

BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

*The Lamentations
of Jeremiah*



CROWN
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Royal Reading

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The Lamentations of Jeremiah

CLARENCE SEXTON

FIRST EDITION

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SEPTEMBER 2022



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SUNDAY SCHOOL AND BIBLE TEACHING SERIES

BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

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Crown Christian Publications

Powell, Tennessee · 37849

CrownChristianPublications.com

FAITHfortheFAMILY.com

ISBN: 978-1-58981-792-0

Design and layout by Ryan Keiter, Sarah Sullivan, and Tatiana Hester

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Cover Photo: Rembrandt portrays the distraught lone figure of Jeremiah, in a cave, with downcast eyes. Positioning the prophet in regal dress while leaning upon the Bible, Rembrandt casts an otherworldly light upon his subject's overwhelming sorrow. In the background, a figure (taken to be King Zedekiah) walks from Jerusalem ablaze, fists covering his eyes.

Printed in the United States of America

Dedication

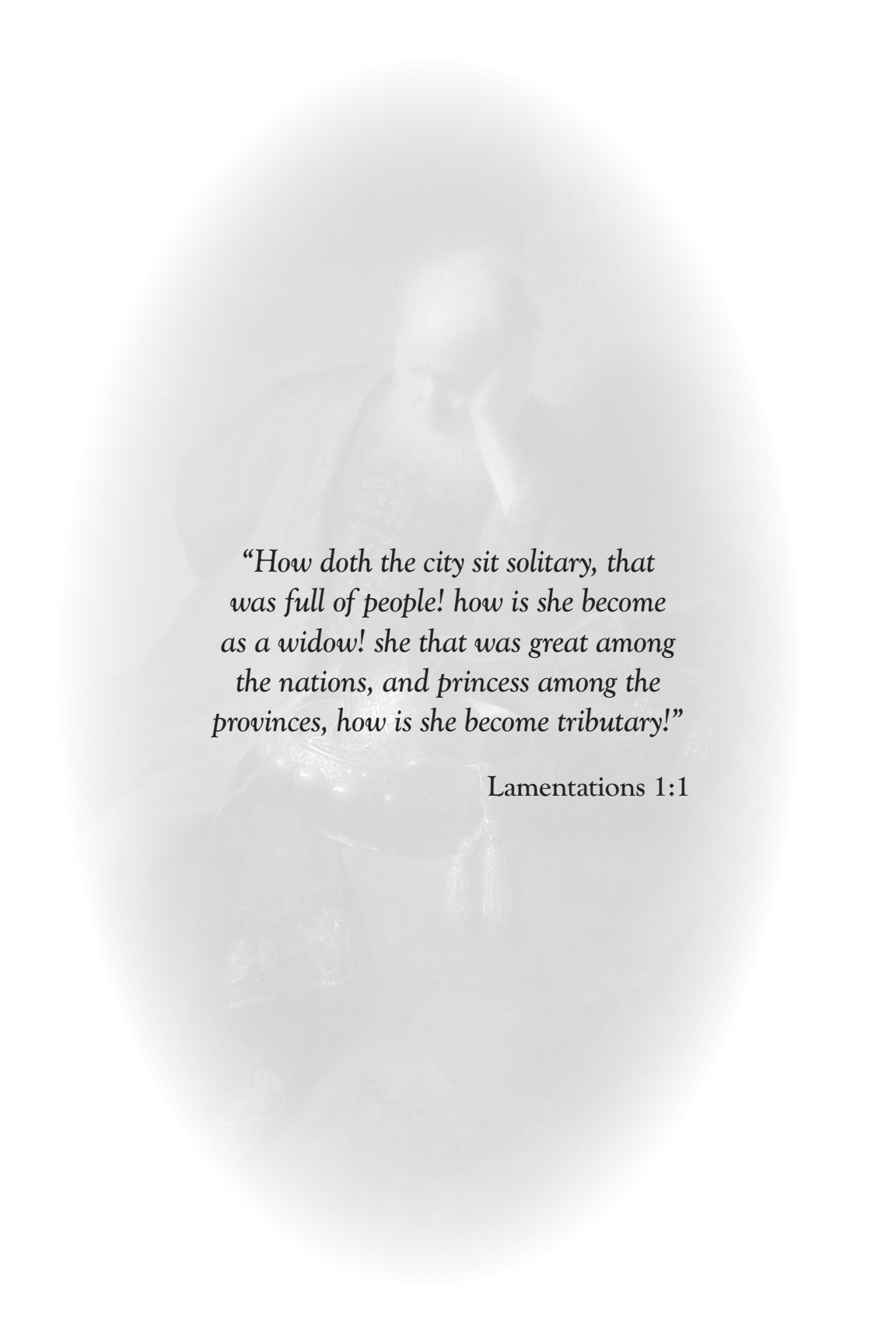
This volume is dedicated with a desire to stir the hearts of young preachers. We need a new generation to answer the heavenly call with an intense, all-absorbing devotion for God's work.

