PREPARE TO MEET YOUR GOD!

God's Warning to Us Through Amos
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by John W. Ritenbaugh and Richard T. Ritenbaugh
The handwriting is on the wall” is a cliché that describes a situation where all the evidence points to an imminent climactic event. The saying originated when God judged the Babylonian Empire and found it wanting (Daniel 5). Babylon fell that very night! Though our nations may not fall this very night, there is no doubt we are being judged—and the outlook is grim.

Some feel we have reached a time in history that parallels the period just before the Flood. God recorded what conditions were like as Noah was building the ark: “Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5). What a horrifying thought! What danger and oppression must have lurked at every turn!

Yet Jesus predicts in a prophecy regarding the time of the end—the time we live in today, “But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be” (Matthew 24:37). In a larger, more general context, Jesus meant that, despite the dangerous, portentous events occurring all around them, people will be going about their normal routines without seriously considering the meaning of these events (verses 38-39). They will not take the time to wonder if these cataclysmic events are affecting them personally.

How about you? Even though we are living in momentous times, we are easily distracted from their importance by our high standard of living and convenient access to just about anything we desire. The nations of western Europe, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the United States are, for the most part, wallowing in unprecedented technological luxury. Much to our spiritual detriment, our lives are caught up in our possessions and keeping our noses above water economically.

But we must not allow this to happen any longer! Time and prophecy are relentlessly marching on. The book of Amos records an almost exact parallel account to what is happening in our day. It chronicles the social, political, economic, military, and religious conditions and attitudes prevalent in ancient Israel in about 760 BC. This was about forty years before Assyria invaded and completely devastated the nation. So awesome was Israel’s defeat that, as far as the world is concerned, her people disappeared from history! Today, they are known as the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel.

Amos is not a happy book to read. It does not contain the encouraging, soaring, and hope-inspiring prophecies of Isaiah. No, Amos speaks of almost unending gloom and doom. This presents an interesting contrast when seen against Israel’s surging power, wealth, and influence. During the days of Amos’ ministry, the nation was undergoing a burst of prosperity second only to Solomon’s time. On the surface, it appeared that Israel’s prosperity indicated God’s pleasure, but Amos’ words prove beyond any doubt that God was not pleased at all! He was deadly serious! If the people would not repent, they were doomed!

The Israelites did not repent. They suffered war, famine, pestilence, and captivity as a result. Tens of thousands died. They learned the hard way that God means exactly what He says through His prophets (Amos 3:7).

Though Amos describes what was literally happening in ancient Israel, God intended the message for us, the physical and/or spiritual descendants of Israel. It was written to stir us to action, seeing that the times indicate Jesus Christ will return soon.

Amos clearly shows that our nations are headed along the same path to destruction as ancient Israel. There is still hope that we will turn around and avoid the wrath of God, but as each day passes, it becomes more unlikely. We have many lessons to learn, and we seem determined to learn them the hard way.

One of our main problems is that our focus is solely on ourselves and the things that we do. We judge a person based on how much wealth he can accumulate
over a lifetime. It is a wrong standard. Even the world understands that money and possessions bring little satisfaction, yet we continue to pursue that kind of “success” as if that is all that matters. The great Creator never intended materialism to be the basis for abundant living.

We publish this booklet in the hope that the church member will be stirred to be astute enough spiritually to prevent himself from being ensnared in this seductive, self-centered trap. The basis of a truly abundant life is a God-centered life as shown through devotion to keeping the commandments, praying regularly, studying the Bible, and sacrificing ourselves in service in family relationships and community responsibilities. God will look favorably upon the Christian who is doing these things.

We also hope that others will also be awakened to the impending crisis descending upon the modern nations of Israel. They are Laodicean—apathetic, self-absorbed, materialistic, and spiritually asleep (Revelation 3:14-22)—and headed pell-mell and unheeding toward the prophesied Great Tribulation and Day of the Lord. But there is still time for individuals to wake up and return to God.

We must not allow this attractive and easily absorbed way of life to become our own. Avoiding it will require an ever-closer relationship with God and a discipline of our attitudes and conduct. God promises in Revelation 3:10 to provide a way of escape for His faithful, loving, and enthusiastic children. Thus, we must yield to the urgent message given through His servant Amos.
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Israel and Surrounding Nations During the Time of Amos (c. 760 BC)
Has the world ever witnessed a time like this? Has any nation experienced such prosperity and strength, yet such turmoil, injustice, and oppression as our nations have?

The answer to these questions is both yes and no. Yes, other nations have risen to power on the world scene, though none as spectacularly nor to such dizzying heights as America and the British Commonwealth. Yes, other nations have fallen from the peak of their power for the same reasons: The peoples’ spiritual, moral, and ethical disregard, irresponsibility, and apathy. On the other hand, never in history has a nation’s decline been so deep, so rapid, so extreme, so unnecessary, and so clearly prophesied in the pages of the Bible.

Human nature has not changed. Mankind is no more sinful now than any other time in human history. With the rise of technology, though, man has the ability and opportunity to sin more frequently, to involve others in his sins more easily, and thus multiply the devastating effects of sin—all to a magnitude unparalleled in history.

No nations ever had less excuse for wallowing in a crisis of morality than have the Anglo-Saxon, English-speaking nations—the descendants of ancient Israel. In about a generation, we have collectively gone from exalting godly morality to complaining about its lack. What is ironic is that, individually, our actions border on being amoral. We once extolled and defended our foundational laws based on God’s Word, and Christianity was by choice our national religion. But in our lifetimes we have seen both our founding principles and God’s Word assailed relentlessly and often forgotten. Humanism—exalting man over God—has risen as our new religion to replace Christianity.

We have even less excuse because God has provided a record of a nation that took the same course. If we continue down that same path of moral decay, we will arrive at the same destination—national military defeat and captivity.

The book of Amos records God’s assessment of ancient Israel’s internal condition some forty years before she fell. The prophet was sent to warn the people and lead them to repentance, but they would not change. As punishment for her spiritual and moral decay, Israel was invaded by Assyria in 721 BC and crushed in a devastating war. The surviving Israelites were taken into captivity where they seemingly disappeared from the face of the earth. This was God’s answer to their sin and rebellion!

But Israel was God’s “chosen nation”! He rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 12:40-42) and made a covenant with them on Mount Sinai, giving them His laws and His way of life (Exodus 19-24). After their years of wandering in the wilderness, He established them in the land of promise (Joshua 11:16-23), and as they grew, He provided for them and protected them (Psalm 147).

No nation ever had God so near and so willing to help! How far they must have fallen! What did the Israelites do to incur God’s wrath? What was Israel like when God sent His servant Amos with a burdensome message of evaluation? How did God see the people’s moral and ethical condition?

These are important questions, but for us in God’s church, other questions are even more vital. Was Amos’ message only for the ancient nation of Israel? Did God leave this account for our benefit also? Are there any parallels in Israel’s decline and fall from which the church can learn?

At baptism we, like Israel, made a covenant with God. In Galatians 6:16, the church is even called “the Israel of God.” The church exists in the world, and her members must not merely function but grow in the midst of free-falling moral and spiritual standards. Does Amos show any area of decline that we might see reflected in ourselves?

May Amos motivate us to turn to God and please Him—and thereby escape what is as sure to fall upon our nations as fell upon ancient Israel!
Amos’ Approach

Amos writes primarily to or against Israel, but he approaches his primary subject like a bird of prey, circling overhead, effortlessly gliding in the sky searching for game, floating on the updrafts. The circle keeps getting smaller and smaller. Then—woosh!—it dives for its victim.

Amos designed his prophecy exactly this way. Like an eagle, Amos starts in a wide circle, denouncing nations surrounding Israel—Syria, Philistia, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab, and Judah—then he suddenly swoops down on Israel. He devotes a little over one chapter to these other nations but more than seven chapters to Israel.

Syria, Philistia, and Tyre were part of Israel’s political world, and Edom, Ammon, and Moab were ethnic cousins. Judah was a brother. Notice Amos’ method. He moves from associates to relatives, finally attacking Israel inside the house, the immediate family.

The prophet gets God’s message across masterfully and powerfully. Imagine Amos going into Bethel or Samaria, two of Israel’s chief cities, and to catch the attention of his audience, attacking Israel’s enemies. He denounces the sins of the Syrians, Philistines, Tyrians, Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites, and—yes—Israel’s rivals to the south, the Jews! Soon they begin to agree eagerly with his pronouncements. “Give it to them, Amos! I always knew those people were rats!”

But they had been set up for the kill. As they point their fingers at their neighbors, Amos, like the eagle with talons bared, descends upon them for their own sins.

Conditions in Israel

After the Assyrians attacked and defeated Syria in 805 BC, they suddenly stopped their advance toward Palestine and returned to Assyria. This abrupt retreat unwittingly set the stage for a surge of Israelite wealth and power that had steadily waned following Solomon’s reign. In the absence of foreign domination, Israel’s prosperity and influence began to grow.

When Jeroboam II became king of Israel in 793 BC, he continued the governmental and religious systems that Jeroboam I (931-910 BC) had instituted. From God’s perspective Jeroboam II was an evil king, but he was a capable administrator and military leader (II Kings 14:23-29). During the vacuum of power caused by the Assyrian withdrawal, he seized control of the lucrative trade routes that went through Israel. Coming from Babylon and Assyria, from Egypt and North Africa, from Syria and Asia Minor, these roads made Israel the crossroads of trade and commerce.

Because of the outrageous tolls Jeroboam II charged for merchants to travel on these Israelite-controlled trade routes, the nation’s wealth and power began to rival that of Solomon’s kingdom two centuries earlier. A similar surge in prosperity occurred in Judah under Uzziah (II Chronicles 26). Unlike any other pair of kings, Jeroboam and Uzziah restored Israel’s boundaries to what they were under David and Solomon. In A Survey of Israel’s History (p. 277), Historian Leon J. Wood, describes this period as, “the almost unprecedented prosperity of Jeroboam’s rule.”

But there were problems.

Rich and proud Israel! The nations sang Israel’s praises and beat a path to her doors. As a whole, the people were well-fed, well-dressed, well-entertained. Politically and militarily, Israel was powerful and influential, making alliances with other nations and extending her trade over all the known world. While the nation looked very impressive on the outside, the cancer of moral degeneracy was eating away at her spiritual core.

Biblical historian Charles F. Pfeiffer writes:

A rich merchant class developed and merchants and nobles alike built elaborate houses and revelled in the comforts which wealth made possible. The poor, however, did not share in the prosperity. . . . Society was divided between the dissolute rich and the embittered poor. (Old Testament History, p. 328)

When Amos looks at Israel, he confirms Pfeiffer’s assessment: “‘I will destroy the winter house along with the summer house; the houses of ivory shall perish, and the great houses shall have an end,’ says the Lord” (Amos 3:15). Some of the people had so much wealth that they hardly knew what to do with it! These few wealthy Israelites were so rich that they owned not just one house, but two, three or four! Blinded by their riches, thinking God had prospered them for their righteousness, they ignored the terrible oppressions they were inflicting on the poor and weak. For this, God promises punishment.

Thus, Amos scathingly rebukes them:

- I will not turn away its punishment, because they sell the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of sandals. They pant after the dust of the earth which is on the head of the poor, and pervert the way of the humble. (Amos 2:6-7)

- 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!’ (Amos 4:1)

- Woe to you . . . who lie on beds of ivory, stretch out on your couches, eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall; who chant to
He describes a tremendously wealthy people. Men sought to make money at any price, no matter what the consequences to the “little guy.” The derogatory term “cows of Bashan” describes the rich women who controlled Israelite families, making demands on their husbands to keep them in their accustomed lifestyle. Spoiled people living ostentatious lives, luxuriating in expensive materialism, satiating their flesh with wine and rich foods, they denied themselves nothing.

But how did they obtain such wealth? Property and legal rackets! Exploiting the poor! Shady business deals! The powerful and rich used the laws and the courts to their advantage against the weak and poor who could not afford legal assistance. The latter always came out on the short end of the deal.

They hate the one who rebukes in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks uprightly. . . . For I know your manifold transgressions and your mighty sins. You afflict the just and take bribes; you divert the poor from justice at the gate. (Amos 5:10, 12)

Israelites held their public meetings and court trials at the city gate where everyone could witness the proceedings. When rebuked for the way that they lived, for their social attitudes, for their immorality, for their lack of spirituality, the hedonistic Israelites would typically malign or assault their critic rather than repent. Bribery, obstruction of justice, and attacks on law-abiding citizens were common occurrences.

Israelite Religion

M aybe their business practices were corrupt, but surely the religious sector of society up held a high moral standard! What did Amos see when he observed the people’s religious life?

- “Come to Bethel and transgress, at Gilgal multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days [margin, years]. 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. (Amos 4:4-5)

- But do not seek Bethel, nor enter Gilgal, nor pass over to Beersheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into captivity, and Bethel shall come to nothing. Seek the Lord and live. (Amos 5:5-6)

- I hate, I despise your feast days, and I do not savor your sacred assemblies. Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them, nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings. Take away from Me the noise of your songs, for I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments. But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream. (Amos 5:21-24)

Because of their connection to Israel’s past, Bethel, Gilgal, and Beersheba all bore significant religious meaning to the common Israelite. Jeroboam I set up a golden calf at Bethel (I Kings 12:25-31), since the city had religious associations from the days of Jacob (Genesis 28:10-22; 35:1-7). Gilgal’s significance sprang from Israel’s entrance into Canaan after her forty years in the wilderness and the circumcision of her men there (Joshua 5:1-12). Beersheba had strong connections with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the nation’s forefathers (Genesis 21:22-34; 22:19; 26:32-33; 28:10).

Even so, Israelite religion displeased God on two counts. First, the Israelites of Amos’ day were guilty of following the sin of Jeroboam I: combining the worship of the true God with that of idols. God hates idolatry (Exodus 20:1-6). Apparently, the people were thronging to these pagan shrines and punctiliously offering sacrifices. In all their religious fervor, however, their eyes were not upon the God of heaven. Their religious practice was not done in obedience to God, as they claimed, but had been conceived in the mind of a man. In His denunciations of their religion, God tells them that their worship would do them no good because its foundations were in a source other than Himself.

Second, their religion was self-pleasing. Because of their careful observance of their form of worship, Israelites felt good about themselves, but they forgot their social responsibility. They failed to love their neighbors (Amos 8:4). Ritual sexual indulgence was common practice (Amos 2:7). Despite their sincerity, they abandoned all godly standards and values and despised authority and law (Amos 3:10).

Application to Our Time

W hat significance does Amos’ prophecy have for us today? How deeply should we consider it? Amos is speaking to us just as much as he was speaking to ancient Israel—he might as well have been walking through Los Angeles or New York, London or Edinburgh, Sydney or Brisbane, Toronto or Montreal.

The indictments that he makes against Israel are indictments against sin, and “sin is a reproach to any people” (Proverbs 14:34). Thus, Amos speaks to any nation caught in the destructive grip of moral decay.
What he says may not apply to every individual within these nations, but the principles certainly do apply to these societies in general.

Obviously, he addresses the problems he saw with his own eyes and speaks against the evils of his own time. But if we accept this view only, we miss the point. To feel the intended force of his message, we must understand that it is also addressed to us as individuals living in the nations of modern Israel. Like Amos, we live in times when morals and ethics are in full retreat, and the ramifications of that affects us all.

Yet even this is not close enough. Though what Amos says certainly applies to the world’s nations, his message has its first and foremost audience as those of us whose “citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3:20). Amos speaks—indeed he shouts—to God’s people, His church, the future Bride of Christ.

In the biblical sense, the church is the continuation of Old Testament Israel, which can be seen in the promise of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:31: “‘Behold, the days are coming,’ says the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.’” When Jesus came and founded the church, beginning with His disciples, He showed that the New Covenant has been made with His disciples, the church of God: “In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me’” (I Corinthians 11:25).

As a part of the church of God, we are forerunners of the covenant that will eventually also be made with physical Israel. “For we [the church] are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh” (Philippians 3:3). As Spirit-begotten children of God, we are the true spiritual Jews or Israelites (John 4:22-24).

We are also the children of promise (Galatians 4:28-29) and Abraham’s seed (Romans 9:6-8; Galatians 3:28-29). Of all mankind, we are the ones most directly involved in God’s purpose. We are the ones most aware of and striving the hardest for the Kingdom of God. Because of this awesome calling as His New Covenant people, God had the Scriptures written for our benefit: “For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope” (Romans 15:4).

Paul also writes, “Now all these things happened to them [the Israelites] as examples, and they were written for our admonition, on whom the ends of the ages have come” (I Corinthians 10:11). As we saw earlier, the church is specifically named “the Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16). God inspired the book of Amos so that in this end time His people, surrounded by materialism and worldly distractions unparalleled in human history, would not follow Israel’s example.

In this booklet we will look into Israel’s example, noting where it applies to our nations, the church and us as individuals. Amos’ approach is very direct and difficult to expound verse by verse. Instead, we have taken a thematic approach to this very vital warning message to God’s people. Together, the following themes in Amos give us a complete picture of Israelite society, culture, and religion, and demonstrate how they apply to us:

- The responsibilities of those who make a covenant with God.
- The fairness of God’s judgment.
- The effects of sin upon a nation.
- The importance of true religion and holiness.
- The cancer of complacency and Laodiceanism.
- The terrible punishment for sin despite repeated warnings.
- The need for repentance and the promise of God’s blessing.

The book of Amos is a stinging rebuke of a nation that has rejected and forgotten God. It is a stirring warning to all of the dangers of apostasy, rebellion, and complacency. And we must never forget that Amos is speaking to us, the church of God, the Israel of God! He urgently warns us, “Prepare to meet your God!” and shows us how to do it.

Are we listening?
THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE COVENANT PEOPLE

The basis of God’s accusation and judgment against the people of Israel is their special relationship: “You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities” (Amos 3:2). From the beginning of His dealings with them, God has stressed their higher responsibility because of their knowledge of Him (Deuteronomy 4:5-10).

As used in Amos 3:2, known can be cognitive, involving the thinking process, or it can be relational, indicating experience with someone else. The word is used in this latter sense in Genesis 4:1: “Adam knew Eve his wife.” He had an intimate, caring relationship with her. So with God. Of all the world’s nations, He had been intimate only with Israel, watching over and caring for her in a very personal way (Ezekiel 16:1-14). Israel was so dear to Him that He called her “the apple of His eye” (Deuteronomy 32:10)!

Yet, whether they realized it or not, the people God cared for so much came to devalue their calling, their special status (Deuteronomy 7:6). As time passed, they perverted it into a doctrine of divine favoritism. We can see this in two historical examples:

- In Jeremiah’s day (c. 600 BC), the Jews took great pride and security from the fact that they lived in the presence of the Temple (Jeremiah 7:1-15).

- Centuries later during Jesus’ lifetime, the Jews believed that their physical descent from Abraham procured God’s favor (John 8:31-40).

In practice, this attitude caused the Israelites to live as if they were not accountable for their individual actions.

