

Seek God

God expects His people to seek Him and demonstrate His character.

Tony, ordinarily a smart guy, had heard it all before. For years during his annual checkups, his doctor had recommended, demanded, even begged Tony to lose weight. He cited all the statistics and repeatedly warned Tony of the dangers of heart disease and stroke. Over time, “Doc” became more exasperated. Even after a minor heart attack, Tony made no serious effort to change. This was the last straw. In frustration, the doctor threw up his hands and fumed, “Tony, it’s your funeral.”

Amos 5:4-15 could be titled, “It’s your funeral!” Israel had been warned repeatedly that oppression and idolatry would lead to its demise. Finally, Amos uttered two final pleas: “Seek me and live!” (v. 4) and “Pursue good not evil” (v. 14). The importance of these two phrases really can’t be overemphasized. Seeking God echoes the first four of the Ten Commandments, while seeking good echoes the last six. The Lord wasn’t just trying to correct His people’s wayward ethics. He was trying to redirect them back to Himself—and to life!

The prophet Ezekiel graphically depicted Israel as an abandoned and dying baby whom God rescued (Ezek. 16:1-7). When He found this pathetic child, God spoke a single word: “Live!” With that, God gave Israel the vitality to thrive and grow. Essentially, Amos shared the same message. Like God, he wanted Israel to live. But they had to return to the Giver of life.

God desires life for us, both now and in the future. In a world where death reigns as the “final enemy,” God promises life (John 10:10; 1 Cor. 15:26). In fact, life is what God and His rules are all about.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

AMOS 5:1–6:14

Amos 5:1–6:14 is made up of several sections. Amos 5 begins a lament or funeral song that runs through verse 17. Nested inside this lament, Amos

included a hymn praising the grandeur of God (Amos 5:8-9). Like a frame around a picture, the lament provides the context, while the hymn supplies the inner picture. Both the frame and the picture must be interpreted together.

Immediately following the lament, Amos 5:18–6:14 focuses on several woe oracles. These oracles end with a promise of God raising up a nation to use against Israel. Once everything was said and done, only about 10 percent of Israel's population would survive. As long as Israel refused to change, the result would be utter devastation.

These two literary genres (the lament and the woe oracles) may not be familiar to many readers. A lament is a song about a calamity or group of calamities. These are common in the book of Psalms, where three out of every five psalms could be classified as laments. Of course, the best biblical example comes from the book of Lamentations, a collection of several dirges that mourn the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon in 587/586 BC.

But the Old Testament prophets did something radically new with this genre. They often used laments to express grief over something that hadn't happened yet, but would happen in the future. So certain of judgment, they sang the lament as though the calamity had *already* struck. In Amos 5:2, for example, the lament speaks in past tense, as though the calamity had already devastated God's people: "She has fallen; Virgin Israel will never rise again."

The word "woe" is also an exclamation of lament (Amos 5:18; 6:1). A woe oracle expresses grief over the pain and loss a community experiences. Like the laments, the Old Testament prophets used woe oracles as a preview of dreadful things to come. In Amos 5:18–6:14, woe oracles describe the day of the Lord as a time of darkness and suffering. Amos proposed only one way to prevent such a catastrophe: true transformation (5:23-24).

Amos also mentioned the gates of the city in this session's passage. These gates were fortified entrances, but they were also metaphors for institutional justice. City gates served as a funnel for urban life in the ancient Near East. All streets led to the city gate. In one sense, they were the most vulnerable part of a city because the opening made the city susceptible to attack. On the other hand, many gates had elaborate chambers and watchtowers designed to provide protection and security.

The city gates had other important functions. Merchants and leaders conducted important business at the gate. For example, Abraham negotiated a place to bury Sarah at a city gate (Gen. 23:3-20), and Boaz negotiated his marriage to Ruth at the city gate (Ruth 4:1-12). Gates were also where legal disputes were settled (Deut. 17:5; 21:19). The poor or oppressed would congregate there, hoping their voices would be heard and their lives improved. But if the system was rigged and injustice prevailed, widows, orphans, and the poor had little reason for hope.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE CHOICE (Amos 5:4-9)

Imagine that the IRS was going to audit your taxes. Chances are, you wouldn't blow it off. You would do all you could to get ready because no one wants to face the IRS unprepared. Still, that's exactly what Israel did with God in Amos's day. The nation's great wealth distracted her from justice and compassion toward the poor. As a result, the people were completely unprepared to face God's coming judgment.

