nations would drive them
out.

Is 52:11

¹⁶Yahweh himself has dispersed them;
no longer does he watch over them.
The priests are shown no honor;
the elders are given no favor.

¹⁷Our watchmen strained their eyes,
looking for help in vain.
We anxiously waited for an ally,
who failed to save us.

Jer 37:7

¹⁸Like dogs our enemies hounded us
and kept us off the streets.
As our end drew near,
we knew our days were numbered.

¹⁹Swifter were our pursuers,
than the eagles in the sky.
Over the hills they chased us,
they waylaid us in the wilderness.

²⁰Our life's breath, Yahweh's anointed,
was taken captive in their pit—
he of whom we said, "In his protection
we shall live among the nations."

²¹Rejoice and be glad, O daughter of
Edom,
you who dwell in the land of Uz.
But you shall be drunk and stripped bare,
for to you also the cup will pass.

Is 51:17;
Heb
2:15

²²Your ordeal, daughter of Zion, will end;
for your exile will not be prolonged.
But Edom's daughter will be chastised,
and her wickedness will be exposed.

Fifth lamentation

5 ¹Remember, Yahweh, what has be-
fallen us. Look, and see our dis-
grace,

²our home handed over to stran-
gers, our inheritance to foreigners.

³We are as orphans, fatherless, and
early widowed are our mothers.

⁴Our drinking water we must buy;
for our own wood we have to pay.

Is 55:1

⁵With the yoke stifling our breath,
without rest we work to death.

⁶We have bowed down to Egypt,
and to Assyria, just to subsist.

⁷Our ancestors who sinned are no
more but we bear their guilt.

⁸Slaves rule us, and there is no one
to rescue us from their hands.

⁹We brave the desert heat and the
sword just to get our hard-earned
food.

¹⁰Our skin is hot like a furnace,
dried up and shriveled by hunger.

¹¹Ravished are the wives in Zion,
the virgins in the towns of Judah.

¹²Princes are hung up by their
hands; elders shown no respect.

¹³Young men toil at the millstones,
boys stagger under heavy loads.

¹⁴The old have shunned the city
gate, the young, their music.

¹⁵From our hearts joy is gone; we
danced then, but now we lament.

¹⁶The garlands have fallen from
our heads. Woe upon us, for we have
sinned!

¹⁷Over all this our hearts are sick;
and our eyes have grown weak:

¹⁸for we see Mount Zion desolate; Mic 3:12
the jackals prowl within.

¹⁹You, O Yahweh, forever reign; Ps 102:13
your throne endures from age to age.

²⁰Why, then, should you abandon
us, why forget us for so long a time?

²¹Lead us to you again, O Yahweh,
that we may be restored; renew our
days as of old.

²³Have you utterly rejected us? Is Jer 14:19
there no end to your wrath against
us?