C.H. Spurgeon said, "A true call for the ministry brings an irresistible, overwhelming craving and raging thirst for telling others what God has done for our own souls." Praying for revival.

Carrence Sexton
Acts 5:42

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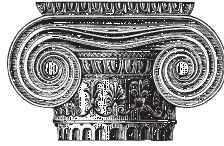


*“How doth the city sit solitary, that
was full of people! how is she become
as a widow! she that was great among
the nations, and princess among the
provinces, how is she become tributary!”*

Lamentations 1:1

CHAPTER ONE

HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?



In Lamentations, we find the funeral address for a nation. As we move through this particular book of the Bible, we are walking through the graveyard of a nation. If we do not remind ourselves that there is hope in the Lord, what we find in this book of the Bible will be so discouraging. As God speaks through the prophet, Jeremiah gives us this eye witness account of what happened to his people. Lamentations reveals the heart of our weeping Saviour mourning the death and destruction of the people He had called His own.

When Judah fell to the nation of Babylon, Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple was torn down, and the remnant of the people were carried away to Babylon. Jerusalem had once been the greatest place on earth. By this small nation of people, mighty nations had been defeated, but now the city lay in a smoldering ruins.

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This is the nation whose God had fought for them. This is the nation where after one night, 185,000 Assyrian soldiers had been ready to come in the next day to take the city, but God sent a death angel the night before and killed the entire army. What miraculous things surrounded the history of God's chosen people! But all that was quickly taken away.

In Lamentations, the Lord allows us to read and rehearse their funeral. The Bible says in Lamentations 1:1, *"How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people! how is she become as a widow! she that was great among the nations, and princess among the provinces, how is she become tributary!"* Notice the little word, "how," each time it occurs in this verse.

"How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people!"

Then, *"How is she become as a widow! she that was great among the nations, and princess among the provinces."*

And then again, *"How is she become tributary!"*

How did this happen? If we can discover the answer to that question, it will move us to action and cause us to do something that we have yet to do with the urgency we desperately need.

In the book of Job, we find the calamity and suffering of an individual. But in this book of Lamentations, we find the calamity and suffering of a nation. The book is given to us in five chapters, each written originally as a form of Hebrew poetry. Chapters one, two, and four each have twenty-two verses with each verse beginning with a unique letter from the Hebrew alphabet and progressing from the beginning of the Hebrew alphabet to the end.

The first chapter deals with suffering because of sin. The second chapter remembers the days of old now gone from that generation forever and brings us face to face with the anger of God. The third chapter also goes through each of the twenty-two

How Did This Happen?

letters, but gives three verses to each letter. This funeral poem reminds us that the sufferer needs mercy.

In the fourth chapter, we discover that the leaders have greatly failed. The final poem in the fifth chapter finds God's people praying for revival, putting their hope in the Lord, and asking God to do what only He could.

