

(Amos) Yet You Have Not Returned to Me

by David Guzik

David Guzik's sermon on Amos emphasizes the urgent call for Israel to repent and return to God amidst their indulgent and corrupt practices.

Duration: 53:54

Scripture: Proverbs 3:34, Amos 4:6-8, Amos 6:12, Matthew 5:23-24, James 4:6, 1 Peter 5:5

Topics: "Social Justice", "Humility Before God"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker begins by sharing a personal anecdote about watching the Rocky movies and how the preparation for the boxing matches is the main focus of the plot. The speaker then transitions to discussing the humiliation and degradation of the Israelites, who had lived self-indulgent lives and made their fortunes on the backs of the poor. Despite their religious practices, God reminds them that their gains are temporary and that they will soon be brought low by the Assyrians. The speaker concludes by emphasizing the importance of seeking good and establishing justice, as God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.

Transcript

Tonight, we begin in Amos chapter 4. The prophet Amos was from the southern kingdom of Judah, but he had his ministry mostly among the northern kingdom of Israel. It seems he went to a city there named Bethel and he spoke out against corruption and injustice in the northern kingdom of Israel. And tonight we're going to read three chapters of his prophecy together.

Amos chapter 4, verse 1. Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, bring wine, let us drink. Now, Amos wasn't trained as a prophet. He was a simple herdsman, a farmer.

And when he wanted to get a point across about the indulgent women of the northern kingdom of Israel, well, basically he called them a bunch of fat cows. That's verse 1. You cows of Bashan. Bashan was a well-known area, well-known, I should say, for its excellent grazing lands.

And so the cattle and the livestock and the cows of Bashan were beautiful and fat and healthy. And so when he says, you cows of Bashan, and when you notice he says there in verse 1, who say to your husbands, bring wine, let us drink. He's talking to the wives.

He's talking to the affluent wives of the kingdom of Israel. It's funny, there's a few places in the scriptures where it talks about livestock from Bashan. In Psalm 22, David mentions the strong bulls of Bashan that have come against him.

And if they come from this great grazing land, they're strong, they're mighty, they're fearsome bulls. Ezekiel 39 also mentions the large livestock, the fatlings of Bashan, it calls them. And so it's no exaggeration that Amos calls these women fat cows.

Now, it's very true that the very skinny ideal of female beauty, it's a modern phenomenon. Kind of twisted, too, don't you think? I mean, it's just a funny ideal that we have in our modern world about the ideal of feminine beauty. It's true that especially in the ancient world, plumpness was sort of a valued sign of affluence.

They liked it if a man or a woman was a little bit plump. I mean, it showed you had plenty to eat. It showed you didn't have to work so hard in life.

But I think you can count on it that at no time in human history has a woman appreciated being called a fat cow. And they would have taken offense when Amos said this. And so he really lays it on them.

I like what Adam Clark says here. He says the prophet here represents the iniquitous, opulent, idle, lazy drones, whether men or women, under the idea of fatted bullocks, which were shortly to be let out to the slaughter. And that's what's in his mind here.

Now, notice what the crime is of these, well, these fat cows. He says in verse one, who crush the needy and oppress the poor. It wasn't that the crime of these women were that they were plump or affluent.

That wasn't it at all. It was that they gained their wealth and their affluence by oppressing and crushing the less fortunate. God saw this and he promised to hold them to account.

He said, well, maybe it wasn't the women directly. Maybe it was their husbands. But you could see how perhaps the nagging of these women, the constant pressing for greater luxuries and greater ease and greater affluence, it pushed their husbands on to make more money and to make it through oppressing the poor.

You can just see the picture here at verse one where it says, who say to your husbands, bring wine, let us drink. It wasn't just that these women were plump and affluent. It was they used their affluence in a pure, self-focused pursuit of pleasure.

And God saw this. God saw it and he promised to hold them to account. Look at it here in verse two.

The Lord God has sworn by his holiness. Behold, the day shall come upon you when he will take you away with fishhooks and your posterity with fishhooks. You will go out through broken walls, each one straight ahead of her, and you will be cast into Haman, says the Lord.

It's an exceedingly solemn oath, don't you think, in verse two where it says that the Lord God swore by his holiness. When God swears by his holiness, it's a serious oath. And what does he swear to? He swears that they will take you away with fishhooks.

God tells unrepentant Israel of their coming agony when they're conquered and exiled by the mighty Assyrian Empire. You see, the Assyrian Empire had a policy in that day. Maybe you've heard in recent

times in wars in Europe and Africa where they practice ethnic cleansing or they move or force out populations from one area and make them go to a completely different area.

That's nothing new. The ancient Assyrians did that. And when they conquered a people such as the Israelites, what they did was they basically depopulated the country and brought in new people.

They wanted to sever the bond that those people had between their heart and the land. They said, let's just move you away, move you to someplace else. And so you can imagine long trains of Israelites walking for hundreds of miles, being repopulated from the land of Israel to some distant point in the Assyrian Empire.

