

## Prayer

Gentle and loving Lord, bless us all in our family life. Bring love and joy and laughter to our homes, and a spirit of openness, honesty and compassion; and where these life-sustaining blessings have been compromised due to troubles and strife, bring reconciliation and understanding. May all of us who bear the responsibilities of family life find our true help and support in You, who knew family life in Galilee. AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*Read psalm 111 several times out loud in pure praise to God. Refrain from adding to these words, and be content with them; listen for the Lord's voice.*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray about the need for good church leaders.** *Pray for leaders in countries where there is persecution*
- *Pray for scientists working at the edge of knowledge*
- *Give thanks for the routines of daily life that nourish your soul*

## Meditation

Are we available when the Lord requires us?

Or, being otherwise occupied,

Do we fit the needs of the Kingdom of God

Around a pre-booked, personal calendar?

Are we available when the Lord needs us?

Or, being far too tired or lazy,

Do we stall, and put off His work until tomorrow

Because we do not want to do it today?

Are we available when the Lord needs us?

Or, being otherwise minded,

Do we imagine that the things we normally do

Are more important than the call to holy living?

Are we available when the Lord needs us?

Or, being blind to the Kingdom

Do we hold on to the world's greater temptations

Because we've long since sold our souls?

The Lord still calls and awaits our response

But will we turn back to His love?

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## Bible passage - Amos 4:1-5

<sup>1</sup> 'Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on the mountain of Samaria! You women who oppress the poor and crush the needy, and who say to your husbands, "Bring wine and let's drink!" <sup>2</sup> The Lord GOD has sworn on His holiness that look, the time is coming when they will pull you away with hooks, yes, the last of you with fishhooks! <sup>3</sup> You will be dragged by the straightest route through the breached walls, and you will be flung out into Harmon,' says the LORD.

<sup>4</sup> 'Come to Bethel and sin; to Gilgal, and sin even more; bring your sacrifices each morning and your tithes every three days; <sup>5</sup> bring a thanksgiving offering of leavened bread, and proclaim freewill offerings. Tell everyone about them, as you love to do, O people of Israel!' says the Lord GOD.

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# Bible Study

## Review

**In these two brief prophecies, Amos exposes the sins of arrogant selfishness and religious self satisfaction, and declares them openly as an insult to God**

Amos ploughs on in his quest to confront Israel with her sins, and we are left wondering what the people who first heard his prophecies made of them. In general, people who hear that they have done something wrong will either be humbled by the message and accept it, or they will strongly oppose it. So although many Israelites would have been affronted by what Amos said about social injustice and irreligion, others may have listened and perceived something of the truth. They would have already been concerned about oppression and godlessness within the nation, but it was only when Amos spoke that they realised he was a prophet of God and gave voice to their feelings.

In our passage today, Amos delivers two brief prophecies that strike at heart of Israel's sins. Each of them begins with a cutting dramatic picture, and continues with God's comments on the sins that have been exposed. The first prophecy parodies the excesses of the rich in Samaria (4:1-3) and the second makes a mockery of the religious rituals practiced at sacred shrines of Israel (4:4,5). If we have followed everything that Amos has said so far, then we will recognise these themes as the twin pillars of God's complaint against Israel; social injustice and religious apostasy.

To begin with, Amos rounds on the profligate women of northern Israel, which he calls 'Samaria', after its capital city, with a direct insult! Yes, here in this prophecy Amos calls the women of Samaria 'cows' (4:1)! Various scholars have tried to explain why Amos should call women 'cows', but we cannot escape the fact that in Hebrew just as in English, it is insulting to liken women to cows! His exact phrase is 'cows of Bashan', which is a reference to cattle reared in Bashan on the far northern side of the Jordan and Lake Galilee. The region was famous for its fatted cattle, which provided the best animals for ritual slaughter at the sanctuaries and also the best beef for eating. So, Amos compares the rich women of Samaria to the fattened cows of Bashan, awaiting slaughter! It is hard to think of a more pointed insult!

Yet the message of the prophecy is not found in the insult, for this is only the startling picture that arrests our attention. Amos paints a picture of profligate and self-centred excess amongst the rich, and prophesies that the days of their indulgence are ending. Indeed, they will end violently. He describes a horrendous scene of people being dragged with fishhooks straight out through the walls of their cities after they have been overcome in battle and defeated (4:3). In days long before visual arts and drama, Amos' prophecies require an X rating for violence!

