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AMOS 4:1-13

Prepare to display:

- ☐ **Pack Item 1** (*Map: Prophets of the Eighth Century*)
- ☐ **Pack Item 2** (*Poster: Outlines of Amos; Jonah; Hosea; Micah*)

Make copies of:

- ☐ **Pack Item 8** (*Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark*)

CONSULT the Explore the Bible website for ways to use a current news event to start and conclude the session (goExploreTheBible.com/LeaderExtras).

- REINFORCE** the study by creating an online prayer community for the group to use during the study. Encourage the group to participate regularly by both praying for others and sharing personal requests on the site.

KEY DOCTRINE

The Christian and Social Order

We should work to provide for the orphaned, the needy, the abused, the aged, the helpless, and the sick. (See Deuteronomy. 10:18; James 1:27.)

FIRST THOUGHTS

Courtrooms can be intimidating places. They are places of accountability, and most of us believe people need to be held accountable for their actions. Amos spoke to Israel as one who was witnessing Israel's consequences for their actions. God seeks His people, and there are consequences for how they respond to Him—both in the present and in the future.

(In PSG, p. 19) **On a scale of zero to ten, how important is accountability in deterring bad behavior? Is it possible to have justice without accountability? Explain.**

BIBLE SKILL

Use a Bible dictionary to better understand a word.

Read articles about “judgment” in a Bible dictionary. Review Bible passages identified in the articles. What was the significance of God’s pronouncement of judgment on Israel through His prophet Amos? How do these pronouncements of God’s judgment help us understand what God did for us through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, on the cross?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

AMOS 3:1–4:13

Chapter 3 begins a new section of the book where Amos brought a series of three messages introduced by the phrase, “Listen to this message” (Amos 3:1; 4:1; 5:1). The message in chapter 3 lays the foundation for the remainder of the book. God was targeting Israel in such a scrupulous way because of the privileges He had given to His people. Israel had the privilege of being God’s chosen people out of all the other nations—called to be a blessing to those nations. Israel alone had experienced God’s manifest presence and provision and had received His Word through His prophets. However, with much privilege comes much responsibility, and with much responsibility comes much accountability.

God would hold His people accountable for their irresponsibility. Asking seven rhetorical questions with obvious answers, Amos reminded Israel of the principle of cause and effect (3:3-6). The seventh climactic question reveals that God would be the cause of the calamities Israel would experience. God would use the Assyrians as His instruments of judgment on Israel. As a lion warns his adversaries of danger, so the Lord roared through His prophets so that Israel might fear Him and repent (3:7-8).

Next, Amos called forth surprising witnesses, the Philistines and the Egyptians. Their expertise as oppressors made them well suited to identify Israel as a fellow persecutor of the poor and the weak. Even these pagan nations would recognize that Israel was deserving of God’s judgment (3:9-10). Israel’s fortified ramparts, false religion, and fancy homes would not be able to save them from God judgment. Yet still, there was still a glimmer of hope. God would spare a remnant of His people (3:11-15).

In Amos 4:1-13, Amos focused on Israel's sin of self-centeredness. Their self-centeredness was expressed in a number of ways: self-indulgence, self-deception, self-delusion, and self-reliance. They had a sense of entitlement and took for themselves whatever they wanted with no regard for others (4:1-3). They deceived themselves into thinking their religious fervor would appease God (4:4-5). Even though God used various means of difficulty to get their attention, they still would not allow themselves to fathom that God could be displeased with them (4:6-11). Therefore, God would leave them to rely on themselves as He came in judgment (4:12-13).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

INDULGE (AMOS 4:1-3)

Verse 1

Amos called out the women of **Samaria**, pointing to their personal indulgences at the expense of others. He declared that God would exact punishment on these women.

From our modern cultural perspective, it is surprising, maybe even shocking, that Amos began this message by addressing the wealthy women in Samaria, Israel's capital city, as **you cows of Bashan**. Understanding something of Amos's agrarian culture can inform today's reader of what the prophet meant by the expression.

The region that was called *Bashan* is located east of the Sea of Galilee, stretching eastward to about thirty-seven miles to Mount Bashan on the edge of the Arabian Desert. Bashan runs north to south about fifty-six miles from Mount Hermon to just south of the Yarmuk River. It contained wide open plains with exceptionally fertile soil. It served as Israel's "breadbasket," with wheat as its primary crop. The region provided high-quality pastures for livestock (Ps. 22:12; Ezek. 39:18). The best livestock in the land came from Bashan.

