

preppies

amos 4

Amos chapter 4 is where we find ourselves this morning. Through His prophet, God continues to list His charges against the nation of Israel.

We saw last week that our God is a God of love and tenderness. He is a God who cares deeply for His people and, despite the anger He feels toward sin, the Lord does not delight in bringing judgment on sinners. Sadly, His own people, knowing who He is and how He loves, still find themselves sinning from time to time, and in the case of the nation of Israel, they had fully moved out of their relationship and into idolatry and the wickedness that flows from it.

So, the message continues, starting in verse 1.

Amos 4.1-13 - 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!" The Lord God has sworn by His holiness: "Behold, the days 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 Harmon," Says the Lord. "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 God.

"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, When there were still three months to the harvest. I made it rain on one city, 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. "I blasted you with blight and mildew. When your gardens increased, Your vineyards, Your fig trees, And your olive trees, The locust devoured them; Yet you have not returned to Me," Says the Lord. "I sent among you a plague after the manner of Egypt; Your young men I killed with a sword, Along with your captive horses; I made the stench of your camps come up into 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; Yet you have not returned to Me," Says the Lord. "Therefore thus will I 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, Who declares to man what this thought is, And makes the morning darkness, Who treads the high places of the earth— The Lord God of hosts is His name.

Admittedly, the Prophetic books of the Old Testament are not where most of us spend the bulk of our devotional life. We read a passage like this and it can be hard to get into a teachable position since we're *not* Jewish and we're *not* Ba'al worshipers. I don't think any of us set up

an Ashtoreth pole this morning before we left the house. And throughout these books there's often talk about the different sacrifices and different historical events and things that we don't necessarily have a personal or cultural connection to.

But we have to step back and realize that this is God's word. And He's recorded this message for us that we might learn and be warned as well. There were all sorts of prophets. God spoke often to His people. But there's something about Amos that God wants to be sure that we get. Things He wants us to understand. And I think there's a little clue to that in the closing verses of this chapter. Look again at verse 12:

Amos 4.12-13 - "Therefore thus will I 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, Who declares to man what this thought is, And makes the morning darkness, Who treads the high places of the earth— The Lord God of hosts is His name.

God there explains His eternal power, He explains that man is going to stand before Him one day, and He explains that He's not just dealing with an isolated situation, but He's talking about the thoughts of man and the practice of humankind when we're not living a life that pursues relationship with our Creator. And so, the message of God regarding sin, regarding His plan, regarding His heart for the earth transcends generation or culture and is applicable to us today as well as the individual Israelites in Amos' time.

Now, over and over again we see this phrase 'you have not returned to Me' so we know this is a passage about repentance. Then, there at the end the Lord says, 'hey, get ready to meet your Maker.' And what we see is that God *is* going to bring people to Himself at the end of their lives, a moment in time that He can see approaching, and He encourages us to be prepared. Be ready. And the Jews were not ready. That's why He's sending a prophet to them, to warn them of the inevitable fact that one day we will be standing before God to give an account and this life is given to us to prepare for that moment.

And, really, even if you haven't read Amos before, these ideas aren't anything new. Jesus presented these ideas frequently in parables about the moment of Christ's return for us and that time when we will stand before our Master to account for what has happened during our lives on the earth. And so, these warnings that we see given to God's people in Amos have value for us today. So let's look at what God had to say to those people who had been called by His name.

Amos 4.1a - Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria...

It's interesting to me that God called them cows. God gives us analogies to understand Him, and when talking about our relationship He uses a specific animal to represent His people. There are a lot of different analogies, but the most famous animal we are compared to is not the cow, but the sheep.

Psalm 23.1 - The Lord is my Shepherd...

Psalm 100.3 - ...we are His people and the sheep of His pasture.

But, in God's eyes, the people of Samaria were cows, not sheep. It's sort of interesting to think about that and chew on it a little. Cows and sheep are pretty similar. Both are livestock. Both give milk. Sheep give wool for clothing, cows give leather. On some level they seem similar. But if you inspected a cow and inspected a sheep you'd see very quickly that they are completely different. And God came to His people and said, "I want you to be My *sheep* and I want to be your Shepherd."

But, what we're seeing in Amos is that the people had slowly changed course and were heading in a different direction than God was. They weren't in agreement with the Lord anymore and they were becoming something else. And, from God's perspective, they weren't even recognizable as sheep anymore, they had become cattle, a completely different animal.

Verse 1 continues:

Amos 4.1b - ...[you] who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, "Bring wine, let us drink!"

A major, major theme in Amos and the other prophetic books and the whole Bible really, is the fact that God judges those who mistreat the poor. And this is something that we *have* to pay attention to. We may have opinions about poor people. We may have anger over the problems in the social welfare system that our country has. But, the bottom line for the Christian is this: God is on the side of the poor. God takes up the cause of the poor. And it is unacceptable to God when His people mistreat or ignore the poor.

Now, here's another sobering fact: Using data from the World Bank and other global population data, if you make \$25,000 a year, you are richer than 90% of the 7 billion people who are alive on the earth today. If you make \$50,000 a year, you are richer than 99%. That's just the deal. We find ourselves in a very blessed, very affluent situation. Of course everything is relative and not every person who makes less than us is impoverished, but we have to start taking hold of the idea that God cares very deeply about how we assist the poor. He looked at the Israelites and said, "You crush the needy, you oppress the poor, and that's sin and I'm going to judge it."