And when they were let out through their broken down city walls, the Assyrians had a way that they kept order in the ranks as they were marching these hundreds of people away. First of all, what we do is commonly while they were marching along the way, they would strip them naked just to humiliate them and make them feel like they were embarrassed to run away somewhere. The second thing they would do is they would take fishhooks and attach them on a big line.

And they would take those fishhooks and pierce them through either the nose or the lip of each person. Now, you're not going to sash somebody if you've got a fishhook through your lip or your nose and are attached on a long line of other people. That's going to completely humiliate you, could completely bring you under the submission of somebody else.

And you're going to do whatever they say. So can you see this long line, hundreds, thousands of humiliated, degraded Israelites, some of these fat cows who lived it up in their self-indulgent affluent lifestyles, when they made their fortunes on the backs of the poor, and here they are now, now being brought low by the Lord in their humiliation, marching through, as it says there in verse 3, the broken walls of the cities of Israel. And notice here he speaks in verse 4, Come to Bethel and transgress at Gilgal.

Multiply transgression. Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days. Offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving with leaven.

Proclaim and announce the freewill offerings. For this you love, you children of Israel, says the Lord your God. You see, now God remembers, well, listen, the Israelites, they have religion, don't they? Don't they worship the Lord? Don't they serve him? Well, yes and no.

They make a name to serving God. They make an outward display of it. But actually God almost mocks them in verse 4 where he says, Come to Bethel and transgress.

Bethel was one of the centers of worship that the northern kings set up in Israel, so that the people of Israel wouldn't go down to the southern kingdom of Judah and worship at Jerusalem. They did this to keep their citizens away from the rival kingdom of Judah. And so you had these rival centers of worship, Bethel and Gilgal.

He says, Go, go there and worship. Give your best shot. Because all you're going to do is transgress.

You know, God said, Don't make Bethel a place of sacrifice. Don't make Gilgal a sacrifice. There is to be one place of sacrifice in all of Israel, and that was the city of Jerusalem.

So God says, Go ahead, go to Bethel and transgress. Matter of fact, if you notice there, in verse 4 it says, Offer your tithes every three days. It's very interesting because there was a certain tithe that was required of the people of Israel that they had to bring once every three years.

Deuteronomy chapter 14 describes it. And God says, You know that three-year tithe? I don't care if you bring it every three days. Everybody says, Oh my, that's impressive.

How much they must love God to bring the three-year tithe, and they're bringing it every three days. God says, He doesn't care. It means nothing to Him.

Go ahead and offer your sacrifice at Thanksgiving with leaven. Proclaim and announce the freewill offerings. For this you love, you children of Israel.

I want you to notice those last few lines of verse 5. For this you love. Friends, notice it please. The children of Israel loved their corrupted worship.

They loved it. It was disobedient both in heart and in action. But they loved it.

Might I make a point that we've made several times before, but we just need to remind ourselves of it. It's always wrong to measure worship by how it pleases us. Because it's possible for corrupt and disobedient worship to be wonderfully pleasing.

They loved it. For this you love, God said. Now, of course, we don't want to get into the thinking that worship has to hurt to be acceptable to God.

That the more dour it is, the more honoring it is to God. No, that's not it at all. That's not the point.

The point is simply this. We don't first measure worship by how it makes us feel. We measure it by how it honors God.

And if it makes you feel like a million bucks, if you love it, as the Israelites loved their disobedient and rebellious worship, if you love it, but if it doesn't honor God, it's not real worship. You measure worship first by how it honors God. Now, please, again, we don't want to get off on to some other extreme.

As I said before, to think that worship has to hurt or be miserable. You're not really worshiping God unless you're miserable. No, that's not the idea at all.

It's just we put God at the center, not ourselves. We don't evaluate worship by how it makes us feel. We evaluate it first by how it honors the Lord God.

So what would God do? Look at here, verse six. Also I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places, yet you have not returned to me, says the Lord. I also withheld rain from you, and there were still three months to the harvest.

I made it rain on one city, and I withheld rain from another city. One part was rained upon, and where it did not rain, the part withered. So two or three cities wandered to another city to drink water, but they were not satisfied, yet you have not returned to me, says the Lord.

You read the first line of verse six, and you think, oh, God's blessing them. He gave them cleanness of teeth. Wasn't that great? God promoting dental hygiene among the kingdom of Israel.

Friends, that's not at all, you know why their teeth are clean? Because there's no food to eat. I gave you cleanness of teeth, and lack of bread in all your places. God's disciplining them.

But do you see the line in verse six? Yet you have not returned to me. And God says, I withheld the rain. That's it, I started doing tricks with the rain.

I made it rain in this city, but not in this city. Just to show you that I was in charge of the rain. I made it rain on this farmer's fields, but not on this farmer's fields.

Just to show you that I was in charge of the rain. Yet you have not returned to me, says the Lord. This is the greatest tragedy, isn't it, friends? Any one of us can stumble into sin and feel the correcting hand of God, but we're in far greater trouble when we feel God's correction and will not return to him.

