

Bible-Reading Coach Podcast Transcript

Week 35: Lamentations & Ezekiel 1-12 *When Life is Hard*

Welcome to Week 35 of the Bible Reading Coach Podcast. My name is Karl Vaters and I'm here to help you read through the entire Bible in 52 weeks.

This week, we will be reading all of one small book and the beginning of a very long book, we're talking Lamentations and the beginning of Ezekiel. They are two very different books, they have some similarities, though. And really what they have in common is that they talk about what happens when life gets hard. Let's take a look at each book. And then we'll look at the passage for this week. First of all, the book of Lamentations. It was probably written by Jeremiah and of course, we've just finished reading the book of Jeremiah, you can almost read it as a sequel to that book. It may have been written in Jerusalem right after the fall of Jerusalem or even in Babylon. After Jeremiah had been exiled there, he writes about the overthrow of Jerusalem in a way that only an eyewitness could write about. It's one of the many reasons that we believe Jeremiah wrote this book.

It has five chapters total and each chapter is a separate poem. And remember, in Hebrew poems don't rhyme, they have parallels. And these rhymes, actually these poems, are written in an acrostic. That is, each chapter, when the verses come along, each verse begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. So if it was an English, chapter one, verse by verse would start with A, then B, then C, then D, of course, it's the, you know, alternate for Hebrew, if that sounds familiar, you may remember back in Psalm 119, that really, really long chapter, the longest chapter in the Bible, it was divided into big sections. And each verse in each of those sections started with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. So in Psalm 119, it was A-A-A-A, B-B-B-B, C-C-C-C. In this one, each chapter goes A, B, C, D. So you won't notice that in English. But it's an interesting thing to note from the original Hebrew, that's part of the way the poetry was written. Now, while Jeremiah, the book, might have felt angry, and certainly it did, this feels less angry, and it feels more sad. Thus, the name, Lamentations, that is they're lamenting the fall of Jerusalem.

Then halfway through the week, we'll get into the book of Ezekiel, and we'll just get through the first 12 of 48 chapters of this monumental book is like, was written by the prophet Ezekiel, and is equal prophesied at the same time as Jeremiah, as Habakkuk, who will get to in week 39. And as Obadiah, who will get to in week 40. Those three prophets, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Obadiah, are prophesying in Jerusalem about the fall of the city. Ezekiel, at the same time, is prophesying about the fall of Jerusalem, but he's doing so 500 miles away in exile in Babylon. We know this because Ezekiel, as well as Jeremiah is filled with timestamps, we know exactly the days that certain prophecies took place and we can match them up to what was happening in Jerusalem at the time.

This is really important to understand when you're reading the book through in the next few weeks. If you approach Ezekiel thinking it was written in Jerusalem, or in Israel, like so many of the other books, you'll get a wrong impression of the book, you have to remember as you read it, that it's being written by an exile in Babylon. So it's talking about the things that are happening in Jerusalem from a long way away. But in Babylon is where he's doing it. And you'll notice if you pay attention to that, how it changes what the book means, and it gives you a more

accurate representation of what we'll be getting into. So we'll give you more about this epic book in the next couple of weeks as we read through it, because we'll just begin the start of it today.

One more thing to note, however, is this. Ezekiel is the first time that we will see a decent amount of apocalyptic writing, so a little bit of it in Isaiah, but this is the first time that apocalyptic writing really shows up in the Bible. Apocalyptic writing is a type of writing that was popular for just a few 100 years. It uses figures of speech, uses visions, it uses dramatic images, a couple of which we'll see. Well, one big one that we'll see this week. Other apocalyptic writings include Daniel, and of course, most famously, Revelation. Revelation is entirely apocalyptic writing. In a couple of weeks, we'll let you know exactly what that means in more detail. But look for those images as we begin to read Ezekiel this week. Well, let's take a look at the passages themselves, shall we?