“Are we not God’s people?” they said in justification. As such, were they not protected from their enemies and subsidized into prosperity? God had fought for them before, and they assumed He always would. They forgot that with privilege comes responsibility. They forgot that God is no respecter of persons (Acts 10:34; see James 2:1-13). He would judge them against the same righteous standards by which He denounces the Gentiles in Amos 1:3–2:3.

Though guilty of things similar to the Gentiles, they would be held more responsible because of their special relationship with God. In fact, as the covenant people with a responsibility to be a light to the nations around them (Deuteronomy 28:9-10), they faced an even stricter judgment than their neighbors to whom the eternal God had never been revealed.

An Intimate Relationship

At first, Amos addresses Judah and Israel separately. However, Amos 3:1-2 ties them together by accusing “the whole family” of iniquities. **Israel**, the name given to Jacob in Genesis 32:28, covers all the people who made a covenant with God at Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:1-8). Israel and Judah are often both meant by the single name **Israel**.

But **Israel** is more than the name of a nation. Like a code name, it is the name of God’s true church, which Paul called “the Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16). The church, too, is a body of people who made a covenant with God. Though the actual events that Amos describes took place in physical Israel, the warning is also very much addressed to the church today.

Like the children of Israel, God has an intimate relationship with those whom He has spiritually begotten. We can see that He had an intimate relationship with the patriarchs, such as Abraham and Jacob, and with the prophets—in fact, with Jeremiah even before he was born! “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you; and I ordained you a prophet to the nations” (Jeremiah 1:5).

This is not metaphorical. God desires an intimate,
family relationship with each one of us. He asks to be called “our Father in heaven” (Matthew 6:9). His firstborn Son is our Elder Brother (Matthew 12:50), and we are God’s sons and daughters (II Corinthians 6:18). As close as relationships are within a family, so are the relationships between God and His begotten children.

So, what can we learn from ancient Israel’s example as His chosen people? Privilege brings peril. Amos’ message is that the closer we are to God, the closer the scrutiny and the stricter the judgment. Judgment starts with those who make a covenant with Him: “For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?” (I Peter 4:17). Ezekiel 9:3-6 and Revelation 11:1-2 illustrate this principle. As the people and temple of God, we are evaluated first and most closely to determine if we measure up to the standards of righteousness that God has revealed to us.

Refusing the Revelation

Unlike the judgments of the Gentiles (Amos 1:3-2:3), Amos indicts Judah for breaking His commandments, specifically lying.

Thus says the Lord: “For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment, because they have despised the law of the Lord, and have not kept His commandments. Their lies lead them astray, lies after which their fathers walked. But I will send a fire upon Judah, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem.” (Amos 2:4-5)

Judah’s despising of God’s law and Israel’s commanding the prophets to stop preaching His Word (Amos 2:12) reflect exactly the same moral condition: Both refused the voice of God as spoken through His prophets. What God intended to be their privilege through revelation of Himself and His law had turned out to be their central peril. It is another way of saying, “To whom much is given, from him much will be required” (Luke 12:48).

Modern Israel—the Anglo-Saxon nations of America, the British Commonwealth and northwestern Europe—is rejecting God’s way of life today just as ancient Israel did. It is this proud attitude that spiritual Israel, God’s church, is fighting. God will not accept any excuse for failing to live His way of life (Hebrews 6:4-6) because when He reveals it, He also provides the power to live it.

God makes the promise that He will never give us a trial that is too great and will always provide a way of escape (I Corinthians 10:13). He wants to see if we love His truth and will follow His instructions. And if we need help to do what He has revealed to us to be His way, He will endow us with the abilities to fulfill it (II Corinthians 3:4-6).

As God destroyed the Amorites and Egyptians to deliver Israel (Amos 2:9-10), He will also deliver us no matter that the odds are against us. We cannot overcome human nature, Satan, and this evil world without the help of God. We need to seek God and ask for the gifts we need to overcome, grow, and produce the fruit of a godly way of life (Luke 11:9-13; James 1:5).

A Warning to the Individual

Despising truth is an inward attitude that outwardly reveals itself in immorality, and this is the condition God found in ancient Israel. The people had become complacent about His revelation to them. They zealously sought after knowledge—even religious knowledge—but they did not really love the truth (Romans 10:2-3). This was reflected in their immorality: if they had loved God’s truth, they would have been living it, and God would have had no cause for judgment.

In this information age, we accumulate mounds of data—regarding ethics, solutions to social ills, and the like—yet our morals decline. Intelligent, educated individuals have written many Bible commentaries, but they still refuse to keep the Sabbath or holy days. They write that Christmas and Easter have pagan origins and are not commanded in the Bible, but they still observe them. They do not love God’s truth enough to change. This was Israel’s problem, and it could be ours if we are not careful.

Because God has revealed His truth to us, each individual Christian has a responsibility to conform to it and grow. A greater diversity of distractions compete for our time and attention than at any other time in the history of mankind. If we are not extremely careful, and if we lose our sense of urgency, we will gradually lose our understanding of what is true and what is not. Our ability to distinguish between right and wrong will become blurred. We must make sure that God, His Word, and His way are always first in our lives.

Christ said that if we keep the truth, the truth in turn will keep us free (John 8:31-36). If we live it, the revealed truth of God will protect us from sinking back into slavery to sin. But first, we must love the truth we have been given. Humanly, we pursue what we love. God wants a father-child or teacher-student relationship with us. If we do not love truth, and if we do not pursue it and God Himself, we will seriously undermine our relationship with Him, and He could interpret our attitude as despising His truth.

Love of the truth comes from God through His Holy Spirit and must be nourished through our response to it. We must not only learn it but also apply it in our lives. This will make the difference between being saved and perishing (II Thessalonians 2:9-12).
Those who critically examine the Bible unanimously agree that Amos wrote the book that bears his name. Some researchers feel that some minor material may have been inserted later by an editor, but few doubt that a Jewish man named Amos was the author.

The prophet hailed from Tekoa, a small town about thirteen miles south of Jerusalem in the Wilderness of Judah. Since he was not from a large cosmopolitan city like Jerusalem or Samaria, Amos, shaped by his rural experiences, had a clearer perspective of the evils that he saw as he walked through the cities of Israel. While the Israelites accepted their lifestyle as normal, the prophet recognized it as a perversion and an abomination to God. Amos means “burden-bearer,” and his message to Israel, one of continuous judgment and denunciation, was indeed a heavy burden.

Because of the distrust between the two peoples, it is ironic that God sent a Jew to warn the Israelites of their impending judgment. God obviously sent the best man available to do the job, though he was not a formally trained prophet. “I was no prophet, nor was I a son of a prophet,” he explains, “but I was a herdsman and a tender of sycamore fruit. Then the Lord took me as I followed the flock and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to My people Israel’” (Amos 7:14-15).

Amos was more than “just a shepherd.” In Amos 1:1, the Hebrew word noqed indicates a keeper or raiser of sheep or goats (see II Kings 3:4), though it is often rendered as “shepherd.” In Amos 7:14, “herdsman” (bowker) refers to large cattle. God inspired two different words to show that he was a breeder of sheep (and maybe of cattle), supplying others with stock, and possibly developing and refining the breeds. Some of Amos’ land may have also been set aside as a sycamore-fig orchard. His ranch seems to have been small enough that he was personally involved in its operation, though he also seems to have been successful enough to take time off to preach in Israel.

Judging from the book’s language and style, Amos was also well-educated. Scholars judge his use of language as particularly expressive, vivid, and forceful. Far from being an illiterate shepherd, the prophet was a man of refinement and substance, aware of past events and current conditions in Israel and Judah, as well as in the surrounding nations.

Amos wrote at a very significant time in Israel’s history (Amos 1:1). Both kings Jeroboam II of Israel (793-753 BC) and Uzziah of Judah (791-739 BC) enjoyed long and prosperous reigns. His prophecy can be dated before 750 BC, since Uzziah’s son, Jotham (750-731 BC), who reigned as co-regent with his father for eleven years, is not mentioned.

The phrase “two years before the earthquake” helps to narrow the book’s date. Archeological findings unearthed at Hazor in northern Palestine show that an unusually strong earthquake occurred about 760 BC. If so, Amos prophesied in about 762 BC. The phrase seems to limit his prophesying to this particular year, suggesting that his prophetic activity was very short.

Many historians have concluded that 722 BC—forty years later—was when Assyria marched on Israel. Beginning with Amos’ warning message, God in His mercy provided His people with a forty-year period of trial and testing during which they could repent. History records, however, that Samaria fell and her survivors were dragged into captivity in 718 BC. Tradition holds that Amos died a violent death at the hands of Jeroboam II, but no historical records have confirmed this claim. However, the prophet left a powerful message of warning and urgency that still rings with truth and fervor.

Reverting God

law in Amos 2:4 refers to instruction, not legislation and its enforcement. From a verb that means “to throw,” its root describes casting lots or throwing dice. When lots or dice were cast, God revealed His will in the way they landed (Proverbs 16:33; see Leviticus 16:8-10; Acts 1:26). At times, lots were used in making judgments in criminal cases in which God’s will needed to be ascertained (Joshua 7:13-25). Thus, by setting a legal precedent, the casting of lots served to give instruction in other cases in which the same basic principles of behavior were involved. God’s will—His law—was taught to His people through the casting of lots.

This instruction process implies a teacher-student relationship between God and His people. It is through the casting of lots that God’s will—His law—is taught to His people. The instruction process implies a teacher-student relationship between God and His people.
relationship. When the Israelites rejected God’s instruction contained in His law, they rejected the Instructor as well. Their relationship with Him quickly deteriorated.

*Commandment* means “to engrave or cut into stone,” suggesting its permanence and immutability in contrast to temporary and changeable lies. The law comes from an unchangeable, righteous, and pure God in contrast to fickle and iniquitous men.

Judah’s despising of God’s law and revelation of Himself was internal—from the heart (Psalm 78:37; 81:11-12; Jeremiah 5:23). The personal and social failures Amos records are evidence that the people had rejected the truth. So it is with us: God wants to change our hearts so He can change our actions and turn around our lives.

In every area of life, Israel perverted the truth of God to accommodate the ideas of men. In the final tally, they loved lies rather than the revelation of God (II Thessalonians 2:11-12). Thus Amos says that God’s people despised His law. They made the mistake of devaluing their calling and considered it common. Believing they were God’s elect, they thought they were irrevocably saved. With this attitude, it was only a matter of time before spiritual and moral complacency set in. As the church of God, we cannot allow ourselves to slip into this attitude because we, too, would fall into immorality.

If that occurs, God must pass judgment because His justice is the same for everybody (Colossians 3:25; I Peter 1:17). God’s laws govern the people on the outside as well as the people on the inside. No matter what makes Israel or the church distinctly different, His judgment is always righteous. When God could not change Israel’s immorality through His prophets, He had to punish them. So will He punish an apostate church.

It is easy to see why this book is written to the endtime church. The people of America and the British Commonwealth are already in the moral and spiritual condition of the people of Israel and Judah in the time of Amos. Members of God’s church come out of such a world. Just as Israel’s privileged position became a curse, so will it be for the Christian who ultimately rejects his calling (Hebrews 6:4).

**God’s Verdict**

Behold, I am weighed down by you, as a cart that is weighed down that is full of sheaves. Therefore flight shall perish from the swift, the strong shall not strengthen his power, nor shall the mighty deliver himself; he shall not stand who handles the bow, the swift of foot shall not deliver himself, nor shall he who rides a horse deliver himself. The most courageous men of might shall flee naked in that day,” says the L ORD. (Amos 2:13-16)

The wording of verse 13 provides two possibilities. The first is that God, in exasperation, refuses to carry His people any longer, as one might put down a burden that is too heavy. The second possibility pictures a heavily loaded cart with a broken wheel that carves deep ruts in the road and throws its occupants into ditches. The context implies that the heavy load is the crushing burden of sins that impede Israel from staying on “the straight and narrow” (Matthew 7:14).

This second meaning seems to fit the best, as He proceeds to foretell Israel’s destruction. Israel had reached the end of her greatest period of prosperity since the time of Solomon. The nation was rich, powerful, and well-armed, proud in her might, abilities, wisdom, wealth, strategic advantages, and courage. Who could stand against Israel? But God thunders the warning that all the nation’s natural abilities (Amos 2:14), acquired skills (verse 15), and outstanding qualities (verse 16) would not help her.

Men see the strength of a nation in its wealth, population, armaments, technology, and knowledge. But where does God look? “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people” (Proverbs 14:34). The Bible reveals that the cause of the rise and fall of nations is moral and spiritual. As Amos shows, no nation can rely on its strength, power, and wealth to save it from the devastating effects of moral decay. Moral, ethical, and spiritual problems cannot be resolved by money, strength of arms, “Star Wars” projects, social programs, intelligence, or humanitarian goodwill.

Since Israel had forfeited her privileged status, God promised to destroy her as He destroyed the Amorites and the Egyptians (Amos 2:9-10; 4:10, 12). The people of Israel had gone so far that God expected no repentance from them. Like Ecclesiastes 3, Amos shows there is a time of opportunity and a time when opportunity is gone. Evidently, Israel’s opportunity to repent had faded away. It was too late!

As He had fought their battles for them in the past, now God would fight against them. Whatever their courage or expertise, nothing would go in their favor. The things that had formerly given Israel strength in war would be turned against them.

**A Ray of Hope**

Notice, however, that a ray of hope still exists:

And I will bring a sword against you that will execute the vengeance of My covenant; when you are gathered together within your cities I will send pestilence among you; and you shall be delivered into the hand of the enemy . . . . But for their sake I will remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God: I am the L ORD. (Leviticus 26:25, 45)
God will remember His covenant because He is a jealous God (Exodus 20:5). Because He does not want His name to be profaned in any way, He is very concerned about those who bear it (Exodus 20:7). The covenant people, Israel, had profaned His name by their conduct among the other nations. Because God is holy and righteous, what He proclaimed to do against the heathen in the first chapter of Amos, He will also do to Israel—a people who had forsaken their covenant with Him.

Isaiah writes that Jerusalem, symbolizing all the tribes of Israel, will receive double for her sins because of her privileged position under the covenant (Isaiah 40:2). God will punish Israel for her failure to live up to her responsibilities within the covenant.

God’s punishment, though, is never an end in itself, nor does He punish in wild anger or frustration. Rather, He punishes in the best way and at the best time to bring individuals to repentance. He has not forgotten His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but He will correct their descendants so that He can eventually save His people and give them the promises. The process will be painful but also effective: Israel will come to repentance (Romans 11:25-29).

Reflecting on the history of the British Commonwealth and America in the last two hundred years, we see two nations quickly rising to prominence along with unparalleled accomplishments. The British produced a great empire far out of proportion to their population, native wealth, and abilities. Through her commercial power, the United States became the single richest nation that has ever existed. American influence has since exceeded even that of Britain, making English the universal language of business and politics.

Thousands of academic, scientific, and engineering breakthroughs and inventions have sprung from British and American individuals, discoveries which greatly affected the rest of this world. Such power and influence have made both nations feel they have an unlimited reservoir of natural ability and wealth. They even feel a kind of invincibility.

Amos warns ancient Israel and her modern descendants, however, that no nation is so great that it can stand without God. He makes and unmakes nations (II Chronicles 20:6; Daniel 4:17; Acts 17:26). Their rise or fall is largely dependent upon His purpose for them and their significance in prophecy (e.g. Jeremiah 12:14-17; 25:15-32). If their moral and ethical foundation has eroded, the natural process of strong nations displacing weaker ones will take place (Leviticus 18:28; 20:22). It is this process that God often uses to punish His people for apostasy and immorality.

But though God punishes, there is always the hope of repentance and restitution:

“Behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord, “when the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him who sows seed; the mountains shall drip with sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. I will bring back the captives of My people Israel; they shall build the waste cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink wine from them; they shall also make gardens and eat fruit from them. I will plant them in their land, and no longer shall they be pulled up from the land I have given them,” says the Lord your God. (Amos 9:13-15)

Central to both the punishment and the restitution is loving and living the truth of God. This is the responsibility of those who have made a covenant with Him, whether the Old or the New Covenant. It is our part of the deal—a small part really, but a difficult one that must be kept (Matthew 7:13-14). If we do not keep it, God must correct us.

But if we keep our part of the agreement, we will reap the benefits that flow from God keeping His. He promises good health (Exodus 15:26), prosperity (Malachi 3:8-12), children (Psalm 127:3-5), security (Psalm 46), and many other blessings besides His greatest gift, eternal life in His Kingdom (John 17:1-3; Romans 6:23)!
The LORD roars from Zion, and utters His voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds mourn, and the top of Carmel withers” (Amos 1:2). In the wild, a lion roars just as it is about to pounce on its prey. Symbolically and metaphorically, the roar of a lion or the crack of thunder shows the imminent intervention of God in human affairs (1 Samuel 2:10; Isaiah 29:6; 31:4; Hosea 11:9-11; Revelation 16:18).

In the mid-eighth century BC when Amos preached, Israel’s economic base was largely in agriculture, but a drought had begun to destabilize that foundation. The pastures had already begun to feel the effects of God’s roaring, as had Carmel, the most verdant part of Israel, and incidentally, the supposed stronghold of Baal. Amos proclaims that the drought is the result of God’s judgment.

The prophet uses this drought to illustrate that God is not an absentee landlord. He governs His creation (Psalm 104; Matthew 6:26) and knows everything that happens in it (Psalm 139; Matthew 10:29). He has neither abdicated nor delegated these responsibilities. If calamity strikes, God is involved in some way, possibly executing judgment.

A Lion Has Roared!

A lion has roared” (Amos 3:8) concludes the section that began with “The LORD roars from Zion” (Amos 1:2). The LORD, “the Lion of the tribe of Judah” (Revelation 5:5), has roared against Israel to take heed. When a lion roars, anyone within hearing distance should change the direction of his path, especially if the lion is very close!

Amos 3:3-6 contains seven consecutive questions. After the first one (verse 3), the remaining three pairs of questions consist of a sequence of “before” and “after” illustrations:

- When a lion roars (verse 4), he is warning others of his presence—there is still time to escape. When a young lion cries out of his den, however, he is content because he has killed and eaten. It is too late to escape.

- Birds cannot fall into a snare when there is no trap (verse 5), but the trap always springs when one walks into it.

- The trumpet warns of danger coming (verse 6), but it cannot sound if the watchman is already dead and the city has been taken.

The LORD has done what He warned He would do. While the threat is being made, one can still escape, but once judgment begins, it is too late.

When a lion sees his prey, he will try to kill it. When the divine Lion roars, the people need to shake off their complacency because His roar means He is about to spring into action! He means what He says about living His way of life, and He follows through when we depart from it.

Some people, like birds, unwittingly stumble into trouble. Oblivious to everything around them, they fall into traps, like being swindled by con men or crafty deceivers. God’s people are often just like birds, unsuspectingly going to their destruction, unmindful of the dangers around them. In other words, God is warning: “Don’t be a birdbrain!” We must think about the direction that we are heading. In His mercy, God always warns His people of coming calamity, either through His prophets (Amos 3:7) or through escalating disasters that lead to His ultimate judgment.