Maybe that's a question we need to seriously ask before the Lord tonight. Lord, are you trying to correct me in some way, and I'm not listening to you? Could it be said of our life in some place? The Lord says, well, I did this and this, and yet you did not return to me. And then I did that and the other thing, and you did not return to me.

And it goes on and on. Look at it here, verse nine. I blasted you with blight and mildew.

Friends, he's not talking about, you know, green stuff around the shower. Those are agricultural kind of diseases. It's the kind of thing that wastes crops.

He says, I blasted you with blight and mildew. When your gardens increased, your vineyards, your fig trees, and your olive trees, the locusts devoured them. Yet you have not returned to me, says the Lord.

I sent among you a plague after the manor of Egypt. Your young men I killed with a sword along with your captive horses. I made the stench of your camps to come up to your nostrils.

Yet you have not returned to me, says the Lord. I overthrew some of you as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. And you were like a firebrand plucked from the burning.

You could finish it for me, couldn't you? Yet you have not returned to me, says the Lord. I want you to notice a few things here. First of all, it's obvious the main message here.

Israel would not listen to the chastisement of the Lord, right? God was trying to correct them. They wouldn't listen. They had their fingers in their ears.

And God was screaming to them through the circumstances of their life, but they wouldn't listen. But the other thing I want you to see is how God keeps trying. Doesn't the Lord love us? How many of us would stick with somebody as disobedient, as rebellious as us? I would never tolerate somebody like me.

The Lord has so much love, so much compassion. What a great God He is. And then the other thing we think about is how loving God is in the way that He does it.

I mean, He doesn't start off with the highest thing. He doesn't start off with Sodom and Gomorrah. He starts off small, and that doesn't work.

So He gets it a little bigger, and then we're still not listening. And God so kindly, so graciously, it's as if the Lord says, Look, I want to chastise them as little as possible. As little as it will take to bring them to

repentance.

That's all I want to do. My goal isn't to punish them. My goal is to bring them to repentance.

So I'm going to do it step by step and hope that someplace along the way that they will return to me. And at the end of it all, God says, You were like a fire brand, plucked from the burning, yet you have not returned to me. God sees Israel as a glowing ember plucked from the fires of judgment, like the same judgment that devoured Sodom and Gomorrah.

And even though God spared them, they didn't respond in gratitude. They have not returned to God. How important it is to clear out our ears, Lord.

Are you trying to get through to me in some way? Notice how God vows to perform what he promised. Verse 12. Therefore, thus I will do to you, O Israel, because I will do this to you.

Prepare to meet your God, O Israel. For behold, he who forms mountains and creates the wind and declares man what his thought is and makes the morning darkness, who treads the high places of the earth, the Lord God of hosts is his name. That's heavy, isn't it? God coming up before Israel and he says, Prepare to meet your God.

That's a sober warning. You know, it's appropriate for all men, for all women, and at all times. Shouldn't every one of us hear that right now and say, Listen, you prepare to meet your God.

Because we never know when we're going to meet our God for eternity. Because we don't know, we must always be prepared to meet our God. Friends, I would say this is especially true to those who are in sin and facing the judgment of God.

I'd suggest to you that you can apply this text in three ways. You can take prepare to meet your God. You can take it as a challenge.

You can take prepare to meet your God as an invitation. Or you can take prepare to meet your God as a summons. First, as a challenge, it's as if God invites his enemies to prepare to meet him.

I have a confession to make. Our children wanted to watch some videos the other day. And so I went out to the video place and I rented them.

Rocky, Rocky 2, Rocky 3, and Rocky 4. It was the Rocky-thon at the Guzik house this last week. And you know, every one of the movies is the same. He trains, he fights, he's a human punching bag in the fight.

And somehow he wins or nobly loses. It's the same thing every movie. But the big thing and the biggest point of the movie is the preparation for the boxing match, right? That's what takes up the most of the plot.

Him training, him preparing. I mean, he's going to face an adversary. So he better be ready.

A boxer would be nuts to know, well, I'm going to face the champion of the world in three weeks. And well, I'll just take it easy. Maybe the day before I'll start thinking, you better prepare to meet the champion of the world.

Well, God says prepare to meet your God. God says, you want to fight with me? You want to rebel against me? Then you better prepare for it, mister. And I don't know how you're going to prepare to fight against

God, but you better do the best you can.

So you can take it as a challenge. You can also take that phrase, prepare to meet your God, as an invitation. That's a blessing, isn't it? Doesn't God say to his people every day, every time they gather together, you prepare to meet your God.

I wonder if that's not what you should put on the mirror at home. And every Sunday morning before you get ready for church, you read right there, prepare to meet your God. And that's what you should prepare.

You know, if you would prepare to meet your God when you come on Sunday morning, you'd meet him so much more wonderfully. If you started to prepare your heart at home. If you started to thank God and to worship him and to set your heart in the right place before you even get in the car.

Before the devil gets to you and your wife in the car and you start arguing and fighting with each other. If you'd prepare to meet your God, even before that. Oh, how much more profitable that meeting would be.

Think about that call going out. Think about that call going out to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Adam, prepare to meet your God.