First of all, let's take a look at Lamentations. If you're reading through with us on a day by day basis you'll be reading through Lamentations on Monday and Tuesday of this week. First of all, the book of Lamentations starts with this verse. Lamentations 1:1, "How deserted lies the city once so full of people. How like a one widow is she who once was great among the nations, she who was Queen among the provinces has now become a slave." This is a reference, of course, to the fall of Jerusalem. But I want you to note the first word, the first word is "How" or in Hebrew "Eikha". then you'll get to chapter 2 verse 1 where we'll read this, "How the Lord has covered daughter Zion with the cloud of his anger." And then in chapter 4, verse 1, it will read, "How the gold has lost its luster, the fine gold become dull." Now, how is one of those words we don't pay a lot of attention to in English, because it just kind of joins other words, right? But it really is important in this because it's repeated three times on purpose. And the word "Eikha" is actually the word that a lot of ancient Jewish traditions use as the title for this book. So we call it Lamentations, a lot of our Jewish friends do as well. But there are some ancient Jewish traditions that call the book of Lamentations "How", or in other words, "How!?". It's a word of amazement, how in the world that this take place, is actually the title of the book in some ancient Jewish tradition. So that's interesting to note, they were that amazed and astonished at the fall of Jerusalem, even though it had been prophesied by multiple Prophets for a whole lot of years.

Now, how do we know that the city it's being described as fallen in chapter one, verse one, how do we know that that's Jerusalem? Well, it's confirmed many times. As an example, in chapter one, verse eight of limitations, we'll read this, Jerusalem has sinned greatly, and so has become unclean. As you read through this book, you're going to have the feeling of a city immediately after its destruction. If you've ever watched any post-apocalyptic movie, there's that word again, right? That's where we get it from as the Bible. If you've ever read any, watched any post apocalyptic movies or TV shows the idea of somebody walking through this deserted city where there's nothing left and around each corner, it's just devastation. It has that feeling when you read through Lamentations, because that's what it's about. Also, notice that it's filled with details about a city after months of siege. Now, siege was when a nation or a city would come against another city. And instead of attacking it and losing hundreds, maybe 1000s of soldiers in the attack, they would just camp around the city and wait the city out because eventually, the people in the side of the city would die of starvation and thirst and then they'd be easy to conquer. It's a brutal, horrifying practice, but it was used by a whole lot of armies throughout the centuries.

Here are some of the siege verses you're going to read. Understanding that this was written about a city that was under siege helped us to understand some of the more really difficult and quite frankly, horrifying verses such as chapter 1 verse 11, "All her people groan as they search for bread, they barter their treasures for food to keep themselves alive." That's what happens in the city under siege. Chapter 2 verse 11, horrifyingly "Children and infants faint in the streets of their city. They say to their mothers, 'where is bread and wine?' and they faint, like the wounded in the streets of the city." Chapter 2, verse 21, "Young and old lived together in the dust of the streets", and then maybe the most horrible pair of verses of the entire book, chapter 2:20 asks, "Should women eat their offspring? The children they have cared for?" Yes, cities under siege often resorted to cannibalism. So the question is, we got to the point where we were wondering about doing that. And then it was answered in chapter 4, verse 10, "With their own hands, compassionate women have cooked their own children who became their food when my people were destroyed."

I hate even reading that verse out loud. It's one of those things where, you know, why are you telling us about this verse?" Well, you're going to read it this week and you need to understand where that's coming from. Because again, we've talked about this often right, cynics and skeptics of the Bible, like to go to certain places, take them out of context and make the Bible look different than it actually is. And this is one of those places where a cynic or a skeptic can look at it and go, 'Well, God talks about eating your own children.' Yeah, the Bible relates a siege story about a situation so desperate that the people under siege actually did those horrific acts. But just because they're mentioned doesn't mean that they're approved of. It actually just shows the depths of depravity that people end up in when they've been disobedient to God for so long that they finally end up under God's judgment.