The final chapter of Lamentations also has twenty-two letters, but it does not cover the Hebrew alphabet in the same acrostic form of poetry. Bible students believe the prophet was inspired to write using this form to show the *A* to *Z* completeness of Jeremiah's lament, God's judgment, and the people's repentance. The lack of this form in the last chapter suggests that they must keep praying for the Lord to heal their land.

When I started out as a preacher, I was only eighteen years old. I met another young preacher at a meeting in which we had both been asked to speak. He would speak and then I would speak, and the next night I would speak and then he would speak. Let us call him Danny. We became good friends. I followed his ministry for awhile, and then I lost contact with him.

A number of years later, I was asked to bring a message to some prisoners in a work-release program. In this particular stage of their incarceration, they were allowed more freedom. They could come and go to a job, and they invited me to come bring a Bible study. The first time I went, after I had finished preaching, the prisoners had kind things to say, but holding back in the rear of the group was a young man who came to see me after everyone else had left.

I looked into his face and recognized that he was Danny. Of course, you can imagine how shocked I was to find this preacher among those convicts. I said to him, "How did this happen?" He was such a wonderful man.

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He said, “Clarence, I got so discouraged. I married a young lady that I thought would serve God with me, but soon found out that she had no interest in the things of God or in me. She left me. I became so discouraged, I didn’t know what to do. To make a long story much shorter, I got a gun, pulled up in front of a restaurant, went inside, and robbed the restaurant.”

I could hardly believe what I was hearing. Then he said, “I went back to my car, sat down in the seat, closed the door, put the gun by my side, and waited for the police to come and arrest me. The mandatory penalty for robbing with a weapon was enforced against me. I knew that would happen, and I knew I would go to prison. I just thought that if I went to prison and got away from everyone I know and everyone who knows me, maybe something in my life would change.”

It made no sense to me, but that was the story that unfolded when I asked, “How did this happen?”

I have always loved our country. I was taught to love America. I grew up respecting people in the armed services, and was taught to salute the flag, pledge allegiance, and stand still for the National Anthem. There was a different atmosphere in America when I was growing up. We were grateful to God and extremely proud that we were Americans, but now our country is falling on hard times. Even the way we speak has changed in a manner that I would never have imagined. All of us are wondering how far it will drift.

When Joseph Stalin was ruling in Russia and murdering as many people as he possibly could, he said, “If we want to destroy America, there are three things we must do.”

1. We must destroy her spiritual life.
2. We must destroy her patriotism.
3. We must destroy her morality.

How Did This Happen?

We are witnessing the unraveling of America's spiritual life, her patriotism, and her morality. At the heart of our nation and who we truly are as a people lies our strong faith and belief in God. As that erodes and is destroyed, every other kind of destruction will follow.

Could it be that the answer is so simple that people refuse it? Could a return to God be a return to greatness in America? I believe it would.

From the most powerful offices in our land to local governments across the United States, many of our leaders seem to have lost the patriotic spirit we once had as we stood on the shoulders of our forefathers rejoicing in all that has been done for our freedom and liberty in this country.

The moral bankruptcy that we are witnessing is shocking. I heard someone mention the other day that drinking beer is as common in East Tennessee as drinking iced tea is in the South. They thought they were cute when they said that, but I did not think it was a cute statement. The drifting of moral decency into indecency is something that even people who have no identity at all with the Christian faith are complaining about. What can be done to clean up this country?

In Galatians 6:1-7, the Bible says,

Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.

Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself.



*Could a return
to God be
a return to
greatness in
America?*

Before It's Too Late

But let every man prove his own work, and then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another. For every man shall bear his own burden.

Let him that is taught in the word communicate unto him that teacheth in all good things. Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.

You and I are standing at a moment in the history of our nation when we need to ask the question, "How did this happen?" If we discover how it happened, we can do something about it.

Before we launch into this, consider what the Lord Jesus said concerning Jerusalem. Six hundred years after the writing of Lamentations, the Lord Jesus stood over this same city, and the Bible says in Luke 19:41-44,

And when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it, Saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes.