Unlike the other six questions, Amos 3:3 stands alone without a second question following it: “Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?” It pictures a couple who have arranged to meet and do something together; they have a date. In the language of the Bible, this agreement is a covenant. God considered His covenant with Israel to be a marriage (Isaiah 54:5; Jeremiah 3:8, 14). Could the silent second question be:
“Can a marriage be restored if the bill of divorce has already been issued?”

God chose to withdraw Himself from Israel because He realized He had nothing in common with her. They could not walk together any longer. But in Amos’ day, the divorce was not yet final; reconciliation between God and His people was still possible.

But there came a point in Israel’s history that it was too late. The die had been cast. Repentance was no longer possible. The trumpet blew, the trap sprang, the lion pounced.

Through Amos, God is warning our nations today that similar, devastating calamities lie just ahead, and escape from them is still possible. As yet, the lion has not pounced—it is too late.

Is God Fair?

Before Amos gives specific reasons for God’s judgment on Israel, he explains His judgment on the surrounding nations in Amos 1:3–2:3. Some may question God’s punishment of nations to whom He has not revealed Himself. But God’s response is that every human being knows—to one degree or another—what is moral and immoral (Romans 2:14-15). Abimelech, a pagan king of the Philistines, knew that it was wrong to commit sexual immorality (Genesis 26:10). In like manner, God holds these surrounding nations guilty.

Man has learned to silence the voice of his conscience (Romans 1:18), which has led to his sinking into total depravity (verses 20-32). Though God does not hold man accountable for understanding every detail of Him and His way, God does judge him for suppressing the knowledge of Him that he does have.

God does not unfairly accuse anyone. When He judges the Gentile nations as guilty, He does it with good cause. David writes poetically in Psalm 19:1-4 that man has ample evidence in the creation to conclude that a great and awesome Creator God exists. In Lystra, Paul and Barnabas preached that God witnesses to the Gentiles through the many things He provides for them (Acts 14:12-17). Paul writes similarly in Romans 1:19: “What may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them.” If he follows his conscience, man should bow down in reverence and awe to his Maker. Instead, mankind has worshipped things that God has made.

Impartial Judgment

God’s impartial judgment is important to this book. The nations around Israel in 760 BC had one negative common denominator: They had no revelation of God or His law, no priests or prophets from God. Yet Amos shows them as nations under judgment. Even without special revelation, they had a moral responsibility to God and to one another.

They were accountable to God to be good men, not depraved animals. He does not hold them responsible for their horrible and erroneous religious ideas, but He judges them for what they did or failed to do to other men. No human being can escape the obligation to be humanly moral as God intended, not even the Gentiles. Though God has never dealt directly with them, they know enough of His moral standards to be accountable to God.

If God requires this of men who have no revelation of Him, what does He require of us? The sobering fact is that we are held accountable for our relationship with both God and man. This underlines our need to listen to Amos.

The Father has given Christ “authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man” (John 5:27). The Son executes judgment because He fully realizes the perfection of God’s purpose for humanity. Only He embodies the law and its perfect fulfillment. How will this work in His judgment of us?

God judges us for failing to be righteous men and women, not God-beings. Jesus lived as a perfectly righteous human, so He knows how difficult it can be. Therefore, He can truly be a merciful Judge and High Priest.

“And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one’s work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your sojourning here in fear” (I Peter 1:17). Whether he is a Gentile or Israelite, heathen or Christian, one who turns to God will be judged by Him without partiality.

God’s Judgment of the Nations

The Hebraic formula, “For three transgressions of [a nation], and for four,” is a way of showing that a matter has been looked into thoroughly and a complete list of sins has been made. It could also be described as accounting for a nation’s sins and exhibiting the worst ones. God concentrates on the fourth transgression, a sin that epitomizes each nation’s iniquities.

God’s judgment of Syria (Amos 1:3-5) focuses on her use of total war—take no prisoners and leave nothing productive. Amos says to them: “War or no war, you had no right to treat people like that!” It is barbarism, and even in war people must be treated honorably and well.

The accusation against the cities of Philistia (verses 6-8) shifts from the battleground to the marketplace. Other parts of the Bible indicate that they took a large number of Israelites captive; they sold a whole nation into slavery for profit (II Chronicles 21:16-17; Joel 3:1-6). Amos reminds them that human welfare is more important than commercial profit.

God’s judgment on Tyre (verses 9-10) is similar to that of Philistia. As greedy for gain as the people of Gazz, the Tyrians breached an agreement between Solomon and Hiram to secure it. When one enters into an agreement with another and does not follow through
with its terms, to God it is the same as breaking one’s word to a brother. God allows one to break a covenant only if keeping it will cause further sin. The pledged word of Tyre, however, was always negotiable, depending on her self-interest.

**Edom**, already implicated with Gaza and Tyre in slave trading, is now directly accused of bitter enmity against Israel (verses 11-12). Esau’s descendants (Genesis 36:1, 9) never forgave Jacob for stealing the blessing and the birthright. They let their anger smolder within them—blowing it into a flame every now and then lest it die—and it broke out in unreasonable acts of aggression against Israel. This is perhaps the worse sin because hatred concealed in the heart is a transgression without fear and a candidate for the unpardonable sin.

The people of **Ammon** are guilty of wanton cruelty against the helpless, the expectant mother, and the unborn child (verses 13-15). God is the defender of the helpless and the weak (Psalm 68:5). Pure and undefiled religion is to show kindness, warmth, and generosity and to care for the widow and the orphan in their affliction (James 1:27).

Next, Amos exposes Moab’s major transgression, the result of a long-burning feud between Moab and Edom (Amos 2:1-3). Out of spite and anger, the Moabites dug up the bones of a long-dead Edomite king and threw them into a fire. This is another example of taking advantage of someone who is weak and defenseless. Can a corpse fight back? The principle here is that every sin has a boomerang. God noticed the sin, burning the bones of the king of Edom, and promised to avenge it (Deuteronomy 32:35).

In one way or another, these Gentile nations took vengeance in retaliation for injustices that they believed other nations committed against them. God promises to judge their barbarity, but He does not say when. Many years may pass before He takes action because His overriding goal is repentance and a change in character.

He will execute proper judgment—true justice, and it is our responsibility to have faith in that. Fifty years passed before God avenged the depredating acts of Hazael, king of Syria, against Gilead (Amos 1:3; II Kings 10:32-33). God waited for the right time and place to act. But He did act with a punishment from which He will not turn back (II Kings 13:22-25). When He decides to act, He acts!

When He says that He knows our sitting down and rising up (Psalm 139:2), He is not speaking metaphorically. He is involved with His people. We must learn that sometimes God may not take action within our lifetime, but when He says, “I will repay” (Romans 12:19; Deuteronomy 32:35), He means it!

### Eye for an Eye

What kind of justice does God dispense? Is it based on a so-called cruel Old Testament law? The “Christian” churches of this world say that Jesus came to do away with that law. Preposterous! Without law as a foundation, there can be no justice. Jesus explicitly says, “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17).

Some think that Jesus condemns the Old Testament system of justice in Matthew 5:38-40. However, He is correcting, not nullifying, an abuse of the eye-for-an-eye principle, which the Romans called *Lex Talionis*. The Jews of His day were advocating it for settling personal disputes. In effect, each person was taking justice into his own hands, and Jesus says that was not His intent when He gave it to their forefathers.

Considered by many to be barbaric and primitive, the eye-for-an-eye principle is, on the contrary, the basis for God’s system of judgment, of civil law, for ruling a nation (Exodus 21:22-25; Leviticus 24:19-20). It has its foundation in equal justice as provided by equal payment for damage done. God established this principle so that a judge could be merciful in evaluating the circumstances of the crime and render a fair and just decision in cases of sin against other men.

This does not mean that if A bloodies B’s nose, then B has to punch A in the nose in return. *Lex Talionis* requires commensurate payment for damage done, punishment fitting the crime. It is the basis for even-handed justice, demanding fair compensation for damages. As implemented in God’s law, *Lex Talionis* was enforced with a system of fines—with the money paid to the injured party, not to the state (e.g. Exodus 21:22, 28-32).

Though it was to be the basic law, a judge had the power to give mercy. For instance, if he determined that B really goaded A into punching his nose, he was free to show mercy along with the payment required. In His judgment of us, God does the same. When we deserve death because of sin, God shows us mercy by allowing Christ’s blood to cover our transgressions. He has decided to forgo the strict application of the eye-for-an-eye principle and extend mercy.

Amos tells Israel that it is too late. The people had gone too far. They had refused correction and warning too often. As God’s retribution for rejecting His rev-
elation to them of His way of life, the prophet warns that an invading foe was coming against Israel (Amos 3:11; 6:14; 8:2-3). In actuality, this is the eye-for-an-eye principle brought to bear against the whole nation.

Israel Ignores Correction

God’s people were very busy making money, accumulating things, and practicing their religion. But God was also very busy—sending famines, droughts, blights, locusts, epidemics, warfare, and possibly earthquakes in judgment for their unrighteousness (Amos 4:6-11). He hoped that they would heed these “minor” warnings before He sent the rod of His anger against them (Isaiah 10:5).

Rain fell on one part of the country and not on another. When it rained, it rained too much, causing floods. In other places just enough rain fell to deceive the people into feeling a sense of hope—that it was not so bad after all.

We see this in the United States. Natural disasters—insurance companies call them “acts of God”—are growing more frequent and more intense, killing many and causing billions of dollars in damage. Floods ravaged the Midwest in 1993, while drought killed crops in other areas. After a year or so of good rainfall, California fell back into drought conditions—only to suffer from floods a year later! Fires rage over thousands of acres after periods of drought, destroying forests and homes. Sudden earthquakes, storms, tornadoes and extreme temperatures destroy homes, businesses, and lives.

It never seems to get quite bad enough to send the nation into a real tailspin, but it is just enough that, like the Egyptian Pharaoh of the Exodus (Exodus 7:13-14), we continue to harden our hearts. We fail to repent. If the unrepentant attitude continues, the “natural” disasters will intensify, bankrupting the nation economically. Since money seems to be the nation’s foremost god, the true God will hit where it hurts most.

The vast majority of Americans have become so far removed from God that they lack the eyes to see and the ears to hear the warnings He sends. Educated in a system that fundamentally denies God, they lack understanding. They interpret God’s warnings as natural events—just nature running her course. An earthquake or flood or drought is viewed as “nature doing her thing.”

Rather than heed the warning and repent, Americans turn to their other false gods—science and technology—to bail them out. “Design better levees to protect us from floods,” they cry. “Seed the clouds to produce more rain.” “Engineer stronger buildings to withstand more powerful earthquakes.” “Science will someday give us the ability to predict—even stop—earthquakes.” Americans have eyes that do not see, ears that do not hear (Isaiah 6:9-10; Matthew 13:14-15).

In these disasters, God is saying something quite different—something vitally important. He is warning the people that they have a responsibility, and if they fail to live under their covenant with Him, He has the power to correct them so that they will repent. So, in fairness and mercy, God lays a simple choice before them: “Therefore thus will I do to you, O Israel; and because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel!” (Amos 4:12). Their choice is either to face their sins and repent, or face the wrath of a just God.

To bring about His purpose, God is active in His creation, especially among His people, whether physical or spiritual Israel. “If there is calamity in a city, will not the Lord have done it?” (Amos 3:6). Is God involved in our lives? Do things happen by chance to the people of God? This world would have you believe that God really is not aware, that He does not care or even exist! But He says, “I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity; I, the Lord, do all these things” (Isaiah 45:7).

Is God involved? “Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father’s will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered” (Matthew 10:29-30). Do we see God working in our lives? Events do not happen accidentally to God’s people, of whom God is very aware. He is very concerned and thus very involved.

We must remember that, as a concerned Father, God is actively working in our lives to produce sons and daughters with His characteristics. When trials and calamities occur, rather than rebel, we must learn to improve our witness of Him and strive to become more like Him. Abraham, Isaac and Joseph, our fathers in the faith (Hebrews 11:8-22), had many trials, but they never rebelled against Him.

God brought Assyria to power so that He might use them as the rod of His anger against Israel. But He never intended to abandon or destroy His people totally—only to punish them in correction.

No weapon formed against you shall prosper, and every tongue which rises against you in judgment you shall condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord and their righteousness is from Me. (Isaiah 54:17)

His punishments will bring repentance in the end! Nothing can separate His people from His love. He says, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5). God may raise up a nation as His “battle-axe” to correct His people (Jeremiah 51:20-23), but He always promises peace and blessings after repentance (Amos 9:11, 14).
As Amos walked through the nation of Israel, he saw deep problems. As a people, Israel had rejected the truth God had revealed to them, and thus, they had rejected Him. Dismissing the truth led to corruption, immorality, injustice, oppression, and violence. Their attitude was complacent, self-satisfied, and proud. They set themselves up on a pedestal as the chief of the nations (Amos 6:1), despising and ridiculing the peoples around them. No wonder God threatened them with His imminent wrath!

“But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit; so He turned Himself against them as an enemy, and He fought against them” (Isaiah 63:10). He who had been their Friend (II Chronicles 20:7), Husband (Jeremiah 31:32), Provider (Genesis 22:14), Banner (Exodus 17:15), and Shield (Psalm 115:9) had now become their enemy! He had plenty of reasons for doing so. This is what happened to Israel when her people rejected God’s truth!

The church is not a nation, but individuals within a spiritual body (I Corinthians 12:12-14). Even so, we can make God our enemy too. We often worry about falling under the power of Satan, but it is more likely that we, like Israel, will first reject the power and truth of God. When armed with His power and truth, we can quickly recognize Satan’s threats and resist them. But without God’s power and truth, we fail even to recognize that Satan is tempting us. We become powerless against spiritual foes. Our rejection of God’s truth and power reveals itself when we fail to live in faithful obedience to Him. As we reject God, He becomes our enemy.

Israel’s problem was that she had done just that (Jeremiah 7:28). In rejecting the truth, the people lapsed into unrighteousness, and their sins began to increase and become more perverse. Eventually, those sins built a barrier between them and God:

Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear. (Isaiah 59:1-2)

Israel’s Judgment

Thus says the Lord: “For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment, because they sell the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of sandals. They pant after the dust of the earth which is on the head of the poor, and pervert the way of the humble... They lie down by every altar on clothes taken in pledge, and drink the wine of the condemned in the house of their god.” (Amos 2:6-8)

The Israelites’ immorality fell into three major areas:

1) Indifference to and oppression of the poor.

2) Covetousness displayed by placing primary importance on material possessions.

3) Unrestricted promotion of self-advantage—doing anything to anyone to get their way.

The Hebrew words for poor are very similar to our “underdog.” Amos uses two different words, ‘ebyôn and dal, to designate the poor (see Amos 4:1). ‘Ebyôn usually designates the very poor, and dal describes the lowest social class. However, both words connote “wanting because of oppression or exploitation” and refer to the weaker members of society. To God, the poor are those without the worldly resources or connections to defend themselves. As a result of their weakness, the wicked look upon the poor as fair game to exploit (Isaiah 10:1-2). Today, “poor” could refer to the small businessman or consumer at the mercy of the huge corporations, or the “little guy” under the thumb of “big government.”
Like Amos, Isaiah also calls the Israelites to task for their oppression of the poor:

The Lord will enter into judgment with the elders of His people and His princes: “For you have eaten up the vineyard; the plunder of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing My people and grinding the faces of the poor?” says the Lord God of hosts. (Isaiah 3:14-15)

One of the means of oppression was the courts, and Amos frequently shows how the poor “took it on the chin” within the “justice” system. In a lawsuit, the guilty party—one of the “strong”—bribed the judge, who found the innocent person—the weak—guilty (Isaiah 5:23). As so often happens today in America, the ancient Israelites shunned out-of-court settlements. They went to court even over minor matters because their chances for a larger settlement were better.

When a person was found guilty by the court, he, of course, had to pay a fine. If he did not have enough in his pocket to pay it, he could pay in produce. For example, a vintner could pay in wine. The victors then took their winnings—“the wine of the condemned”—and partied (Amos 2:8). They had turned into self-centered parasites who lived by the code, “get the other guy before he gets you.” Israelites can be a mercenary, unmerciful lot of people.

Obviously, God was not happy with this system of justice, and it is even worse now. Today’s “wine of the condemned” awarded to the injured party—reaching into the millions of dollars—goes mostly for exorbitant lawyer and court fees. Governments of all sizes include expected fines from lawbreakers in their budgets.

In addition, Israelites coveted real estate to the ridiculous extent that the buyer begrudged the small amount of dust the seller threw on his head to symbolize his grief over losing his ancestral properties (Amos 2:7). In a similar vein, God accuses the Jews of moving the boundaries between parcels of land (Hosea 5:10). In those days, instead of driving a stake into the ground to mark their property lines, landowners set up pillars of stones on the boundaries. God pictures the Jews kicking the boundary stones over a few feet when no one is looking. They may have justified it with, “Doesn’t everybody do it?” but it was still outright theft.

Because the strong could so easily exploit the weak, land and wealth in Israel fell into fewer and fewer hands. God cries, “Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field, till there is no place where they may dwell alone in the midst of the land!” (Isaiah 5:8).

It is no different than today’s big international combines buying up farmland and displacing farmers, who must then find jobs, usually in urban areas. How soon we have forgotten that small family farms played a large role in keeping the United States economically and socially stable for generations! America’s agrarian heartland was the backbone of the nation. We need to be aware that the resulting instability will lead us down the same path of destruction as it did Israel!

“They lie down by every altar on clothes taken in pledge” (Amos 2:8). Under the Old Covenant, a person’s cloak could be taken as security for a loan, but Exodus 22:26-27 shows that it was to be returned every evening if it doubled as his blanket at night. God considers keeping a poor man’s coat overnight as taking advantage of him.

Remember, our judgment from God largely depends on how we treat our fellow man (Matthew 25:33-46). Good relationships with others are vital to maintaining a good relationship with God (Matthew 5:23-24). This means we must always do the right things toward others no matter how much it hurts us (Psalm 15:4) or how they might react (Matthew 5:44-45).

**Powerless at the Height of Power**

In Amos 3:9-10, the prophet is told to proclaim the tumults, oppression, violence, and robbery in the nation. The man on the street was not too disturbed at the lack of law and order. He did not seem to realize that this cancerous immorality plaguing the country would result in her being crushed and destroyed from without.

However, when the time came to defend Israel from foreign invasion, Israel would have no strength (verse 11). God says, “They have blown the trumpet and made everyone ready, but no one goes to battle” (Ezekiel 7:14). Because the people were so preoccupied with their own self-interests, they did not respond to the external threat of invasion. As a result, the nation fell easily.

In our own generation, we have seen that our adversaries could not conquer us on the battlefield when our general level of morality was high. But as our moral fiber weakened between 1950 and today, they began to destroy us in the business world. Our foes in World War II, in becoming our allies during the Cold War, learned our ways and now rival or outpace us in most economic categories—not only in the area of heavy industry, but in highly technological matters as well.
As our economic power is being sapped by moral cancer, our fighting spirit is being drained too. We are no longer able to present a united front on any matter. In addition, as the United States takes on the role of sole superpower, as our troops are used to enforce United Nations policies, our military strength is exploited and thinned. In our moral and social malaise, we find rousing ourselves to action as a nation gets harder and harder to do. Our allies know we are a weak branch to lean on.

