

dead serious

amos 5

One of the unique things about Christianity is that we are offered joy in spite of circumstances. I'm thankful for that as we read the news each week. The world can be very demoralizing, but there's joy in our faith. There's love and peace and wisdom. There are good things. But that doesn't mean that our spiritual lives aren't also very serious.

In fact, God uses very serious language when He's talking about spirituality and our response to Him. He talks about it in terms of life and death. In the Garden of Eden, remember, He said, "The day you eat of this fruit, you're going to die." And that began a struggle between life and death.

In Deuteronomy chapter 30, a text we've referenced before in these studies, we read:

Deuteronomy 30.15-18a - See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess. But if your heart turns away so that you do not hear, and are drawn away, and worship other gods and serve them, I announce to you today that you shall surely perish.

Amos chapter 5 presents to us life and death. It opens with a lamentation, which is a dirge or a funeral song. It brings many images of death to our minds. But it also repeats a certain phrase: "Seek Me and live." So we see very clearly the stakes of life and death as God speaks to His people.

So, here's what the Lord says, starting in verse 1:

Amos 5.1-27 - Hear this word which I take up against you, a 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."

For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel: "Seek Me and live; But do not seek Bethel, Nor 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 waters 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. 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 have 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 you have spoken. Hate evil, love good; Establish justice in the gate. It may be that the Lord God of hosts Will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

Therefore the Lord God of hosts, the Lord, says this: “ There shall be wailing in all streets, And they shall say in all the highways, ‘Alas! Alas!’ They shall call the farmer to mourning, and skillful lamenters to wailing. In all vineyards there 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? “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 Sikkuth your king And Chiun, 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.

The great thing about Amos for us is not just the message that we receive, but also the example of the messenger. This is a great guy, a great servant of the Lord. He lived it. Because this right here is not an easy message to deliver. I need to remind myself that he actually said this stuff to God’s people in an effort to save them from the coming Assyrian captivity. And Amos *knew* that the people weren’t going to like it. He said it right there in our text. And it wasn’t a popular message. Especially because the people of Israel seemed very spiritual. They were very religious and were still carrying out their traditions. And they were super successful money-wise, which they often interpreted as God’s favor. But Amos was being used by God to reveal their sin, and the revelation of sin is never a pleasant thing. It’s never fun to be the person to go to someone and say, “You’re so selfish and greedy and proud that God can’t tell the difference between you and an Amorite.”

Yet, Amos was faithful. He was faithful to carry the message he had been given. He didn’t hold back because he might lose some prominence in his social circles. He didn’t downplay God’s message because it might make him seem like an outcast or a weirdo. He did what God asked him to do. And He pursued God’s calling on his life. He didn’t delay it or avoid it, he pursued it. And, interesting tidbit from this chapter specifically, we can see that he also pursued God’s word in his personal life. Commentators and scholars will point out that verse 8 is a reference to the book of Job and scholars see correlations there which indicate that Amos was quite familiar with Job’s book.

And as we evaluate Amos the messenger, we should be inspired. Because, as we’ve talked about before, at the end of the day, Amos wasn’t special. He wasn’t a prophet (educationally or

vocationally) or the son of a prophet. He wasn't a priest. He was just willing. He was willing to pursue God. And that willingness has had an incalculable effect over the last 2,800 years as people have been ministered to by God through this book. And the more we learn about this guy, the more we should be able to identify with him. He was just like anyone else, but he was willing to be used by God and He pursued God's word and God's calling on his life. He is a stunning messenger.

But next we come to the message itself. Week to week I think we've seen that this old, Jewish book *does* have a lot for us as Church-age believers, and today is no exception. And as we read through this chapter, seeing some of the language, I can't help but be reminded of the Passover in Exodus. There in verse 17 we see God talking about how He was going to pass through their midst and destroy those who weren't turning to Him for salvation. It feels a lot like Exodus 12. There, God laid out His plan of coming judgment, He said that the people needed to remove leaven from their houses, sacrifice a choice lamb and then paint the blood on their doorposts as a sign of the fact that they had turned their hearts in trust and dependence on God. And as the Lord passed through the camp, there was life for those who identified with Him and death for those who did not.

In Exodus, God told the people to turn from leaven. And He instituted an annual observance of what had happened. It was to be the beginning of their months, the start of each year, as they turned from leaven and toward God.

In our text, God is asking His people to turn from a number of things. Really He's asking them to turn *TO* Him, but He reveals their sin and shows them that they need to turn from idolatry, turn from greed, turn from afflicting the poor, turn from taking bribes, turn from these sins so that they might live and not die.

We want to briefly look at a few of these things God highlighted so that we can be sure we've swept them from our own lives.