For the days shall come upon thee, that thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side, and shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation.

Christ was speaking a prophetic word about the coming destruction of Jerusalem. This time it would be at the hands of

How Did This Happen?

the Romans. In Lamentations, we are studying the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians. But the destruction of Jerusalem came not only at the hands of the Romans or the hands of the Babylonians. These forces were instruments in God's hands to execute judgment on His people because they had rejected Him. Jeremiah the prophet wrote that the city felt the full fury of the Lord.

The Lord Jesus said in Luke 13:34,

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee; how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and ye would not!

Notice the expression, "Ye would not." We learn from other passages of Scripture that when we will not do what God would have us do, we lose touch with God and cannot do what needs to be done. Is it too late for America?

May God help us to be the faithful remnant, obey His Word, and pray for the Lord to revive our land. The Bible says,

If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.

II Chronicles 7:14

We cannot change the future unless we disturb the present. The present will be changed only if we are disturbed. Business as normal and doing things as we always have will not bring revival.

Shortly before John F. Kennedy's assassination, he published a study on why England slept before World War II. He agreed with

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England's prime minister Winston Churchill who said that World War II was an unnecessary war. If England had been prepared, the war would never have taken place.



*Pray for
the coming
revival!*

Kennedy also wrote that England had decided they would put to sleep any idea of building a war machine or a mighty military. We have the weakest military in this country that we have had in decades. That is no disparaging remark against the people who are now serving. But those in responsible positions are not building up the might and strength of our country.

I am not thinking that the answer is simply in military strength, but this carelessness is a reflection of the attitude we have in this nation. In England, they said, "If we built four ships last year and built five this year, that's good. If we built six airplanes last year and seven this year, that's good." But they slept while the German army kept building, and then the invasion came.

We have another kind of sleep going on. Our kind of sleep is the idea that it will always be as good or better as it is now. But the economic forecasters are predicting this generation of Americans coming on will face less opportunity, less advance, and less of a nation for the first time in any generation in American history. This economic loss could bring America to a spiritual turning point, a returning to God, the things of God, and the things that are right.

How does this happen? The Lord gives us this little book of Lamentations to remind us how God's judgment fell on Jerusalem, and what we can do when our nation is facing His coming judgment. The answer is found in the closing chapter. In Lamentations 5:7, the Bible says, "*Our fathers have sinned, and are not; and we have borne their iniquities.*"

How Did This Happen?

God's Word says in II Kings 24:18-20,

Zedekiah was twenty and one years old when he began to reign, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. And his mother's name was Hamutal, the daughter of Jeremiah of Libnah. And he did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD, according to all that Jehoiakim had done. For through the anger of the LORD it came to pass in Jerusalem and Judah, until he had cast them out from his presence, that Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon.

The magnitude of what happened is recorded in Lamentations 4:11, "*The LORD hath accomplished his fury; he hath poured out his fierce anger, and hath kindled a fire in Zion, and it hath devoured the foundations thereof.*" We would be wrong to conclude that all the credit for Jerusalem's destruction should go to the Babylonian army and the leadership of King Nebuchadnezzar.

God has blessed America beyond anything we could ever imagine. Someone might say, "Well, I don't think there is any fighting force in the whole wide world that could invade our land. We'll fight for it." But now we are imploding as a nation! We have trouble with individual terrorism, and we have threats like North Korea and others. I wish that we were trying to defeat them with more force, but the real threat is that our nation has made God the enemy by dishonoring Him and opposing His law.

If you think that this does not apply you, then you are like the person who reads through the book of Job and says, "Well, I've tried to live for God and serve God." Not one of us could measure up to the greatest man in the East, Job, and yet the Lord allowed him to go through great suffering. But we are not studying individual suffering in Lamentations. We are studying

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the communal suffering of an entire nation that turned its back on God.