VERSE 4

For the LORD says to the house of Israel: Seek me and live!

God had a message for His wandering people, and He was using His prophet as His mouthpiece. The term **the LORD says** emphasizes that Amos was not the originator of these woes and warnings. Instead, God Himself was giving the **house of Israel**, His people, one last chance to reverse course and avoid the consequences of their sin.

The injunction to **Seek me and live!** is uttered here and in verse 6 (using a slightly different form). While God spoke through Amos in this context, he was not the only prophet the Lord used to warn Israel. A century later, Jeremiah urged the Southern Kingdom to seek God because He would be found if "you search for me with all your heart" (Jer. 29:13). But seeking must be combined with right conduct toward others. Isaiah, a prophetic contemporary of Amos, spoke sarcastically of those who "seek me day after day and delight to know my ways, like a nation that does what is right" (Isa. 58:2).

Of course, God didn't want Israel to *seek* Him simply to find His help. The wording here includes reorienting one's life in God's service. The object of seeking God is not personal satisfaction, self-confidence, or even spiritual wisdom. The ultimate object of our search is God, and the result is to *live* in His fullness. Experiencing life also means sharing that hope for life with others through our words and through daily actions that honor God.

VERSE 5

Do not seek Bethel or go to Gilgal or journey to Beer-sheba, for Gilgal will certainly go into exile, and Bethel will come to nothing.

While God encouraged the people to seek Him, He also urged them to avoid seeking **Bethel**. We can all remember special places where God seemed unusually real to us: a beloved church, a favorite place of prayer, or a special

camp or conference. There is a temptation to cherish the location (or feeling) rather than the One who spoke there. *Bethel*, which literally means “house of God,” was such a place for Israel. Abraham built an altar near there and “called on the name of the LORD” (Gen. 12:8). Later, Jacob met God there (28:10-22). Then, on his way back into the promised land, Jacob returned to Bethel, where God changed his name to Israel (35:1-15). Unfortunately, Jeroboam I, the Northern Kingdom’s first ruler, made Bethel a hub for idolatry (1 Kings 12:26-30).

Like Bethel, the Israelites believed **Gilgal** and **Beer-sheba** were significant religious sites. Centuries earlier, Israel commemorated the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River at *Gilgal* (Josh. 4:19-24). *Beer-sheba* is where Abraham sojourned (Gen. 21:22-34; 22:19) and where God confirmed His covenant with Isaac (26:23-25). Yet, God warned His people to avoid coming to these places because the kings of Israel had turned them into filthy centers of pagan worship. In addition, He had long before put His name on Jerusalem and commanded His people to worship at the temple there instead of locations established by human leaders.

Gilgal will . . . go into exile represents a tongue twister in Hebrew (*haggilgal galoh yigleh*), but it can be translated “Gilgal . . . into exile . . . will go.” **Bethel will come to nothing** is also a play on words. The word translated *nothing* (*aven*) can mean emptiness, evil, sorrow, or trouble. The prophet Hosea used this term to describe the emptiness of worship at Bethel (Hos. 4:15; 5:8; 10:5), which he derisively called *Beth-aven* (“house of evil”). Despite their history and heritage, both sacred sites would be devastated by God’s judgment.

VERSE 6

Seek the LORD and live, or he will spread like fire throughout the house of Joseph; it will consume everything with no one at Bethel to extinguish it.

After telling the Israelites what to avoid, Amos returned to the theme of verse 4: **Seek the LORD and live**. When it comes to God, the call to *seek* is not an attempt to find something lost, but to pursue Him unrelentingly. Jesus spoke of this passionate pursuit of God: “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matt. 6:33). He also held up examples of people who sacrificed everything for the sake of the kingdom of God.

The consequence of ignoring God was that He would **spread like fire**. The motif of *fire* as judgment is repeated numerous times in chapters 1–2, as well as in Amos’s second vision (Amos 7:4-6). The Psalms also refer to God’s jealousy or anger as *fire* (Pss. 79:5; 89:46). Jeremiah warned that ignoring the helpless would lead to God’s wrath burning like a *fire* (Jer. 21:12). Nahum also

used *fire* to describe God's punishment (Nah. 1:6). As fire devours everything in its path, so God's judgment will be widespread and devastating.

