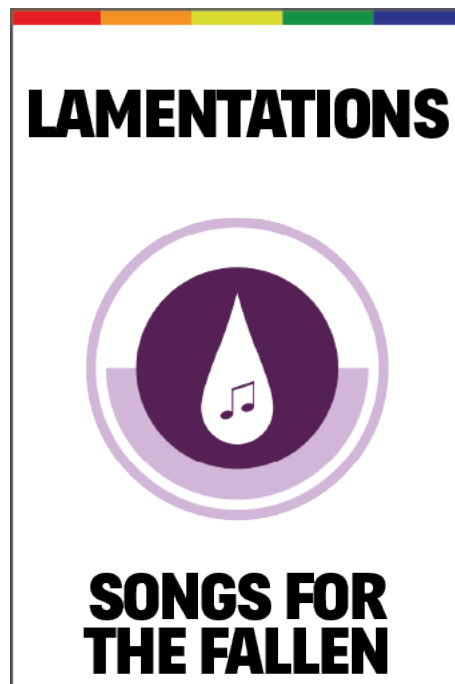




BIBLE IN A YEAR 2020



Summary

These songs, traditionally credited to Jeremiah, reflect on the tragedy of a fallen people at the time of Jewish people's defeat and exile to Babylon.

Each verse (or triplet of verses in Lamentations 3) starts with consecutive letters of the Hebrew alphabet, so each song is literally an A-Z (more literally an Aleph-Tav) of comprehensive human failure, desolation and suffering.

However, there is a little hope in the heart of this book. God's love remains in the centre, preserving life, promising goodness to come, requiring anyone who wants this to wait and align their grieving heart with his.

Bern Leckie

Tuesday August 18: Lamentations 1-2

An A-Z of ruin

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

Where in the Bible is the story of "the fall"? My first thought is near the beginning of Genesis with Adam and Eve, the original sin and having to leave the Garden of Eden. But while that account was inspired and important, it wasn't eye witnessed by a nation of God's people.

However, their defeat and exile to Babylon was a tragic fall they suffered and had to come to terms with in real time. In many ways, it was similar to the original fall, a result of turning from God, making bad choices at every level of society, resulting in an unsustainable situation in God's promised land. Closeness to God was replaced by distancing, as God had warned.

Hearing what happened to Adam and Eve would have been one thing. Seeing and feeling the results of defeat and exile would have been something else – a deserted city, displaced people, forced labour, looted treasures, suffering, starvation, death. The first poem here makes this feel horribly close, and it's bound up with reflection – why has this happened?

There is acknowledgement of sin here, but it's the second poem which really credits God with an active role. What a painful reversal from the victories and joy of entering the land, the glory stories accumulated about God's work and the movement from slavery to freedom.

These poems feel heavy and comprehensive, and it turns out that they are constructed in a way which makes this even clearer in Hebrew. Each verse starts with a consecutive letter of the alphabet, so each poem is literally an A-Z (more literally an Aleph-Tav) of failure, desolation and suffering.

Is there hope? There has to be hope, right? We'll have to wait and see...

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God can be seen in several ways here. At first, perhaps he looks like a cruel punisher. It seems that he has not just observed but been active in this process with "fierce anger" and "without pity", "like an enemy". The rejection Israel felt would make it feel like that, certainly. But this is a poem. We should expect imagery like a "wound as deep as the sea" to be meaningful, true but not literally so. What else can we see about God?

There is also an element of faithfulness and consistency – "The Lord has done what he planned, he has fulfilled his word," not with nice results, but he is not random or unpredictable, at least. His work to warn and show the way to walk with him covers centuries.

He is also mourning along with Israel. This is not an account which is independent of God but inspired by his Spirit. The ruin is caused by people's choices, the pain of the results is shared.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

This was hard to read! I'm going to reflect on how God shares the pain of our bad choices.

Who am I going to share this with?

People I pray with.

Tuesday August 20: Lamentations 3-5

There is hope in God's heart

Bern Leckie writes:

What did I like about today's reading?

These are still hard to take in, but if we are going to look at the profound grief and suffering of a fallen people, I'm glad we have this honest and inspired summary which distills so many facets of the turn from security to exile into alphabetically organised Hebrew poetry.

The big standout difference from chapters 1 and 2 is the hope at the heart of the collection, in the middle of chapter 3, which also has special status as it organises thoughts into triplets. God is at the very heart of this suffering.

What difference does that make? I'm struck by the writer's faith that because God is central rather than a faraway observer, love and hope remain in the heart too. Life may be awful right now, but waiting for God and salvation make sense. Injustice may be winning right now, but God will bring justice. Enemies may be planning to eliminate God's people altogether, but God will never allow it.

The fall from grace into the consequences of sin is painful, but the expectations we can hold from a renewal of faith and reliance on God should be life-changing and, if not immediate, at least much longer lasting.

This isn't to say that a book of Lamentations will have a happy ending. Of course not! It's real, just as the suffering and terrible feelings about it are real. Hope is in the heart, but I'm moved by the final contrast between proclamation of God's glory and admission that people can still feel forgotten and rejected. The final note is not that everything is fine now, but that the difference between where the people are and where they want to be could not be any clearer, setting a clear direction for the future.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God loves us, suffers along with us and chose to put Jesus into the frontline of our most important and painful battles. But he also wants us to know that if we have been too focused on ourselves, we need to look in a different direction, trusting in him.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I am glad not to be feeling as bad as the writer right now. Thinking and praying about this, I'm reminded that others in my community might be. Some are mourning, others are exiled, and I chatted with a mother today who feels that taking her family back to where she grew up might be better for everyone.

I will remember from this, as well as Job and other wise, loving people in the Bible, that suffering isn't best met with easy, quick answers. I don't have any, so that's handy. But I do want to share this kind of hope, the kind that comes from God through looking at him and waiting patiently. I want to get better at realising why I have that and get better at sharing it.

Who am I going to share this with?

I'm open to more chats with neighbours, and there will be lots to talk about in our school community when the new term starts.