But we must not be distracted by the picture, for in the midst of this prophecy, Amos hints at something important about why this awful judgment must take place. In verse 2, the Lord God swears by '*His holiness*' that He will deal with Israel, and this phrase suggests that Israel, God's 'holy' nation, has profaned what is holy. She has sinned by living according to her own wants and desires. Selfishness has replaced godliness, as it always does, and if God is to re-establish His witness in the world, He must act for the sake of His holiness.

The second prophecy is no less awful, though less directly insulting. Amos issues a classic summons to worship, saying, '*come to Bethel ...*' and he calls for the standard ritual practices of daily sacrifices, regular tithes, and thanksgiving as well as free-will offerings (4:5). Nevertheless, the result of this dedication to ritual is no more than sin in God's eyes, he says, '*come to Bethel ... and sin*' (4:5)! Indeed, the sin is endemic in Israel, because for a proud people, the practice of religion has itself replaced God.

It is shocking to read Amos' insults and cynicism, but this is his prophecy. Such tactics cannot always be defended, but we must be in no doubt that God will use them where necessary, to make His people face the truth about their self-centredness. This is God's Word at its most sharp and most urgent.

### Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Profligacy and ignorance of God
- Holiness
- The threat of war
- The insult of religious practice without God

## Notes on the text and translation

#### **V1 'who say to your husbands'**

All translations are similar at this point, but it is still worth noting that the term 'husbands' translates the Hebrew 'adonai' meaning 'Lords'. This same word is used to speak of God Himself as the 'Lord God', and it is possible that Amos was taking advantage of this in a word play. If we add to this the fact that the word 'Ba'al' also means 'master' or 'lord', then we can see that there is ample scope for any play on words (see study)

#### **V2 'holiness'**

The Hebrew word for holiness 'qadesh' is used frequently in the Old Testament, yet it is not always understood. Something that is holy is something that is of God and not of this world, and only God can make something 'holy'; it is different and set apart from the things of ordinary life. There is no place in the Bible for the idea that something special to our religious practice is 'holy', for it is not us who make this designation. Holiness is God's and God's alone.

#### **V4 'sin'**

The word for sin used here is 'pesach', meaning to transgress or rebel. Amos specifically refers therefore to deliberate deviation from the ways of the Lord, not casual or unfortunate misunderstanding or the like. This word denotes the most serious form of sin.

#### **V5 'Tell everyone about them, as you love to do, O people of Israel!'**

##### Other translations:

*'boast about them, you Israelites, for this is what you love to do ...'* (NIV)

*'publish them, for so you love to do, O people of Israel ...'* (NRSV)

The Hebrew says poetically 'make them heard about, just as you love, O people of Israel', and each translator finds a way of expressing this. It is also clear that Amos speaks here with cynicism, for Israel like to think that she is religious and has in fact lost sight of the true holiness of God.

## Going Deeper

### **Profligacy and ignorance of God**

The whole region around Samaria is picturesque, and regarded as one of the beautiful parts of the central regions of Israel, with hills rising on each side of the valley and fertile fields with vineyards and crops such as wheat and barley. This was why King Omri bought the land for his capital (1 Kings 16:24), and if there was anywhere in Israel where life should be good, it was here.

With an economy of words, Amos' prophecy describes a simple truth known to us even today, which comments on the consequences of such good living. He observes that when people become self content they forget God. We can easily construct a mental picture of the affluent circumstances and gratification behind verse 1. Israel's men had created wealth through economic means such as trading, and whilst engaged in this, their wives lorded it over their households. Most significantly, Amos complains that the women oppressed the poor and needy. There is no other accusation like this in the Bible, for Amos observes that women had broken the bonds of their own oppression only to act with cruelty against servants and the poor. Meanwhile, they drank to excess and made sure that their husbands provided the necessary liquor! Binge drinking amongst women is not just a modern phenomenon!