Therefore, *you cows of Bashan* should be understood as an expression pertaining to their luxury and privileged circumstances. In our vernacular, the expression might be better understood as Amos's addressing the "divas" of Samaria. What is negative about Amos's use of this expression pertains to how they became so affluent. Their sense of entitlement meant that no whim of theirs went unmet as others suffered to make it happen. It is a picture of extortion, exploitation, and manipulation from the poor to bankroll an opulent lifestyle. Amos depicted these divas as overbearing housewives commanding their husbands to bring them what they desired—no matter what the expense or means of getting it. While these women may not have been the ones physically taking money and possessions from the poor, they were just as guilty as their husbands for the demands they were placing on them.

VERSE 1

¹ Listen to this message,
you cows of Bashan
who are on the hill of
Samaria, women who
oppress the poor and
crush the needy, who
say to their husbands,
"Bring us something
to drink."

VERSES 2-3

² The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness: Look, the days are coming when you will be taken away with hooks, every last one of you with fishhooks. ³ You will go through breaches in the wall, each woman straight ahead, and you will be driven along toward Harmon. This is the LORD's declaration.

VERSES 4-5

⁴ Come to Bethel and rebel; rebel even more at Gilgal! Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tenths every three days. ⁵ Offer leavened bread as a thanksgiving sacrifice, and loudly proclaim your freewill offerings, for that is what you Israelites love to do! This is the declaration of the Lord GOD.

Verses 2-3

Amos announced the grim consequences of Samaria's divas for their self-absorption. **Look, the days are coming when you will be taken away with hooks, every last one of you with fishhooks** has been interpreted in a number of ways because of the ambiguity of the Hebrew terms Amos used. The possibilities are as follows:

- (1) The women would be carried away in boats.
- (2) The women would be carried away in pots or baskets used to carry fish to market. This interpretation would mean the women would be carried off into captivity or their corpses would be carried away like fish that had been butchered.
- (3) The women would be dragged away by ropes.
- (4) It may refer to hooks or fishhooks hooked into the women to pull them along into captivity. The Assyrians sometimes put rings in the noses or lips of their captives and hooked chains into them as they led their captives in a line off into captivity.
- (5) In keeping with *cows of Bashan*, the phrase could be referring to barbed cattle prods used to drive cattle.
- (6) *Fishhooks* may be used metaphorically, saying the women had been caught like fish on hooks.
- (7) The *hooks* may be metaphorically referring to butchered cattle hanging on hooks. The Assyrian propensity for impaling their captives may support this notion.

While there may be debate over the exact meaning of the expression Amos used, the people of his day understood his meaning. Further, there is no debate concerning its ultimate meaning. Like Jezebel before them, these divas of Samaria would suffer (2 Kings 9:30-37). Some would perish while others would be driven into exile. The walls that once stood in testimony to their wealth and glory would have such large breaches in them that the women would be driven straight out of the city through the gaping holes. The Lord had sworn this declaration by his own holiness. Therefore, it would happen. In 722 BC, the Assyrians destroyed Samaria and carried its survivors into captivity.

[In PSG, p. 22] **How does a person's treatment of others, especially those in need, indicate their spiritual condition?**

WORSHIP (AMOS 4:4-5)

Verses 4-5

Amos turned his attention to a second offense before the Lord. Israel's worship had become superficial and self-exalting. Amos mockingly called the people to come to **come to Bethel** so that they could continue to **rebel** against God. The people were busily involved in religious activities as they

thronged to their places of worship. **Every morning** they offered their **sacrifices**. These sacrifices were supposed to be made for the atonement of sins and to symbolize fellowship with God. The requirement was for the sacrifices to be made only once or at most three times a year (Lev. 1-5). The people were required to bring their tithes from the produce of their land every three years (Deut. 14:28-29). Yet they were bringing tithes **every three days**. Amos said to them, **offer leavened bread as a thanksgiving sacrifice**. These sacrifices were supposed to be voluntary expressions of gratitude for God's blessing (Lev. 7:13-15). Further, Amos said to the people, **loudly proclaim your freewill offerings**. These offerings were to be voluntary, usually associated with a vow (v. 16).

Why were the people so involved in these acts of worship? Why were they going beyond what the law required? It was so they could boast to others about how pious they were. For them, acts of worship were about drawing attention and glory to themselves, not to God.

God saw through their religious veneer; He was neither impressed nor deceived. Instead of pleasing God, their preoccupation with religious ceremonies served to deepen the depth of their transgressions and intensify God's wrath. No amount of religious fervor can substitute for faithful obedience to God marked by a life of integrity.

Notice how there is no mention of the people offering up sin offerings or guilt offerings. This should not be surprising, for apparently they lacked any sense of guilt. They had deceived themselves into believing they were blameless before God. The absence of repentance in their worship should have given them pause, as it should anyone who claims to be devoted to God.

