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Turn to God

God seeks His people, holding them accountable for how they respond to Him.

AMOS 4:1-13

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.

On a scale of zero to ten, how important is accountability in deterring bad behavior? Is it possible to have justice without accountability? Explain.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

AMOS 3:1–4:13

This week's focal passage is set in a series of oracles that began at Amos 3:1. Amos answered those who claimed he had no right to prophesy against Israel because they were the chosen people of God. To this charge, Amos argued that Israel's election insured God's judgment against them rather than excusing their sinful behavior (Amos 3:1-3). He further argued that his words were not his own but God's; he was only the messenger (3:4-8). Amos painted a picture of destruction in Israel, including images such as the horns falling off the altar in Bethel and the winter and summer houses of luxury being destroyed (3:12-15). It is probably the latter reference to luxury that led to the second oracle (4:1-13). Amos began the oracle speaking to those who profited the most from that luxury.

In the time of Amos (783-746 BC), Samaria had a wealthy and indulgent upper class. They built this wealth on the backs of the common people by oppressing them and exploiting the middle and lower classes. Amos knew God would hold the leaders accountable for that type of disregard of the poor. The beginning of the eighth century BC had brought great hope to Israel and Judah. Damascus's domination of Israel had ended abruptly when the Assyrians crushed Damascus in 802 BC. In Judah, Uzziah ascended the throne in 792 BC and solved some of the internal struggles in the nation. At the same time, Jeroboam II took control in Israel and restored much of the territory that had fallen to Damascus (2 Kings 14:28). It was a rare time of peace at the same time for Judah and Israel. But it also inspired a time of corruption, when those who lived in luxury oppressed those who were poor. This caused the rise of the eighth-century prophets—Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah—though the messages of these prophets were largely ignored by both Judah and Israel (2 Kings 17:13-14).

As you read Amos 4:1-13, note how the people of Israel demonstrated self-centeredness and their disregard for God and for others. How did the disregard for God contribute to social injustice?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

INDULGE (AMOS 4:1-3)

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.” 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.

VERSE 1

Amos introduced a new oracle not unrelated to the one in chapter 3. He had ended that oracle with a reference to God’s destroying the luxuries of Israel, and he built on that idea in his second oracle (4:1-13). The oracle was directed to the **cows of Bashan**, who represented those living in luxury but oppressing the poor. Bashan was located east of the Sea of Galilee and known for its lush pastureland and prime livestock (Deut. 32:14). Like the cows in Bashan, the upper class women in Israel were well-fed and pampered. All their indulgences were satisfied.

The women of luxury had indirect ways of getting what they wanted—oppressing the poor, crushing the needy, and imploring their husbands to bring them more, which probably drove their husbands to even greater injustices against the poor. The upper class cared little who was affected adversely by their own lives of luxury.

VERSES 2-3

The oppressors in Israel were not accountable to Amos alone. God Himself had **sworn by his holiness** to take this assignment. In Psalm 89:35, God swore by His holiness that He would keep His covenant with David. He could not violate His own character and righteousness. That same character would not allow God to look the other way when Israel violated the ethics of His covenant in the way people treated one another.

As a judge pronouncing a verdict, God described the days when those living in luxury would be **taken away with hooks**. It is probably in the sense of a hook designed to drag cattle that Amos intended

in this. This was a clear prophecy of the coming invasion of the Assyrians during the fall of Samaria in 722 BC. The wall of the city would be breached, and those living in luxury would be taken through them toward **Harmon**. It is not clear where Harmon was located, though some have identified it with the garbage heap in Isaiah 25:10.

Amos saw the corruption of a society that was insensitive to the plight of the poor and needy. Those with the power and authority to change that plight cared little about the ones being oppressed. God called this indulgent society to accountability for its sins against Him and against one another. He had desired that they be the champions of the oppressed, not their oppressors. The time had come for the people to prepare to meet God (Amos 4:12).

How does a person's treatment of others, especially those in need, indicate their spiritual condition?

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.)

