

Honoring God



Called to Accountability

Study Scripture: Amos 5: 18-24

Background Scripture: Amos 5

Devotional Reading Psalms 78

Lesson 1

February 29, 2020

Key Verse

*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.
Amos 5:23-24*

INTRODUCTION

Our Study Lesson is focused on the negative consequences that will come when the people of God do not seek God. Israel and believers often talk about the promises of God. But it is to be noted carefully that it is one thing to know about the promises of God but quite another thing to possess them. The prophets in Israel certainly spoke often about the promises of God to the fathers for they wanted the people to know them. But they also stressed that the people had a Covenant responsibility to keep the Laws, the Testimony, and the Commandments of God. Remember that these words have different meanings. They cover the entire range of what God has established for man's benefit. God has left nothing out.

Jesus in the Upper Room discourse when speaking to the Apostles there and giving them detailed instructions therefore stated plainly, ***“If you know these things you're blessed if you do them”***.

Now notice that it is not that this prophet Amos was speaking to people who did not worship. They did sing faithfully to the Lord the songs recorded in Scripture, made great music with elaborate orchestras and musical scores to the Lord, observed the great festivals created by God, and offered sacrifices to the Lord.

But this behaviour of the nation of Israel, the Ten Tribes had over the years developed into a matter of national and personal rebellion against the Lord God and it was offensive to Him. God therefore instructed the prophet Amos to preach a funeral sermon to Israel in the style of a doleful unhappy slow funeral dirge which had the peculiar poetic and solemn form similar to what was used by David when he mourned over the death of Jonathan in 2 Samuel 1.

Jesus Teaches about True Worship

You can be sure that Amos was not happy to do this. He had to leave his business affairs in the Southern Kingdom in Judah, a kingdom that the Northern kingdom of Israel treated with great hostility though they were ethnic brothers and both descendants of Jacob.

But the **unpleasant** message of accountability though not sought for by the Northern kingdom was necessary to avoid tragedy. Similarly, the word of God from Amos for modern believers is urgently called for and we should expect that it would bring the same response of hostility and rejection by the men who heard the prophecy and sermon of Amos.

It is to be noted that these people in the Northern Kingdom had broken away from the Northern kingdom ruled by Judah the tribe that was in the line of David from which the promised Messiah would come. In addition, they had broken away from the teachings of the word of God in which God had specified that the official Worship was to be carried on in Jerusalem. Sacrifices were to be offered by the established priesthood in Jerusalem manned by those in the line of Aaron.

Special sacrifices on the annual Day of Atonement was to be made in Jerusalem.
The established Feasts of the Lord were to be celebrated in Jerusalem.
Political allegiance was to be made to God in Jerusalem.

But instead they had established a place of worship at Gilgal, the place where Israel had come through after crossing the **Jordan** River into the land of Canaan and where the men had been circumcised after coming through the wilderness. They had been rededicated there and renewed circumcision, the sign of covenantal renewing. Does not that sound like a good alternative place of worship to the one established by God?

Then the Northern kingdom established another worship place that figured prominently in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob recorded in Genesis 21, Genesis 26, and Genesis 46. God had appeared to all three there and promised that He would be with them and their descendants. So doesn't that sound like a good alternative choice to the place that God had chosen?

Then in addition they had established a place of worship at Bethel where Jacob had a remarkable vision of the ladder connected to Heaven with the angels of God ascending and descending upon it. God had appeared to Jacob there and confirmed that He would be with Jacob and accomplish the purposes that He had in mind for him. So there were great spiritual connections with Bethel. Would it not be right to use that alternative place for worship of God rather than the place in Jerusalem that God had established?

The astute political rulers had to solve the problem of cementing what they have done in the minds of the people so encourage them to worship at those shrines. Hence the cynical political choice of the locations of the shrines! The leaders of the Northern kingdom led by Jeroboam created images of gold that they said represented God. The people were encouraged to worship these images like they did the Golden Calf.

So there was conscious violation of what God had commanded. This was outright rebellion. This behaviour might not seem to some to be rebellion because they were worshiping and singing and celebrating. But though there was no extremely different forms of outward worship between the formal worship of the shrines and that at Jerusalem this was rebellion.

Piety that Honors God

So God gave Amos the message that the people were dead spiritually. All their religious activities and worship was dead, of no value to Him, because the Lord God was absent. God was left out. No one was seeking after God.

