

Introduction

For many readers, the idea of stopping the book of Lamentations after chapter 3 is very appealing. But the grief of Lamentations continues for two more poems in chapters 4 and 5.

It's not as though in the Christian life you gain a glimpse of hope and the revelation that God is good and then it's smooth sailing from that point. Very often these are helps along the way and the Christian may turn once again into the pit of despond. This doesn't negate the real encouragement that came before. It just underlies the truth that the Christian faith, this side of the Age to Come, is one of peaks and valleys. And times in the valley can have glimpses of the peaks while still experiencing the pain of suffering and loss.

In [Lam 4](#), there is basically one main theme that is presented in 10 different examples. The theme is this: **Whenever a blessing from God becomes an idol, it ceases to be a blessing and becomes a curse.**

1) Gold and Precious Stones (vv. 1-2)

The first reversal is that of “gold and precious stones” in vv. 1-2.

Gold represented the glory of the nation of Israel. The Temple was covered in gold and the Temple was Israel's glory because it is where God dwelt in their midst. The garments of the high priest was covered in precious stones and he represented the people when he had the privilege of entering into the Most Holy Place and commune with the maker of heaven and earth.

Verse 1 states that “***the gold has grown dim***”. The issue here is that gold *doesn't* tarnish, *it doesn't grow dim*. But what the poet highlights is **what happens to the good gifts of God when they are prized above the giver of good gifts.**

God **is** able to make gold grow dim if His people puts their trust in gold. God can bring about a situation where the wealth and security that gold brings is negated.

Someone can put their trust in financial security, but if things get bad enough, gold and precious stones are no more of value. If people are starving for food in the streets, they have no interest in your gold.

Material prosperity was one of the blessings that God's people were promised in the covenant. However, as the curses of the covenant descended upon Jerusalem, those who put their trust in gold saw the **gold grow dim**.

2) Parents and Mothers (vv. 3-4)

The second reversal is that of parents and mothers in verses 3-4.

Verse 3 speaks of how the “**daughters of my people have become cruel, like the ostriches in the wilderness**”. Most female species of ostrich do not care for their young and this is what has happened to the mothers in Jerusalem. Children are a blessing from the Lord and should be received as such. But here this is reversed.

The hearts of the mothers were hardened toward their children. Parent knows that if you have a hectic day or are living through a difficult season it is easy to lose patience with your children. It is God's grace that can often keep your circumstances relatively stable as an aid to your lack of patience and love toward your children. But as God removes all the external aids, the mothers become completely hardened toward their children.

So here too, a blessing from God is turned upside down in the fall of Jerusalem.

3) Nobility (vv. 5-6)

The third reversal comes in verses 5-6 where the nobility are spoken of.

The nobility offered protection to those beneath them in society. But in these verses “**Those who once feasted...are “empty” [“perished”] in the streets**”

There is no covering for those in need and their suffering is great. Verse 6 shows that one of the worst parts of the suffering is just how long it is drawn out. Unlike

Sodom “**which was overthrown in a moment**”, Jerusalem experiences prolonged suffering.

The judgement that falls upon God’s people for their wickedness is greater than the judgement of the godless. For those to whom much is given, much is required. Sodom, as Jesus laments in the gospel, would have repented had his works been done in their midst, but Jerusalem refused to repent in light of all that God had done for them, and so their devastation was great.

4) Nazarites (vv. 7-8)

The fourth reversal is that of the nazirite in verses 7-8. The ESV and some other translations translate the word “princes” but it is more likely that the poet has in mind those who were under some sort of oath to be set apart for the LORD like the nazirite vow.

This too would have been a glory for Israel but these men are no longer recognizable and no longer glorious.

There is possibly a hint that such vows and oaths had become a show for ceremonial holiness similar to what Jesus condemns in the sermon on the mount about those who like to parade their fasting and have their prayers heard. Such ceremonial holiness is here too condemned.

No longer are these men a source of glory for Jerusalem. They are a source of shame.

5) Food (vv. 9-10)

In verses 9-10 food is reversed.

In stark detail the poet speaks of how those who died by the sword were better off than those who were victims of hunger.

The security of food was taken away and the people resorted to barbarity with “**compassionate women boiling their own children.**”

6) Military Power (vv. 11-12)

Verses 11-12 speak of the reversal of military power.

Jerusalem had a reputation of being a somewhat impregnable. God had made them safe. If you read through the narratives of the kingdom of Judah, there are numerous times where Jerusalem was right on the brink and God intervened.

But things have been reversed here. Her military power and defense is defeated and “**The kings of the earth did not believe** [it]”.