And Adam would get all excited. Yes. Yes, God and I, we're going to walk together in the cool of the day.

Yes, I want to prepare to meet my God. But ever since the fall, ever since the fall, it's our nature to hide from God. So here, this call to prepare to meet your God, it has a different sense entirely.

Still, if you're going to come to God, prepare yourself. Prepare to meet your God. So it's a challenge.

It's an invitation. Friends, it's also a summons. We recognize that one day we will all stand before God and give account.

I can't resist a quote from Charles Spurgeon here. He says, think a while upon who it is that you have to meet. You have to meet your God, your God.

That is offended justice. You must meet whose laws you have broken, whose penalties you've ridiculed. Justice, righteously indignant with its sword drawn.

You must confront. You must meet your God. That is, you must be examined by unblinded omniscience.

He who has seen your heart and read your thoughts and jotted down your affections and remembered your idle words, you must meet him. An infinite discernment you must meet. Those eyes that you are never yet duped.

The God who will see through the veils of hypocrisy and all concealments of formality. There will be no making yourself out to be better than you are before him. So prepare to meet your God now.

Humble yourself now. Say, Lord, God, save me now. And if it could be any more serious, I don't know how it could be more serious.

Look at how he adds on it here at the end of verse 13. The Lord God of hosts is his name. You know what God of hosts means, don't you? It's not the God of hosts and hostesses like the God of Martha Stewart's and that kind of thing.

God of hosts means God of armies. The God of heavenly armies. This is his military title.

You know, the military title of the President of the United States. Commander in Chief. Well, this is the military title of God.

The Lord of hosts. And he says, that's my name. God emphasizes the point.

He emphasizes just who it is making the point. A God we should never trifle with. He's the God of all creation.

He forms the mountains and creates the wind. He's the God who's absolutely sovereign over man. He declares to man what his thought is.

He's the God with the power over nature. He makes the morning darkness. And he's the God who rules above all.

He treads the high places of the earth, Amos says. So it's time to get serious. He goes on now.

Chapter five. Hear this word which I take up against you. This lamentation, O house of Israel.

The Virgin of Israel has fallen. She will rise no more. She lies forsaken on her land.

There is no one to raise her up. For thus says the Lord God. The city that goes out by a thousand shall have a hundred left.

And that which goes out by a hundred shall have ten left to the house of Israel. Did you catch that phrase there? The Virgin of Israel has fallen. Amos sees Israel as a tragic young woman who's fallen and forsaken.

And no one's coming to her aid in rebelling against God. Israel is as helpless as a young woman among violent men. It's as if he chose a title that would emphasize the vulnerability and the dependence of Israel.

And he says the city that goes out by a thousand, you're going to have a hundred left. Amos predicts that things will be so bad among the children of Israel that when an enemy comes, a city that before would have sent out a thousand soldiers, now they'll only send out a hundred. They're only going to have a handful of war-weary men to defend their cities, and they'll be completely overcome.

And so God offers an alternative here. Look at it beginning at verse 4. For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel, Seek me and live, but do not seek Bethel, do not enter Gilgal, nor pass over to Beersheba. For Gilgal shall surely go into captivity, and Bethel shall come to nothing.

Seek the Lord and live, lest He break out like fire in the house of Joseph and devour it with no one to quench it in Bethel. You who turn justice to wormwood and lay righteousness to rest in the earth. He made the Pleiades and Orion.

He turns the shadow of death into morning and makes the day dark as night. He calls for the water of the sea and pours them out on the face of the earth. The Lord is His name.

He rains ruin upon the strong so that fury comes upon the fortress. See what God says there at the beginning of verse 4? Seek me and live. And God looks at this destruction that's ripe to come upon Israel and He says, seek me and live.

And some people did. You know what the godly in Israel did before it fell to the Assyrians that would come after this prophecy of Amos? The Bible tells us that the godly in the northern kingdom of Israel said that's it, we've had it here and they moved down to the southern kingdom of Judah and they were spared this Assyrian invasion. And that's exactly what they did.

Seek me and live. They sought the Lord. They responded to His voice.

They got out of Israel and they lived. But those who didn't... Oh, you see, God says don't seek Bethel nor enter Gilgal nor pass over to Beersheba. These were rival centers of worship.

These were places other than Jerusalem where they had gathered together for worship. Interesting. Each one of those places were at one time places of great spiritual privilege.

Bethel. That was the place where the Lord God met with Jacob when he came out and was escaping from Esau. The Lord gave him a beautiful vision of angels ascending and descending upon a ladder up into heaven.

And Jacob said, I'm at the very house of God. And he named it Bethel, which means house of the Lord. And then Gilgal.

Oh, what a place that was. Gilgal was the place where Israel got right with God in the days of Joshua when they came into the Promised Land. Gilgal means rolling.

And it was a day when the shame of Israel was rolled away because they ministered to the Lord in radical obedience. And then Beersheba. That was an ancient place connected to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

All those places that were once places of great prestige, great honor, a great name. Now they were places of vain, empty worship. God looks at them and He says, you, you who turn justice to wormwood and lay righteousness to rest.