And behind all this is God, who sees our corruption and warns us that the time is near.

"Therefore thus says the Lord God: ‘An adversary shall be all around the land; he shall sap your strength from you, and your palaces shall be plundered’” (Amos 3:11). “Therefore” connects the preceding verses with a conclusion or result. Tumult, oppression, violence, and robbery beget weakness and destruction. Sin is inherently self-destructive. It holds out such promise of pleasure and fulfillment, but contains within it the seeds of destruction. Whatever is sown is reaped.

Why does Amos depict Israel as a powerless nation while she was at the height of her economic, political, and military power? The nation’s religion was a sham! Morality and righteousness make a nation strong, but immorality and unrighteousness will always bring it to ruin (Proverbs 14:34). Where religion is powerless, government, business, and community become ineffective because their moral undergirding is gone.

“‘For they do not know to do right,’ says the Lord” (Amos 3:10). Unable to tell the difference between good and evil, Israelites finally reached the point where they called evil good and good evil (Isaiah 5:20). Not only is this in regard to spiritual truths but also to the marketplace. While they no doubt complained about the violence, they could not see that their own selfish ambitions actually produced the violence on the streets.

Evidently, even the religious people never made the connection between the moral and social breakdown in the nation and their own selfish ambitions. They may have been embezzling from their company or overcharging their customers, but they went to church every week! That is why God says He will destroy the religious system too (Amos 3:14).

Cold, calloused, indifferent, the common Israelite just did not care about the other guy. “So what if he suffers while I enrich myself—that’s life in the big city, baby!” Whether politician or businessman or religious person, all Israelites, it seems, looked at life this way. It was a view of life almost totally devoid of a social conscience. Their lifestyle glorified amorality. But, most condemning of all, it was a lifestyle diametrically opposite to that revealed by God through Moses.

We, too, need to be careful of this attitude in our own self-absorbed culture. The media even calls the “baby boom” generation the “Me Generation,” and a popular magazine found in supermarket checkout lines is boldly titled Self.

Notice the repetition of “palaces” and “houses” in verses 9-11 and 15. God instructs Amos to tell the kings of foreign nations (verse 9) about the Israelites’ stockpiling “violence and robbery in their palaces” against themselves (verse 10). To paraphrase, He says, “Look, My people have weakened themselves through sin! They are ripe for destruction!” God empowers the heathen, so they, as His battle-ax, will punish His people. His ultimate aim, of course, is to bring them to repentance.

Cows of Bashan

Cows of Bashan” (Amos 4:1-4) is a figure or symbol for the Israelite women in Samaria. Amos implies that these women are the trendsetters and leaders in Israelite society, a course Judah also took before she fell (Isaiah 3:12). Apparently, when nations degenerate, leaders of society, who should be setting the standards, are replaced by women (or the effeminate) and children (or the immature), who, Isaiah says, “cause [them] to err, and destroy the way of [their] paths.”

In the United States, women have traditionally been the guardians of moral standards. In general, women have had high standards, while many men have held double standards. Amos, however, shows that the women of his day had slipped so far that they were “leading the pack” in immorality. And in America, the same is true: Women are becoming just as immoral as men. Between 1990 and 1991, according to the Uniform Crime Reports for the United States, the female crime rate increased 15.2 percent while the male crime rate increased by 17.4 percent.

Apparently, God built safeguards into women to ensure that some measure of right ideals, standards and practices are passed on to the next generation. This gives a measure of stability to a society. Men, with their mind-set of aggressive ambition and their desire to compete and conquer, tend to focus on achievement, often at the expense of morality and ethics. In general, women are not designed for this role, and when they begin to fill it, a nation is on its way down very rapidly.

Besides this, a growing number of women today pursue full-time career positions for reasons of “fulfillment,” personal ambition, and social advancement, diminishing their high calling as wives and mothers. Womanhood, marriage, and homemaking (Titus 2:5) have become subservient to the selfish accumulation of things. Unfortunately, many women have to work these days just to make ends meet. Primarily, Amos is speaking to the selfish, power-hungry, ruthless women we often see portrayed on television.
As a sample of the similarity between modern America and ancient Israel, compare the news stories in the left column found in a typical issue of USA Today (February 8, 1995) against selected verses from the book of Amos in the right column. The cultures of the nations are different, as are their technologies, criminal justice systems and societal problems. However, the results of sin and rejecting God—injustice, oppression, violence, addiction, deceit, theft, pride—are the same.

- Farmington [Utah] — The Rev. Raymond Sarter, who volunteered as chaplain of the Weber County Jail, has been ordered to report Friday to the Davis County Jail to serve 180 days for falsifying 66 money orders.

- Johnson City [Tennessee] — David Bala, 31, and wife, Ellisha, 23, face child abuse charges, accused of shocking their children, ages 7 and 5, with electrical cords and stuffing socks in their mouths to stifle screams, officials say.

- Neglect Death
A Moore Haven, Fla., jury found Cheryl Mickler, 39, guilty of failing to properly care for her paraplegic husband. Scott Mickler, 31, died Sept. 10, 1990. Paramedics found him with severe bedsores and his feet rotting from gangrene. She testified she didn’t see his foot condition until a part fell off the day before he died.

- Bankrupt County
Orange County, Calif., is proposing giving school districts, cities and agencies 77 cents for every dollar they invested in the county’s bankrupt investment pool. That’s what’s left after former treasurer Robert Citron’s bets on lower interest rates flopped, causing $1.69 billion in losses.

- Drug War on Losing Path
Something just doesn’t make sense about the USA’s drug war. It’s like no one wants to win it.
Tuesday, the Clinton administration paraded out a new drug fighting plan for 1996. It proposes spending a record $14.6 billion—$1.3 billion more than this year.
Now, there’s no doubt the nation has a whopping drug problem. One in eight Americans used drugs last year. Nearly 2.7 million are addicts. And the costs of that use and addiction are huge—$70 billion a year.

Yet you have turned . . . the fruit of righteousness into wormwood. (Amos 6:12)

“For they do not know to do right, “ says the Lord, “who store up violence and robbery in their palaces.” (Amos 3:10)

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy. . . . (Amos 4:1)

Making the ephah small and the shekel large, falsifying the balances by deceit, that we may buy the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—even sell the bad wheat? (Amos 8:5-6)

Woe to you who put far off the day of doom, who cause the seat of violence to come near; . . . who drink wine from bowls, . . . but are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph. (Amos 6:3, 6)
and in movies.

Amos impolitely calls them a very demeaning name: a bunch of well-fed cows. Like cows, they are just following the herd. They are content with an animal existence, that is, they are completely carnal in their outlook (Romans 8:5-7). Their concern is only for the beautification, care, and satiation of their own bodies. They live only for themselves, not for God. Isaiah captures their attitude in a word—complacent (Isaiah 32:9-11).

Like their husbands, these cows of Bashan oppress the poor and crush the needy. By demanding more things, they push their husbands to succeed—at the expense of the weak. With the attitude shown in this passage, though, they probably did not care as long as their “needs” were met.

“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 L ORD. (Amos 4:2-3)

The word translated “fishhooks” is quite obscure in the Hebrew, but it suggests that these lazy women will be ignominiously herded into captivity. Some have suggested it means carried away on the shields of their enemies or pulled on a leash.

In any case, those who formerly lay on the beds of ivory and on plush couches, pandering to themselves, will be led in humiliation through Samaria and into slavery. Isaiah also describes the same scene in Isaiah 3:16-26. Because of their oppression and their haughty self-concern, their riches and beauty will be stripped away, and they will be left with nothing.

The Prudent Keep Silent

They hate the one who rebukes in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks uprightly.

Therefore, because you tread down the poor and take grain taxes from him, though you have built houses of hewn stone, yet you shall not dwell in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink wine from them. (Amos 5:10-11)

Despite their pilgrimages and their love of religion (Amos 4:4-5), the Israelites’ real focus was getting for themselves. Since it was more difficult to accumulate wealth and power lawfully, they built their empires on the backs of the weak and poor and persecuted those who insisted on doing business legally. God promises He will avenge them.

“For I know your manifold transgressions and your mighty sins. You afflict the just and take bribes; you divert the poor from justice at the gate” (Amos 5:12). Again, Amos describes injustice in the legal system. The rich and powerful hired false witnesses, just as was done against Jesus (Matthew 26:59-60) and Stephen (Acts 6:11). The poor, without the financial ability to hire high-powered lawyers to handle their cases, were helpless before them.

What was the effect of this? “Therefore the prudent keep silent at that time, for it is an evil time” (verse 13). The poor could only wait quietly for the judgment of God, since they were powerless to appeal to the judgment of men through the civil authorities.

Today, many people are afraid to help the police because they fear that, if they go to court and testify, the accused felon or his friends will take some kind of retribution against them or their families. For just this reason, we have rampant problems with inner-city gangs and organized crime.

Our criminal justice system is so lax and unjust that the odds are good that an accused criminal will be acquitted through a technicality or receive a very short sentence. In our nation today, crime does pay! No wonder witnesses are afraid!

We find in America a very large but timid group that the media call “the silent majority.” Though predominantly conservative and moral, these people allow themselves to be led by a vocal minority that espouses radically liberal views. Though they privately denounce high taxes, homosexuality, rising crime, illegal aliens, gangs, corrupt government, and so on, “the silent majority” publicly “keep silent.”

Indulgent Self-Concern

Do horses run on [the face of a cliff]? Does one plow [the sea] with oxen? Yet you have turned justice into gall, and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood” (Amos 6:12). What absurd things to suggest! They are impossibilities! Just as absurd is Israel’s turning justice into poison and righteousness into bitter and sickening wormwood. Amos implies that though we may do something technical or mechanical that had previously seemed impossible—like plowing the sea—improving our morality is vastly more important.

Amos 6:4-6 mentions feasting, indulging in artificial stimulation, listening to unusual music, and taking excessive and vain measures in personal hygiene. The single idea behind these illustrations is that the excesses of powerful Israelites were possible because of their oppression of the weak and poor.
By contrast, verses 9-10 show ten common Israelites huddled together in one house in fear of the war-induced plagues. People will die so rapidly that the survivors, looking out for themselves, will not take the time to bury the bodies of their own families, but burn them in huge funeral pyres. These survivors will eventually recognize that God has dissociated Himself from them, and they will consider it an evil thing even to mention His name! How very bitter! And how very far from God!

The people, whether rich and indulgent or poor and deprived, were self-concerned. Throughout chapter six, Amos balances complacency and disaster, boasting and fear, showing that they result from rejecting God and idolizing self. Inevitably, God will send judgment upon Israel.

**Selling the Bad Wheat**

Hear this, you who swallow up the needy, and make the poor of the land fail, saying: “When will the New Moon be past, that we may sell grain? And the Sabbath, that we may trade wheat? Making the ephah smial and the shekel large, falsifying the balances by deceit, that we may buy the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—even sell the bad wheat?” (Amos 8:4-6)

To enlarge their coffers, merchants opened their shops for business the minute the Sabbath and holy days passed. They used nonstandard weights and measures to cheat their customers of a few ounces of grain. Some cheated the people to the point that they had to sell themselves into slavery to pay their debts! At the end of the day, the businessman would sweep up the bad wheat berries left on the floor, and sell them to the poor as first-quality wheat when business resumed in the morning!

Their problem lay in their personal attitude toward sin and holiness. God looked at their hearts and saw nothing of His righteousness and holiness. Whenever He finds a lack of these elements in His people, He becomes very concerned. The Israelites manifested their godless attitude in their domineering ways, their penchant to exploit and their insatiable feeding of their own indulgences. Although God appears to attack mainly the rich and powerful throughout the book, the poor and needy probably had the same attitude but lacked the power to carry it out. Thus, God will punish both “the great house”—the rich—and “the little house”—the poor (Amos 6:11).

Israel’s attitude toward the things of God was one of total disrespect and indifference. When Jesus cleansed the Temple (John 2:13-16), one thing that angered Him was how the priests disqualified the peoples’ sacrifices without legitimate grounds, forcing them to buy animals far above fair market value. Sincere worshippers would have no choice but to pay fifteen or twenty times the normal price for another sacrificial animal that the priests had already proclaimed acceptable. The Israelites of Amos’ day exhibited the same attitudes in their normal business practices.

The sin that underpinned these attitudes is covetousness, causing them to turn everything in life to self-advantage. As in America, competition was the lifeblood of the people, the vitality of the nation, and they felt they had no alternative but to lie, cheat, and steal to keep their “competitive edge.” “The end justifies the means” was their motto. God says that they did not have to approach business this way. The nation was very wealthy—there was enough for everyone.

**Justice to Wormwood**

When God looked at Israel, what did He see? He saw “children who are corruptors” or “children of corruption” (Isaiah 1:4). What does He mean? Generally, children display the characteristics of their parents. So, in II Samuel 23:6 (KJV), God refers to “sons of Belial,” meaning those who display the characteristics of Belial—worthlessness, foolishness, corruption, rebellion. In Hosea 2:4, He calls His people “children of [spiritual] harlotry” because they reflected the traits of a god who was not just and moral as their Creator and Father is.

As His people, they should have exhibited the moral characteristics of God, just as any child displays some of the characteristics of his parents. They had His law and the guidance of His prophets in His way of life. But by rejecting God and His truth, they failed to develop His righteousness. The results were rampant injustice and immorality in the nation.

For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel: . . . “Seek the Lord and live, lest He break out like a fire in the house of Joseph, and devour it, with no one to quench it in Bethel—you who turn justice to wormwood, and lay righteousness to rest in the earth!” (Amos 5:4, 6-7)

Similar to Amos 6:12, Amos 5:7 connects justice and righteousness. The fruit of righteousness is justice. Justice is fair treatment, not only in the courts but in every aspect of life. This strikes at the root of a major portion of God’s judgment of Israel (Isaiah 59:13-15). In Amos 5:7, righteousness is pictured as a standard, flag, or banner thrown to the ground. They had “[laid] . . . to rest” or thrown aside the Torah, the law of God, the teachings of God. Instead, they were practicing what we call “situation ethics”—allowing their weak and untrained consciences to be their guide. The practical result was “anything goes.” What does this mean in relation to social conditions?
Righteousness is what is right with God: “For all Your commandments are righteousness” (Psalm 119:172). It is the cultivation of correct moral principles within ourselves. As a nation, we should cultivate morality to produce spiritual and social growth. Righteousness—morality—is therefore the foundation of justice. Justice is correct moral practice, the practical application of morality.

The Israelites were not cultivating God’s commandments, the moral standards upon which any nation must operate if it is to be successful. Instead, they had developed a specious code of living which was incompatible with the Word of God. Since the right moral principles were not being cultivated, there was no justice in society and immorality reigned.

While righteousness is inward, justice is outgoing, concerning even such “trivial” things as being neat and orderly. Notice how much trash litters our highways and graffiti mars our cities. Maybe no law of God specifically regulates our driving, but is it not fair and just to be considerate of others on the road? Certainly God’s law has to do with being thoughtful, gracious, tactful, and discreet, all of which are founded on one of its basic principles, the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12).

Once these “little things” stop being cultivated, then injustice begins to appear in more serious areas, such as increased crime, divorce, abortion, suicide, and the like. Morality plunges and the people move farther and farther from godly mores and values. And when God sees no repentance in sight, His wrath is not long in coming.
The Lord God has sworn by His holiness” (Amos 4:2). Although not in the habit of swearing oaths—His Word is sufficient—God sometimes does so to focus on the seriousness of a pronouncement. As the writer of Hebrews says, “For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself” (Hebrews 6:13).

What does God see in Israel that so affronts Him that He has to swear “by His holiness”? Israel had every opportunity that the Gentiles did not have: His calling, His promises, His Word, His laws. He gave the Israelites these gifts to help them develop into His sons and daughters, but God sees them as diametrically opposite of Himself. Should not God expect to see some of His characteristics in His children?

A simple illustration from the author’s experience in visiting a family may help in understanding this point. Parents often show their pride by prominently displaying a photograph of their children, and these parents were no different. In this case, three of the four children bore a strong resemblance to their parents, but the fourth child was so noticeably different that it was obviously either an adopted child or the product of adultery.

God says, “I have children who bear no spiritual resemblance to me.” He shows the cause to have been spiritual adultery—going after other gods and other ways of life.

“I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me; the ox knows its owner and the donkey its master’s crib; but Israel does not know. My people do not consider.” Alas, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a brood of evildoers, children who are corrupters! They have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked to anger the Holy One of Israel, they have turned away backward. (Isaiah 1:2-4)

A dumb ox and donkey show more sense and appreciation to their masters than Israel did to her Father! Instead, she rebelled against Him!

God gave Israel many advantages—His law, His providence, His protection—to allow His people to live His way of life, but they turned their backs on Him and followed the ways of other gods. Paul shows how illogical this is:

For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live. (I Corinthians 8:5-6)

Since we have complete dependence upon God for life as our Designer, Lifegiver and Sustainer, He has complete authority over how we should live. Among the multiple pantheons of gods, only one God lives the way a God ought to live. This particular God—the God of Israel—is holy, that is, He alone is transcendentally different, superior, and separate. He has called His people to be holy (I Peter 1:15-16). It follows that a holy person must be different in the way that God is different.

From God’s holiness flows His love—outgoing concern for others, His outstanding attribute. When God looked on Israel, however, He saw a whole nation, from her culture to her government to her religion, organized on the basis of human self-concern. God wanted to see clear evidence of godly living, by which He could verify their claims of being His people. In Israel, He saw no such evidence, but instead a people in opposition to Him in every area of life. Spiritual adultery had occurred.

Form But No Substance

God’s complaint against Israel’s religion is that it had form but no substance. The people made pilgrimages to their shrines, but they did not
grieve for their nation’s sins (Amos 6:6). They went to church, but they continued to cheat and steal and lie (Amos 8:5-6). They made a great show of being religious, but their religion caused no changes in their conduct.

God’s Word shows that true religion is having concern for and helping the weak, as well as showing hospitality and generosity to those who cannot return the favor (James 1:27). It is sacrificing oneself in service; as Christ said, “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends” (John 15:13). It is speaking the truth and being honest—even swearing by one’s own hurt (Psalm 15:4)—not backbiting or gossiping. True religion is not exacting the last cent on a deal, or impatiently watching the sun go down on the Sabbath to do one’s business or pleasure. It is not taking usury and so on. To use a cliche, Israel talked the talk but did not walk the walk.

Even after giving them His law, God did not leave the people of Israel without a witness—a right example—of how to live. While they were drifting away, He gave them the Nazirites, people who had consecrated themselves to God (Amos 2:11; see Numbers 6:1-21). A Nazirite, a “separated one,” was anyone from a tribe other than Levi who dedicated himself to God for a special period of time. Nazirites were separate because of their holiness; they vowed not to drink wine, cut their hair, or touch dead bodies.

