

Called To Accountability

Bible Background • AMOS 5

Printed Text • AMOS 5:18-24| Devotional Reading • PSALM 97

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: **COMPREHEND** advocating for all oppressed as a commitment to divine justice and righteousness, **DESIRE** fairness for the disadvantaged, and **CHOOSE** to become activists supporting the cause of the poor and oppressed.

In Focus

Shanice and Tamara had been friends since college. After graduation, the two decided to share an apartment. Shanice wanted to live in the renovated townhomes where many people who lived in the former housing project were forced out.

After touring the homes with the realtor, Tamara began talking to a man who was standing around outside. Shanice thought he was a bum. Tamara shook her head. “His name is Albert. He used to live here before they renovated this building. He told me that several former residents of this building are now either homeless or living in a shelter.” “Why is that my concern?” asked Shanice.

Tamara knew that Shanice was materialistic. She prayed that her friend would learn to lead a more selfless life. Concerned, Tamara asked, “Do you think that my conversation with Albert was just a coincidence? You’ve given your life to God, right?” asked Tamara.

“Yes. I go to church and I give my tithes. That should be enough,” retorted Shanice.

“Well, it’s not. When we see something that is unfair, God wants us to take action. After you give your life to God, He expects your life to reflect Jesus Christ. It’s not about you, Shanice; it’s about God and living for Him.”

When have you responded to a situation like Tamara and Shanice? Discuss ways you keep yourself from choosing to be unethical.

Keep in Mind

“Instead, I want to see a mighty flood of justice, an endless river of righteous living” (Amos 5:24, NLT).

Words You Should Know

A. Burnt Offerings (v. 22) ‘olah (Heb.)—A sacrifice that consumed the whole animal with fire.

B. Judgment (v. 24) mishpat (Heb.)—Proper treatment of all people; a judge’s final verdict; right action according to the Law.

Say It Correctly

Tekoa. teh-**KOH**-uh.

Uzziah. oo-**ZEYE**-uh.

Amaziah. **AH**-muh-**ZEYE**-uh.

Jeroboam. **JARE**-uh-**BOE**-um.

KJV

Amos 5:18 Woe unto you that desire the day of the LORD! to what end is it for you? the day of the LORD is darkness, and not light.

19 As if a man did flee from a lion, and a bear met him; or went into the house, and leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him.

20 Shall not the day of the LORD be darkness, and not light? even very dark, and no brightness in it?

21 I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies.

22 Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts.

23 Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols.

24 But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.

NLT

Amos 5:18 What sorrow awaits you who say, “If only the day of the LORD were here!” You have no idea what you are wishing for. That day will bring darkness, not light.

19 In that day you will be like a man who runs from a lion—only to meet a bear. Escaping from the bear, he leans his hand against a wall in his house—and he’s bitten by a snake.

20 Yes, the day of the LORD will be dark and hopeless, without a ray of joy or hope.

21 “I hate all your show and pretense—the hypocrisy of your religious festivals and solemn assemblies.

22 I will not accept your burnt offerings and grain offerings. I won’t even notice all your choice peace offerings.

23 Away with your noisy hymns of praise! I will not listen to the music of your harps.

24 Instead, I want to see a mighty flood of justice, an endless river of righteous living.”

The People, Places, and Times

Feast Days. There were three major feast days in the nation of Israel: the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Passover), the Feast of Harvest (Pentecost), and the Feast of Ingathering (Tabernacles or Booths). These were pilgrimage festivals that required participation from the entire Israelite community. All work was to cease, and travelers made their way from all over Israel to celebrate these festivals in Jerusalem.

Background

Amos was a shepherd and keeper of sycamore fig trees. From Tekoa, a town ten miles south of Jerusalem, in the hill country of Judah. Although a resident of the Southern Kingdom, God called him to be a prophet to warn the Northern Kingdom of coming judgment (Amos 7:14–15). Amos prophesied during the reigns of Jeroboam II, the king of Israel, in the north (792–753 B.C.), and Uzziah, king of Judah, in the south (792 – 740 B.C.).

