

Turn to God

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

About fifteen years ago, I visited the archaeological site of Samaria, the capital of ancient Israel. You could call it the Washington, DC, of the Northern Kingdom. An archaeologist friend pulled a few strings because the site was ordinarily closed to the public. Because of unrest in the area, we were escorted up the steep hill by two Humvees, each with a handful of Israeli soldiers keeping a watchful eye while we investigated the ancient city.

It is no surprise why King Omri chose this spot for his capital (1 Kings 16:24). At 1,400 feet above sea level, atop a steep slope that once deterred foreign armies, the area provides a stunning view in every direction. In Hebrew, Samaria literally means, “Lookout Mountain” and comes from the Hebrew root *shamar*, which means “to watch, guard, or observe.” The hill is indeed the perfect place for a fortified city.

In the early 1900s excavators in Samaria found more than sixty ostraca (potsherds with writing on them) recording lavish shipments of oil and wine. They also uncovered remains of a citadel that included a tower wall, a gate system, and even a pool. A large number of ivory fragments and furnishings correlate with biblical descriptions of the extravagant wealth of the city.

In this lesson’s passages, Amos singled out wealthy women who lived on this impressive hill. While they should have been champions of the weak, they oppressed the poor instead. Because of the nation’s disregard for justice, Amos alluded to a time when the invading forces of Assyria would demolish Samaria’s massive walls and take God’s people into exile.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

AMOS 3:1–4:13

Unlike many prophetic books, Amos is fairly easy to outline. The book contains eight burdens/oracles (chapters 1-2), three sermons (chapters 3-6),

and five visions (chapters 7-9). The three sermons all begin with the same introductory phrase, “Listen to this message” (3:1; 4:1; 5:1), and each contains at least one “therefore” to announce a specific judgment (3:11; 4:12; 5:16). Through Amos, God directed these sermons at particular groups: all the clan of Israel (3:1), the cows of Bashan (4:1), and the house of Israel (5:1). Each time, the prophet explained exactly why Israel deserved divine punishment. These three sermons also use legal language from the covenant.

Since many crimes were committed in secret, residents of the ancient world would utter a curse to prevent crime and secure justice. In a way these curses were like spiritual land mines. The device does not detonate unless someone places their weight on it. Likewise, these curses only took effect when someone violated God’s covenant—which Israel did quite often.

The Old Testament is full of such curses, with Deuteronomy 28 perhaps serving as the best example. There, God demanded that Israel choose between blessing and curses. This was no minor issue, but a matter of life and death (Deut. 11:26-28). Amos announced a series of calamities drawn directly from this covenant curse because God’s people had made the wrong choices.

In the New Testament, Paul spoke about the curse of the law. The liberating message of the gospel is that Jesus “reversed the curse.” Rather than waiting to pounce on every transgression, God offers the blessing of salvation through His Son (Gal. 3:13). Instead of God’s curse, the blessing of Abraham comes by faith to everyone through the finished work of the Messiah.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

INDULGE (Amos 4:1-3)

Meeting your needs is one thing. Satisfying your greed is another. Indulgence tends to deaden our consciences while bringing our darkest cravings to life. In the eighth century BC, the Northern Kingdom fell into that trap.

VERSE 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.”

Each sermon in Amos 4–6 begins with the same phrase: **Listen to this message**. Amos employed several formulas to identify divine speech and to show that his address originated with God Himself. *Listen to this message* is one such formula. While it does not specifically mention God, the implication is that the words are from Him and demand attention.

Since it was the capital, **Samaria** was the most visible city in Israel. Consequently, Amos regularly aimed his prophetic warnings in that direction (Amos 3:12; 6:1; 8:14). The expression **cows of Bashan** refers to wealthy women in *Samaria*. Perhaps wives of wealthy bureaucrats, they lived in luxury, textbook examples of indulgence at the expense of others.

Amos stacked up three participles to describe these women and to highlight the injustice of their lifestyles: **oppress the poor . . . crush the needy . . . say to their husbands**. They lived in luxury in fortified citadels (3:9-12) and reclined on opulent furniture (3:12; 6:4). They lived in multiple houses, including some inlaid with ivory (3:15; 6:11). They drank wine by the bowlful (4:1; 6:6) and enjoyed choice foods (5:11-12,17; 6:4-6). They had grown accustomed to being served and to having every desire met.

Bashan probably refers to a fertile plain east of the Jordan River and just south of the Sea of Galilee. At numerous points, the Old Testament alludes to this area's robust production of livestock (Deut. 32:14; Ps. 22:12; Ezek. 39:18; Mic. 7:14). So, the oppressive women were symbolically growing fat, like the cattle in this region. In addition, Amos may have been satirizing the bull symbol of Baal, the Canaanites' chief god.