There are many parallels to be drawn with our own world today, but we must keep close to Amos' point, which is that self-centredness and materialism draws men and women away from their God. Amos was not just observing a characteristic of Israel in the eighth century BC, he put his finger on something that continues to haunt God's people, especially those who live in the midst of relative material wealth. The remarkable thing about this passage is that this is the first place in the Bible where this point is forcefully made. Centuries later, Jesus picks up on this in his teaching about wealth and worry in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 6,7).

### **Holiness**

Living in the Christian era we are used to the idea that God's holiness has been shared with us through Jesus Christ, and His sacrifice for us breaks down the barriers between earth and heaven. We therefore do not have such a developed sense of the holiness of God as is found in the Old Testament. So when Amos says '*The Lord God has sworn on His holiness ...*' (4:2), we tend to read on, thinking that this is just some form of emphatic oath.

In truth, Amos could hardly have said anything stronger. As a prophet, he said these words only with utter conviction, for they would have sounded ridiculous without such certainty. The punishment of God against those of His people who had become apparently self sufficient and ignorant of their God was something of enormous importance. God had deigned to cross the great divide between heaven and earth to choose His own people, to have a covenant relationship with them so that they would demonstrate something of His glory in the earth. But if His own people ignored Him, they blasphemed against His holiness. For the sake of His holiness, God could not allow such a tainted witness to Him to continue, and He took an oath to destroy it.

We may wonder whether Amos simply said this in order to make a forceful point, for there were indeed other prophets of the day who claimed to know what God had said or would do. But the reason we have the book of Amos in Scripture is because those who heard Amos wrote down what He said, and history proved that God did indeed punish Israel by bringing the northern nation to an end, only a few decades after Amos spoke. Part of the armoury of the prophet is to say that God will do certain things and risk their reputation on whether what they say comes true. So although verse 2 sounds as if Amos might describe God swearing an oath in order to make a point, we must remember that his words are in Scripture for a good reason.

### ***The threat of war***

Amos has skilfully used scaring images of battle and war. He has already compared God's saving of Israel from battle as like saving pieces of a sheep that has been slaughtered by a lion (3:12)! Here, he describes an awful practice of invading armies of evicting the occupants of a city they have sieged swiftly and with violence force. They have destroyed the walls of the city completely, so that there is no obstacle to this eviction, and people are dragged out with fishhooks. Such violence would seem fanciful if there were not similar descriptions elsewhere (e.g. Habakkuk 1:15), and part of the art of war in those days was to use the implements of agriculture and fishery in battle.

There is no way of taming the fact that war is violent, and people die violent deaths in battle (4:3). Neither can we escape the fact that war is brought on Israel as punishment by God, indeed, everything Amos has said about the punishment of Israel has hinted at war and invasion. Chapter two contains a prophecy of Israel fleeing from battle in the midst of the horror of defeat (2:14-16), and chapter three contains Amos' prophetic invitation of Egypt and Ashdod to survey Israel as ripe targets for invasion. We are beginning to get the picture that the main theme of Amos' prophecy is the military defeat of Israel as God's punishment for her sins.

We find it hard to read about war and battles today, and we certainly find it hard to think that God is somehow involved in this violence of humanity. It is better if we try to see that Amos and God's people of old perceived that God was involved in every aspect of human life, including war, and this of itself does not imply anything bad about God, just that He is to be found in this world along with everything in it. His perfect will is not war but peace, but we should be in no doubt, God fights evil.

### ***The insult of religious practice without God***

Now, Amos was speaking at Bethel and this was the principal shrine of worship to the Lord God in that part of northern Israel. Bethel had grown as a religious centre because it was where Jacob had slept and dreamt of God's angels ascending and descending from heaven (Genesis 28:12f.). Gilgal, which is also mentioned in this prophecy was the place where Israel had camped when re-entering the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua (Joshua 4,5), and was equally valued as a religious shrine.

Northern Israelites did not have the Temple at Jerusalem, and they valued the sites of Bethel and Gilgal as evidence of their close connection with the God of their forefathers, but without the Temple, how did they worship God there? The answer is partly provided by Amos, who lists the bringing of sacrifices every morning, tithes every three days, and the sacrificial offerings of thanksgiving and freewill. This is similar to the sacrificial worship offered to God in the Jerusalem Temple by the Judeans, and the Israelites did this presumably because they felt it was the right thing to do. Amos suggests that they were proud of what they did! But it was not what God required.