First, idolatry. From cover to cover, it seems that God's people will always struggle with setting up some god in place of Jehovah. Rachel brought her father's household idols into her marriage with Jacob. The Israelites often found themselves adopting the paganism of whoever their neighbors were. We see it happening so often because as human beings we have a propensity to worship things which aren't the Lord. And everyone one of us is going to struggle with this on some level, in some way. God commands that our worship be solely and purposefully reserved for Him. Now, the Bible has a bunch of different words that we render as 'worship' in English. Obviously, the one we most think of is the idea of bowing down in submission before a person or an object. Certainly, we understand the act of pagan idolatry, but I think we all know that worship extends to more than statues and prostration. Other definitions of worship in the Bible are those things which we adore. Those things which we give our affection to. Those things which we present ourselves before to find satisfaction and fulfillment. These are the areas in which idolatry can creep up in our lives. And since God has gone to such lengths to warn us, we should take very seriously our propensity to put some god, some pursuit, some supply of pleasure before the God who made us and saved us.

God, above all other things, want exclusivity. Some of us waited year after year for AT&T's iPhone exclusivity to end. And now that phone is available on a variety of carriers. But God demands exclusivity. And so He commands His people to turn from idolatry and to Himself.

Next, we see again a lot of talk about the oppression and exploitation of the poor. God's people had moved away from caring for those who were impoverished and had figured out ways to capitalize off of them. They added to the burdens of the poor. They stripped away what little the poor had. They took and took and took as their greed and their lust for wealth grew and grew. And here, as we see this language that God spoke through His prophet, we see that the Lord cares very deeply about the poor in our society. That's the deal.

Now, listen, the Lord isn't a communist. But He's not a capitalist either. God is an individualist, in the sense that He comes individually to us and He says, "What's in your hand? Is it 10 talents? 5 talents? 1 talent? Is it a bag of gold or a bag of rice? What are you doing with that?" Because relationally speaking, God gave *everything* to us. He gave it all. He did not withhold life. He did not withhold truth. He did not withhold grace. He did not withhold forgiveness. He did not withhold His Son. And, *since* He did not withhold those things from us, He's interested in how we give to or withhold from others.

1 John 3.14-15 - We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death. Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

So the Bible says to us that if the *life* of Jesus is within me as an individual, shouldn't I treat people the way Jesus has treated me? The way He loved me and forgave me and sacrificed to help me? That seems to be the idea that Jesus had in mind. He said the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with everything that you are and then He said that the second is like it, or is equal to it: Love your neighbor as yourself. And so if the life of Christ is within me, then the way I give to others should mimic the way God has given to me.

Third sin God was calling His people to turn from was their self-sufficiency. This is a big one. Who doesn't want to be a 'self-made man'? But this idea has been repeated in Amos. The people had built all this wealth, all these houses, all these fortresses. But God was coming in judgment and all of that was going to be knocked down and wiped out. In fact, the ratio He uses in the text is 90%. He looks at their cities and He says, "90% of these people are going to die."

It's often quoted and ascribed to many teachers, but it's been said that if the Holy Spirit left the Church tomorrow, 90% of the work would probably continue unchanged. Obviously that's a generalization, but it shines a light into how self-sufficient we try to be. And what God wants is dependence. He wants us to be utterly and unashamedly dependent on Him to live and move and have our being. Because that which is done in the flesh is going to burn, it won't endure.

Fourth, God was asking His people to turn away from their sin of neglecting righteousness. You see this talked about in verses 7 and 24. He said, "You guys have laid down righteousness and gone your own way and what I want is for you to put on righteousness again."

The same principle is explained to us in the New Testament. As believers, God has *given* us His righteousness. But we've got to put it on. We've got to walk in it. We've got to let the mind of Christ control our thinking. His righteousness with all its love and discernment and wisdom has to be put on daily if we hope to experience its benefits.

God was lamenting over Israel. He was singing their funeral song. He looked at His people and He said, "You guys are dead. Your love for Me is dead, your love for others is dead. Our relationship is dead." Kind of reminds me of Jesus' letter to the church at Ephesus. But like Ephesus, like Amos, all of these problems, all of these sins, all of this missteps are solved by turning to Jesus. Not by rituals or programs or complex acts. We find life by turning to Jesus, who *IS* life.

Now remember, God is all about resurrection. He wants to bring life to that which is dead. Not just for eternity after physical death, but He's all about resurrection right now. Because the resurrection doesn't just bring immortality in heaven, it also brings power on the earth. God can bring back that which was dead. And even when He looks at the Israelites and says, "Man, you guys are *dead!*" He follows up with the chance for them to live again.

And this is true in our own lives. If we've left our first love for the Lord, if some area of righteousness or Godliness has, in a sense, died in our day to day activities, God is ready and willing to bring it back to life. Now, like I said, the point of the Christian life isn't a list of things we do. The Lord in this text says He hates, He despises religion without relationship. But, as James and John point out in their epistles, if we are alive in Christ, then His life is going to spill out in the things that we do. That's the power of the resurrection. The life of Christ isn't just an immortal future, but it's a power and mission in this life as well. And we can gauge our spiritual vitality by evaluating where we're at with purging idolatry. With sacrificially giving to the poor. With putting on righteousness. Those things help us measure spiritual vitality. Because those are things the Lord says will be a part of the life that He's giving to us, that He's implanting in His people.

God wants us to be in love with Him and be dependent on Him and be in pursuit of Him so that we can live the incredible life He wants us to live. Seek God and live as He adds all these things far above what we could ask or imagine for ourselves.