How can a person's worship practices be a cover up for his or her sins?

REFUSE (AMOS 4:6-11)

Verses 6-8

Amos revealed seven ways God had responded to Israel's unfaithfulness. The Lord had given them every opportunity to return to Him. The purpose of the Lord's actions were two-fold: to serve as (1) God's discipline of His people, and (2) calls to repentance. Yet the Israelites refused to turn back to God.

First, God gave Israel **absolutely nothing to eat**. The literal translation of the Hebrew is "cleanness of teeth," which is a vivid way of describing a nation-wide famine. Because of God's warning in His covenant with Israel (Deut. 28:47-48), they should have recognized the famine was from God. This is not to say every famine is the result of God's judgment of sin (see Gen. 12:10). However, God explicitly indicated in His covenant with Israel that He would send famine upon them as a consequence of their unfaithfulness.

VERSES 6-8

⁶ I gave you absolutely nothing to eat in all your cities, a shortage of food in all your communities, yet you did not return to me. This is the LORD's declaration. ⁷ I also withheld the rain from you while there were still three months until harvest. I sent rain on one city but no rain on another. One field received rain while a field with no rain withered.

⁸ Two or three cities staggered to another city to drink water but were not satisfied, yet you did not return to me. This is the LORD's declaration.

VERSES 9-10

⁹ I struck you with blight and mildew; the locust devoured your many gardens and vineyards, your fig trees and olive trees, yet you did not return to me. This is the LORD's declaration.

¹⁰ I sent plagues like those of Egypt; I killed your young men with the sword, along with your captured horses. I caused the stench of your camp to fill your nostrils, yet you did not return to me. This is the LORD's declaration.

VERSE 11

¹¹ I overthrew some of you as I overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and you were like a burning stick snatched from a fire, yet you did not return to me — This is the LORD's declaration.

Second, God deprived the people of **rain** at the time they needed it most. The harvest season of barley and then wheat came during the months of May and early June. The lack of water **three months** prior to harvest meant their crops would fail. God had warned them of this consequence for their unfaithfulness in His covenant (Deut. 28:23-24).

To make matters worse, God sent rain on some fields and not on others. It is difficult enough to be deprived of life's necessities without the suffering being multiplied when others around us appear to be untouched by it. When they traveled to find water, it was not enough to satisfy their thirst. Nevertheless, their hearts were harder than the ground below them.

Verses 9-10

Third, the Lord struck with disease the crops that had survived the drought. People who thought they had escaped the drought helplessly watched their crops wither away. God's covenant with Israel warned this would happen when rebelled against the Lord (Deut. 28:22).

Fourth, God sent **the locust** on the **gardens** and **vineyards**. Locusts consumed everything in their path. The carcasses of the locusts often stopped up wells and obstructed streams, causing mass devastation to entire regions. Still, Israel refused to repent.

Fifth, the Lord struck Israel with **plagues**. This Hebrew word likely refers to the bubonic plague. The bubonic plague was one of antiquities' most dreaded diseases. It was passed to humans by the rat-flea. Once an individual contracted the disease, he or she became ill almost immediately. The symptoms included a high fever, shivering, pneumonia, and bleeding from mucous membranes. About twenty-four hours after one became infected, the lymph nodes under the armpits, in the groin, or on the neck swelled, forming buboes. These were similar in appearance to large blisters, and then the person died. As with the other incidents, the Lord had previously warned Israel in His covenant that this plague would be the result of its sin, but the people refused to listen (Deut. 28:21-22).

Sixth, the Lord used Israel's enemies to call His people back to Himself. Amos described the loss of Israel's elite soldiers who were killed by **the sword**, along with the **horses** on which they rode. Israel's enemies butchered these young men like the horses on which they rode. What's more, this massacre happened so close to home that the people could smell **the stench** of the rotting corpses of Israel's sons on the battlefield. Their grief must have been unbearable. Still, Israel refused to return to the Lord. They disregarded God's warning in the law and failed to recognize their own culpability for what happened (Lev. 26:25; Deut. 28:25).