So why would we even read such a horrible thing? Well, first of all, because it isn't the Bible. You will read it this week. Secondly, thankfully, Lamentations, as difficult as it is mercifully short. And thirdly, faith that does not acknowledge negative consequences, along with positive blessings isn't much of a faith. There are some preachers who like only talking about the positives, and I get why, but if you don't talk about the negatives and the challenges and the difficulties of life, you don't have a deep faith. There are others who only talk about sin and its consequences and they're always negative. And without the positives of faith and without a way out, it's just a dead end. We need both, the Bible is filled with both.

Now, I want you to note also in Lamentations that well Babylon was the tool that God used to punish his disobedient people. The book shows that God is responsible for it. Babylon is not responsible for the fall of Jerusalem. Babylon is just a tool that God used. Here are a handful of verses that you'll see this week that will show you that chapter 2, verse 5, the Lord is like an enemy. Verse 6 of chapter 2, he has laid waste his dwelling like a garden. Chapter 2, verse 5, the Lord has rejected his altar and abandoned his sanctuary, he has given the walls up for palaces, into the hands of the enemy, the Lord determined to tear down the wall. So notice, as you go through Lamentations, while there's a sadness, and while there's an anger against Babylon, there's a full understanding that God has been in charge of all of this, which means he will also be the one ultimately responsible for its final salvation, which we see in a wonderfully welcome ray of hope.

In the middle of the book, just pay attention to this before we get to Ezekiel, chapter 5, verse 21, of Lamentations. starting with verse 21, reads like this, you read it this week, "Yet this I

call to mind, and therefore I have hope, because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed for his compassions never fail, they are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness." It's amazing how many people have those verses, maybe knitted into a pillow or on their refrigerator to remind themselves of God's compassion and his faithfulness. But we need to recognize the context of that faithfulness, and of that compassion is in the middle of this horror. In order to understand the full depth of it, we have to put it in context, which we get to do this week. Well, that's the first half of the week, the last half of the week, then we're going to get to Ezekiel. And we won't spend a lot of time in this session on that because we will be spending two weeks after this in Ezekiel as well. But let's take a look at what we'll cover this week.

First of all, Ezekiel chapter 1 starts with an exact date, first of many in this book. Ezekiel 1:1 says "In my 30th year in the fourth month, on the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the Chebar river..." So that means in Babylon, "...the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God." There are several things to note about this opening verse first, these dates tie this to an actual historical time and place. So we know that Ezekiel was a real person who received these visions. Secondly, while the visions that he receives are other-worldly, kind of like dreams, they're given to a person living in a the real world in a real time and place, we'll see a similar thing in Revelation when we get to it and week 52 in Revelation starts with very similar verses about on a particular day, the Lord's day in a particular place on the island of Patmos.

Thirdly, the visions that he receives are kind of like dreams. So the question then arises, do we take this literally or not? And the answer is, yes. We take it literally, that Ezekiel literally received and recorded these visions, while literally living in Babylon by the river that he mentioned by the Chebar River. Okay, so literally, that took place. We do not, however, take literally the visions. Because the visions that he was given, just like the visions that John has given later on in Revelation, are like dreams. So it would be like you going to somebody and saying, Hey, I had a dream last night, and you're telling them your dream. They take literally the fact that you had the dream, they don't take the dream as having literally taken place in the real world. And so we have to read Ezekiel like that, when he gives these visions, we have to understand Ezekiel actually got them, they are actually from God, they do give a message to God's people. But the imagery in the visions are like dreams, and they didn't happen in the real world.

So for instance, this week, when we read about creatures with multiple faces and wheels, inside wheels, which we'll see in chapter 1, don't think of those things existing in the real world. They're not, they're part of a dream-like vision that was given to Ezekiel, by God, to lay out a message for us, for us to understand God's word better. Then we go in chapters 2 through 5, we see that we read about the call of Ezekiel to become a prophet. This establishes that this is not just Ezekiel having dreams or having a mental breakdown, but receiving these visions as a message from God and as a call to tell others. Then in chapters 4 through 5, we're going to read about Jerusalem. Note that the prophecies about Jerusalem have a couple important aspects to them. First, they're about things that hadn't happened at the time he got the vision. So here's Ezekiel 500 miles away from Jerusalem, getting visions about what's going to happen immediately in Jerusalem. And they happen before they're able to actually get the message in Babylon about them. So it's extraordinary. The timestamps really matter in this because of that.