So remember therefore that when you are going to church regularly and doing all kinds of good things in the church, be careful. When you are doing the things you do and when people think you are doing good things this does not mean that you are really seeking the Lord. It's possible to be engaged in all kinds of nice endeavours and engaging in religious activities but you are not seeking the Lord at all. Worship needs entering into fellowship directly with God.

So Amos made it clear that they hated God and they hated His messenger for telling the truth of Scripture for they were not really interested in Scripture. One writer tells us what they were doing: **“They want to judge for themselves that which is correct. They have no regard at all for the word of God.....**

They were leaning on the defenceless, in fact, a kind of early protection racket. You impose heavy rent on the poor and then in addition since the poor don't have any other thing to rent then that which you are renting to them they say, because this is an act of cultural economy, we'd appreciate it very much if you would also give us part of the grain that you are producing this year from agricultural activities. So in other words, they were exacting heavy rent upon the poor and then taking further advantage upon them warning them that if they didn't do that, then, of course they might lose the place that they are renting at an exorbitant price.

Do you think those things happen today? Well don't think about the world. We know they happen in the world. Do you think they happen among believers, professing believers? Well, yes they do. They happen among professing believers.”

Amos therefore in chapter 4 told the people of the Northern kingdom that their transgressions are many and their sins are great for they distress the righteous and accept bribes and turn away the poor who go to the judges for remedy. They have no concern about their activities and what the Lord God thinks of them. They have no regard for moral integrity. They rigged the trials and you have to produce money, and let the judge see the colour of your money to get an acceptable verdict. The prudent person sees no evil even though they have a responsibility to see that justice is done. They do not speak up.

You can understand therefore the times and the position that the prophet was in because God had called him to deliver an unpopular message to challenge injustice.

We note therefore that the book of Amos is generally one of the most unpopular and neglected books of the Bible in the more affluent parts of the Christian world. Apparently the condition in 8th century B.C. Israel which Amos challenged sounds too much like what is happening in our lifetime in our country and in our churches. There is a distressing similarity between then and now.

Some people go so far as to accuse and criticize Amos for preaching a “social gospel” (this is used in a pejorative or in other words a slanderous sense) rather than preaching a simple gospel message about salvation only which involves turning away from sin and repenting. This of course allows us to remain as we are and if we are better off to work and compromise with the way of the world, while others who believe in God suffer from their rejection and unmet need.

Jesus Teaches about True Worship

On the other hand some see themselves as “an Amos” and turn themselves **into** today's social activists of the left, using Amos’ Book as a model for confrontation protest against the powers of the world. In many cases unfortunately however they do not follow the light of God's commandments and the behaviour of Amos in all respects.

This book addresses what God is really like and how the nature of God relates to how people should behave and how they should treat each other. The heart of God is so significantly different from the heart of those who call on His name, that the message of Amos is offensive to many.

Amos came from a little village about 10 miles outside Jerusalem and he was called by God to speak to his ethnic brothers who were politically separated from him and who would certainly not appreciate the “stranger”, though their kinsman, coming to straighten them out. So it is not surprising that they criticized him, threatened him, told him to shut his mouth and go back home. They did everything to run him out of town.

But he was simply carrying out God's instruction doing the right thing by speaking the truth in a very difficult situation and presenting God’s truth where Satan had corrupted and ruled. Note that being related by blood to someone will not protect or spare you when you witness.

During this period we are told that King Uzziah ruled reasonably well in Judah, while Jeroboam 11 was ruler in Israel. 2 Kings 14:23-27 tells us this Jeroboam *did evil in the sight of the Lord*, exactly like his earlier namesake who had led the 10 tribes into rebellion against God and into deep idolatry.

Prior to Amos, God had allowed the nation of Syria, otherwise called Aram, to oppress Israel, as a warning that they should abandon the idolatry instituted by the first King Jeroboam. Consequently, there was tremendous suffering in the kingdom and the people of Israel cried out to God for deliverance. God was compassionate to their plea and raised up enemies against the Syrians which forced them to relax their hold on Israel. This allowed the new King Jeroboam, even though he was evil, to re-establish the borders of Israel.

An Assyrian king then ruled over the surrounding nations, but Israel was protected and along with Judah, expanded its borders almost to the same extent as they were during the time of David and Solomon. One would think that Israel would have seen their turnaround in fortunes as a sign of God's mercy in responding to their cries for help. Sadly this was not so!