His prophecies would come at a time when both kingdoms were experiencing stability, expansion, political influence, and material prosperity. They attributed all of these to favor and blessings from God. However, they were grossly mistaken. In actuality, their prosperity was rooted in evil, the result of the exploitation of the poor—both through systems of law and of money. Israel’s first king, also named Jeroboam, was responsible for the division of the kingdoms. He established Bethel as a center of worship, encouraging the Israelites to worship in Bethel instead of Jerusalem. Over the years, while morality and true commitment to God declined, religious activities—such as festivals and sacrifices—flourished, causing Israel to erroneously believe that they were immune to God’s wrath.

This was the climate in which Amos would preach. For several months, he delivered a message of judgment to Israel, warning her leaders that failure to repent of the injustices they committed against the poor and vulnerable would lead to Israel’s destruction. Amos began his message with a series of oracles pronouncing judgment against Israel’s pagan neighbors—Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab (1:1–2:3). Then, the remainder of the message was dedicated to condemning Judah and Israel.

Do you find any similarities between this description of Israel and the current state of our country? Describe them.

At-A-Glance

1. False Hope (Amos 5:18–20)
2. False Sacrifices (vv. 21–24)

In Depth

1. False Hope (Amos 5:18–20)

One can imagine the sense of satisfaction and pride God’s chosen people would have to hear the initial proclamations against the sins of the other nations. This would have supported the popular belief that in the “day of the Lord,” God would exact vengeance on Israel’s enemies and restore her to a time of greatness. However, Amos reveals that Israel is also worthy of condemnation, even more so because of their habitual sins, frequently violating their covenant relationship with God.

“Woe” was a funeral cry, the wailing in grief over the dead. When referring to the living, it serves as a prediction of death. Here, the “woe” is for those eagerly awaiting the day of the Lord, expecting light and abundant life, who will instead be met with darkness and death.

Amos illustrates the futility of such hope using images of a lion, bear, and poisonous snake to describe the terror one will experience when, after escaping one danger, finding himself face to face with an equally terrifying one. Then, upon finally believing that rest and relief are available in their own home, meeting even more danger. There will be no safe haven when judgment comes.

Why is it important to be critical of ourselves instead of believing we are above criticism?

2. False Sacrifices (vv. 21-24)

“I hate ... I despise ... I will not smell ... I will not accept ... nor regard ... I will not hear.” In three short verses, God vehemently rejects multiple aspects of Israel’s hypocritical religious rituals. Although their outward practices imitate a commitment to the Lord, their hearts are far from him. He begins with his displeasure with their feasts. Moses gave instructions for three feasts that the Israelites were to celebrate annually—the Passover with the Festival of Unleavened Bread, honoring God for His protection, and the Festival of Harvest and Festival of Shelters, honoring His provision (Deuteronomy 16). God’s disdain for their celebrations of these stems from the reality that in daily activities they make a mockery of them.

Amos then addresses the assemblies, offerings, and sacrifices. The Israelites offer sacrifices that are required by law. They are supposed to be a representation of lives totally surrendered to God—acknowledging and repenting of sin, reconciling to Him, and seeking His pleasure. However, these offerings are refused because they are not authentic—Israel is blatantly disobedient and their “worship” is self-seeking. Even their music, previously prescribed and valued by God as worship, is disregarded as useless noise.

Instead of these insincere ritualistic performances, God calls for repentant hearts committed to doing what is morally right, just, and fair. However, justice and righteousness are not to be an occasional action, but exacted continuously and abundantly, as with rolling water and an ever-flowing stream.

In what ways do believers sometimes get caught up on rituals and neglect the command to love our neighbors?