Secondly, notice that he's prophesying about Jerusalem, while he's living a long, long way away, and the communication would take a long time to get there. Thirdly, the timestamps tell us that they were happening as the events were occurring. And fourth, note how he's asked to make these prophecies in memorable ways in front of people. Why? Because he says, On this day, I gave this prophecy in this really weird and memorable way to a whole bunch of people. Why did it tell us that? So at the time, they can go to those people and go, Okay, he says that he prophesied about the fall of Jerusalem in this way, long before it actually happened. And long before you could have gotten the message about it.

But how do we know he actually did it on that day, and people in Babylon can go "Oh, I remember because he did this really weird thing and I turned to my wife and said 'What in the world was going on?'" He made it memorable on particular days, so that the timestamp would be put into people's hearts and minds because they didn't have recording devices back then other than the written word, like we have today. And so he made it memorable. You'll notice he's got a couple of things. In chapter 4, he makes clay tablets, with a map of Jerusalem. In chapter 5 he'll shave his head and burn his hair. Why? He's making it memorable so the people remember the event, they remember the message, and they remember exactly when and where they were when it happened, because the timestamps matter.

Then in chapters 6 and 7, this week, we'll read about a prophecy against Jerusalem, about the fall of Jerusalem, at the same time that Jeremiah in Jerusalem is also prophesying about its fall 500 miles away. He even gives the reason for the fall and the main reason he gives him this chapter, these chapters, verses chapter 6 through 7, is because of the idolatry that they were committing in what's called the high places. And the idolatry in high places in Jerusalem also included child sacrifices. So this is part of the reason, the sin of the people is so great that God has to punish them.

Then in chapters 8 through 10, there's a prophecy against the idolatry that was actually happening in the temple; the idol worshiping that was going on in Jerusalem at this time was so bad that they were actually doing worship to pagan idols inside God's temple. And then the last chapter that we will, or the last two chapters that we'll read this week, chapters 11, and 12. First of all, in chapter 11, God turns his anger of judgment against Israel's leader, while Israel's leaders, the priests, the prophets, the people who should have known better and who led the people the wrong way, instead, a lot of people want to lead. But when you read about leadership in the Bible, you understand that there's a much higher responsibility for the leaders. And we see that in chapter 11. And then we'll conclude this week's reading with chapter 12, which basically says, the exile is going to come and it's going to come fast. It tells about an episode in which Ezekiel tells the people, God's judgment is coming, and it's coming quickly. He even packs his bags as though he's going on a long trip in order to really, you know, cement this in their minds. The false prophets go, yeah, it's gonna happen, but it's gonna be a long way off, you guys don't need to worry about it. And then Ezekiel comes back and says, "No, tell them this is happening and it's happening fast." And that's where we'll finish for this week anyway, at Ezekiel 12.

So what do you look for, as you're reading through this week? First of all, in Lamentations, remember, it's a continuation of the book of Jeremiah. It has some hard but important truths, but God is in charge of everything. And then in Ezekiel, remember, he is not in Jerusalem, as he prophesied these things. He tells them what's going to happen in Jerusalem,

500 miles away, he timestamps it in memorable ways, so that later on, they can look back at it and go, Whoa, he really did prophesy this before it happened. And also remember that the very strange parts of the visions that he gets, are like dreams that God gives them. The four living creatures, the wheels, inside wheels, and so on are not actual events that happen in time and space. They are visions given to a person who's living in real time and space but God gives them these visions as a way of communicating truths that could not be told in any other way. That's an awful lot, because, well, we're recovering an awful lot, all of Lamentations and the beginning of Ezekiel. It's a big week of reading. I hope now that you'll be able to get more out of it than maybe you ever got before, because you have this background. Alright, we'll see you next week.

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