Again, Amos confronts the corrupt legal system of Israel. Justice had been thoroughly spoiled. And righteousness, it was as good as dead.

Wormwood is something that's spoiled and bitter. Amos is trying to give a wake-up call to Israel. He says, look, he made the Pleiades and Orion.

Those are constellations in the sky. God is mighty enough to make these great constellations in the sky. This is why God is worthy to be sought.

This is why God can deliver Israel from their coming doom. He can do it because He's smart enough to set the constellations in the sky. He's mighty enough to do it.

He's mighty enough to manage creation, but we rebel against Him. It means that God is strong enough to save, but it also means that God is plenty strong enough to bring judgment. Did you notice there at verse 9, he says he reigns ruin upon the strong so that fury comes upon the fortress.

If the strong and the fortress can't stand before God's power, well then, no one can. He goes on. Now, here's a section where he talks about the cause and the curse and the cure that's going to come, or at least is offered unto Israel.

Verse 10. They hate the one who rebukes in the gate and they abhor the one who speaks uprightly. Therefore, because you tread down the poor and take grain taxes from him, though you have built houses of hewn stone, yet you shall not dwell in them.

You've planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink wine from them. For I know your manifold transgressions and your mighty sins, afflicting the just and taking bribes, diverting the poor from justice at the gate. Therefore, the prudent keep silent at that time, for it is an evil time.

Seek good and not evil that you may live. So the Lord God of hosts will be with you as he has spoken. Hate evil.

Love good. Establish justice in the gates. It may be that the Lord God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

Here again, the prophet Amos in his bold and fearless fashion, he touches on the great unrighteousness and iniquity in the social institutions of Israel, notably here in the courts. They hate the one who rebukes in the gate. You see, the gate was the law court in ancient cities.

And Israel's courts were so corrupt that they silenced the poor and the righteous. And the effect of this culture of injustice was that the prudent keep silent at that time, for it's an evil time. Righteous people were afraid to speak out because they knew that the judge, they knew that the magistrate wouldn't back them.

They were afraid. That's how it is when unrighteousness rules in courts. People are afraid to stick up for what's right because they know that the justice system will hang them out to dry.

We look at this in Israel and we're amazed. The prophet Amos, he speaks about money and power of being able to buy justice. Well, haven't things come to a pretty pass when you have money and influence where that can get you off? Where that can get you a presidential pardon? Or where that can get you preferential treatments in the courts because you have the right lawyers and the right connections? Staggering, isn't it? That's what my father used to say.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. The godly and righteous people in Israel, they wouldn't speak out. They feared retribution or they just knew that it wouldn't do any good.

What good is it to speak out? So I'll keep silent. And Amos speaks to the rich and the affluent people. He says, Though you built houses of hewn stone, yet you shall not dwell in them.

This is God's curse for Israel's wickedness. Though the wicked in Israel, they gained fancy houses and vineyards from their oppression of the poor in the way that they railroaded justice. Those gains were only temporary.

Here's a rich man in Israel. And through his manipulation of the courts and his robbery of the poor, he built this great majestic house out of carved stone and everybody, oh, it's the most magnificent house in town. God says, you're only renting it.

You may as well turn the title deed over to the Assyrians because pretty soon they're going to take it over. You've got it just for a short time. And at the end of this passage, God gives them prescription that could be a cure for Israel's sin.

He says, Seek good and not evil that you may live. So the Lord God of hosts will be with you. All you have to do is simply seek good and not evil.

Transform the corrupt courts and establish justice in the gates. So now, they wouldn't do that. So there's going to be wailing and woe in the day of the Lord.

Look at it here. Verse 16 Therefore the Lord God of hosts, the Lord says this, There shall be wailing in all the streets. And they shall say in all the highways, Alas, alas! They shall call the farmer to mourning and the skillful lamenters to wailing.

In all vineyards, they shall be wailing. For I will pass through you, says the Lord. Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! For what good is the day of the Lord to you? It will be darkness and not light.

It will be as though a man fled from a lion and a bear met him. Or as though he went into the house, leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him. Is not the day of the Lord darkness and not light? Is it not very dark with no brightness in it? God says there is going to be such wailing in the streets when his judgment comes upon Israel.

And friends, if you read the account in the books of 1st and 2nd Kings of what happened when God's judgment came upon the northern kingdom of Israel through the Assyrian army, it was horrible. Stories of gross cannibalism in the cities of Israel because of the great hunger they were through from the siege armies of the Assyrians. Just terrible brutality and viciousness both among one another and then from the conquering armies.

It's going to be so bad that there's going to be a shortage of mourners. Did you see that there? It says, they shall call the farmer to mourning and skillful lamenters to wailing. You see, in Israel back then, indeed they still do it today, at a funeral they will hire professional mourners.

They'll hire people to come and to add to the sadness of the occasion. People who are, I guess, good at turning on the tears. They'll wail and they'll weep.

You hire them and they're the professional mourners. But you see, there's a shortage. So you have to call the farmer to mourning.