Search the Scriptures

1. What made the Israelites' sacrifices unacceptable (Amos 5:22)?
2. What standard is set regarding what God requires when it comes to worshiping Him (v. 24)?
3. How are the Israelites to worship God if not with offerings and music (v. 24)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. When we read Amos, it is tempting to focus on the cultural aspects of ancient Israel and ignore the prophecy's relevance to today. If Amos were to address today's church, what would his message of warning to the church be? Complete this statement, "Woe to you who..."
2. God indicates that justice and righteousness are to be integral parts of the life of His people. What can today's followers of Christ do to help justice and righteousness flow?

Liberating Lesson

God's judgment of Israel came because their mistreatment, exploitation, and neglect of the poor and vulnerable did not show their worship of God, but instead their love of power, comfort, money, and idols. Anyone can succumb to the temptation to elevate the pursuit of money and comfort above loving God and loving others. It is our duty as Christians to stand up for the oppressed.

Application for Activation

Compare the amount of money, energy, and time you spend on entertainment, pleasure, and leisure to the money, energy, and time you reserve for ministry and serving others. What does this say about where your true affections reside? A path to contentment is to practice gratitude. Spend time this week thanking and worshiping God for what He has provided for you. Ask God to open your eyes to ways you can use your time, talents, money, and other resources to serve others. Make a list of how you will follow God's leading.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Amos 5:18–24

18 Woe unto you that desire the day of the LORD! to what end is it for you? the day of the LORD is darkness, and not light. 19 As if a man did flee from a lion, and a bear met him; or went into the house, and leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him. 20 Shall not the day of the LORD be darkness, and not light? even very dark, and no brightness in it?

"The day of the LORD" is a term that refers to the Lord appearing and judging the nations and punishing wickedness (Isaiah 13:6; Joel 2:1). Amos implies that some Israelites longed for this Day of Judgment. The Israelites are expected to be on the side of safety during the Day of the Lord. They are God's covenant people,

and Amos' hearers are anticipating the Lord punishing their enemies for how they treated Israel. Yet, these same people are involved in oppressing the poor. Amos announces that God comes to punish unrighteousness and injustice, and Israel and Judah will be included in the judgment rather than exempt. Amos directly speaks judgment against the high priest Amaziah in the temple at Bethel and, by implication, King Jeroboam II of Israel for their false worship (Amos 7:10-17).

God does not tolerate us saying we love God while not showing love to our neighbors. Amos calls out the Israelites for their sin. It is sinful and hypocritical to expect God to execute justice on our behalf while condoning our unjust acts. God included many systems in the Mosaic Law to help free those in bondage and debt and to defend the accused. But these laws are being neglected while meaningless rituals and sacrifices are being made.

The images of running from a lion only to meet a bear or running into a house only to be bitten by a serpent describe the Day of the Lord as a time where they will not be able to escape God's judgment. The Asian lion (now extinct), the Syrian bear, and the snake are the major animal predators of the region. Serpent (Heb. nakhsh naw-KHASH) refers specifically to a poisonous snake. As one cannot escape darkness at night, Israel will not escape God's deadly judgment on the Day of the Lord.

21 I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. 22 Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts.

God's heart is not moved by outwardly impressive religious acts of goodwill that are selfishly done. The phrase "your feast days" (Heb. khag, KHAG) refers to the three main festivals that God established in Israel: Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles (Exodus 23:14-19; Deuteronomy 16:16-17). Israel is abusing all of these festivals at this time. The Israelites' hypocritical celebration of God's protection at Passover, His Law at Pentecost, and His provision at the Feast of Tabernacles is meaningless while they also pray to other gods (Amos 5:5). God says He despises (Heb. ma'as, maw-AHS) their false feasts and celebrations. This term can also mean reject and is often used in the context of breaking covenant. God rejects what Israel has done during these feasts, which is a form of religious practice but lacks the power of true worship. The implication is that God establishes events, activities, and rituals, but His people pervert, abuse, and misuse them to achieve their own selfish ends.