The **house of Joseph** is another name for the Northern Kingdom (see v. 15). Joseph was not one of the twelve tribes of Israel, even though he was one of Jacob's sons. In the book of Joshua, Joseph's land allotment was split instead between the descendants of his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. King Solomon later appointed Jeroboam over the laborers from the *house of Joseph* (1 Kings 11:28). After Solomon's death, Jeroboam led the northern tribes in a revolt that divided the nation into two kingdoms: Israel (or Samaria) in the north and Judah in the south. When Ezekiel promised that God would reunite Israel and Judah, he also referred to Israel as *Joseph* (Ezek. 37:16,19).

Once God's fire broke out, **no one at Bethel** would **extinguish it**. This phrase also may play on Amos's interactions with Amaziah (Amos 7:10-17). Amaziah, a priest at Bethel, tried to extinguish Amos's preaching. Yet his threats failed to silence the prophet. Centuries later, God challenged the people of the Southern Kingdom to circumcise their hearts, or "my wrath will break out like fire and burn with no one to extinguish it" (Jer. 4:4).

VERSE 7

Those who turn justice into wormwood also throw righteousness to the ground.

Justice should taste sweet; but Israel's leaders had turned **justice into wormwood**. *Wormwood* is mentioned in seven Old Testament verses, each time referring to its bitter taste. A plant that typically smells good, wormwood also has some excellent medicinal properties, but its acerbic flavor came to symbolize troubled times. In Revelation 8:10-11 a star called Wormwood ruined a third of the world's waters, killing many.

The poor and helpless suffered most from Israel's twisted justice system. Amos noted how evil leaders threw **righteousness to the ground**, and God's ways were ignored. Instead of transforming individuals and cultures, unfit leaders led society deeper into chaos. The courts designed to mend Israel's social fabric created the gaps that offered no protection to the poor.

VERSES 8-9

The one who made the Pleiades and Orion, who turns darkness into dawn and darkens day into night, who summons the water of the sea and pours it out over the surface of the earth—the LORD is his name. He brings destruction on the strong, and it falls on the fortress.

Verses 8-9 form a brief hymn, inserted in the middle of a lament. The transition from lament to praise is so abrupt that some commentators believe these verses were added by a later editor. Yet, the structure is actually quite beautiful. As noted, the hymn is framed by the lament. In the center of that frame stands a magnificent statement about God, the divine Creator. Interpreted together, the lament and the hymn demonstrate that the terrible events coming Israel's way were from the very hand of God. The same God who creates everything has the authority to devastate everything.

By His very nature, God creates, and He takes pleasure in creating new things in our lives as well. Looking to God's creation, Amos focused on a pair of constellations, **Pleiades and Orion**. Each was associated with changing seasons. Likewise, **darkness into dawn** and **day into night** relate to the movements of each. Even **the sea** constantly moves and changes. And God is the One behind all these transitions.

Once again, Amos piled up a series of verbs to describe God's creative acts: God **made, turns, darkens, summons, pours, and brings**. The Hebrew word here for *darkness* (*tsalmoth*) is the same one used in Psalm 23:4, where David wrote that he would not fear even the darkest valley. *Tsalmoth* doesn't just mean literal *darkness*, but also the terrors associated with that darkness. A favorite term of Job, these "night terrors" frightened him constantly and caused him to lose sleep (Job 3:5; 10:21; 12:22; 16:16; 24:17; 34:22; 38:17).

If the hymn is at the heart of the lament, then **LORD is his name** sits at the heart of the hymn. Like a single stone creates ripples across a pond, God alone stands behind all that exists, and He has a *name*. This is one of seven references in Amos to God's name (Amos 2:7; 4:13; 5:8,27; 6:10; 9:6,12). **LORD** is God's covenant name, emphasizing His self-existence and eternity.