He's not even a professional, but you need to hire somebody. So here's a... We'll call the farmer. We need somebody to help us mourn.

That's how bad things are. There's a shortage of professional mourners. It's a staggering thing that he says there.

What good is the day of the Lord to you? You know, when we're not right with God and we have our wits about us, the last thing we want in the world is the day of the Lord. Oh no, Lord. Wait till I get right with you.

Don't come now. Don't show your strength and your triumph and your victory now, Lord. I'm not right with you.

And that's what the Lord's saying to this wicked nation, this wicked northern kingdom of Israel. What good is the day of the Lord to you? It's going to be darkness to you and not light. You see, in their religious ritualism, the people of Israel still claim that they long for the day of the Lord.

And Amos says, you don't know what you're asking for. You don't know what you claim you want. Because the day of the Lord will bring to you judgment, not mercy.

It's as if a lion is chasing you. And you finally escape the lion, only to fall into the clutches of a bear. And then the bear is chasing you, and so you run, and you're finally able to shut yourself into a house, and you're safe from the bear.

And you put your hand against the wall and it slips into a hole, and there's a deadly serpent in that hole, and it bites you. See what it means? It's unescapable. If the lion misses, the bear will get you.

If the bear misses, then the snake will get you. You're going to be got by the day of the Lord if you're not walking right with him. Now, a lot of people, they look at a nation the way that the northern kingdom was at this time.

And they say that the answer is religion. You know, you need that good old time religion. Let's see what the good old time religion did for the northern kingdom of Israel.

Verse 21 I hate, God says, I hate. I despise your feast days, and I do not savor your sacred assemblies. Though you offer me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them, nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings.

Take away from me the noise of your songs, for I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments. But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream. Did you offer me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel? You also carried Sikoth, your king, and Chin, your idols, the star of your gods, which you made for yourselves.

Therefore, I will send you into captivity beyond Damascus, says the Lord, whose name is the God of hosts. Can you imagine how this would have amazed or offended those in Israel who heard Amos say this? Oh God, you hate, you despise our feast days? Well, Lord, those are days for you. We all gather together at Bethel or Gilgal and we have a wonderful feast unto the Lord.

Why are you so sore about this, God? They told themselves, we're really honoring the Lord, we're really pleasing Him by observing these feasts, these sacred assemblies. But God was offended at their religious ceremonialism because it was disconnected from the heart and justice towards one another. You know, Jesus told us a very similar kind of thing.

Matthew chapter 5, verse 23 and 24, Jesus said, Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift. See, Israel thought that the feast days, their sacred assemblies, their burnt offerings, their grain offerings, their peace offerings and their songs, they thought they were something before God.

God says, Those things are nothing before me as long as there's no justice or righteousness in your dealings with others. Friends, are you at odds with somebody else? Are you at odds with another brother and sister in the body of Christ? Unless you can say in the integrity of your heart that you've done everything you can to make peace between that brother or sister, you would have been better off going and fixing that before coming here tonight. God says, I'm not impressed by your church attendance.

Get it right before your brother and sister. Have you done everything you can? The Apostle Paul says, As much as it lies within you, be at peace with every man. Well, can you say you fulfilled that? Can you stand before God and say, Well, Lord, as much as it lies within me, I've done everything I can.

That's what the Lord would have. Painful thing to think about, isn't it? That the religious things that we do, going to church, making a contribution to the offer, singing songs of worship, that we could have our hearts in such a place where God would say, I hate it. I despise it.

I said, Get right with me first. Sometimes we're under the delusion that the devil hates religion. Ladies and gentlemen, the devil loves religion.

What he wants is religious ceremony detached from real relationship with God. Now, I believe that we can criticize unfairly that name religion. There's a such thing as good and true religion in the sight of our God.

But it's connected with relationship. Now, God's real prescription for Israel was Let justice run down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream. You know, it's easy to separate our religious ceremonies from the way that we treat other people to think that God should just be happy if we give Him His due without regard to justice or righteousness towards others.

God says, I won't have it. Keep your annoying religious ceremonies and let justice run down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream. And friends, He's not talking about a trickle or a drop here and there.

Keep it flowing. Keep it going. Funny here at the end, God says in verse 26, You also carried Sikoth, your king, and Cheon, your idols, the star of your gods, which you made for yourself.

Apparently, from verse 25 and 26, these were pagan deities that Israel brought with them from Egypt into the Promised Land. And God reminds Israel that even though they sacrificed to Him in the wilderness, they also hung on to their idolatry. It didn't please them then, and it doesn't please them now.

Those names mentioned there in the New King James Version, Sikoth and Cheon, the NIV translates them as shrine and pedestal. Honestly, it's a difficult passage to translate. Translators kind of scratch their head.

They don't know exactly what Amos is getting at there. Perhaps it's just an obscure name of a pagan god or a pagan ritual. But the point is clear enough.

Their extreme sin clung on to, God says, therefore I will send you into captivity. Their extreme sin merited an extreme correction. Nothing less than exile and captivity.