Now remember, directed at us:

James 1.27 - Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

and,

Matthew 25.41-45 - "Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.'

"Then they also will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?' Then He will answer

them, saying, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.'

We have a responsibility to the poor and the needy. This is an issue that is very, very serious to God. And it was an issue that was bringing national judgment onto the Children of Israel alongside their idolatry.

We see something else in these verses and in the passages we've already read in Amos - wine was flowing. Winter and summer houses were being built. The Israelites were living the good life. Living large.

As we study the history of the nation of Israel or the lives individuals like Saul or Solomon, we find that often times the good life opens the door to less Godliness rather than more. There's nothing wrong with being blessed by God, even materially. The Lord certainly doesn't promise material blessing to all of us, but we know that He does allow that sort of physical affluence in the lives of His people from time to time. Abraham, Job, Solomon. But what we find is that physical affluence often leads to excess in life. It can lead to spiritual relaxation because, if we're not careful, more of our focus gets put on the enjoyment of temporal things rather than the investment of eternal things. That is the danger of wealth. And the more we focus on temporal things, the less fortified we're going to be in our spiritual lives and the less invested in eternity we will be.

And we need fortification. God says, "Listen, there are adversaries out there seeking to destroy you. There's a sin nature that I've crucified, but it's still lurking around waiting for a foothold in your life. It wants to destroy you. And, on top of that, you're in a dark world, in enemy territory, trying to extract prisoners on My behalf."

Temporality, this life on the earth, is given to us for preparation, for building, for service, and for enduring. It's not given to us for luxury or inactivity. The life we've received comes with purpose and assignment.

There's joy in the Christian life. There's rest. There's blessing. We're not all called to be ascetics. But the world we find ourselves in is filled with prisoners of war. The war is won, but we've been sent to rescue, not retire. Retirement is coming! Eternal luxury is being prepared for us and I'm excited about that, but this life right now is meant to be the life of a builder and a fighter and a runner, not a lounge. And so often God warns His people to make sure we're keeping our heads in the game. Because He's really serious about this life. He's serious about rescuing people from sin. He serious about building His Church and building His Kingdom. And He wants His people to be prepared. To have our heads in the game.

I remember once when I was a freshman in high school I was on the basketball team, and I was just terrible. One game in particular I finally got put in, which was rare, and as soon as I got buzzed in, they passed me the ball and I had a clear route to the hoop and I put in my lay up...in the wrong basket. And, I understood you can't keep players like that in the game. We understand that. But when we're talking about people's lives and people's eternal destinations, we have to be dedicated about doing what we're supposed to be doing. Living Godly. Making disciples. Tending to the poor and the oppressed. God is serious about this work He's given us.

And what happens is that, whether it's us or it's the Jews or whoever else, there are eternal moments that present themselves. Moments where we're presented with some choice where one direction leads to God and the other leads away from Him. 'Choose this day whom you will serve.'

What we're seeing in Amos is that when God's people choose sin, when we choose to walk away from the direction God is going, we're putting ourselves on a track that leads outside of God's desire, outside of His provision, outside of His protection, like the prodigal who ran away from home. And God does a lot of work to warn us when we're headed that way. He puts up many, many 'Bridge Out!' signs. But, the only way for us to get off of that track when we're on it is repentance. Turning around, returning to God and getting back on the road He wants us.

And repentance is a fruit that we have to bring forth. God brings a lot of fruit in our lives. But the fruit of repentance is in our hands. It's ours to bring out.

And here's the thing: the Israelites seemed spiritual. They did all sorts of religious things. They had their religious culture and their rituals and all that. They seemed successful. They were eating good and building summer houses and living large. But all along the way God was trying to get their attention. "Hey. Remember Me. Remember what I said. You're not on the right track. You're moving away from Me." And as you look at verses 6 through 11 and you see that God did so much to try to get their attention. He presented Himself to them through their weather and through their crops and through their families and their military engagements and their politics and their health and even their very senses. But the people were obsessed with wealth and luxury and they weren't ready. They weren't prepared. And they ignored all those ways God was trying to speak to them. And, finally, at this point, God comes to them with one more message and He says, "You've ignored all the signs and now you're going over the ledge. You're gonna crash. And it's going to be terrible." And in the next chapter we'll see a lament for Israel as God's heart breaks because of how far His people had moved away from Him.

Listen, God doesn't want to lament over our lives, He wants to rejoice over us. He wants to sing over us. What we can do is prepare ourselves. Stay close to God, focused on God, who wants to accomplish all these things through our lives. But we need to be ready for those eternal moments where God brings us a chance to invest in eternity, reach out in rescue and fulfill the purpose He's given us. That's the deal. Staying close to God, living in pursuit of Him and listening for those warnings that He brings us. And when we hear God revealing sin in our lives, we need to repent not ignore it. Not act like it's nothing. If we're sinning in lust or in greed or in bitterness or in worry or in anger or in some other kind of idolatry, we just need to stop moving down that track. We need to turn around and get into agreement with God so that we can get back to work doing what God does best. Being fruitful. Being used. Being in relationship with the Lord. Not going over the ledge.

We need to prep. We're going to meet with our God today. Maybe in death, maybe in the rapture, maybe in a Divine appointment where He brings an eternal moment to us. But one way or another, God will be before us and we can be the sheep of His hand.