7) Priests and Prophets (vv. 13-16)

The seventh reversal focuses on the priests and prophets in verses 13-16.

These verses give a theological explanation for the fall of Jerusalem. The devastation is the result of “**the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests, who shed in the midst of her the blood of the righteous.**”

Priests were supposed to shed blood. But they were to shed the blood of sacrifices. But instead they have shed innocent blood.

Verse 14 states that, “**They wandered, blind, through the streets;**”

Prophets were to guide the people with their visions and words. Instead they are blind.

The poet says that, “**they were so defiled with blood that no one was able to touch their garments.**”

Rather than bringing ritual purity to the people, they have become unclean. They are so unclean that they are shunned by the people who cry “**unclean**”

[Leviticus 15](#) speaks of how lepers would have to declare themselves “unclean” so that no one would touch them and contract their defilement. This often meant that lepers lived “outside the camp” to avoid contaminating others.

This is exactly what happens to the priests and prophets as we see in verse 16, they are “**scattered**” and they no longer receive any honor.

8) Foreign Nations (vv. 17-18)

The eighth reversal is that of foreign nations in verses 17-18.

Zedekiah was condemned by the prophet Jeremiah (the likely author of Lamentations) for refusing to submit to God's judgement in the form of Babylon and bowing under the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar.

Instead, Zedekiah looked for aid from foreign nations like Assyria and Egypt. But both of these nations were false hopes. Especially considering the fact that God's prophet had spoken. At *that* time in history, the righteous thing to do would have been to bow the knee to Nebuchadnezzar because God had made it known through his prophets that his people were to do so.

[Proverbs 16:7](#) states, "When a man's ways please the Lord, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him."

The ways of Jerusalem did not please the LORD and the LORD raised up enemies.

9) The King (vv. 19-20)

The ninth reversal is that of the king in verses 19-20.

In a veiled way, these verses recount the fleeing of Zedekiah from Jerusalem when the city falls and his capture by the Babylonian army.

They were "***swifter than the eagles in the heavens***" and they caught, "***the LORD's anointed***". If you know the story of Zedekiah, you will know that he was captured along with his sons. His sons were put to death in front of him before his eyes were torn out so that the last thing he saw was the death of his own sons.

Of the king it was said, "***Under his shadow we shall live among the nations.***" The king was to be a shepherd to the people but here he is captured by the nations.

But there is a deeper significance here. For Judah, the king's fate was intertwined with the people's fate. God had made a promise to David that he would never lack an heir to the throne.

The life of Zedekiah and indeed the entire Davidic line is on the brink.

There is a question here at the end of Lamentations. What happens if the Davidic king falls? Is Zion utterly without hope?

10) Esau & Edom (vv. 21-22)

The final reversal comes in the form of Edom in verses 21-22.

The Edomites are the offspring of Esau and they were supposed to be a help and aid to Israel but they never were. They were the older brother who scorned the blessedness of the younger

Here the poet pronounces that for the time, Edom sits rejoicing in safety while they look on at Jerusalem's fall. But the poet states that the punishment for Jerusalem's sins is accomplished. She has received the covenant curses and God will not keep her in exile forever. But God will bring judgement upon the iniquity of Edom.

Conclusion

I stated at the beginning that here in [Lamentations 4](#), the poet presents 10 things that are "reversed" in the fortunes of Jerusalem. Things that should have been good blessings for her or aspects of her glory, were turned into curses and shame.

Their **wealth**, their **children**, their **leaders**, their **sustenance**, their **military security**, their **priests and prophets**, their **diplomatic relationships**, and their **king** all became sources of shame rather than glory.

I also mentioned that all these reversals show the terrible consequences of idolatry. Worshipping the creation rather than the creator only leads to devastation.

As you consider all these reversals you should remember another great reversal that is portrayed in the Bible. On the cross, as Jesus suffered he received the opposite of what was his due. Jesus led a life wholly free from idolatry. In each moment he loved the Lord God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength and he loved his neighbor as himself.

And yet, even as the perfect keeper of the covenant, he did not receive the blessings of the covenant. Wealth, glory, security, and kingship were all kept from him. Rather than receiving the great benediction over his life, on the cross Jesus received malediction. Rather than blessing, Jesus was made a curse.

Rather than being guarded, he was exposed to cruelty. Rather than having the Lord's face shine upon him, he received wrath. Rather than God being gracious to Him, he received judgement. Rather than receiving the Lord's countenance and peace, Jesus received agony on the cross.

This great inversion and reversal gives us hope as we read of the devastation of Lamentations. Jesus received the malediction so that you might receive the Lord's benediction!

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.