God apparently called enough Nazirites within Israel to exemplify pure living before His people. Additionally, He sent prophets to testify against the nation and expose the direction she was going. How did Israel react? Probably through some kind of persecution, they forced the Nazirites to break their vow and muzzled the prophets (Amos 2:12).

The more holy we become, the greater the contrast between us and the world—and the more likely the world will seek to persecute us. When Jesus Christ the most holy, moral, and different human being who ever lived—walked this earth, His own people killed Him. They could not tolerate His holiness. Thus, He warned His disciples, “If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20).

A Warning to the Church

Like ancient Israel, we can easily fall back into our former ways. The Israelites rejected the law of God and relied on the traditions of Gentile nations. Elijah had to take drastic measures to prevent Baal worship from completely eradicating the worship of the true God (I Kings 18:20-40). Some of Judah’s kings spent years tearing down shrines and high places to foreign gods (II Chronicles 34:1-7).

Christ warned the Pharisees: “For laying aside the commandments of God, you hold the traditions of men” (Mark 7:8). For example, Christmas and Easter are traditions of men, but they are lies. What happens if a person, trying to establish a religion, mixes falsehood with the truth of God? Recall God’s wrath when Aaron made a golden calf at the urging of the Israelites in the wilderness and proclaimed a feast to the Lord (Exodus 32:1-5). Observing Christmas and Easter in the name of Christ is no different.

Blending the lies of this world with the truth of God produces a foul mixture called syncretism (James 3:10-13). “Christian” religions of this world have mixed the traditions of paganism with some of the truth of God’s Word. This is no different from what Israel was doing when Amos wrote back in 762 BC. Since their rejection of the house of David under Jeroboam I, the Israelites had practiced a syncretistic religion (Amos 5:21-26; 8:14; I Kings 12:25-33).

Today, the religious problems we face generally reside in the more subtle parts of this world’s Christianity. When the apostle John tells us we must come out of the world (I John 2:15-17), he is not talking just about Christmas and Easter, but about attitudes, approaches, ideas, and inclinations that we drag with us and mix with the truth of God. How many of these do we still have? We may not have identified many of them, but as we continue to grow in grace and knowledge, we become aware of them and repent.

Through human nature, Satan constantly attempts to displace the truth of God with error. The loss is usually subtle and gradual, much like the effect on the proverbial frog in water that is slowly coming to a boil. In a religious organization, the second generation of adherents tends to lack the vigor and dynamism which characterized the founding one. The church of God is following the same pattern today, as one of her largest branches adopts one false doctrine after another (see Revelation 2:18-29). Her administration, ministry, and membership have almost entirely returned to the world. Syncretism is certainly alive in the twenty-first century!

Paul warns Timothy, a leader of second generation Christians, “Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. That good thing which was committed to you, keep by the Holy Spirit who dwells in us” (II Timothy 1:13-14). It is the responsibility of God’s church to be extremely careful not to drift away from the truth. (For more information on this topic, request our free booklet, Guard the Truth.)

Ancient Israel did not “hold fast” to the truth God had given her, and by the time Amos came on the scene, the people exhibited glaring proof that they were far removed from the way of life that had been revealed to their fathers.

Building Righteous Character

Hear and testify against the house of Jacob,” says the Lord God, the God of hosts, “That in the day I punish Israel for their transgressions,
Israel’s false religion, represented by the altars of Bethel, is at the root of her problems. The violence and injustice in Israelite society ultimately stemmed from the false teaching proclaimed from the pulpits.

For this reason, God shows that the preacher, not the civil authority, is the most vital part of the community. God set up the Levites within Israel to function as the teachers of His way of life, and He sent the prophets as watchdogs on the Levites and civil leaders. In many cases, when the king or the nation had wandered from the way, the prophets were sent to correct them (e.g., II Samuel 12:1-15; I Kings 18:17-19; II Kings 21:10-15).

At the foundation of every community is a way of life that its people live and teach their children. Does that way of life conform to the God of the Bible, or does it spring from the mind of men? If it is of men, it will not work very long. So it was in Israel. The religion of Israel began with a man, Jeroboam I, who changed the true worship of God (I Kings 12:26-33).

- He established a feast in the eighth month to replace the true Feast of Tabernacles in the seventh.
- He may have replaced the Sabbath with Sunday worship.
- He replaced the Levitical priesthood with men of his own choosing.
- Lastly, he replaced God with golden calves in Bethel and Dan.

A religion with such a beginning was doomed to fail, bringing the nation down with it.

When religion is ungodly, its power is destructive, and every institution in the nation suffers. For instance, Amos 2:7 describes a deliberate act of ritual prostitution in a pagan temple: “A man and his father go in to the same girl, to defile My holy name.” What was the rationale behind this perverse, immoral act?

Because Baal was neither alive nor a moral force, his worshippers felt they could communicate with him only by ritual actions that portrayed what they were asking him to do. Since Baal was, like almost all ancient deities, a fertility god, the human act of intercourse demonstrated that they wanted Baal to prosper them. But what was its real effect on the participants and the nation? Ritual prostitution only served to erode the family, eventually leading to the destruction of the nation.

Baal was different from his adherents merely in that he was above them. God’s difference from us is that He is holy; He is moral and we are immoral. After we accept His calling, He commands us to become moral as He is.

The basis of all immorality is selfishness, the exact opposite of what God is. God wants to transform us from people who are bent on pleasing ourselves to people who show concern for others. This is the crux of our salvation through Jesus Christ. In those God calls out—those who, by faith, will voluntarily yield to Him—He is building character based on outgoing love.

Immorality lies in the desire of men to live self-centered lives independent of God, as when Adam and Eve took of the forbidden tree (Genesis 3:1-19). To become moral, we must kill our selfish egos through the use and guidance of God’s Holy Spirit. When we see that our thoughts and ways are not His, we should reform and repent. By submitting to Him, we take a small step in being transformed into what He is.

This process—building character and becoming holy—takes place in one’s judgment period. Judgment is now on the house of God (I Peter 4:17). Eventually, God will convict the whole world of sin (John 16:8-9) and attempt to bring all men to repentance (II Peter 3:9) in the Millennium and general resurrection.

Becoming Holy

When a person swears by a thing greater than himself, it lends weight to what he says. He means that his word is as certain as the existence and power of the one by whom he is swearing. When one takes an oath by God or on the Bible, such as in a court of law, men recognize that God Himself makes the oath binding.

God swore by His holiness. “As He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct” (I Peter 1:15; see Leviticus 19:2). We find here that we are to be holy because He is holy. Holiness, like righteousness, is both imputed by God and achieved by us. Just as the vessels of the Tabernacle and Temple were holy, so are we when we are consecrated, set apart, for God’s use upon conversion (I Corinthians 3:16; Colossians 1:22). Holiness, however, is more than an imputed state of being. It is a process that we must pursue throughout our Christian lives (Hebrews 12:14). That is why God admonishes us to become holy, to be holy in our conduct (Romans 12:1; II Corinthians 7:1; Ephesians 4:24; II Peter 3:11; I John 3:3).

The laws written in Leviticus 19, from which Peter quoted, are injunctions against defiling the mind, character, personality, and attitudes of a person through sins like idolatry and breaking the Sabbath. God also speaks of taking care of the poor, of not reaping the corners of the fields, and of being just in judgment. He warns against respecting persons and always siding
with the disadvantaged (who may be wrong in his cause). He also mentions not eating anything with blood, practicing divination or soothsaying, and so forth. These and other defilements make one unholy, impure, and defiled.

He wants us to be holy because He is with us and in us. He does not want to be contaminated by the impurities of His people. God wants to have close contact with His people. “I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God and they shall be My people” (II Corinthians 6:16). If we want to have a fellowship with Him, we must start to become holy as He is. “Come out from among them and be separate,” says the Lord. “Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you” (II Corinthians 6:17).

Israelites, God’s people, are advised to be separate so they can avoid every possibility of defilement: “Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (II Corinthians 7:1). *Flesh and spirit* indicates “physical and spiritual” or “body and mind”—one’s total personality—outwardly and inwardly in all relations with God and fellow man. Our sanctification, part of which we do, sets us apart to walk the way of holiness.

**God’s Holiness**

Holiness is what makes God what He is. It is not an attribute of God like love, joy, or omnipotence. Holiness is the ground, basis, and foundation of God. It is His uniqueness and totality, His deity and divinity itself. It is the perfect purity of God.

His holiness is symbolized in the construction of the Tabernacle: “The veil shall be a divider for you between the holy place and the Most Holy” (Exodus 26:33). A curtain separated the two chambers, and only the high priest could pass through the veil—and then only once a year. The phrase *Most Holy* is literally “holiness of holinesses.” It represents the height, the top, the very pinnacle of morality. God was isolated from Israel, not because He was unapproachable, but because He wanted us to see the difference between us and Him. He really is approachable; no one in the universe is more approachable than God. But He is **transcendently superior**.

By the exercise of His will, He kept Himself separate from His people to impress upon them—and us—that the difference is moral. He gave His people tables of the law, the code of a perfectly moral God, so that they could become moral like He is. He also gave them the mercy seat, upon which blood was sprinkled, so they could be reconciled with Him. Both the mercy seat and the tables of stone were kept in the Most Holy.

Adam and Eve hid themselves from God only after their sin. Before that, they were not afraid of Him. We tremble before God, not because we fear the Divine Power, but because we know we are sinners. As sinners, we do not belong in the presence of an absolutely moral and pure God. Because of guilt, we feel estranged, fearful, and isolated from God.

We can easily see this in Isaiah’s experience with our holy God (Isaiah 6:1-5). The prophet writes that he “saw the Lord sitting on a throne” (verse 1), above which stood an unnamed number of seraphim, each with six wings. One of these angels cried, “Holy, holy, holy is the L ORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!” (verse 3).

Isaiah’s reaction is instructive. He wails, “Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the L ORD of hosts” (verse 5). In the presence of a transcendentally holy God, this man of God felt completely shattered! Every cell of his body cried out its corruption! Peter felt something of this sort of sinfulness in Jesus’ presence as well (Luke 5:8).

It is holiness that makes God what He is. No one is holy in the way our God is. He is holiness, the God of utter moral perfection. No man or god can claim this. He is utterly unique and different. God swears by what He is, by His very nature. It is the very strongest of oaths.

**The Sin of Samaria**

Israel, on the other hand, swore by “the sin of Samaria” (Amos 8:14), which actually refers to a name, Ashima, a Canaanite mother-goddess. This Ashima represents the importation of foreign cults and gods. Historically, Israel borrowed gods from the surrounding nations and combined their worship with that of the true God. By changing His nature, they destroyed the right image of the true God. This, in turn, changed the source of beliefs, ideals, laws, standards, ethics, and morality. Thus, when a famine of God’s Word comes (Amos 8:11), immorality swiftly sets in.

Dan was the location of one of the sanctuaries that Jeroboam I set up to imitate the Temple in Jerusalem (I Kings 12:29). His counterfeit sanctuary was made of a counterfeit Holy of Holies. Instead of cherubim, it had two golden calves arranged to form the base of a counterfeit mercy seat. Over the years, the visible presence of the calves became familiar to the Israelites, who soon were worshipping the calves as God. After a little more time, the nature of the calves became the nature of God.

Beersheba, with its false shrine associated with the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, was in the southern part of Judah. People made pilgrimages to Beersheba, a very long and arduous trip. Over time, they came to believe that righteousness accrued to them simply by going there. They walked “the way of Beer-
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sheba” (Amos 8:14), thinking to put God in their debt. But God owes no one anything! He blesses those who are in the right attitude, who are following His way, who are growing and overcoming.

Amos also warns modern Israel of a future famine of the Word (verse 11), when a very strong movement will arise to syncretize or join all the religions into one. Already, ecumenical movements, like the “Parliament of the World’s Religions” held in Chicago in August and September 1993, are working “to promote and encourage religious tolerance and interfaith cooperation.” During the Parliament, 6,000 representatives from all the world’s major religions discussed common ground and signed “The Global Ethic,” a code that condemns environmental abuses, sexual discrimination, social disarray, and military aggression. Attendees watched or participated in New Age, Baha’i, Buddhist, Confucian, Muslim, Native American, Shinto, Sikh, Taoist, and Christian rituals.

Those who worship these abominations, God warns, “shall fall and never rise again” (verse 14). How final! It truly behooves us to “stock up” on God’s Word now, before this spiritual famine—already in its early stages—reaches its peak, so we will be sustained to endure the hard times just ahead.

Leaven in Religion

Come to Bethel and transgress, at Gilgal multiply transgressions; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days” (Amos 4:4). Transgress means rebellion, not just sin. As we have seen, God considered Israel’s syncretistic approach to religion to be an outright rejection of His way of life.

Amos is speaking sarcastically when he suggests that the people sacrifice and tithe more often. “If you bring your tithes every three days instead of every three years,” he says, “maybe your god, Baal, will respond.” This sounds somewhat like Elijah’s sarcastic comments in 1 Kings 18:27.

“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” (Amos 4:5). Leaven was not allowed to be in any sacrifice: “No grain offering which you bring to the Lord shall be made with leaven, for you shall burn no leaven nor any honey in any offering to the Lord made by fire” (Leviticus 2:11). Only one offering, the wave loaves on Pentecost, was made with leaven (Leviticus 23:17). A sin offering preceded the offering of the wave loaves, the leavening in them representing the sins still in the congregation of Israel.

In Amos 4:5, his sarcasm continues. The Israelites might as well have been making all their sacrifices with leaven because all their traditions, doctrines, customs, and religious duties were nothing but vanity. Even though they were sincere in doing them, they were nevertheless a leaven brought in from the world. In like manner, Jesus tells us to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 16:6-12), that is, of their doctrine and their traditions.

Even a quick glance at modern religious practices reveals how thoughtlessly people accept the doctrines and traditions they have learned—without proving them. Millions of sincere people attend church every week, celebrate the holidays, and send their children to church schools without ever proving their beliefs. They sing in the choir and donate generously when the plate is passed, but they do not really know—have an intimate relationship with—the god they worship. They just blindly accept the leaven they were taught while growing up.

God Transforms Us

God threatens to send fire, symbolizing divine rejection and purification (Malachi 4:1), upon Israel because of her false religion (Amos 5:6). The Bible, though ultimately written for His spiritual children, focuses on ancient Israel because she is comprised of God’s chosen people. We can see our own lives in their examples. Amos proves through the Israelites’ disobedience and corruption that they had no relationship with God. They had not allowed their privileged position under the covenant to transform them into godly people. Thus, God must send a purifying destruction upon them.

Bethel, Gilgal, and Beersheba were places of pilgrimage, places people went to observe the feasts. But God says, “I hate, I despise your feast days” (Amos 5:21)! Verses 22-23 show that the Israelites loved all the rituals and entertainments of the feasts, but they did not leave the feasts better people (verse 24). They returned to their homes unchanged, unrepentant, after what was supposed to be a rededication of their lives to God!

Our attitudes in attending the feasts today tell God just as much as the Israelites’ did during Amos’ ministry. Do we go to the Feast of Tabernacles to seek God and learn to fear Him, as He says in Deuteronomy 14:23? Our reasons for attending God’s feasts are very important. Do we go to get love and enjoy ourselves? The feasts should be enjoyable, but those who go there to give love and serve others profit the most from them. Those who go to get love usually become offended and leave the feast, telling anyone who will listen how “cold” others were to them.
From the biblical events that occurred in these places, Bethel pictures reorientation and hope; Gilgal, possession of the promises; and Beersheba, fellowship with God. We can have these things in Christ if we abide under the terms of our covenant with Him. In the example of Israel, we can see that hearing and knowing the way of God intellectually is not enough. The lives of the people of Israel did not match what they knew.

The lesson we can learn from the events in Bethel are particularly illustrative of God’s transforming influence. At Bethel, Jacob had his dream of a ladder reaching to heaven and angels walking up and down on it (Genesis 28:12). When he woke up from his dream, Jacob reckoned that God was surely in that place and named it “Bethel” or “house of God.” The ascending and descending angels, messengers of God, depict God, not man, initiating communication. In other words, the ladder brought God to Bethel. When God arrives on the scene and descends to communicate with a man, He makes a difference in his life.

Certainly, Jacob’s life quickly began to change, especially his attitude. He had been fleeing for his life, but when he got to Bethel, his future changed dramatically because God made contact with him. God confirmed to Jacob His promises to Abraham and Isaac. A transformation began then that did not end as long as he lived.

On the run from Esau, a man to be feared, Jacob felt at any moment his brother would appear around the next rock. He arrived at Bethel hopeless, but he left a man with a future—God said that He would be with him. So Jacob arose and made a covenant with God that if He would bless him, then he would give a tenth, a tithe, to God (Genesis 28:18-22).

When Jacob returned to Bethel after serving Laban for some twenty years, God appeared to him again, changing his name to Israel (Genesis 35:1-15). In the biblical record, a name change, normally occurring during a period of crisis in a person’s conversion, signifies a change in his heart. Undoubtedly, a significant change happened here and another at Peniel where Jacob wrestled with Christ (Genesis 32:24-30). Peniel was a stepping stone to what occurred at his return to Bethel, and between them, we see Jacob’s spiritual conversion.

To Israel and Amos, then, Bethel represented reorientation and hope. There the old life and the old man became new. This idea is later reflected in New Testament teaching about our spiritual transformation into the image of God (II Corinthians 3:18; Ephesians 4:12-15, 20-24; I John 3:2).

Contact with God causes transformation, and Bethel represents this hopeful reorientation. Israelites may have journeyed to Bethel, but Amos shows that no transformation occurred. There was no change in holiness or morality. They enjoyed the fellowship and good times of the feasts, but they returned to their homes, and it was “business as usual.” Unlike Jacob, they had not repented.

The illustrations in Amos 5:8-9 picture the process of change and transformation of character that God is looking for. The Pleiades and Orion represent the change of seasons when different constellations dominate the sky. Though He does not really change the Pleiades or Orion, God makes them appear to shift around the heavens because of the earth’s revolution around the sun. “The shadow of death into morning” means He turns darkness into light. “The waters of the sea” describes the process of evaporation and condensation that produces rainfall upon the earth.

Notice the changes in these pairs: the Pleiades to Orion, shadow of death to morning, day to night, waters from the sea to the earth, ruin to the strong, and fury (destruction) to the fortress. God is a transforming God; He changes people for the better. When we seek God, He will make a difference in our lives.

**True Religion**

I hate, I despise your feast days, and I do not savor your sacred assemblies. Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them, nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings. Take away from Me the noise of your songs, for I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments. But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream. (Amos 5:21-24).

Israel’s religion was going nowhere. The people were not righteous, moral, or just in their dealings with one another, so their playing at religion, though sincere, was despicable to God.

When Noah offered a sacrifice after the Flood, God was pleased with its fragrance (Genesis 8:20-21). But the Israelites made sacrifices that did not please Him. They offered the same sacrifices, but there was a vast difference between the offerers, between Noah and the Israelites of Amos’ day. Ezekiel 14:14 lists Noah as one of the most righteous men who ever lived. But these Israelites were corrupt, unjust, merciless, and hypocritical.