WORSHIP (AMOS 4:4-5)

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 4-5

Jesus said that the whole law was fulfilled in the way we love God and love others (Matt. 22:34-40). Not only did Israel fail in the way they treated one another, but they also neglected to demonstrate love for God through worship in the way He prescribed. As worshipers

made their way to the places of worship, they would expect a priest or prophet to pronounce a benediction on the pilgrim worshipers. One might expect this blessing to say, “Come and worship.” However, Amos issued a surprising invitation—***Come to Bethel and rebel.*** What priest would invite worshipers to the temple to rebel? The sarcasm is thick in this passage, as the hearts of the worshipers were not right with God.

Bethel was an ancient site of worship from the time of the Patriarchs (Gen. 12:8; 28:19). It once housed the Ark of the Covenant (Judg. 20:27). However, Jeroboam I, the first king of Israel, erected calves at Bethel and Dan to encourage the people of the Northern Kingdom to worship there rather than in Jerusalem (1 Kings 12:28-30). This sin would plague the Northern Kingdom throughout its existence. •***Gilgal*** was the site of the first camp of Israel as they entered the promised land (Josh. 4:20-24). It was a place where Samuel regularly offered sacrifices (1 Sam. 7:16) and the place where Saul was made king (1 Sam. 11:14). It was also the site of Saul’s failure to obey the Lord (1 Sam. 15:32-33), when Samuel declared obedience was better than sacrifice.

Though the people were offering sacrifices to God, their lives were not obedient to Him. Like Saul, they faced God’s judgment. Even if they brought their ***sacrifices every morning*** and their ***tenths every three days***, it could not make up for their lack of integrity. Even today, without the shedding of Jesus’ blood on the cross, we have no authority to come before God in worship (Heb. 9:22).

One gets a glimpse of the worshipers’ motives when Amos declared that they ***loudly proclaim*** their offerings because that is what they ***love to do***. The ritual was not at fault as much as the motives. 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.

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?

REFUSE (AMOS 4:6-11)

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. 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. 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.

VERSES 6-11

In these verses, Amos listed five calamities that should have turned the hearts of Israel back to God but did not. In verse 6, the prophet described times of famine that should have awakened Israel from its rebellion. The phrase ***nothing to eat*** literally in Hebrew described God as giving them cleanness of teeth. They literally had no food to get stuck in their teeth.

In verses 7-8, Amos described how God sent a shortage of water at the worst possible time in the agricultural year. A third calamity was the failure of the crops (v. 9). Disease in the form of a ***blight and mildew*** caused by warm, damp rains affected the harvest. Then, locusts came and destroyed what was left. Such a catastrophic event in an agricultural society should have caused the Israelites to be on their knees before God, but they ***did not return*** to God.

A fourth calamity involved disease and death (v. 10). Young men unexpectedly died. Even their horses perished and the smell of death was all around Israel. Still Israel did not repent.

Finally, some of the prominent cities of Israel were overthrown like ***Sodom and Gomorrah***, yet God had plucked them from the ***fire***. The nation had just come out of a period of domination by Damascus.

But when that ended with Jeroboam II, they still did not repent and turn to God.

God's involvement in the events of verses 6-11 was redemptive in nature. He orchestrated the events in Israel to give them the opportunity to repent, but they refused.

Why might two people experience the same sets of calamities and one turn to God while the other refuses to turn to God?

PREPARE (AMOS 4:12-13)

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.

VERSE 12

The time of accountability had come. The God who was a consuming fire and a jealous God was prepared to bring the nation to accountability.

The calamities God had sent to Israel in the past as discipline would now face them in destruction. Food shortage, water shortage, failure of crops, disease and death, and the falling of cities would characterize the upcoming Assyrian invasion of Israel that resulted in the fall of Samaria in 722 BC. What God had first sent as warning signs that were ignored would now be the judgments Israel faced.

With a note of finality, God said: ***Israel, prepare to meet your God!*** They had relied on themselves and their religious performances. Their unwillingness to return to God would result in Him coming to them in judgment.

All who are outside of a relationship with Jesus Christ can expect that they will one day be called to accountability for their refusal to repent and receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

APPLY THE TEXT

- Believers are to be champions of the poor and oppressed, not oppressors of them.
- Believers are to worship God with humility and repentance.
- Believers should look to God in repentance when facing His discipline.
- All believers should live knowing that God will hold them accountable.

Discuss as a group ways of reminding each other of your accountability to God. How can this be done with humility and transparency? What principles from today's study should the group follow in holding each other accountable?

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?

PRAYER NEEDS