The women demanded **something to drink** from their husbands. Like Amos 2:8, wine was a centerpiece of their feasts. An example of their indolence and entitlement, they drank "wine by the bowlful" (Amos 6:6).

VERSE 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.

Amos layered his metaphors with imagery from beef production, commercial fishing, and military deportation. Just like today, cattle in ancient times were raised for one particular purpose. They are fed well in preparation for slaughter. The overindulged women would also face a certain fate. The phrase **The Lord GOD has sworn** marks the forceful language of a divine oath. This was a promise God was determined to keep.

Taken away with hooks elicits the image of a fish caught on a lure. It could indicate a day when Israel would be dragged away into exile like a fisherman drags a fish out of the water. However, it likely suggested more for Amos's audience. Scholars note that Assyria literally took captives into exile with *hooks*. Assyrian murals depict warriors leading their enemies away with long ropes anchored by hooks through the noses of the prisoners. This, of course, was an extremely effective and painful way of fastening captives together and forcing them to go in a chosen direction.

VERSE 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.

Amos painted a picture of invaders going **through breaches in the wall**. Rather than using the closest gate, people would be able to exit through one of the huge gaps that the enemy had created in the wall. As God spoke through His prophet, He reminded the women of Samaria—and the other residents—that this was their future. They would be facing certain exile.

No one is sure about the exact location of **Harmon**. The word is mentioned only here in the Bible, though some have suggested alternative readings like “Hermon.” Mount Hermon is indeed a prominent mountain in the north of Israel, but it is probably best to acknowledge the uncertainty. It is more likely that *Harmon* was a distant place where Assyria deported exiles.

Verse 3 ends with the first of seven utterances, or judgment oracles, in verses 3-11. Each one is marked by another common formula of divine address: **This is the LORD's declaration**. This phrase fuses God's words with the words of Amos. When he spoke, God was speaking through him.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read and reflect on the article “Economic Conditions in the Eighth Century BC” on page 1211 of the *Holy Land Illustrated Bible*. Where do you see similarities in our world today? How can believers avoid falling into the trap of ignoring (or even exploiting) the poor?

WORSHIP (Amos 4:4-5)

At times, what appears to be genuine worship can actually be a cover for evil. God would rather people not worship Him at all than to profane His name by performing dead rituals that have no bearing on a person's daily life.

VERSE 4

Come to Bethel and rebel; rebel even more at Gilgal! Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tenths every three days.

Verse 4 gushes with sarcasm related to Israel's worship: **Come to Bethel and rebel; rebel even more in Gilgal!** Amos mockingly implied that if the people were determined to sin, they should do it in style by coming to

their traditional sacred spaces. Of course, God never condones rebellion, but Amos's tone indicated that this would simply be a continuation of Israel's current worship patterns. So, instead of calling them to find God in their worship, he accused them of dishonoring God through their worship.

The Hebrew word translated *rebel* means to intentionally cross a line. Some sins are the result of omission, failing to meet God's expectations. But the Israelites' sin here involved commission. They deliberately crossed a line and understood perfectly well that they were wrong. Even when they brought the proper, prescribed offerings, their rituals were empty because their hearts were turned away from God.

Through Amos, God expressed His disgust with worshipers who honored rituals, but abused the poor through extravagance. *Bethel* and *Gilgal* may have referred to recurring pilgrimages that residents of Samaria took. But God wanted more than empty practices. He longed for people to seek Him personally, not some shrine or altar.

Jeroboam I, the Northern Kingdom's first king, established state temples at Dan and *Bethel* shortly after the death of Solomon (1 Kings 12:26-30). Bethel also served as a personal shrine for the king. Amaziah, the high priest at Bethel, even warned Jeroboam II that Amos was conspiring against the monarchy (Amos 7:10-11). He demanded that Amos go back to Judah and never prophesy at Bethel again—an order that Amos ignored.

Israel also established a shrine at *Gilgal*. This was the site of Israel's first camp in Canaan under Joshua and where they celebrated the first Passover in the promised land (Josh. 4:20; 5:10). Gilgal was also where they circumcised their warriors prior to the battle of Jericho and erected a memorial.

Amos referred to **sacrifices every morning** and **tenths every three days**. Numbers 28:1-8 describes daily sacrifices, which included a burnt offering and a grain and drink offering, every morning and evening. Some tithes (*tenths*) were collected every three years, but the Bible does not talk about a tithe taken every three days (Deut. 14:28-29). Most likely, this is a continuation of Amos's sarcasm regarding religious overkill. The Israelites were consumed with ceremony, but they ignored God's demand for justice.