Let's finish tonight with chapter 6. Woe to you who are at ease in Zion and who trust in Mount Samaria, notable persons in the chief nation to whom the house of Israel comes. Go over to Calma and see. And from there go to Hama, the great.

Then go to Gath of the Philistines. Are you better than these kingdoms? Or is their territory greater than your territory? Interesting line to begin the chapter, isn't it? Woe to you who are at ease in Zion. In her pride and in her indulgence, all Israel sought was ease.

And this indulgent lust for comfort and luxury, it's a sin. And God will judge Israel for it. We have to walk a balance here, don't we? God likes the idea of rest.

The idea of rest isn't all bad. Jesus said, Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. And there's a rest waiting for the people of God.

Hebrews chapter 4 says that we have to believe and endeavor to enter into that rest. And the Bible says in Revelation chapter 4 that there is a rest waiting for the people of God in heaven. So there's a good kind of rest in the Christian life.

But then there's another kind of rest. A sinful kind of rest that's connected to indifference and laziness and indulgence. Let me quote to you Charles Spurgeon.

I think he defines this pretty good. He says that the prophet Amos here speaks of a carnal ease, a fleshly security. It's not the confidence of a man who's pardoned, but the ease of a hardened wretch who has learned to despise the hangman's noose.

It's not the assurance of one who's on the rock, but the ease of a senseless drunkard whose house is tottering from its sandy foundations, yet he riots at full speed. It's not the calm of a soul at peace with God, but the ease of a madman. Because he's hidden his sin from his own eyes, he thinks that it's concealed from God.

It's the ease and peace of one who's grown calloused, hardened, brutalized, stupid, sullen, and careless, who has begun a sleep which God may soon grant be broken, or else it'll surely bring him where he will make his bed in hell. That's the kind of ease that the prophet Amos is speaking against. How did it show itself? Well, notice here, first of all, it showed itself in presumption.

He says, Woe to you who are at ease in Zion and trust in Mount Samaria. Mount Samaria and the hills around the city of Samaria, which, by the way, was the capital city of the northern kingdom of Israel. Mount Samaria provided excellent natural fortifications.

It was a hilly, mountainous area. It was hard for a conquering army to get to the city of Samaria. And Mount Samaria was tremendous just natural fortifications, and the people of Israel were trusting in that.

Oh, we're safe. We live in Mount Samaria. We don't have to worry about a conquering army.

We live in Mount Samaria. God says you're at ease in Zion. It's a wicked, ungodly ease.

You're presumptuous. You're trusting in the mount of Mount Samaria. Israel's sinful ease was also shown in procrastination.

Look at it there in verse 3. It says, Woe to you who put off the day of doom. Oh, you just put it off. Ah, judgment.

Somewhere down the road. I'll get right with God later. I don't have too much fun now.

It's said of the ancient Christian theologian, Augustine, that he used to pray, Lord, make me chaste. But not just yet. That's living at ease in Zion.

Israel's sinful ease was shown in their cruelty to men because she had become the seed of violence. Israel's sinful ease was shown in its love of self, as we'll see in the following verses. It was shown in carelessness.

You want an illustration of ungodly ease? Think of King David when he stayed behind in Jerusalem when it was time for the kings to go out to war. There's David just kicking it back in the palace in Jerusalem. Yeah, I know it's the time for the kings to go out to war and I should probably be doing that, but I've got other people to fight that battle.

I'll just hang out. I've deserved it. I deserve a break.

While he was resting in that ungodly ease, that's when his eyes set upon a woman bathing. He took her and he eventually murdered her husband to cover up his immorality with her. God wants to issue a wake-up call to Israel.

Notice what he says at the end of verse 2. Go down to Gath, the Philistines. Are you better than these kingdoms? Now, we don't know for sure if these cities were conquered at the time of Amos. Maybe he's telling them, you just go look at these ungodly cities and see that you're no better than them.

Or maybe that these cities were already conquered and he's saying, you look at their state and that's going to happen to you too. Either way, the message is clear. Even when you compare yourself to the pagan cities around you, you don't measure up so good, do you, Israel? Here, verse 3 shows how the high standing in Israel will be brought low.

It says here, Woe to you who put far off the day of doom, who cause the seed of violence to come near, who lie on beds of ivory, stretch out on your couches, eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall, who sing idly to the sound of stringed instruments and invent for yourself musical instruments like David, who drink wine from bowls and anoint yourself with the best ointments but are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph. Therefore, they shall go now captive as the first of the captives and those who recline at banquets shall be removed. You get the picture here, right? It's a time of economic prosperity in Israel and the successful in Israel use that prosperity for pure self-indulgence.

Friends, I'm just going to put it plain. I wish we had more time here. I'd labor it even more.

But let's just make it plain here. When God makes us prosperous, we have an absolute obligation to use what He gives us in a way that glorifies Him, not in a way that just pampers ourself. Spurgeon said, Self-indulgence, oh, this is the God of many.

They live not for Christ. What do they care for Him? They live not for the church. What do they care for that? They live for self and for self only.

And Mark, there are such among the poor as well as among the rich for all classes have this evil leaven. Self-indulgence. It's funny.