In the list of sacrifices in Amos 5:22, the sin offering is not mentioned, suggesting that the Israelites felt they
had done no sin that required forgiveness. This shows that they were not in contact with God; they had no relationship with Him. If they had, they would have been aware where they had fallen short, and they could have repented.

Amos includes three other offerings that the Israelites gave but God would not accept. Knowing what they represent gives us insight into how the people were falling short in their spiritual lives.

The **burnt offering** teaches total devotion to the Creator. It was completely burned up on the altar, typifying the offerer being completely devoted in service to God. This offering corresponds to the first four commandments, which show love and devotion toward God.

Similarly, the **grain offering**, also called the cereal offering, meal offering, or meat offering, teaches total dedication and service to man. It was offered in conjunction with the burnt offering. The grain offering typifies the last six commandments, which regulate our relationships and love toward our fellow man.

The **peace offering** represents one’s fellowship upward to God and outward to man. It was primarily given in thanks for God’s blessing. When this offering was made, God, the priest, the offerer, and his family and friends shared in a common meal and fellowship, as all these parties ate part of the sacrificed animal.

But from God’s reaction to their offerings, it is clear that the people of ancient Israel were not devoted to God or to their fellow man. Nor were they in true fellowship with either God or man, and therefore they could not see their sins. They did not see the holiness of God and compare themselves to it. If they had, they would have seen that they needed to make changes in their lives, but in judging themselves solely against other men—an unwise thing to do (II Corinthians 10:12)—they felt no need for repentance.

They did not understand what God really wanted of them. They may have appealed their own consciences with their church attendance, hymn singing, and sacrifices, but they went home and continued to oppress and cheat and lie. True religion is

1) A **relationship with God** (Matthew 22:37). Without a relationship with Him, we cannot know Him or understand His purpose for us.

2) **Submission and obedience to God** as our part of the relationship (James 4:7-8). In offering to make the covenant with the children of Israel (Exodus 20-24), He proposed to them. They accepted their obligation—to obey Him—but they were unfaithful in fulfilling it. As the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16) and the future Bride of Christ (Revelation 19:7-9), the church must not fail as ancient Israel did.

3) **Real love for God’s truth** (II Thessalonians 2:10). Israel neither loved nor sought God’s truth.

4) **Moral integrity** (I Peter 3:8-12). Living in righteousness and holiness shows love toward God and man.

5) **Social responsibility** (James 1:27). Israel, as a nation of this world, had a responsibility to ensure that their care of their fellow Israelites was acceptable in God’s eyes. The church, a spiritual organism, is not of this world, and as a body, has no responsibility at this time to change society—only ourselves. We must take care of our brethren within the church now, and we will have our chance to help this world in God’s Kingdom.

These five points will not “buy” us into the presence of God, but rather they are five proofs that we follow true religion. Remember Jacob’s dream. God chooses us and meets us at the foot of the ladder, making a difference in our lives. He gives us a way of life to follow, and we pledge to follow it. Thus, true religion is not a way to God but a way of living from God.

**Grace and Law**

The giving of the law at Mount Sinai was the climax of a series of events that began at Passover, the moment and the means of the Israelites’ redemption. At Passover they killed a lamb and put the blood on their doorposts. When the death angel passed through to slay the firstborn, those who had blood on the doorposts were spared. God was saving, redeeming, buying back His people.

Mount Sinai adds the other half of the equation. Though redemption through the blood of a lamb (Christ) freed them from sin’s dominion and death, the giving of the law at Mount Sinai shows that freeing them is not all that God had in mind. Israel came to Mount Sinai after being redeemed, heard the law, and assented to keep it. God gave the law to show the pattern of life, the principles of righteousness, for the redeemed.

On one side of the coin is grace and on the other is law and obedience. They are harmonious; they cannot be separated. They are both vital parts of the process of sanctification leading to salvation. Grace is given upon repentance from sin, but after repentance, what is a Christian to do with his life? Obedience to God and living a life of holiness become his first priorities, and these work to produce character in the image of God (II Corinthians 3:18).

Amos 5:25 reconfirms that the sacrifice, offering and shedding of blood are foundational necessities for a relationship with God. “Did you offer Me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel?” The answer is, “Yes.” The people were
sacrificing, but is that all that they did? He implies that though they were sacrificing, something was missing—obedience to the law.

God told Israel that He would dwell in the Tabernacle, specifically the Holy of Holies, the symbolism of which we need to understand. The most important piece of furniture inside the Holy of Holies was the mercy seat, a wooden chest overlaid with gold. Its lid functioned as the seat. Inside the chest, under the seat, were stored the two tablets of stone, symbolizing God sitting on His law, the basis of His judgment.

When a one sins, he begins to separate himself from fellowship with God (Isaiah 59:1-2). He is no longer permitted, as it were, to come into the Holy of Holies. What means did God provide to heal the broken relationship, to restore the fellowship?

One might think that the giving of a sin offering would appease God, and He would forgive the sin. However, Hebrews 10:4 is very clear: “For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins.” Then why did God have the Israelites make these sacrifices? “But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year” (verse 3). As Amos does not mention the sin offering in Amos 5:22, it seems that Israel did not even make the attempt to be reminded of sin.

So how was fellowship restored? On the Day of Atonement, once a year, the high priest entered the Holy of Holies to sprinkle the mercy seat with blood. God’s intent in this ritual was to show people that their transgressions of His law were covered by the blood. The redeemed were again in fellowship with God.

The blood and the law are essential parts for maintaining the correct relationship with God. The law is permanent and codifies the nature of God in precepts to help us understand Him clearly. Obedience to His law is a perpetual requirement, with blood available to cover any transgression of it.

Application for Today

The New Testament application is found in I John 2:1-2:

My little children, these things I write to you, that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.

Propitiation is “an appeasing force.” The law spells out the perpetual requirements of obedience to God, and blood pays for sin.

God desires sacrifice and obedience, not a religious game. It must be emphasized that our obedience is not for the purpose of saving us—salvation is by grace—but to assist us in perfecting holiness (II Corinthians 7:1) and to provide a witness of God working in our lives (Matthew 5:16).

Israel’s purely ceremonial religion could never safeguard the truth because the people were not living it. By being used in the worship of manmade deities, not the Creator God, the rituals of their shrines were completely divorced from the truth found in the law. God will not be mocked (Galatians 6:7). The evidence of true religion is that, through His correction in mercy and love, it will touch and purify every area of life. If we are really in contact with the true God, change will take place gradually as we grow.

To determine if our profession and practice of religion is pleasing to God, we must consider two questions: 1) Are we covered by the blood of Jesus Christ? and 2) Are we obeying God to the best of our understanding?

We never obey to the extent of our knowledge because knowledge, knowing what God expects, always outpaces ability. We gather knowledge before we have the ability to live it, and that makes us feel guilty because we realize we are not applying what we know. This guilty feeling is not really wrong, for without guilt we would not change. It is good if it makes us change, but when guilt becomes neurotic, it becomes destructive and wrong.

Today, psychologists are trying to remove guilt from our every thought, word, and deed—a sure sign of widespread spiritual poverty and complacency. But God says we can worship Him with a pure conscience through Christ’s sacrifice, and because we know God is faithful to us as we live by faith in Him (Hebrews 10:19-23).

Zeal Without Truth

Amos was conscious of having a message from God. He wanted his message to have as powerful an impact as possible. He wanted to get the entire truth to these people so that they could repent. The apostle Paul had a similar desire:

Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. (Romans 10:1-3)

The Israelites were zealously religious. However, they erred in isolating sincerity and ceremony away from the truth as revealed in God’s Word. Sincerity and ceremony are only parts of what makes a religion. The people attended services, flocked to the shrines,
performed the rituals, and offered the sacrifices. But they did not worship according to knowledge or cultivate the righteousness of God. David writes, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart—these, O God, You will not despise” (Psalms 51:17). God despised Israel’s sacrifices because the people did not offer them in spirit and truth (John 4:21-24).

In the United States, people are generally religious too. American money bears the motto, “In God we trust.” Churches seem to rise on almost every corner, and a great deal of talking about religion goes on. Many get caught up in the “spirit of the holidays.” Radio stations play Christmas music constantly for weeks prior to the holiday. Polls indicate that a high percentage of Americans consider themselves religious. Eighty-four percent of Americans view God as the heavenly Father of the Bible who can be reached through prayer (The Princeton Religion Research Center, “Religion in America: 1992-1993”). But as a whole, we do not worship God in spirit and truth.

Worshipping in truth is knowing and following God’s way of life. Worshipping in spirit can mean two basic things: 1) through and by means of the Spirit of God, and also 2) with sincerity, enthusiasm and zeal. Jesus intends us to understand His words in John 4 in the same respect. Those who worship God must do it in truth through His Spirit with sincerity and zeal. They follow a way of life and practice a religion that pleases God. And their lives reflect the great transforming power of God.
Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall,” writes the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:12. In different words, Amos issues the same warning to the Israelites of his time. A dominant theme in his book is that past performance cannot compensate for a present lack of spiritual and moral commitment. Though outwardly religious, the people of Israel were not seeking God, but were relying solely on their privileged position under the Old Covenant.

In his day, John the Baptist attacked this same problem in the attitude of the Pharisees, a group that was outwardly religious but inwardly corrupt and self-seeking (Matthew 23:25, 27-28).

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “Brood of vipers! Who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.” (Matthew 3:7-9)

Christ frequently lambasted the Pharisees for their hypocritical religion exhibited in a fondness for ritual and pomp with little or no regard for true righteousness. A similar attitude of neglecting one’s spiritual condition crept into the church quite early, spurring the apostles to caution Christians about its dangers (Hebrews 2:1-3; 5:12). These warnings are just as suitable to our age. With such a complacent attitude prevalent in the society around us—and the return of Jesus Christ just around the corner—we need to heed them as well.

God and the Prophet

Amos, a small-town Jewish herdsman, faced certain rejection and persecution for his message, yet he denounced the Israelites from the beginning to the end of his book. Prudent people were afraid to speak up for fear of retribution (Amos 5:13), but Amos feared no one but God. When the people shouted, “Who are you to come into Bethel and Samaria and preach against us?” he boldly replied, “The Lord God has spoken! Who can but prophesy?” (Amos 3:8). He had good reason to expose their corruption and complacency, and God had given him the authority to censure them.

The roaring lion (verse 8) had stimulated the voice of prophecy in Amos because repentance for the people of Israel was still possible. Thus, the prophet’s responsibility is to stand in the gap—to deliver a clear warning message to reconcile the people to God. In like manner, a pastor has the same responsibility to his congregation. He must, “Cry aloud, spare not; lift up [his] voice like a trumpet; tell My people their transgression,” so they can be reconciled to God (Isaiah 58:1).

The prophet must address the present while considering the future. As God says in Deuteronomy 32:29, “Oh, that [My people] were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their latter end!” God holds the prophet accountable for speaking out and providing His people with a witness of what the consequences of their actions are.

How does the prophet know what kind of witness to provide to God’s people? “He reveals His secrets to His servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7), those with whom He has a special, close relationship. God walked and talked with Abraham, whom He called His friend. Moses’ fellowship with God was so close that He revealed His hinder parts to him. He also revealed Himself to other prophets through this close fellowship, and they came to know the mind and will of God.

God did not dictate His relationship with His prophets so that their personalities disappeared from what they said or wrote. In Amos’ case, the
book begins with “The words of Amos,” but he immediately writes, “The LORD roars from Zion” (verse 2) and “Thus says the LORD” (verse 3). God and the prophet cooperate.

God inspires but does not dictate, as if the prophet were simply a tool like a typewriter or loud speaker. He makes the prophet aware of Him, and helps him observe his environment and reminds him of his own experiences in relation to His way. Thus, the prophet’s personality surfaces in what he speaks and writes.

Amos’ censuring approach brings up a few questions: Is it always a prophet’s (or preacher’s) duty to infuse people with faith, confidence and positivity? No. Is there ever a time or a circumstance when it is right for him to fill people with doubt about their lives? Yes! What kind of circumstance? When people are doing wrong and do not realize it.

How, then, should he correct them? Normally, the best way is to be gentle and ask questions. He sows doubt by making them think that perhaps the future is not as rosy and secure as they imagine if they continue in the direction they are going. Then he gives them space to think it through.

Now consider modern America. Are we not the greatest “Christian” nation that has ever graced this earth? Have we not distributed Bibles all over the world? Have we not given more money for charitable works than practically all the nations in the world combined? We feel we are a separate, distinct, and greater nation than others. The Bible was deeply ingrained in the thinking of our people until this last generation or so. Surely the Lord is with this nation!

But Amos injects an element of doubt into this line of reasoning for both us and ancient Israel. “It may be that the LORD God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph” (Amos 5:15). God was with their father Joseph, but was He with his descendants? They went to church and the feasts, but such actions do not necessarily impress God.

Because of his earlier reference to Beersheba (verse 5), Amos mentions Joseph, whom God blessed even in slavery. God told Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in Beersheba, “I will be with you.” To Israel, the shrine in Beersheba represented God being with them, an idea that is equally important to us. Does God really walk with us as He did with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph? Can we look forward to the future with great hope? Will we sail right through this life into the Kingdom of God and avoid the Great Tribulation? If God is really with us, do we not have His promise, “I . . . will keep you from the hour of trial” (Revelation 3:10)?

Or are we, as a nation or as a church, complacently assuming that He is walking with us? Have we considered that He may not be? The people of Israel assumed it, and Amos announced very plainly that God was not walking with them. They were deceived!

The Israelites were wallowing in wealth and power. They were supporting their religious institutions and attending worship services and festivals. But in God’s eyes, they were “wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked”—just like the Laodicean church (Revelation 3:17). In reality, God was not in their lives, though He wanted to be. Through Amos, He was knocking on their door (verse 20).

Should we allow ourselves to relax because we are part of God’s true church? The Jews in Jeremiah’s time relied on the presence of the Temple to give them security (Jeremiah 7:1-4). Not long thereafter, Nebuchadnezzar’s army carted the nation into slavery in Babylon. The Jews of Jesus’ day felt secure because they were born under the Old Covenant and could trace their ancestry back to Abraham (John 8:33). Within forty years, Rome reduced Jerusalem to a pile of rubble.

Is it possible, then, that even though we consider ourselves Christians, our future may not be a time of serenity and hope, but of great testing? Are we not fast approaching “the time of Jacob’s trouble” (Jeremiah 30:7)? Now is no time to rest—either on our oars or our laurels!

First of the Nations

Amos 6 is written in an interesting way. The first verse corresponds to the last verse, verse 2 to verse 13 and so on. This correspondence is not exact, but it does show cause and effect from God’s perspective. We will look at several verses in this chapter that reflect the complacent attitudes in Israel, especially among the leadership.

Woe to you who are at ease in Zion, and trust in Mount Samaria, notable persons in the chief nation, to whom the house of Israel comes! . . . “But, behold, I will raise up a nation against you, O house of Israel,” says the LORD God of hosts; “and they will afflict you from the entrance of Hamath to the valley of the Arabah.” (verses 1, 14)

In these two verses, Amos addresses the nation’s leadership about the way they were living. Chief means “first.” They felt Israel was the chief nation on earth, and no other could withstand it. But God says the leaders of Israel were complacent, “at ease,” and the nation was following their examples.
The common Israelite looked to people of wealth, power and influence for models of their own behavior, and they saw self-indulgence, unfounded pride, moral degeneracy and self-satisfaction. Another nation, the real “first nation,” would show Israel its true state by destroying it. Israel would be attacked from Hamath in the north to the Arabah in the south.

Go over to Calneh and see; and from there go to Hamath the great; then go down to Gath of the Philistines. Are you better than these kingdoms? Or is their territory greater than your territory? . . . You who rejoice over Lo Debar, who say, “Have we not taken Karnaim for ourselves by our own strength?” (verses 2, 13)

Israel’s leaders boasted that these nations are no match for the power and wealth of Israel. “They may have had their day,” they said, “but Israel will not be troubled by them anymore!” They felt so secure in themselves!

Twice in verse 13, Amos makes a play on words. Because these cities were recent victories of Jeroboam II, Israelites were extolling their military might. In Hebrew, however, Lo Debar means “no thing” or “nothing.” They were rejoicing over nothing! Karnaim means “horns,” a symbol of strength. To paraphrase, they say, “Have we not overcome strength with greater strength?” God’s view, however, is that their strength, in which they boast, is of little consequence. A nation of even greater strength will completely conquer them.

Woe to you who put far off the day of doom, who cause the seat of violence to come near. . . . Do horses run on [the face of a cliff]? Does one plow [the sea] with oxen? Yet you have turned justice into gall, and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood. (verses 3, 12)

In their false security, none of the people worried about the collapse of the nation, even though the signs of it were all around them. In fact, put far off literally means “drive out” or “cast out” (see Isaiah 66:5). They did not just ignore the danger signals, they utterly rejected any notion of an imminent downfall. In doing so, they had done a very stupid thing, as foolish as running horses upon crags or trying to plow the sea. They had allowed violence, corruption and exploitation to mount in their midst (verse 12).

Verses 4-6 and 9-11 form another corresponding pair of passages. The earlier verses show the people’s wanton use of their prosperity and their utter ignorance and heedlessness of the coming destruction of Israel. The later verses show the same people after a plague, one of God’s judgments, kills whole families. Amos contrasts and connects their giddy complacency with their future wretched despair.

“The First of the Captives”

Therefore they shall now go captive as the first of the captives, and those who recline at banquets shall be removed. The Lord God has sworn by Himself, the Lord God of hosts says: “I abhor the pride of Jacob, and hate his palaces; therefore I will deliver up the city and all that is in it.” (Amos 6:7-8)

Now God exposes the root cause: Pride brought forth their self-pleasing religion, their overconfidence in their strength, and their self-indulgent lifestyles. Where were their trust and faith in God? Pride causes people to resist and reject Him.

God saw this unwarranted pride most acutely in Israel’s leadership. As we have seen, most of this chapter is aimed directly at the leaders, upon whose conduct the nation’s destiny is largely dependent. God shows in the Bible that the leader of any institution—nation, church, business, family—can make or break it. If a leader because of righteousness comes under the blessing of God, then the people are also blessed. But if the leader is cursed by God because of his wickedness, his people likewise come under the curse.

When Judah had a good and righteous king like Josiah (I Chronicles 34-35), the nation prospered, but under evil Manasseh (I Chronicles 33), the nation declined. In this century, England experienced a year of turmoil in 1936 over the determination of Edward VIII to marry the American divorcée, Wallis Simpson. Yet, his brother, George VI, refusing to leave London during World War II, rallied the nation during its darkest hour. This principle of leadership holds true in any enterprise from large to small.

We can also see this in the second commandment: “You shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children” (Exodus 20:5). The fathers—the leaders—and the children both suffer. When the fathers are blessed or cursed by God, so are the children. The difference is only in the measure of responsibility that each bears.