They reverted to their evil ways of living without God and were becoming increasingly prosperous because of their expanded borders and the freedom to trade without intervention by the Syrians and other enemies. The rulers allowed a few rich businessmen, the corrupt priesthood, and the elite to live a life of increasing luxury and ease, and to squeeze and oppress the poor to increase their wealth. The ruling classes, the King, the nobility, the priests and businessmen grossly exploited the people and justice became a casualty of their corruption.

This was a high point of prosperity, peace, great economic well-being and national strength and led to an extensive building program a notoriously, so that Amos described the people as being, *“at ease in Zion”*. Amos 6:1.

Piety that Honors God

All of the sins and evils prevalent during the prosperous reign of Solomon were back in vogue. The rich were becoming richer and the poor were becoming even poorer. There was no social concern. The well-to-do did everything they could to increase their profits, oppress the poor and both men and women without exception lived an indulgent life of luxury.

There was apostasy and religious decay. The people did go to the shrines regularly and put on a great show, boasted of their numerous sacrifices and even tithed three times a week. Religious ceremonies were extravagant. (Amos 4:4-5). One writer noted”

“They were well pleased with their efforts to sing praises to the Lord. But by way of contrast, Amos rejected the idea that quantity, numbers, and external show was really religion”.

God said He had established a plumb line to show how far Israel had moved away from His standard of righteousness. Accordingly there would be accountability. There would be tragedy. There would be a funeral. Since instead of a right relationship with God and being a blessing to others they become selfish and thought they could indulge themselves in pursuing their own personal interests there would be a reckoning.

The reasons for judgment had been clearly stated and the people were warned that they were not immune from judgment simply because they were the chosen people. There were among other sins:

1. Oppression worse than that suffered under the Philistines and others.
2. Economic exploitation of the poor and innocent
3. The justice system was so corrupt that the people were being sold into slavery for small debts or pledges
4. The women had become so insensitive that they were described unflatteringly as “cows of Bashan” who would only pressure their husbands for luxury to such an extent that their husbands would meet their demands only by oppressing the poor. (4:1-3).
5. They were engaging in pagan religious practices.
6. They have no respect for the servants of God. The people were even encouraging the Nazarites who had taken a vow not to drink wine, to break their pledge.
7. There was much sham worship and intense religious hypocrisy.
8. The people were going to Bethel, Gilgal, and the Beersheba shrines instead of going to Jerusalem to worship.
9. They were going to these shrines to sin rather than to worship.
10. A man and his father were using the same maiden sexually to profane God's holy name.
11. They drank wine in the house of God seized by those who had paid fines in the form of wine.

Verses 16-18. God now deals with His judgment because of the false hopes, the false allegiances, and the false worship of the people of Israel. There would be crying and wailing in all the streets and on all the highways. Staying in the city or going out on the highways will make no difference. The land **will** be full of funerals. There would be no rejoicing in the vineyards which were the places where one would normally expect feasting and enjoyment.

The oppressors would call on the farmers that they had been robbing by overcharging rents and demanding that they get in addition to the rents a part of the produce to mourn for them at their funeral. They would have to spend a lot of money hiring professional mourners to give the impression that some was sorry that they had died. They would have to hire a lot of people to make a lot of noise and shed tears and tear their clothes to make the mourning look real.

Jesus Teaches about True Worship

There will be weeping in the streets, on the highways, and in the vineyards because God will pass over them.

The prophet has recalled the time when Israel was in slavery in Egypt and God had told the Israelites to prepare to leave Egypt. To force the hand of the rulers to free them the Destroying angel would pass through the land and kill all the first born that were in houses that did not have the Passover blood on the doorposts.

But now there was nothing to protect the disobedient people. There was nothing to release the people from death. The people in Egypt then had obeyed God, and their actions showed that they were now going to follow God. But now the people of Israel though they had been warned and called to follow God they kept turning a deaf ear. So judgment was on its way. God had wanted the people to have a heart for Him but they had broken God's heart. Life without God was not going to look very nice.

God was going to “pass through” like He did in Egypt, but this time there was no redeeming blood to save them. The destruction of the nation would come at the hands of the Assyrians and not directly by the destroying angel. But God had sent the Assyrians and so the “passing over” had occurred. The thing that Amos prophesied came to pass in 722 B.C.

The hope of the people had been placed in the wrong things.

This prophet of justice had another warning.

The people had believed a doctrine which gave them great assurance but it was a false assurance. **So** they had become complacent. Both the inhabitants of the Northern and the Southern kingdoms believed that because of God's Covenant with them and God's promises there would be no judgment for them. They thought that they were all right no matter what they do. They thought that on that Day God would judge the Gentiles and Other people but He would deliver them.