Verse 11

The seventh and climactic calamity involved **fire**. Many scholars believe Amos was describing the results of Israel's military defeats, given verse 10 along with Amos's prolific use of the word **fire** to denote military defeat. It probably refers to Israel's near extinction at the hands of the Syrians prior to Jeroboam's taking the throne of Israel. The comparison to **Sodom and Gomorrah** may serve more than simply to illustrate the extent of the

destruction. It may indicate Israel's enemies sowed the ground with salt so that nothing could grow there anymore. The Assyrians appear to have practiced this act of retribution on their enemies quite often. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude others might have done the same to Israel. If so, like Sodom and Gomorrah, Israel became a wasteland of salt, sulfur, and ash. As deserving of these consequences as Israel was, the Lord graciously and mercifully saved a remnant of Israel **like a burning stick snatched from a fire** before it was totally annihilated. Still, Israel refused to repent and turn to God.

What keeps a person from confessing their sin and turning back to God?

PREPARE (AMOS 4:12-13)

Verses 12-13

Amos challenged the Israelites: **prepare to meet your God!** In this meeting, they would give an accounting to Him. To emphasize the seriousness of the meeting, the prophet reminded the people of God's power and sovereignty.

Because of their self-centeredness and refusal to return to the Lord, there would be no more warnings and no more opportunities to return to God. They had relied on themselves and their own religious performances, now they could continue to rely on themselves as they prepared to meet the Lord. Their unwillingness to return to their God would result in their God coming to them in judgment.

Israel's God was the One who created the **mountains** and the **wind**, who makes the **darkness** turn to dawn, and who strides on **the heights of the earth**. How could they have been as foolish as to disregard their covenant with the Lord who is the Creator and to have developed such an attitude of self-reliance? How could they have ignored the Almighty God who graciously revealed His Word to Israel through His prophets? They would realize their blunder when **the LORD, the God of Armies** came to meet them in judgment and wage war against His rebellious people.

(In PSG, p. 26) **How should the promise of standing before God impact how one lives?**

VERSES 12-13

¹² Therefore, Israel, that is what I will do to you, and since I will do that to you, Israel, prepare to meet your God! ¹³ He is here: the one who forms the mountains, creates the wind, and reveals his thoughts to man, the one who makes the dawn out of darkness and strides on the heights of the earth. The LORD, the God of Armies, is his name.

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

ENGAGE

INTRODUCE: Hold up a gavel or display a picture of a judge in a courtroom. Ask: *What comes to your mind when you picture a courtroom? Why does our court system allow for evidence to be presented before a verdict is determined? How would you describe the role of the judge?*

FOCUS: The courtroom is a place of accountability, and most of us believe people need to be held accountable for their actions. (PSG, p. 19)

DISCUSS: *On a scale of zero to ten, how important is accountability in deterring bad behavior? Is it possible to have justice without accountability? Explain.* (PSG, p. 19)

TRANSITION: *In today's study, we will examine the evidence against Israel and learn the consequences they faced due to their continued disobedience. We will see the character of God revealed as both redeemer and judge.*

EXPLORE

REVIEW: Display **Pack Item 1** (Map: *Prophets of the Eighth Century*) and **Pack Item 2** (Poster: *Outlines of Amos; Jonah; Hosea; Micah*), and utilize each to review the context for the book of Amos. Explain that Amos is considered a Minor Prophet due to the length of the book, not because it is of lesser importance. Use Understand the Context (PSG, p. 20) to provide background for the session.

READ: Call on a volunteer to read aloud **Amos 4:1-3**, directing the group to focus on specific evidence presented by Amos.

GUIDE: Direct attention to the first words of Amos 4, "Listen to this message."

DISCUSS: *Why is it important to listen or heed the evidence? How does failure to listen create problems?*

EXPLAIN: Share with the group that Bashan was located east of the Sea of Galilee and was known for its lush pastureland and prime livestock. Ask: *What did "cows of Bashan" really refer to? How does this image relate to indulgence?* Use the content related to verse 1 on page 21 of the PSG if needed.

DIRECT: Guide the group to pair up with another person and read the content related to verses 2-3 (PSG, pp. 21-22) and then address the question: *What is the verdict God issues for the oppression of others while indulging self?*

TRANSITION: *Amos mocked the worship of the Israelites at the sites they considered to be places for worship. In doing so, Amos was declaring that God detested their insincere sacrifices and false worship.*

READ: As you read aloud **Amos 4:4-5**, call the group to listen for the accusations made about the worship practices in Israel.

HIGHLIGHT: Highlight the statement: Offerings, sacrifices, and tithes were good things, but the boastfulness of the worshipers in doing those things was the issue. The outward motions of worship were not enough to please God. (PSG, p. 23) Guide the group to consider outwardly positive religious actions done with the wrong attitude or motive. The ritual was not at fault as much as the motives.