VERSE 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.

The Bible often used **leavened bread** to represent how sin spreads through a community. Jesus even used the yeast metaphor to symbolize the dangerous teachings of the Pharisees (Matt. 16:6). However, *leavened bread* was also a prescribed part of many offerings and observances. That included Pentecost,

a feast held fifty days after Passover, as well as the kind of **thanksgiving** offerings noted by Amos. So, the prophet was again pointing to a spiritual disconnect. The people were following the rules, all while rejecting God.

To make matters worse, the Israelites would **loudly proclaim** their offerings as proof of their piety. In fact, Amos said it was something the **Israelites love to do!** In Matthew 6:1-4, Jesus encouraged believers to give secretly, rather than striving for the praise of others. Our worship misses the mark when we seek the praise of others more than God's approval.

EXPLORE FURTHER

To learn more about yeast, read the articles titled "Leaven" on page 1000 and "Unleavened Bread" on page 1621 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Why was unleavened bread called "the bread of affliction?" How can the imagery of leaven help us avoid empty worship in our lives?

REFUSE (Amos 4:6-11)

Not every stressful event is the judgment of God, but Amos noted several calamities that had struck Israel because of sin. Still, because God's people failed to connect these terrible events to His wrath, they refused to change.

VERSE 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.

Verses 6-11 announce a series of seven calamities Israel had experienced: famine, drought, blight, mildew, locusts, plague, and sword. The number seven is likely not a coincidence, as Leviticus 26:24 and Deuteronomy 28:22 both refer to seven covenant curses. Regardless, God intended this string of corrective judgments to awaken Israel to the realization that they needed to repent.

The first of these calamities was famine. God told Israel that He had given them **absolutely nothing to eat**. The repetition of **a shortage of food** emphasized the judgment. The Hebrew wording refers to "cleanness of teeth." The Bible records some severe famines in Samaria, including one during Elijah's ministry (1 Kings 18:1-2). Another in Elisha's day was the result of a Syrian siege and led some residents toward cannibalism (2 Kings 6:24-33). The pathetic refrain **yet you did not return to me** (Amos 4:6, 8-11) identified

a pattern of Israel's habitual rebellion. Through this phrase, Amos expressed the theological heart of God's message. No matter how desperate the situation, the leaders and residents of the Northern Kingdom could never bring themselves to repent and return to God in humility. As in verse 3, **This is the LORD's declaration** reinforces the truth that this is God's doing, not just the prophet's interpretation of events.

VERSE 7-8

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. 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.

Along with the famine, the Lord **withheld the rain**. In Israel, the rainy season runs from October to April, with little to no rain from mid-May through mid-September. Farmers planted barley and wheat in October, and the grain usually ripened during March and April. If no heavy winter rain came, the early buds would sprout quickly, but wither. So, a lack of rain **three months** before harvest meant no grain during the harvest.

To demonstrate His sovereignty over the elements, God altered the normal rain patterns. Amos noted that **one field received rain while a field with no rain withered**. Rather than the normal widespread precipitation of the rainy season, God allowed only sporadic and widely distributed showers.

This weather anomaly had an impact on the nation's cities, as well. **Two or three cities staggered to another city to drink water**. One of Samaria's greatest weaknesses was its lack of a reliable water supply. While leaders built a water system to help mitigate the problem, God overruled even the best human engineering.

VERSE 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.

The Lord also sent **blight and mildew** as judgment against the people. This plague was directly connected to the covenant curse (Deut. 28:22), and Israel experienced it firsthand. *Blight* refers to blasting winds that kill vegetation (1 Kings 8:37; Ps. 90:5-6; Isa. 37:27; Hag. 2:17). *Mildew* often refers to the black fungus found in wet climates, but it can also refer to a yellow fungus that results from drought.

In 2019-20, an enormous **locust** invasion struck a dozen countries in Africa and the Middle East, as well as India. In most of these countries, the impact was the worst that people had experienced in decades. In the ancient world, such invasions were a matter of life and death. When locusts **devoured** a field, it could be a complete loss. Crops across a wide region would simply disappear in a matter of hours.

Throughout Scripture, **gardens and vineyards**, along with **fig trees and olive trees**, are symbols of prosperity. (See 1 Kings 4:25; Mic. 4:4; Zech. 3:10.) To have them devoured by locusts would have been a curse. It was a warning that the tide was turning from the nation's prosperity under Jeroboam II.

VERSE 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.

In the Bible, **plagues** are typically debilitating events that demonstrate God's sovereignty—and God's people were not immune to their impact. The *plagues* in **Egypt** affirmed God's power over Pharaoh and the Egyptian gods. They also revealed God's nature to Israel. The plagues Amos referenced served the same purpose. God was reminding Israel that He alone was God and that they needed to return to Him.