This kind of false hope gripped them just as false hopes grip professing people today. In the time of Amos they thought that the Day of the Lord would be a great and marvellous day. But actually, said Amos, it would be the very opposite.

Some today make a great deal of escaping from judgment saying that they will escape the judgment of God on the earth. Like the people in that time of Amos who did not obey the commandments of God they do not seem to think that God expects them to have the right heart and the right behaviour toward the poor, the helpless, the dispossessed, and those that have no money for real justice. There is such a thing in the New Testament as measuring up to the Christian life.

So Amos told them that they were right that there would be a Day of Judgment for the citizens of the Northern kingdom and that the day of judgment in which they took so great a delight would not be so pleasant. It would not be the kind of Day they thought. They could shout all they wanted that the Lord was with them but in the situation to occur they would come to learn that God was not with them.

Verse 19. Amos therefore used an illustration to make clear what was going to happen to the nation and the people there. It would be a situation like that of a man who was out in the woods walking and he suddenly was confronted by a mountain lion. He would obviously be terrified and probably froze, but then he got his wits going and he ran as fast as he could to keep ahead of the lion.

Piety that Honors God

But then as soon as he thought he had escaped the lion, a bear met him.

Then in the nick of time he escaped the bear and went to his house escaping the lumbering bear. But then he wanted to rest for a little while but then before he laid down to rest he leaned his hand against the wall and in a crack in the wall there was a poisonous snake and the snake struck and bit him. Death had caught up with him. There was no escape.

Israel had escaped the Egyptians who one could say was the lion. They had escaped the Syrians and they had escaped the Philistines, the big enemies. But now the oppression, materialism, oppression, and indifference to the Lord had so corrupted society that it was decaying and now dead. That was the snake.

Verse 20. In a day of the Lord there would be a day of darkness instead of light. It would in fact be gloomy with no brightness. This meant that the people in the nation had given up relationship with the Lord for the many foolish things they had prized and so there was no personal worship of God and this meant darkness. The things they thought were great were not great in the sight of God. They did not show any of the virtues God wanted to see.

So let's look at what Amos was saying for it applies to us. Any personal faith would be seen in the justice and righteousness manifested in their life.

We often think that it is perfectly fine to say we have faith in God because we do not see Him physically before us, but in reality we have put Him off to the side somewhere and pay no attention in our day-to-day living to what He wants. When we do that we would be in darkness and there will be no light. We should be careful.

Verse 21. Remember now that God has very deep emotions. God says He is offended by their religious ceremonies, their Feast days and the sacredness assemblies.

Now note carefully that these were very religious people and they had more impressive festivals and ceremonies than anything we have in the Christian world. The Feasts of Passover, First fruits, Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Trumpets and all the other Feast of the Old Testament that we read about in Leviticus 23 were great festivals which were so impressive that one writer thinks that they make our Christian celebrations look amateurish. When the Priest came out on the Day of Atonement with the impressive garments described as beautiful garments of glory and beauty which represented the Lord Jesus Christ and the carrying out of His saving work with the millions of people shouting accompanied by harps and musical instruments and the singing of the skilled choirs it must have been quite something.

They were quite impressive kinds of events and much more elaborate and attractive than the things that we do to celebrate worship. But note that God said that though they had been told to celebrate them all the festivals stink. They were an offense in the nose of God. He would not even want to breathe the odour of the festivals.

Amos declares that anything offered to God from a heart which does not include righteousness and justice toward one another make their religious offerings a mockery. If there is no justice or righteousness in their dealings with others, their praises and songs mean nothing.

Jesus Teaches about True Worship

Verse 22. All their services were hypocritical. The burnt offerings, the meat offerings and the peace offerings to obtain favour from God would not be accepted. There would be no remission of sins, no matter how many burnt offerings they made. There would be no peace with God, no matter how many peace offerings they made. Righteousness and justice for others was a nonnegotiable matter for God. God would not accept any of their offerings since they were not obeying the terms of the Covenant.

Verse 23. The many musical instruments and singing praise to God would not make amends for their sins. Their singing was an abomination. Their singing and music were simply noise in the ears of God. God despised everything and considered that they were provoking Him when they came before Him. One writer states:

“Nothing is more hateful, more despicable, than hypocrisy. He that blesseth his friend with a loud voice, it shall be counted a curse, when it appears that his heart is not with him. God will not dwell in their solemn assemblies, for there is nothing in them that is grateful to him, but a great deal that is offensive.... he will not hear the melody of their viols; for, when sin is, it is ajar in the harmony, it grates in his ear”.