In life, everyone is a leader as well as a follower, depending on the circumstance. Amos shows that a leader should never be complacent and content with the way things are because pride follows—and shortly after it, a fall (Proverbs 16:18). Leaders of nations bear a great responsibility because, if they allow morals to collapse, all their military prowess and vaunted technology will not save them. Above all else, the first consideration of a leader is to be moral.

But the Israelite leaders of Amos’ day were people who first considered their own reputation and condition. They compared themselves with others instead of God (II Corinthians 10:12). In ignoring their spiritual health, they could neither lead and guide
the nation, nor help and counsel others. Since they had failed so horribly in their duty, God says the leadership would be among the first to be led away as captives.

Laodiceanism—Then and Now

Amos avoids calling the Israelites “God’s people” to make sure they understand their peril in breaking the covenant. In contrast, he calls God “the Lord God” (Amos 6:8), the Sovereign Covenant God who saves. To save them, He will either destroy the complacency or cause repentance.

Like the ancient Israelites, some people today take God’s commitment to save too far. These people believe in “eternal security,” or in Protestant terms, “once saved, always saved.” They think they can do just about anything and remain under God’s “grace.” Some believe they can “get away with murder!” But they are wrong! Yes, God will follow through with His part of the covenant, for He has promised never to forsake His people (Hebrews 13:5). But there is a point of no return.

Knowing that He promises to remain with us through all the calamities, changes, opportunities, and even the failures that we experience is very encouraging. He is there, determined to carry through with His promises (I Peter 1:3-9). He fervently wants to share His creation with us for all eternity. But we have a responsibility not to abuse the privileges of the calling of God, for His calling requires us to obey and submit to Him and grow in holiness, without which we cannot be accepted by Him (Ephesians 1:3-6; Hebrews 12:14). The Israelites, though, abused their calling, failed to be holy, and found themselves on the brink of grave peril.

Jesus faced a similar attitude in Roman Judea. In a discussion with the Jews of his day, Jesus says, “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” They answered Him, “We are Abraham’s descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone” (John 8:32-33). They believed that they were secure in God despite their manner of life, taking the covenant for granted, and relying on their ancestry to placate God.

In the same vein, we might say, “I’m a member of the true church. Are we not Abraham’s seed, those with whom God has made the covenant?” We may attend Sabbath services and the feasts, sing in the choir, and give tithes—all good things—but God wants more. He wants us to have a zeal for obedience to Him because it will produce in us His mind, heart, and character.

Amos proclaims the whole house of Israel to be complacent, just as our nation is. God prophesies that the church will also be spiritually complacent at the end time (Revelation 3:14-22). Request our booklet, The World, the Church and Laodiceanism, for further information. New members bring it into the church as part of the world that they need to overcome, but older members can also bring it in by gradually absorbing it as a way of life.

Accusation Against Amos

Evidently, Amos’ teaching was effective because the people responded—at least it caused a reaction (Amos 7:10-17). He was a good strategist; he preached at the shrines where the people were. His influence radiated out as the word spread that a prophet from Judah was proclaiming doom for the nation. The people listened and spoke to each other about his preaching. When Amos accused the religious leaders of Israel of failing to teach God’s way of life, Amaziah, a high religious official of the shrine in Bethel, felt he needed to respond.

As we see in Amos’ case, a person can obey God and still receive public persecution. God will not protect us from all persecution, partly because it affords an opportunity to witness for and glorify Him. Amos’ answer to Amaziah’s charges makes this witness and enables him to prophesy further. Additionally, his response instructs us regarding the nature and function of a prophet.

This also shows a clear example of the biblical use of a plumb line, a building tool used to determine if an object is upright (verses 7-9). Does God hold the plumb line against Amaziah or Amos? Actually, He judges both. Amaziah represents the false religions, and Amos represents the true religion. The content of their conversation reveals how God would judge them. Primarily, though, God was evaluating Amos.

We need to apply the plumb line to ourselves. Are we taking the grace of God for granted? Could God be angry with some of us in His true church? Revelation 3:14-22 shows that the Laodiceans are sincere when they assert that they are spiritually complete, but God is ready to vomit them out! Obviously, the Laodiceans are not judging themselves against God’s plumb line, or they would have known they were out of alignment with His will.

Because they feel so secure in their own spirituality, they probably think it incredible that God would single them out for punishment. It is clear, however, that God punishes those who forsake their part of the covenant with Him. Revelation 12:17 shows that, on the other hand, Satan persecutes those who keep the commandments of God and live godly lives.

God’s religion is more than keeping the basic Ten Commandments. The Pharisees kept them, but our righteousness has to exceed theirs (Matthew 5:20). One difference between Christ and the Pharisees was that Christ’s righteousness was positive while
the Pharisees’ was negative. Though both kept the commandments, the sincere Pharisee was righteous by avoiding sin, but Christ was righteous by always doing good as well.

The problem of the Laodicean is selfishness, self-concern. His opposite, the Philadelphia (which means “brotherly love”), is commended by God for his obedience and for doing good. His religion is inward in practice because he has prepared himself to give and serve through his relationship with God. The Laodicean is too busy gathering his wealth and indulging himself to give much thought to his fellow man.

Like the Laodiceans, the ancient Israelites concentrated on self-advantage, self-pleasing, and covetousness. This resulted in their being very hard on the needy and the poor. They ignored doing good works and serving their brothers. Amaziah apparently felt he needed to speak out and defend “that old-time religion.”

The Prophet Tested

In Amaziah’s accusations against him, Amos was tested in several ways. The accusations were very pointed, designed to raise his anger and hatred so that he would respond in a way that would “show his true colors.” In reality, Amos’ true colors did surface—that he was a true man of God!

Amaziah misrepresented him as disloyal, often the first accusation made against a true servant of God. The Jews accused Christ of rebellion against the Roman government, a totally unfounded accusation. In Amos’ case, the accusation was equally unfounded.

The priest accused Amos of saying that Jeroboam would die in battle (Amos 7:11). He was really tricky. To prove that Amos had said this, he quoted something the prophet really did say: “Israel shall surely be led away captive” (Amos 5:27; 6:7). In reality, the prophecy made no mention specifically of Jeroboam. Amaziah's false accusation was supported with something that was true.

The Jews tried this with Christ too. They used, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19), as proof that He would destroy the Temple (Mark 14:58). They misrepresented what He said because He did not refer to the physical Temple. This is one of Satan’s frequent ploys.

A second way that Amos was tested is in his motivation for serving God. Amaziah charges Amos with preaching for selfish reasons, for money, represented by, “Flee to the land of Judah. There eat bread” (Amos 7:12). Amos, a Jew, was preaching in Israel. To paraphrase, Amaziah said, “If you go back to Judah and tell them what you have preached against Israel, they will love you. They like hearing bad things about Israel! They will fill your basket with big offerings, and you’ll be rich!” If Amos were not a true man of God, he might have swallowed this enticement.

Third, Amos was tested in his personal security. A threat implied that if he did not leave Israel, he would get hurt: “Never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is the royal residence” (verse 13). This test evaluated Amos’ ability to confront authority. In referring to “the king’s sanctuary, and . . . the royal residence,” Amaziah warns him: “This is the national cathedral! What you say shouldn’t be uttered in a hallowed, sacred place like this. It is dedicated to the welfare of Israel. In saying such things, you are challenging the king’s authority.” His ploy failed, though, since Jeroboam seems to have taken no action against Amos.

The Prophet Responds

When Amos answers, “I was no prophet, nor was I a son of a prophet, but I was a herdsman and a tender of sycamore fruit” (Amos 7:14), he contends that God Himself commissioned him to “prophesy to My people Israel” (verse 15). Amos was simply a faithful servant of God, with no formal training for the job God sent him to do. “So,” he says, “don’t tell me not to prophesy when God tells me to!” The apostles said much the same to the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:29).

Then he utters his prophetic denunciation of Amaziah:

Therefore thus says the Lord: “Your wife shall be a harlot in the city; your sons and daughters shall fall by the sword; your land shall be divided by survey line; you shall die in a defiled land; and Israel shall surely be led away captive from his own land.” (Amos 7:17)

Amaziah’s wife and children are included in the curse for two reasons. First, as shown earlier, a leader determines the course of those under him. Any curse that fell on Amaziah would also, to one degree or another, affect his family.

Second, it is a biblical principle that families are often unified in belief. The saying, “Blood is thicker than water,” concedes that family ties often prove stronger than the influence of God’s Holy Spirit. Frequently, if one leaves the church, others in the family will leave too.

As one member of the family rises or falls, so do the others. Because of his bold denunciation of God’s
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prophet, Amaziah would suffer, and his family would suffer with him. God would see to it that this priest of Bethel would witness in a personal way the coming destruction of the nation as it fell upon his family with a vengeance.

This example, the only narrative section in the entire book, graphically illustrates the fruits of complacency and pride. God sends His prophets to ring as many warning bells as they can to wake His people up to the urgency of the times. The window of opportunity to avert the prophesied disaster is a small one, and God wants His people to use that time to seek Him and change their ways.

The prophet depicts a Laodicean society, like the United States today, from the top echelons to the lowest of beggars (Isaiah 1:5-6). Such a nation prefers form over substance, words over deeds, and tolerance over righteousness.

A sober glance around this nation speaks volumes about the downward spiral already in progress. Crime is rampant on our streets and in our homes. Government scandal and corruption are common news items. Our families are falling apart while we make speeches about “family values.”

We also see Laodiceanism creeping into the church as the people begin adopting the lifestyles and attitudes of the world. When they equate material prosperity with spiritual acceptance, they become satisfied with themselves and their spiritual progress (Revelation 3:17). Seeing what Laodiceanism produces, we should never let ourselves become spiritually complacent.

The signs of the times are all around (Luke 12:54-56). It is not good enough just to see them, though. We must act upon this knowledge and truly seek God. Isaiah writes,

Seek the L ORD while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the L ORD, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. (Isaiah 55:6-7)

Now is the time!
By refusing to repent of their apostasy from God’s way of life, the Israelites could only expect the coming of God’s fearsome punishment.

Hear this word which I take up against you, this lamentation, O house of Israel: The virgin of Israel has fallen; she will rise no more. She lies forsaken on her land; there is no one to raise her up. For thus says the Lord God: “The city that goes out by a thousand shall have a hundred left, and that which goes out by a hundred shall have ten left to the house of Israel.” (Amos 5:1-3)

The people of Israel would recognize these words as a funeral dirge, a lamentation said over the dead. Amos speaks, not as if it were yet to occur, but as if it had already happened. This death came when Assyria conquered Israel from 721 to 718 BC and deported her people to foreign lands.

Israel is pictured as a virgin, though not a spiritual virgin. God frequently calls her an adulteress, harlot, and fornicator (Jeremiah 3:1-13; Ezekiel 16; Hosea 2:2-13), but He uses “virgin” here because Israel was cut off seemingly in the bloom of youth—before she could produce what she had the potential to produce. In a literal family, God could have expected a happy marriage and children from her (Isaiah 5:1-2). Israel, surrounded by luxury and prosperity, should have produced God’s personality and character, but she failed miserably.

Proof of Their Destruction

Thus says the Lord: “As a shepherd takes from the mouth of a lion two legs or a piece of an ear, so shall the children of Israel be out who dwell in Samaria—in the corner of a bed and on the edge of a couch!” (Amos 3:12).

Amos refers to part of the Old Covenant: “If it is torn to pieces by an animal, then he shall bring it as evidence, and he shall not make good what was torn” (Exodus 22:13). If a lamb was stolen from the flock, the shepherd had to repay the owner for it. If a lamb was attacked and devoured by a beast, however, he had to bring proof that he had not stolen it himself. He had to show evidence that what had previously existed had been destroyed.

Whenever Israel is destroyed, the evidence of her demise will not be a leg or part of an ear, but bits of furniture like couches and beds. When others look for proof of this great nation’s fate, they will find all the accouterments of opulence, luxury, self-indulgence, indolence—products of their self-concern and self-satisfaction. But they will find no effects of godly spirituality—righteousness, justice, and mercy.

The illustration of the bed and couch may be an ironic reference to Israelite sexual exploits with temple prostitutes and other ritual sexual practices (Isaiah 57:3-9). Additionally, God shows Israel committing spiritual adultery by trusting in other nations rather than God (Isaiah 31:1-3), and the destroyed bed and couch would depict His destruction of the nation for her unfaithfulness.

“For behold, the Lord gives a command; He will break the great house into bits, and the little house into pieces” (Amos 6:11). “The great house” refers to the noble or wealthy family in society, and these “big names” will certainly be destroyed along with the common folk. The rich and powerful will not be able to escape the dreadful punishment God promises. God makes it clear that He has given the command to destroy them.

We should never forget that God’s punishment falls upon Israel because of disobedience, rebellion, and sin. America and the British nations are rapidly following ancient Israel’s example as they spiral downward to their destruction. We can see this pattern in the murder on the streets, bloody crimes like rape and
mutilation in our once peaceful towns, AIDS and other sexual diseases rampant among all sectors of society, as well as sexual deviancy, perverse music, self-indulgence, drugs, and alcohol abuse. Wealth is being funneled into the hands of the few, and the poor and weak keep becoming poorer and weaker. These nations may look fine on the outside, but the cancer has spread from head to toe, and they have only so long before the disease proves fatal (Isaiah 1:5-6).

**Visions of Total Destruction**

Amos warns Israel of the coming destruction in three visions recorded in Amos 7:

1) The vision of the locusts.

2) The vision of the fire.

3) The vision of the plumb line.

The first two have two points in common: Israel’s total destruction and Amos’ intercession.

Thus the Lord God showed me: Behold, He formed locust swarms at the beginning of the late crop; indeed it was the late crop after the king’s mowings. And so it was, when they had finished eating the grass of the land, that I said: “O Lord God, forgive, I pray! Oh, that Jacob may stand, for he is small!” So the Lord relented concerning this. “It shall not be,” said the Lord. Thus the Lord God showed me: Behold, the Lord God called for conflict by fire, and it consumed the great deep and devoured the territory. Then I said: “O Lord God, cease, I pray! Oh, that Jacob may stand, for he is small!” So the Lord relented concerning this. “This also shall not be,” said the Lord God. (Amos 7:1-6)

Given insight into what God would soon do, Amos was distressed over whether Israel could survive. God relented both times, probably as a result of Amos’ prayer. But because of His earlier pronouncements and the people’s lack of repentance, there is a sense that God would not postpone Israel’s punishment much longer.

The first vision of Amos 7 may be a natural calamity of locusts rising out of the earth and destroying the crops and the grasslands “after the king’s mowings,” a practice akin to our income tax. Without the late crop, the first cutting for the king would be sparse, and without produce for their personal needs, the people would starve. God decided that Israel would be protected from natural calamity in the main, but a few people may suffer very badly and may even die.

The second vision, a divine fire, could literally be fire on the earth. “For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God” (Deuteronomy 4:24; see 29:20). Fire, in biblical symbolism, is a purging and purifying punishment against sin (Malachi 3:2-3; Hebrews 12:29). To save and turn the people back to morality and obedience, God decrees a purifying fire to come upon Israel, probably in the form of a divinely inspired war. Again, God relents, giving the nation another chance to repent.

This exchange between Amos and God illustrates a wonderful method He uses to teach us what we need. God sometimes leads us into situations that force us to decide what we really need. We ask Him for it, and then He gives it to us. We think He answered our prayer—and He did—but He also led us to pray the prayer (see Romans 8:26)! He guides these situations so that we come to think like Him! When He wants to produce character in us, He will work in whatever way is necessary to build it.

We can learn much from this technique. In our earnest prayers, we cry out to Him, believing we truly need what we have requested. We should also pray to understand how God is working, molding, shaping and leading us to grow and overcome. When we finally see things from His perspective and pray that prayer, He will respond.

That is what He wanted from Israel: He desired the Israelites to understand that they should return to Him. However, Amos 7:9; 8:3, 10; and 9:1 indicate their destruction would be total because the people did not respond.

The example of ancient Israel’s shortsightedness has present-day implications for spiritual Israel—God wants His people to look through the coming crisis and see that He brings it to pass, controls it, and sets its limits. He will use it to bring about His purpose in individual lives or in the life of the nation. In the near future, conditions will become so difficult that, if possible, even the elect will be deceived—“but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened” (Matthew 24:24, 22).

**The Plumb Line**

The two previous visions, depicting devastation to Israel, offered no test of her people. God turns to a third vision that contains a test to detect if they are really His people.

Thus He showed me: Behold, the Lord stood on a wall made with a plumb line, with a plumb line in His hand. And the Lord said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” and I said, “A plumb line.” Then the Lord said: “Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of My people Israel; I will not pass by them anymore. The high places of Isaac shall be desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste. I will rise with the sword against the house of Jeroboam.” (Amos 7:7-9)
**The Plumb Line: A Test Against the Standard**

A major proof of false religion is that it cannot validate its effectiveness before the witness of man, but God can and does validate the true religion. He produces evidence of His righteousness, power, purpose, and way in many forms. God has performed miracles, signs, and wonders in the sight of thousands of witnesses.

Without objective assurance from time to time, we would be living in a world of religious make-believe. God sometimes validates Himself before man by advertising His power through an undeniable occurrence like Jesus’ resurrection (I Corinthians 15:1-8). Men have verified the truths of God through observation and experimentation (I Kings 18:30-39). Man is thus without excuse (Romans 1:18-25).

On occasion, God also verifies our personal relationship with Him by immediately answering a prayer or miraculously saving us from harm. On the other hand, if He needs to get our attention, He will shake us awake by allowing a test or trial to warn us that the relationship is degenerating. Because we are assured that God is with us, the testing is good. It keeps us from sinking into complacency and pride, both of which will separate us from Him.

This is what God is addressing in the principle of the plumb line. Amos understood that God was using it to test the spirituality, morality, and genuineness of the people against the standard. The test answers the question, “Are they really God’s people?” God wants to know if they are exhibiting His characteristics.

This idea of a spiritual standard of measure transferred directly into the New Testament church. God uses similar imagery, a measuring rod, in Revelation 11:1. To the Laodicean church (Revelation 3:14-22), God uses fire to refer to a test instead of a plumb line.

As we can see from these examples, the end-time church will be tested. How are we going to build? What will the test reveal about our Christian growth (I Corinthians 3:9-16)? We are commanded to grow “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13). From this, we see that the plumb line is God’s revelation of Himself as the standard.

At first, God’s revelation of Himself was direct, visible, and personal, but later, as Israel grew, He revealed Himself more verbally through the prophets. They recorded His revelation for all time and all people, and we read it today in our Bibles.

God’s law is the primary vehicle He uses to reveal His nature; it defines how He lives. If we want to be in His Kingdom and live as He does, we must obey His law, but obeying God’s law in no way minimizes grace. God revealed Himself to Israel first as Redeemer and then as Lawgiver. He freed His people from their slavery in Egypt before He gave them the standard of His law. Grace precedes law. God gives grace first, but He does not leave His people ignorant of the life that pleases Him, which is revealed in His law.