In addition, God **killed your young men with the sword**. Elisha used the same words to describe one of Israel's most hated enemies, Hazael, king of Aram (2 Kings 8:12). Amos may have been referring back to Hazael's bloodthirsty acts here. In any case, the death of so many of Israel's warriors created a **stench**. The image is the nauseating result of having so many dead bodies that there are not enough people left to bury them.

Again, none of this was enough to convince Samaria to **return** to God. They refused to repent, so He would act against them. The **LORD's declaration** guaranteed that He would act, and Israel could count on it happening.

VERSE 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.

Samaria was no stranger to bloodshed. Jehu killed seventy of Ahab's sons (2 Kings 10), and the Bible mentions three different sieges against Samaria (1 Kings 20:1; 2 Kings 6:24; 17:1-6). The final siege, conducted by the Assyrians,

was the one Amos had in mind. **As I overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah** assured Israel of its demise (Deut. 29:23; Isa. 13:19; Jer. 49:18; 50:40).

Amos compared Israel to a **burning stick snatched from a fire**. Time and again, God had rescued them from desperate situations. Even the calamities Amos described were designed to bring the nation back to God. He was the Source of their suffering, but He was also the Solution to their troubles.

Zechariah 3:2 adopts similar imagery, comparing Joshua the priest to “a burning stick snatched” from a flame in the days after the Babylonian captivity. The Northern Kingdom did not share Joshua’s faith, so the residents would not experience a similar restoration. **You did not return to me** summarizes the last bitter refrain of Israel’s rebellion.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article “Blessing and Cursing” on pages 225-226 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Why does God give people the option to choose blessings or curses? How can we be more sensitive to events that God might be using to bring us back to Him?

PREPARE (Amos 4:12-13)

A lifestyle characterized by economic indulgence and superficial worship fueled a hard-hearted refusal to repent. Only one possible outcome remained after such stubbornness. Israel would experience God’s judgment, so they needed to get ready for His wrath.

VERSE 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!

After an extended judgment against Samaria, verse 12 introduces a major shift in Amos’s rhetoric. Prophetic indictments were often coupled with an announcement about a future end, a turning point, or a new beginning. **Therefore** indicates a transition from Israel’s sin to God’s punishment.

Some suggest **That is what I will do** is rhetorical because the Lord wasn’t specific, but God’s confrontation is in itself a potent action. In our culture, we might call it an “intervention.” As part of this divine intervention, God used seven vivid verbs: gave, withheld, sent, struck, killed, caused, and overthrew. Since the people rejected Him, the Lord challenged them to get ready for a personal encounter with Him.

The Hebrew word translated **meet** does not describe a casual encounter. In Numbers 21:23, the same word is translated “confront” and is used for facing an enemy combatant. This is similar to the Hebrew verb for “to visit,” suggesting that a visit from God is no social call.

Exodus 19:10-20 also pairs the words **prepare** and *meet*. Twice in that passage, “be prepared” was used to describe how the Israelites should approach their encounter with God (vv. 11,15). Then, in verse 17, Moses brought the people out of the camp to “meet” the Lord. The Israelites in the wilderness shuddered before God’s presence, and Amos implied that the Jews of his day should take their meeting with God just as seriously.

VERSE 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.

The chapter closes with a short hymn, poetry that praises God’s character and His actions. This conclusion reveals the Lord’s grandeur as Creator, Revealer, and Provider. He **forms the mountains** and **the wind** (creation). He also **reveals his thoughts** (revelation) and brings light **out of darkness** (providence). Finally, He **strides on the heights** (glory). God is all-powerful and sovereign over every aspect of His creation.

Unfortunately for the Northern Kingdom, the prosperity they had been enjoying would swiftly end because the wheels of His judgment were already set into motion. God referred to Himself as **The LORD, the God of Armies**. (See Amos 5:14,16; 6:8,14.) The Hebrew word *Yahweh* (translated “The LORD” here) is derived from God’s covenant name, “I AM” (Ex. 3:14).

In His role as sovereign Lord, God often led the heavenly armies against Israel’s enemies. In this case, though, *the God of Armies (Elohē Tsabaōth)* would be marshaling forces against Israel. He holds all people—including His own people—accountable for their sins.

EXPLORE FURTHER

As a prayer activity, meditate on today’s Memory Verse, Amos 4:12. Take time to identify areas of your life where you are not prepared to encounter the Lord right now. As you memorize the verse, ask Him for the courage to repent of those sins and to live a renewed life of devotion to Him.