Verse 24. God desires justice. Israel would have to be reformed. Justice would have to be the basis for every decision by rulers. There would have to be no partiality or bribery. Justice should never be perverted or muddied with corruption.

The streams of righteousness and Justice would have to run like the mighty stream with no obstruction and nothing restricting its course. Judgment should never be bitter.

This verse which is the Key verse is very grand sounding. It represents the longings of those who are oppressed and who long for righteousness in society and justice in the Law courts. In North American and other societies these words of Amos used by Dr. Martin Luther King has struck a deep responsive chord.

But we must realize that though there has been some progress in the concerns Amos would raise, this progress has been very limited. Some might even argue that the present day rulers have worked actively to reverse some of the progress that had Amos. The church today in many respects have refused to accept that they are being called to Accountability. It is still being pointed out that in the United States and North America the churches practise segregation in worship.

So let us understand that the people in the present day are not much different from the people of the Northern and the Southern Kingdoms of Israel. This is Sad but true. We will therefore address the remnant and warn them to remember that we will all have to face the Judgment and even if we remain still saved, we do not want to be ashamed at His Coming.

CONCLUSION

Religious ceremonies will often offend God. Sacrifices will often offend God. Tithing and giving offerings will offend God if our heart is not right.

Prayer and praise is no substitute for justice and honesty. God will not accept us or our offerings if we go through all of the rituals without a broken heart and a love for God and man.

Piety that Honors God

God will not stomach exuberant worship without justice as the standard. Justice is inextricably a part of the nature of God, and He does not accept

- the abuse of wealth, the selling of the needy and the righteous
- the abuse of position, oppressing the poor and putting them aside
- the abuse of authority
- boastful complacency
- luxurious indulgence.

God will not tolerate any breaking of His Covenant, including the social covenant. If the leaders are corrupt, the offending nation and the offending church will be brought to an end. The book of Revelation tells us that the keys will be taken away from the church that is in iniquity. We are told that this is the position of the Lord God, of the sovereign God, the covenant keeping God.

God is a God of passion.

What does this mean for us? We cannot live for self. One writer who knows the truth about life and what God wants admits in his book:

“The overwhelming majority of the time I spend thinking about myself, reassessing myself, and when I am done there is nothing to spare for the needy. 6 billion people live in this world, and I can only muster thoughts for one. Me.”

It was clear that most of us when we look at the drama of life that surrounds us, regard other people as minor character that exist to make our life story better. We live for ourself and so the call of God to express righteousness and justice to others mean little or nothing to us.

We seem to forget that we are bought with a price and we are not our own. We must organize our lives the way that the Lord Jesus wants. Amos calls on us to do just that. The way to live is to repent and seek God. If we do not, know that everything is all over and the judgment of God will destroy us.

We are called to accountability. We do not want to be like the ripe fruit described in chapter 8. It is instructive for Christians to listen to these words of Amos and not neglect the so-called “social gospel”, thinking that our prayers and praise are all that is required of us. We might not be doing the precise things listed, but if we think about it, we are doing comparable things that offend God. Amos says in chapter 8:4-7

Hear this, O Ye that swallow up the needy, even to make the poor of the land to fail. Saying, When will the new moon be gone, that we may sell corn? And the Sabbath that we may set forth wheat, making the ephah small, and the shekel great, and falsifying the balances by deceit? That we may the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes; yea, and sell the refuse of the wheat? The Lord has sworn by the excellency of Jacob. Surely I will never forget any of their works”.

Are we going to follow the ways of the world?

Are we going to simply pray and praise without righteousness and justice?

Are we going to pay no attention to the evil that is happening around us?

Are we going to leave the fight against oppression to others and live in our little corner, enjoying the fruits of our labours?

Just remember that if we have not done what God wants to the ‘least of these the brethren’ we would not have done it to Him’.

Jesus Teaches about True Worship

We are accountable to God whether we like it or not. God wants spiritual integrity. It is in very short supply in the world. So sadly people can without fear of contradiction say many times that Christians do not behave better than the world. They fight, they steal, they rob, and they oppress.

May it not be said of us. May we live lives of righteousness and justice so that both will flow as a *mighty stream*.