In Jeremiah 45:5, we have God's Word to one man in the remnant. *"And seekest thou great things for thyself? seek them not: for, behold, I will bring evil upon all flesh, saith the LORD: but thy life will I give unto thee for a prey in all places whither thou goest."* God's judgment on the people who had rejected Him would affect, "all flesh," but He would spare the lives of those who were faithful to Him. For seventy years the land lay empty before God called His remnant to return, rebuild, and restore biblical faith.

The prophet Jeremiah and a handful of others were obedient to God through this suffering, and God spared their lives. When trouble comes, remember, this lost and dying world will stand before God for their sin. His judgment is coming. We are in God's hand and no man can pluck us out (John 10:28-29). We must do all we can to speak the truth in love to the lost before it is too late for them to come to Christ.

The puppet king Zedekiah rebelled against his master Babylon, aroused the anger of Nebuchadnezzar, and then Nebuchadnezzar came with his army for the great siege of Jerusalem. They had already attacked twice before with their armies, but this time they surrounded the city for eighteen months until no food was left inside. Finally, the army of Babylon broke through the wall of Jerusalem. King Zedekiah and his soldiers ran for their lives, but the armies of Babylon overtook them in the plain of Jericho.

Zedekiah was brought back to Riblah to face the judgment of King Nebuchadnezzar. They made the king of Judah watch as they murdered his children, and then they burned out his eyes so that would be the last thing he ever saw. Then they put him in a cage, and carried him to Babylon to mock him, to praise their heathen gods, and to keep him there until he died.

How Did This Happen?

If you were writing about these events without taking God into account, you would explain, “This is how it happened. This is when the siege began, and this is how many months it went on.” But the Bible says in Lamentations 4:11: “*The LORD hath accomplished his fury.*”

How long can we mock God and the things of God? How long can we murder innocent children in the womb? How long can we pass laws that defy everything that God says about marriage?



*Most churches
across our land
are becoming
more like a
harlot than the
bride of Christ.*

How long can we fire teachers in schools because a child comes and says that she is no longer a girl, but now a boy and insists on being called a boy’s name, and the teacher refuses to acknowledge this contradiction?

How long can we have city councils in major cities across America pass laws in their council meetings, not by popular vote, that every public restroom in their town could be used by a man or a woman so a grown man can go in where a little girl is using a restroom? How long can we tolerate that?

How long can we have allow criminals to take refuge in our great cities? In some places, they will not do anything to prosecute them or bring them to justice. Repeat offenders stay out of jail.

Most churches across our land are becoming more like a harlot than the bride of Christ. Meanwhile, we stand by and say, “I’m reading my Bible, praying, and going to church.” I am not talking about what you are doing. I am talking about what is happening collectively to our country. The church is to be the bride of Christ, but we have turned God’s work into an entertainment business. How does this happen?

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SHE IS CHILDLESS

“How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people!” After the siege, the city was empty. In verse five, the Bible says,

Her adversaries are the chief, her enemies prosper; for the LORD hath afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions: her children are gone into captivity before the enemy.

Any nation is measured by what she does with her children.

She is childless. What kind of future does she have? We ought to be motivated by the Lord. We ought to do what we do for Jesus Christ because of what He has done for us, but we also ought to be stirred to think about the future that our children do or do not have. God says, “She is childless.”

SHE IS a WIDOW

“How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people! how is she become as a widow!” There was no one to comfort her, no helper, no husband. He personifies this country as a wife who has been widowed.

Notice the descriptions of her widowhood in this chapter. In verse two, the Bible says, *“She hath none to comfort her.”*

In verse nine, we read, *“Her filthiness is in her skirts; she remembereth not her last end; therefore she came down wonderfully: she had no comforter.”*

In verse sixteen, the Bible says, *“For these things I weep; mine eye, mine eye runneth down with water, because the comforter that should relieve my soul is far from me.”*

How Did This Happen?