Verses four and five take the form of an invitation to people to come and worship God, and we will find that here, just as later on in chapter 5, Amos uses a classic 'call to worship' to parody the religious practices of Israel. The usual call would be 'come to Bethel and worship the Lord', but Amos calls out '*come to Bethel and sin; to Gilgal, and sin even more!*' (4:4).

There are two possible reasons why Amos declares that the worship at Bethel and Gilgal is 'sin'. Firstly, as Amos has already remarked (2:7,8), worship at Bethel was tainted by the fact that not only was God worshipped there, but the Ba'al gods were also worshipped. Archaeological evidence shows that altars for the worship of the Lord God and also for the worship of Ba'al frequently stood side by side in the Israel of those days, and it was difficult for people to know the difference. Indeed, some scholars suggest that the

sacrificial offerings and tithes could as much be for Ba'al as for the Lord. We will see whether this theory is born out by later prophecies of Amos.

The other reason why Amos might have described the worship as sin was for the same reason just identified. The people of Israel had compromised their relationship with God through the sins of materialism and self centeredness, and no 'correct' worship could be offered if the people were not committed wholly to the Lord in covenant faithfulness. True worship reflects the worshipper, so the worship offered at these shrines was tantamount to sin.

## Application

From this point onwards, Amos' words strike home to us today because of our problems with materialism. Our world today has often been likened to the comfortable world of the Israelites of the mid eighth century BC. In those days, many people were wealthy and were able to account for their own needs, just as many people are today. But this apparent wealth and success has always been mixed up with sinfulness, as Amos points out in our passage, and is clear to us in our own day. For example, the proper liberation of women from the shackles of domination have unfortunately led many younger women to act like young men, and succumb to the gods of selfishness, of fashion and binge drinking. Also, the proper and traditionally morally prudent role of the 'banker' within modern society has been defaced by the greed of the few, so that trust has evaporated and society disserved. God looks on these things and sees sin, moreover, He looks to warn people of the dangers of materialism at every level, especially where His people live in its grip.

The message of Amos is confirmed by the New Testament, for the judgement of God on all sin is indeed absolute. He fights it and will prevail. The Christian must therefore read passages such as this and spot all its hints about the nature of sin, for we must avoid it at all costs. Firstly, we must be conscious of the affects of materialism and the way that it fundamentally erodes faith. The way that it does this today is possibly different to that in Amos' day, but the prophet was right to point to excess, alcohol, male/female relationships and the practice of religion as some of the main routes by which the materialistic person wanders from God. It is up to us to follow Amos' leads.

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## Discipleship

### **Questions** (for use in groups)

1. Can it ever be right to think of the horrors of war as being inflicted upon people today as judgement from God?
2. In what ways do people still go to worship God and yet harbour sin in their lives? Discuss examples of this.
3. How do people 'show off' their faith today in inappropriate ways, and how can you make sure that you do not do this yourself?

### **Personal comments by author**

*This passage of Scripture reminds us yet again of the danger of becoming so wrapped up with our own lives that we fail to honour our Lord properly. Great vigilance is required of each of us to make sure that we do not become wrapped up in our own little worlds and live as if we alone matter to God and not much else. God's world is so much bigger, and there are challenges out there beyond our understanding, if we will rise to what the Lord is saying to us. Our Lord is always calling us on to other things and to greater challenges. Yet for as long as Satan keeps us trapped in our world, we must hear Amos' words and realise that God is calling us on.*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *At the weekend, you will probably be going to worship the Lord in some way together with other people. Remembering Amos' words 'come to Bethel ... and sin!' (4:4), spend time in prayer asking the Lord to enable You to go to worship tomorrow in a true state of worship.*
- *Pray for God's people that they do not fall into sin as the people of Old testament times did. Pray that the Holy Spirit will work amongst God's people to bring light into the church and into the world.*

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## **Final Prayer**

Lord Jesus Christ, save us from becoming so wrapped up with our own lives and our own work that we do not give to You or to listen to Your voice. Bless us we pray with a spirit of discernment so that we may hear Your words of warning when we forget You, and bless us with Your presence, we pray: AMEN

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