If Amos lived in a self-indulgence age, if Spurgeon cried out against it 150 years ago, what would they say of us today? Of how we dedicate so much of our lives is to comfort and ease and self-indulgence. Look at the reward they're going to have. Verse seven.

Therefore, they shall go now as captive as the first of the captives. That's your reward. You want to be first in self-indulgence? God will make sure you're front of the line when the captives get taken away.

Verse eight. The Lord God has sworn by Himself. The Lord God of hosts says, I abhor the pride of Jacob and hate his palaces.

Therefore, I will deliver up the city and all that is in it. And it shall come to pass that if ten men remain in one house, they shall die. And when a kinsman of the dead with the one who burned the bodies picks up the bodies to take them out of the house, he'll say to the one inside the house, are there any more with you? And someone will say, none.

And he'll say, hold your tongue, for we dare not mention the name of the Lord. For behold, the Lord gives a commandment and He will break the great house into bits and the little house into pieces. You see, as much as there's sinful conduct, God says, I abhor the pride of Jacob.

It was their pride that He hated. In their season of prosperity and success, they lifted their hearts high in pride and God was going to send a destroying army to bring them low. Can I suggest a memory verse for you here? It's so important that God gave it to us in triplicate.

Three different places where this verse is used in the Bible. Proverbs 3.34, 1 Peter 5.5, and James 4.6. They each say, God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Do you feel like God's resisting you sometimes? Humble yourself before the Lord.

You see, these things will be so bad that people will be superstitious in the midst of all this devastation. The idea is the relative of a dead person comes to burn the corpses in a house and he finds one person still alive and that person says, don't mention the name of the Lord. I don't want Him to turn His wrath on us.

See how desperate it's all become. Let's finish up the chapter here. Do horses run on rocks? Does one plow there with oxen? Yet you've turned justice into gall and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood.

You who rejoice over Lo de Bar. You who say, have we not taken carnanim for ourselves by our own strength? But behold, I will raise up a nation against you, O house of Israel, says the Lord God of hosts. And they will afflict you from the entrance of Hamath to the valley of the Araba.

Do horses run on rocks? Seems like it was a proverb in the ancient world. The proverb that kind of meant, well, two proverbs there. Do horses run on rocks? And do oxen plow rocks? Well, you think men aren't stupid enough to go run horses on a bunch of rocks.

This is especially in the day before they used horseshoes. And men aren't stupid enough to go out to a big rock and give an ox a plow behind it and try to plow up the rock. The force of these proverbs is this.

If I could translate it to our modern day age, see how you like this paraphrase of this? Don't be stupid. That's pretty much the point there. But Israel was.

They turned justice into gall. That's a bitter substance. And the fruit of righteousness is the wormwood.

You can't expect a good result if you run a horse over rough rocks because you'll wreck the horse. You'll wreck the plow. In the same way, Israel can't expect a good result when they turn justice into gall and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood.

So Amos comes back to the constant theme. I will raise up a nation against you. Because of Israel's great and deep sin, judgment would come through a conquering nation.

But you know, if we've seen anything together here tonight, it's how much the Lord loved them and how much the Lord wanted them to return. Do you remember that repeated five times back in chapter 4? You

have not returned to Me. You have not returned to Me.

And don't you see it now that God opens the doors? Why is there no return to Me? You all look like a pretty good bunch. But even if there were some of you that say your heart was so hardened against God, you were so far from Him, maybe tonight you're guilty of sin and depravity that you would be absolutely humiliated if anybody in this room knew 10% of it. You know what God says to you tonight? I love you.

Return to Me. Tonight's your opportunity. Come, I'll restore.

Seek Me, as He said so many times. Leave besides just that religious formalism, that religious ceremonialism. Let's get real, God says.

Let's get down to where it really is between you and Me. Because that's how much He loves us. He's never content to leave us in the false.

He says, let's get real. Let's pray together and ask that the Lord would do that. Father, I want to pray that for myself tonight.

Oh God, I want to be real before You. I don't want to be caught in a trap of religious ritualism and ceremonialism. Father, I know that those of us in professional ministry, so to speak, Lord, we're more liable to it than just about anybody else.

So God, work on me. Work on us. We want a real relationship with You.

Tonight, Lord, we hear You speaking to our hearts in ways small and great, saying, return to Me. Return to Me. And Lord, we don't want it said of us, yet You would not return to Me.

No, Lord, tonight we do. We turn our hearts towards You. We turn our back on sin and blindness and stupidity.

We're not foolish enough to run the horses on the rocks or to try to plow the rocks with the oxen. No, Lord, we come to You and we turn to You. Father, heal us, restore us.

Tonight, Lord, we stand in the place of every member of our church. We pray that You would do the same work spiritually in hearts, even though people are not here tonight. Do the same work by Your Spirit in their hearts to bring us, Lord, growing into this unity of the faith where You're doing the same wonderful work in each and every one of us.

We love You, God. We praise You for the greatness of Your Word and Your work among us. We pray this tonight in Jesus' name.

Amen.

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