And in verse seventeen, God's Word says, "*Zion spreadeth forth her hands, and there is none to comfort her.*"

We have some idea that someday, somehow we can call God like we call a waiter to our table and He will come running, but God says, "She crossed a line. She is destroyed. She is a widow, and none will come to her to comfort her."

SHE IS a SLAVE

God had made the nation of Judah such a mighty people. He tells us in Lamentations 4:12, "*The kings of the earth, and all the inhabitants of the world, would not have believed that the adversary and the enemy should have entered into the gates of Jerusalem.*" No king or kingdom in the world could ever have imagined that this would have happened to God's people.

I have traveled around the world on every continent, and I know what it means to be a beloved American. I am sorry to say this, but now we are finding out what it means to be a disrespected American. As the table is turning before our very eyes, I want to remain hopeful. He says of her in this first verse, "*How is she become tributary!*" *Tributary* refers to forced labor. The people who escaped death during the siege of Jerusalem were pressed into the service of their captors.

As a nation, how long can we mock God and the things of God? He goes on to say in verse three, "*Judah is gone into captivity because of affliction, and because of great servitude.*" In the closing part of verse five he says, "*Her children are gone into captivity before the enemy.*" The tables have been turned. Israel's mighty power has been removed. God is gone. The nation is in ruin. She is childless. She is a widow. She is a slave.

Before It's Too Late



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to conservatism
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we must have it.
It is a return to
God that is the
answer.*

We must ask, “How did this happen?” God has given us this record to warn us that His judgment is coming for those who reject Him. While He holds back His wrath, we must reach the lost world around us with the Good News of Jesus Christ. He alone can deliver us from the judgment we all justly deserve.

How did Jerusalem become childless? The prognosticators would say of America, “I can tell you. We quit having children. We

aborted babies and mocked the idea of large families.” But that is not the whole reason. Why should God give children to a nation who will no longer train them up in the way of the Lord? Something has to change.

How did Jerusalem become a widow? She thought she could do as she pleased and then devise her own way out when trouble came. But instead, she was left with no comforter. Our nation is following this same pattern: chasing after the things of this world and ignoring God’s Word. We must turn back to God in true repentance.

How did Jerusalem become a slave? The Bible teaches that the debtor is a slave to the one to whom he is in debt. We have become a nation that is borrowing money to pay the interest rate on our debt. We borrow money to give away. We are going to have to wake up someday.

We cannot blame these problems on the current president. We have exactly who God gave us. I plan to do all I can to vote a man in who will do right, but I know that is not the answer and so do you if you are a Christian that is thinking, praying, and discerning.

How Did This Happen?

It is not a return to conservatism that is the answer for America, though we must have it. It is a return to God that is the answer. Think of any small community. Each one is full of families facing real problems in the lives of the parents and children. If a Spirit-filled church were planted in that community where people lived the Christian life, preached the gospel, and won the lost to Christ, then the entire community would be affected positively and helped by that church.

If a city overrun by liberalism and immorality had a strong gospel witness established and a strong church planted, then people's lives would be changed. They would no longer want the drugs, alcohol, or immorality they once pursued. The whole city would be affected by the spiritual growth of that church and those people.

Beyond a political revival, we need a Holy Ghost filled spiritual revival. This is where a remnant of God's people is essential. If you can take it or leave it, you will leave it. If you can read this and not change, then that is exactly what you will do. Someone must rise up and say, "It is not going to be the same in our home anymore. It is not going to be the same in our family anymore. It is not going to be the same with our children anymore. It is not going to be the same with the things we have gone to for entertainment anymore. We are going to live the true Christian life and return to God."

When Jeremiah wrote Lamentations, it was too late for Jerusalem. How did it happen? It happened because of sin. No wonder the last thing we find in the Lamentations is a prayer. In Lamentations 5:21-22, the Bible says, "*Turn thou us unto thee, O LORD, and we shall be turned; renew our days as of old. But thou hast utterly rejected us; thou art very wroth against us.*" Pray for the coming revival! We need something that only God can do.