In verse 9, Amos shifted from nature to history, but the Hebrew is tricky to translate in **He brings destruction on the strong**. The word translated *brings* essentially means "to gleam or flash a smile." This rare word is only used four times in the Hebrew Bible, which makes it challenging to compare contexts. In this context, it probably means to burst or flash, similar to a cloudburst. So, one possible translation would be, "He rains havoc on the strong and fury comes to the fortress." It is clear that Amos looked toward a devastating God-directed event against Israel.

Isaiah 1:31 also describes the downfall of the *strong* as being like tinder ignited by God's spark of anger. The flames created by God's judgment cannot be extinguished by human strength. Early in the twentieth century, excavators of Samaria discovered the remains of a fortress that included a security tower and gates. As secure as the city appeared during Amos's time, that security would quickly dissipate in the decades between Jeroboam II's death and the Assyrian exile.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read “Names of God” on pages 1143-1145 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How has God bridged the gap between humans and Himself by revealing His divine name? What other names of God resonate deeply with you? Why?

THE REALITY (Amos 5:10-13)

VERSE 10

They hate the one who convicts the guilty at the city gate, and they despise the one who speaks with integrity.

The downfall and destruction mentioned in verse 9 were no accident. Verses 10, 12, and 15 all refer to evil that transpired **at the city gate**, an essential site of justice and security in ancient communities. Amos was not concerned with shoddy building practices, but with a shoddy judicial system. It was not just a few individuals creating problems, but systemic injustice.

The leaders had grown to **hate the one who convicts the guilty**. In other words, they actively opposed good people who were trying to make the guilty pay for their crimes. Instead of neutral evenhandedness, every leader had an agenda, and those agendas made justice next to impossible.

As if that wasn't enough, they would **despise** and silence anyone who stood for justice. Centuries later, the prophet Zechariah made some wonderful promises to Israel, but they were all contingent on God's people making true and sound decisions at the city gate (Zech. 8:16). In the best of worlds, the gates were centers of commerce, justice, and protection for the vulnerable (Deut. 17:5; Ruth 4:1-12; Isa. 29:21). But in Amos's world, Israel's gates had disintegrated into places of dishonesty and tyranny.

VERSE 11

Therefore, because you trample on the poor and exact a grain tax from him, you will never live in the houses of cut stone you have built; you will never drink the wine from the lush vineyards you have planted.

Just like in Amos 2:7 and 8:4, **because you trample the poor** accuses Israel of symbolically crushing the heads of the weak. No other biblical writer used such vivid imagery to describe the economic exploitation of the needy.

When a herd stampedes, the animals get caught up in impulse, unable to recognize what they are doing. Everything in their way gets flattened due to the brutalizing fear that drives the herd. Instead of following the crowd and closing our hearts, God's people should open their hands to help the poor find a better life. Like the parable of the good Samaritan, we should care for all people and work for justice on their behalf.

In Amos's day, there was a big difference between houses made with field stones and **houses of cut stone**. Most of the time, people simply picked up field stones wherever they could find them and built their homes. But *cut stone* (also called "ashlar") was quarried, making them more expensive. Amos was targeting affluent Israelites who had multiple homes of quarried ashlar (Amos 3:15) and beds inlaid with ivory (6:4). Like a signature on a painting, mason's marks were symbols found on dressed stones in lavish buildings. A number of Samaritan ashlar discovered by archaeologists have these mason's markings.

In Jesus's parable, a rich fool accumulated so many possessions that he built bigger barns to store his beloved goods for years to come (Luke 12:13-21). Of course, he didn't even make it through the night, much less enjoy security for decades. Like this fool, the residents of the Northern Kingdom would never **drink the wine from the lush vineyards** they had planted or live in their palatial houses. In fact, Amos later predicted that their estates would be demolished and their smaller houses would be crushed (Amos 6:11).

VERSES 12-13

For I know your crimes are many and your sins innumerable. They oppress the righteous, take a bribe, and deprive the poor of justice at the city gates. Therefore, those who have insight will keep silent at such a time, for the days are evil.

For I know resonates like haunting words. God knows all about our "secret" sins and crimes. Nothing surprises Him. No matter what people do to cover up their sin, God still knows. But this is not necessarily bad news. We can find comfort in knowing that before we even confess our sin to God, He already knows about them and stands ready to forgive.