The Lord says He will not smell the smoke of the animal sacrifices made during Israel's assemblies. The scent imagery used here is common throughout the Bible. As the fragrant smoke from the offerings goes up, the smell is thought to rise to God in heaven. Amos is possibly referring to the solemn assembly on the seventh day of Feast of Unleavened Bread and the eighth day of the Feast of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:8, 36). But none of the offerings prescribed in the law will please God. The Lord will not accept their burnt offerings (Heb. 'olah, oh-LAH) in which the whole animal is consumed with fire. This is a symbol of the total commitment of the worshiper's life to God. He will not accept their meat or grain (Heb. minkhah, meen-KHAH) offerings that are supposedly intended as gifts to the Lord. Lastly, He will not accept their peace offerings (Heb. shelem, SHEH-lehm), as these gifts are to be a sign of reconciliation or friendship, but this is not the state of their relationship with God. All of the worship rituals here are supposed to be symbols of the people's real-life walk with the Lord, and offering them without true worship behind them is hypocritical.

23 Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols.

Celebrations and rejoicing in God's presence play an important part in Israel's temple worship, which God established. The Israelites use many kinds of musical instruments to praise God for His goodness and faithfulness (2 Chronicles 7; Psalm 149). In this instance, the Lord actually calls their songs noise. "Viols" in this case refers to lyre-shaped stringed instruments that are used to play music during worship. Instead of rendering the joyful noise of Psalm 100:1, the confusion and insincerity of their false actions creates a noise that the Lord does not want to hear. The Lord is not interested in music and singing that does not match the truth of

a worshipful lifestyle. He is not pleased with the songs of celebration at Temple given while the Israelites continue to treat the people around them, especially the poor, unjustly.

24 But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.

In this verse, often quoted by Martin Luther King Jr. during the Civil Rights Movement, God illustrates the nature of judgment (justice) and righteousness by using the phrases “run down as waters” and “as a mighty stream,” which speak of the ongoing and unobstructed movement of an ever-flowing body of water. The word for stream, *nakhal* (Heb. NAH-khall), is the word for the desert wadi. These small narrow valleys lay dry and barren for much of the year until a torrent of rain flooded them and made them into flowing streams. The Lord already laid out the stipulations of justice in His covenant, and He is waiting for His people to fill the dry and barren land with justice and righteousness as the rain fills up a desert wadi.

Note that Amos does not call the Israelites to simply “love your neighbor like rolling waters” but to practice justice. God wants His people to care not just for those in their same socioeconomic spheres, but for the lesser ones too. The Israelites’ righteousness is supposed to attract the Gentiles to God. Today, we must attract non-Christians not by our worship services alone but by showing that Christians uphold justice and righteousness in the world.

The word judgment here refers to the proper treatment of all people. The Hebrew word *mishpat* (meesh-POT) can refer both to the judge’s final verdict (judgment, KJV), and to that which is right according to the law (justice, NLT). When verdicts flow down like waters, the accused are tried quickly without lingering for years in jail pretrial. When that which is right runs down like waters, there is no stopping the forces of good from cleansing and nourishing the world. Elsewhere in the Bible, the words judgment and righteousness are also used together to describe God’s presence: “righteousness and judgment are the habitation of his throne” (Psalm 97:2). We do not invite God’s presence with our empty worship and sacrifices. We invite His presence with our attention to justice and righteousness that flows down from His very throne into our lives, neighborhoods, and the world. The core problem in the book of Amos is that the people in power are outwardly keeping the covenant of God in worship practices but are perverting justice and oppressing the poor and vulnerable (Amos 5:5–15).

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

The Coming Day of the Lord
(Zephaniah 1:14–18)

TUESDAY

Judgment Coming to the Nation
(Amos 5:1–3, 16–17)

WEDNESDAY

Seek the Lord, Establish Justice
(Amos 5:4–5, 14–15)

THURSDAY

Injustice Leads to Ruin
(Amos 5:6–7, 10–13)

FRIDAY

Lord of Creation and Judgment
(Genesis 1:4–9; Amos 5:8–9)

SATURDAY

God Loves All Peoples
(Hosea 2:14–23)

SUNDAY

Justice for the Poor and Distressed
(Amos 5:18–24)