DISCUSS: *How can the self-indulgent practices of people like those mentioned in verses 1-3, also affect the way that they worship in verses 4-5? How can a person's worship practices be a cover-up for their sins?* (PSG, p. 23)

TRANSITION: *Amos recounted numerous different ways God sought to get the Israelites' attention so they would return to Him. But they refused.*

READ: Direct the group to read **Amos 4:6-11**, guiding them to watch for the numerous ways God sought to get His people's attention.

IDENTIFY: Using a board or large sheet of paper, guide the group to list the five calamities that should have turned the people's hearts back to God. Point the group to pages 24-25 in their PSGs for reference.

ASK: *Why might two people experience the same sets of calamities and one turn to God while the other refuses to turn to God?* (PSG, p. 25)

TRANSITION: *Amos challenged the Israelites to prepare to meet God to give an accounting. The prophet reminded the people of God's power and sovereignty to emphasize the seriousness of this meeting.*

READ: Call on a volunteer to read aloud **Amos 4:12-13**, guiding the group to identify a key word or phrase that stands out to them.

SHARE: Invite volunteers to share the key word or phrase they chose. Write their responses on the board or a large sheet of paper.

EXAMINE: As a group, answer the question, **"What kind of God could Israel expect to meet?"** Guide the group to review the comments for verse 13 on page 26 of their PSGs for additional insight. Add to the responses on the board.

ASK: *How does a person's understanding of God impact how they live their life?* (PSG, p. 26)

TRANSITION: *The Israelites failed to recognize God's loving discipline and the verdict of guilty was confirmed. As we examine our lives, we must recognize the sovereignty of God. He will hold all believers accountable for their actions.*

CHALLENGE

REVIEW: Guide a discussion of each of the bulleted statements under Apply the Text. (PSG, p. 27) Encourage the group to add to the statements listed or add new statements of their own.

SHARE: It may be easy to be critical of the Israelites without examining our own lives against the same charges.

REINFORCE: Lead the group to silently respond to the second question set under Apply the Text (PSG, p. 27): ***Evaluate your attitudes toward people with need, toward the oppressed, and toward worship. How does your attitude in these areas compare with the attitudes Amos addressed? What adjustments do you need to make in these areas to align more with God's desires?*** Encourage them to reflect on their responses this week.

MEMORIZE: Read aloud Amos 4:12, highlighting that this is the memory verse for the session. Distribute **Pack Item 8** (*Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark*) to anyone in the group who didn't receive a copy during the last session.

DISCUSS: ***What are some ways we can remind each other of our accountability to God?*** (PSG, p. 27)

PRAY: Call on a pre-enlisted person to close the group time in prayer, thanking God for holding us accountable for our attitudes and actions and for being a God of mercy and grace when we come to Him with repentant hearts.

OPTIONS

Use these options to supplement and enhance the group plans on the previous pages.

MUSIC

Prior to the session, acquire a recording and the lyrics of “I Repent” by David Noel, Steve Green, and Phil Nash. Play the song in the background as the group arrives. At the conclusion of the group time, return to the song and read aloud the lyrics.

INTERVIEW

Prior to the session, develop three to five questions that a reporter might ask of Amos based on Amos 4:1-14. Pre-enlist two volunteers—one to ask the questions and the other to respond to the questions as he or she believes Amos would. Encourage the interviewee to involve the rest of the group as needed.

DISCUSSION

Emphasize the Key Doctrine: *The Christian and Social Order*. We should work to provide for the orphaned, the needy, the abused, the aged, the helpless, and the sick. (PSG, p. 22) Create teams of two to four persons. Instruct each team to read together Deuteronomy 10:18 and James 1:27, and discuss: ***How does a person’s treatment of others, especially those in need, indicate their spiritual condition?*** Guide the group to focus their hearts on God’s desire for us to be the champions of the oppressed. If time permits, direct each team to share key points from their discussions.

REFLECTIVE

Note cards and pencils

Distribute a note card and a pencil to each person. Direct individuals to write the numbers one through three on their note cards. Read aloud the following statements, instructing the group to evaluate themselves on each statement using a one to five scale, with one being infrequently and five being often:

- I exhibit compassion to people in need.
- I approach worship with a sincere heart that is evident in both attitude and action.
- I examine my own heart for areas in which I need to repent and act in obedience.

Guide the group to circle the lowest number they recorded. Reread the statements, directing each person to listen carefully for the one they identified as needing the most attention. Allow time for everyone to turn their note card over and write one action step they will take to more completely honor God’s expectations.

BIBLE SKILL

Bible dictionaries

Lead the group to complete the Bible Skill activity (PSG, p. 26). Provide Bible dictionaries and invite volunteers to read aloud the articles found or to present a summary of the articles. You may want to pre-enlist a person prior to the group time to present a summary of the articles.