Unfortunately, the Israelites were not interested in taking God up on His offer of forgiveness. Instead, their **crimes are many** and their **sins innumerable**. Note also the three verbs: **oppress the righteous, take a bribe, and deprive the poor of justice**. *Oppress* suggests prolonged malicious treatment of someone else. It is an abuse of power, either overtly or covertly. A *bribe* involves improperly inducing someone to act in your favor against another. To *deprive the poor* can literally be translated, "You turn aside the poor at the gate."

Through oppression and bribery, the poor were rejected, and their voices went unheard. Since the poor had no money, no power, and no authority, God Himself took up their cause.

In Amos, **Therefore** usually introduces judgment (3:11; 4:12; 5:11,16; 6:7; 7:17), but here it refers to those stifled by injustice. The prophet noted that those with **insight will keep silent**, meaning the ones who knew right from wrong refused to speak up. Amos implied that this silence was a sign of prudence. His words were probably sarcastic, though, since he refused to remain silent himself. Indeed, his outspoken nature constitutes one of the major themes in the book of Amos.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article “City Gate” on pages 302-303 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How were city gates instrumental in ensuring justice to all who lived in and around the city? What are some of the “city gates” where God’s people can promote justice today?

THE SOLUTION (Amos 5:14-15)

If you like to “fix” things, these verses are for you. Through Amos, God pointed out that something could be done about all these abuses. It wasn’t too late to seek God and to love good, hate evil, and establish justice.

VERSE 14

Pursue good and not evil so that you may live, and the LORD, the God of Armies, will be with you as you have claimed.

Amos challenged the Israelites to **pursue good and not evil**. The Hebrew wording suggests frequent, repeated action, like treading wheat, beating down a path, or rubbing a surface. Such pursuit is a lifestyle, not a one-time task that can be checked off a list. That’s what makes pursuing good so difficult. This phrase reminds us of the final words of the book of Esther, “Mordecai . . . sought the good of his people” (Esth. 10:3, NASB). This is what all leaders should do for their people.

Amos also returned to the theme of life. Because of Israel’s sins, death was lurking around the corner. They were staring at their own funeral, but life was still a possibility. Even more, it was God’s desire for them. To this point, Israel was blind when it came to their standing with God. They thought He was with them, but Amos promised that **the LORD . . . will be with you** only

as they practiced justice according to His directions. Claiming God’s presence is useless without aligning our lives with Him.

VERSE 15

Hate evil and love good; establish justice at the city gate. Perhaps the LORD, the God of Armies, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

While the command to **hate evil** is fairly common, this is the only time in the Bible where the specific wording **love good** appears. Of course, the principle of loving good is a command for God’s people throughout the pages of Scripture. For example, Amos’s words are remarkably similar to what his contemporary Isaiah preached to the Southern Kingdom (Isa. 1:16c-17).

Another way to *love good* is to *hate evil* (Prov. 8:13; Ps. 97:10). This does not mean that we should hate those who do evil, but we should stand against evil actions wherever they are found. Unfortunately, this was not how the Israelites lived. As Micah pointed out, they were more likely to “hate good and love evil” than to follow God’s commands (Mic. 3:2).

As he wrapped up this passage, Amos circled back to the central theme of verses 10-16: **Establish justice at the city gate**. This command went beyond individual morality and emphasized the responsibility of Israel’s leaders to honor the moral law of God. *Justice* had to be administered fairly in the courts, the marketplace, and the public sphere. It was Israel’s only hope.

The word **perhaps** indicates hope. Amos’s wording suggests that Israel had not crossed a point of no return and that, even in the worst of situations, God’s grace was still available. God does not want anyone to perish, but wants all to come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9).

Like the “house of Joseph” (see Amos 5:6), the **remnant of Joseph** refers to Israel. A *remnant* represents what is left of a community after a catastrophe. Only a small portion of Joseph’s descendants would be left (See 9:8-9,11-15). But several prophets did speak of a remnant who would make it through the calamity (Zeph. 3:12-13; Zech. 8:6-17; 9:9-17).

EXPLORE FURTHER

As a prayer activity, pay special attention to media stories from your area and from around the world. As you see instances where people are dealing with violence and injustice, pray for those situations. Close the prayer time by asking God to help you be more sensitive to injustice around you and to help you stand up for those who are oppressed.