The plumb line combines grace and law, and God will test us against both. If we rely on His grace without law, or on His law without grace, we will not pass the test. If either is abused, we will not measure up to the standard.

Leviticus 19 shows that the revelation of the law is important because it is a verbal description of God’s nature. Our God is a holy God (verse 2), and He expects His representatives to be holy also. But how do we become holy?

After God redeems us from sin and extends to us His Spirit and grace—His free, unmerited election, He expects us to follow His instructions. The remainder of Leviticus 19 fills in the details—we become holy by doing these things. These actions reflect God’s nature. Since God is holy, His law is holy, and if we follow His holy law, we can—with the indwelling of His Holy Spirit—grow to be holy like our holy God.

God chose Israel and extended the offer for a relationship with Him, to walk and fellowship with Him. After Israel’s rejection of it, He has now extended this offer to those He has specifically called and chosen (John 6:44; I Corinthians 1:26-29).

God loves His people and gives them redemption, grace. He expects it will result in obedience to His law, the reflection of His nature, so on occasion, He holds a plumb line against them to check their progress. But when He sees that they have rejected His way of life, He has no choice but to try to guide them to repentance—by any means necessary.
In construction, the plumb line tests whether what was erected is perpendicular to the square, that is, if it is straight up and down, if it is upright. It provides a standard against which one can measure what he has built. Metaphorically, when God draws near with the plumb line, He is looking for those people who are living and abiding in His grace and His law. The Israelites’ moral standards had degenerated, so their religious profession was not verified by the right kind of works. They were not upright; they failed the test.

Amos has no opportunity to intercede at this point. God will no longer relent. “I will not pass by them anymore” means that God would not overlook their sins any longer. And, if He will not pass by them, He must pass through them. The plumb line shows that He will pass through “with the sword” in judgment; His patience and forgiveness have finally ended. He could no longer defer the punishment for their sins—the time had come to destroy them.

God passes through by destroying “the high places of Isaac,” the altars and idols of the false religions responsible for the moral, spiritual, and ethical decline of the people. They worshipped Baal and a host of other foreign deities (Judges 10:6). They set up sacred pillars and idols throughout the land (I Kings 14:23; II Kings 17:10-13). Some of them even burned their sons in the fire to Molech (Ezekiel 16:20-21). Through their spiritual harlotry, they abused grace—the free, unmerited pardon of God—and rejected His law.

“The sanctuaries of Israel,” the religious shrines of Bethel, Dan, Gilgal, and Beersheba, would also be among the first to fall. They were the fountainheads of the attitudes of the nation. In them, the people were taught to seek the material prosperity that characterized the nation, and in part they sought this physical abundance through cultic fornication and fertility rituals done in the name of the eternal God. The religions taught the people how to sin and do it religiously.

Next, “the house of Jeroboam” would fall through war. Amos refers to Jeroboam I, after whom Jeroboam II was named, and worse, after whom he followed in his sins. God selected Jeroboam I to become king of the northern ten tribes of Israel after Solomon (I Kings 11:29-31). However, He made the continuance of Jeroboam’s dynasty contingent upon his obedience (verse 38).

But Jeroboam did not trust God. He thought that the religious festivals and sacrifices would entice Israel to return to David’s line in Judah (I Kings 12:25-27). To counter that possibility, he set up counterfeit shrines in Bethel and Dan and changed the Feast of Tabernacles from the seventh month to the eighth (I Kings 12:27-33). Jeroboam turned away from the law of God, causing the people to sin.

Historians examine economics, social conditions, and military strength to determine what causes the rise or fall of nations, but God shows that His purpose and the morality of the people are the true causes. Thus, God makes sure that the two major motivators of Israel’s spiritual decline, the religious and political leadership, would feel His wrath first (Isaiah 9:13-16).

A Basket of Ripe Fruit

Thus the Lord God showed me: Behold, a basket of summer fruit. And He said, “Amos, what do you see?” So I said, “A basket of summer fruit.” Then the Lord said to me: “The end has come upon My people Israel; I will not pass by them anymore.” (Amos 8:1-2)

Because we read the Bible in English, puns and other wordplay are lost in translation. Understanding this vision depends on a play on the Hebrew words translated “summer fruit” and “end.” Amos answers God’s question by saying he saw ripe fruit. But, when God responds, He uses a similar sounding word to suggest the time was ripe for His people.

The fruit represents people. If ripe, they were ready either to be used or to rot. God says the time is ripe for picking Israel. God had tried to get the people to repent, but in their hardheaded and hardhearted way, they would not. John the Baptist uses a different metaphor for the Jews of his day: The ax is about to fall (Matthew 3:10). God’s patience had run out. He would “not pass by them anymore.” In their spiritually oblivious state, disaster would take them by surprise.

Could we be taken by surprise?

But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, “Peace and safety!” then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. But you, brethren are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. (I Thessalonians 5:1-6)

This passage sounds strikingly similar to Amos 8. Could we be lulled into complacency? Is God’s hand
involved in world events, while we think we have plenty of time before the end? Are we motivated to make use of the time left to us? God says the time is ripe. He gives us time to repent, but that time grows shorter daily.

Joy Turned to Grief

Now that He has announced Israel’s imminent calamity, God begins to show how His punishment would alter the lives of the people. “And the songs of the temple shall be wailing in that day. . . . Many dead bodies everywhere, they shall throw them out in silence” (Amos 8:3). Notice the dramatic change of attitude in the people. The songs of His Temple would ordinarily be happy and joyous songs of praise to God, but He will turn the songs of their temple—sung to Baal in the name of the Lord—to wailing, for the numbers of the dead will be unimaginable.

Because of their self-absorption, God’s “sudden” punishment will stun the people of the United States, Canada, Britain, Australia, and the other nations of modern Israel, including some members of the true church. In their spiritually unaware state, they will be incredulous at God’s punishment for “such a little bit of sin.” But God has a different perspective; He says they are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked (Revelation 3:17).

Because of their self-procured wealth and affluence, they think they are being blessed with material things. They see themselves as following the way of God, but their religion has deceived them by failing to teach them His truth. They think that what they are doing is right, but they are deceived. However, God still holds them responsible because the truth is available. He views them as personally rejecting Him and His Word.

Today, some evangelicals attempt to prepare the people for what is to come, but their teaching is a mixture of right and wrong. Jesus says, “They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch” (Matthew 15:14). In their ignorance, the people do not realize the terrible calamity that is coming soon upon modern Israel. It will be far more terrible than anything ever seen on this earth!

Pride and Instability in Israel

God squarely places the blame for their punishment where it belongs, on Israel’s pride:

The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: “Surely I will never forget any of their works. Shall the land not tremble for this, and everyone mourn who dwells in it? All of it shall swell like the River of Egypt.” (Amos 8:7-8)

In Amos 4:2, God swore by His holiness, all of His moral integrity, His very nature. He also swore by Himself (Amos 6:8), indicating everything that He is and His sovereignty over all creation. Israel was not impressed. So God says, “Look, I have sworn by My holiness and by Myself, and that didn’t carry any weight with you. So now I will swear by something so great—you own pride—that you can’t refuse!” What irony! God says if He swears by something of theirs, it may mean more to them than if He swears by something of His!

This passage also shows that when man gets out of step with God, then nature too begins to suffer. Beauty begins to be replaced by ugliness. We begin to see huge piles of slag, polluted rivers, foul-smelling garbage dumps, expanding deserts, and denuded forests. Finally, when the land begins to vomit the people out (Leviticus 18:24-28), they may show a belated interest in God and His truth, but it will be too late to stop the destruction. The time is right—the fruit is ripe, so God will punish them.

Consider what is currently happening in our Western nations of Israel. God shows a connection between nature and human morality; “natural disasters are acts of God in response to the moral condition of the people. If men will treat other men, created in the image of God, in an immoral way, how will they treat the land, forests, rivers, lakes, and oceans? Because these things seemingly cannot fight back, man will abuse them with no fear of reprisal. But God says that the environment will fight back and vomit them out!

Instead of rain falling in a gentle mist, it will roar like an avalanche until the inhabitants cannot cope with it. The rivers will swell and flood the land in anger, washing the topsoil into the sea. In other areas, fire will sweep over forests and farmlands, destroying everything in its paths. Windstorms like hurricanes and tornadoes will devastate the cities and countryside, endangering the lives and livelihoods of the people. Earthquakes will increase in both frequency and power, costing thousands of lives and billions of dollars of damage. These disasters will mount to such an intensity that the people of modern Israel may seek repentance, but it will be too late. God will not pass by anymore.

“And it shall come to pass in that day,” says the Lord God, “that I will make the sun go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in broad daylight; I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on every waist, and baldness on every head; I will make it like mourning for an only son, and its end like a bitter day.” (Amos 8:9-10)

These are subtle signs of a “ripe” society. When an earthquake strikes, one feels very unstable because he
is not sure if the building will collapse and kill him. A similar type of instability occurs when society is rocked by crime, violence, immorality, and injustice. Amos describes the insecurity, bitterness, and death that result from failing to hold to the absolute standards of God.

One of the first signs of ripeness that society shows is instability. Just a few decades ago, most of us could leave our houses unlocked. But when society began to become unstable, we had to start locking our doors. In the recent past, we did not read a great deal about violence on the streets. Now society is so unstable that violence fills our news reports, and this constant source of worry produces more instability.

Within such a nation, all kinds of unstable factors constantly increase because everyone is running here and there in confusion. The confusion results from the lack of absolute standards of what is right and wrong, moral and immoral, ethical and unethical. Thus, everybody does his own thing. Violence, divorce, suicide, and mental illness increase. We see this in our societies every day.

Terrors of the Day of Judgment

What will the time of Jacob’s trouble—the Great Tribulation—really be like? Amos describes their reaction to the coming punishment to make the ancient Israelites aware of what their mental state would be—the torment, fear, and hopelessness. This made the prospect of having to experience God’s judgment much more terrifying than just knowing what will happen.

Therefore the Lord God of hosts, the Lord, says this: “There shall be wailing in all streets. And they shall say in all the highways, ‘Alas! Alas!’ They shall call the farmer to mourning, and skillful lamenters to wailing. In all vineyards there shall be wailing, for I will pass through you,” says the Lord. (Amos 5:16-17)

The farmer, accustomed to facing all the vagaries and insecurities of nature, like flooding and drought, is less likely to cry and mourn. The professional mourners, who cry at the drop of a hat, typify the other extreme. In their grief and despair, people will wander from one place to another looking for water, food, stability, hope, an organized city, or a functioning society. All they will find is anarchy. Will God be walking beside them? No, He inspired Amos to say, He would walk right through them!

Amos is not argumentative with them; he is not trying to prove anything to them anymore. He merely shows them what the Day of the Lord will be like. He paints a vivid and stark picture of the horrors in their future to make them evaluate the present status of their relationship with God.

“Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! For what good is the day of the Lord to you?” (Amos 5:18). It is always a prophet’s responsibility to remind the people that the future is inextricably bound to the present. What one does today affects the course of events as time marches on.

Malachi asks, “But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears?” (Malachi 3:2). No such doubts assailed these people at all. They were confident that things would be all right. They felt they would march right through the day of their judgment because they were His chosen people.

But when Amos looked at his times, he became frightened. “It will be darkness, and not light. It will be as though a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him; or as though he went into the house, leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him” (Amos 5:18-19).

There is no escape! People, living in their complacency, think that everything is fine. But the day of judgment will come upon them unexpectedly, and in utter hopelessness they will start running for their lives. They will escape one terror only to confront another! And just when they think they are finally safe, they will receive a mortal wound!

But, the prophet is not yet finished! “Is not the day of the Lord darkness, and not light? Is it not very dark, with no brightness in it?” (Amos 5:20). Wailing and inescapable judgment are followed by darkness. In their complacency, the people think it logical to conclude that, since everything is presently all right, they must have overcome those things which plagued them. With that behind them, they think their future is full of gladness and good times. Amos disagrees! He accuses them of feeding themselves false hopes. When God comes, he says, He will be their enemy!

Famine of the Word

Unfortunately, during these terrible times when God’s Word is most needed to help the people come to repentance, it will be almost impossible to find. “‘Behold, the days are coming,’ says the Lord God, ‘That I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord’” (Amos 8:11).

When the people finally realize that God wants them to repent, it will be too late. The seeds of their destruction have been sown, and the crop is already ripe. The only truth available to them in the tumult of God’s judgment is what they can remember. It is for this reason that God warns us in these times to “[redeem] the time, because the days are evil” (Ephesians 5:16).

If our hope in the Kingdom of God, the resurrection of the dead, and sharing life with God eternally are not sufficient to motivate us to repent, perhaps fear of a terrible calamity, the Great Tribulation, the Day of the Lord, or being spewed from God’s mouth as a Laodicean
will move us to use the present to secure the future. God promises to motivate us to cling to Him and His Word right now, and He is willing to scare us nearly to death in order to save us.

During this famine, “They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD, but shall not find it” (Amos 8:12). Amos probably refers to the Dead and Mediterranean Seas, east to west, and adds “north to east,” describing a triangle with the south direction left out. Why would he do this?

On a map of Palestine, the Dead Sea lies to the east, the Mediterranean to the west and the nation of Israel to the north. What lies to the south? Jerusalem, where the truth was! In Amos’ day, the truth was taught in God’s Temple in Jerusalem.

Israelites wanted to be known as seekers of the truth, but in reality they did not want it. Their pride would not allow them to pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the truth, for that meant they would need to humble themselves before the Word of God.

Wander can be rendered “stagger” like a drunk or “tremble” like lips quivering in agitation because one is so angry or fearful he is unable to speak. It shows the people in a state of panic and intense agitation. They are desperately searching for what they had regarded so lightly: God, the Bible, His truth. But they cannot find them anywhere!

Thus they will seek any kind of religion, and many will fall prey to false ones. This scenario is already happening in modern Israel. New Age, mystical, and Eastern religions are growing steadily, and many “Christians” feel free to borrow “truth” from other religions. Additionally, recent years have seen the rise of ecumenical movements within a broad spectrum of religious bodies.

In that day, the fair virgins and strong young men shall faint from thirst. Those who swear by the sin of Samaria, who say, “As your god lives, O Dan!” And, “As the way of Beersheba lives!” They shall fall and never rise again. (Amos 8:13-14)

When the famine of the Word of God occurs, the youth of Israel will fall most readily into the trap. There will be a tremendous revival in false religions, especially of the great false church. Where else can the young turn? They will be more susceptible because their parents failed to provide a solid foundation of truth on which to base wise spiritual decisions. The young only know what the older generation has taught them.

The Punishment Descends

The vision in Amos 9 is different from the four visions in chapters 7 and 8. There is no conversation between God and the prophet. The time for talk is over; God simply acts. The situation has moved beyond Amos’ ability to intercede—God’s time to act has come, and He will not relent.

The background of this final vision is interesting. To make his rule more secure, Jeroboam I devised what the Bible calls “the sin of Jeroboam,” the use of religion in the service of politics. Using the system in place in Judah, he counterfeited the holy days, the priesthood, and the Temple ritual. On his altar, his priests offered sacrifices to the two golden calves, and the king stood by the altar to burn incense (I Kings 12:26-13:1). It apparently became a custom for the king to stand at the right-hand side of the altar at his counterfeit feast in the eighth month.

Who is standing beside the altar in Amos 9? Not Jeroboam, but the Lord!

I saw the Lord standing by the altar, and He said: “Strike the doorposts, that the thresholds may shake, and break them on the heads of them all. I will slay the last of them with the sword. He who flees from them shall not get away, and he who escapes from them shall not be delivered.” (Amos 9:1)

Instead of officiating, God is destroying everything in sight!

Amos also draws on the story of Samson destroying the temple of Dagon by toppling the supporting pillars. If a man tries to pull a house down with his bare hands, he has to undermine it from the bottom, but God is not restricted like a man. He strikes the house down from the top! God, as the Supreme Omnipotent One and the Sovereign Lord, has every right to crush the house of Israel. Since the people had ignored all the numerous warnings He had sent for them to repent, He is now fulfilling His promise.

In the type, the temple of Dagon fell on everyone’s head; no one survived (Judges 16:30). The same holds true in this destruction. No matter where the people of Israel flee in the day of calamity, they will not find any rest, ease, safety, or security (Amos 9:2-6). They had tried to get security by building multiple homes for themselves, but God will wipe away this assurance by smashing their houses to bits. Anything that they thought would provide them security in the day of punishment God will destroy.

God is omnipotent. When He decides to judge His people in this very painful way, there is no escaping it. He reminds His people of the covenant they made with Him, that He called them to His service, yet He is also the God of all the earth and Lord of every nation (verse 7). In other words, He has the same responsibility to judge and punish them as He has to the other nations of the world. The Philistines and Syrians, by the way, are two of the nations He judges in Amos 1. God is judging Israel in the same manner.

We find a manifestation of Israel’s problem—false reliance that the covenant would save them—in modern-
day “Christianity.” Many professing Christians believe in eternal security, commonly called “once saved, always saved,” a devastatingly subtle deception of Satan the Devil. It is a belief that one can never fall out of favor with God, no matter what one’s behavior or attitude.

As members of the true church, we need to beware lest we bring this false idea into the church with us. When God called us, chose us, and granted us repentance, we were baptized. But that does not exclude us from His scrutiny. He is no respecter of persons; He will judge us as justly as He does anyone else on earth.

That we chose to follow God’s way of life is good, but having that fact on our spiritual résumé is not enough. God is not interested in past actions but in present performance. What is happening today? Are we living righteously each day? Or, have we fallen from our past performance and profession? What God did in the past to give us the opportunity for salvation does not absolutely bind Him to work everything out to our benefit, if we do not produce the corresponding good works, character growth, and obedience He expects (Ezekiel 18).

He wants us to see that we should not make the same mistake ancient Israel made—that is, take His salvation for granted. We can rely on Him and trust Him, but we also have a responsibility to submit to and obey Him. We must strive to produce the best character possible and be a light so He can say of each of us, “That’s My son! He looks and acts like Me! He is definitely part of My Family.”

The Prophesied Blow Falls

The Hedge Removed

A prophecy in Isaiah 5:5 parallels this last vision of Amos: “And now, please let Me tell you what I will do to My vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it shall be burned; and break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.” The vineyard is Israel, and “its hedge” is whatever protects it, anything from material resources to God’s Word. What happens to a nation when it loses its defenses? It becomes subject to invasion, since the wall that protected it from marauders, wild beasts, and evil influences is now gone. The Bible depicts the Gentile nations as beasts that rush in when God’s people look weak (Isaiah 30:6-7; Jeremiah 50:17).

Amos paints a stark and terrifying picture of life during the time of Jacob’s trouble. On one side, natural disasters play havoc with the land, and society becomes unstable. On the other side, foreign armies invade, destroying cities, killing indiscriminately, and taking the survivors into captivity. Though the physical necessities of life are scarce, the real famine is of the Word of God—truth cannot be found and repentance is all but impossible.

It appears to be an utterly hopeless situation. God is passing through and His anger is just and terrible. But He promises an end—His anger will be spent, and He will spare a remnant. He “will show mercy on whom [He] will show mercy” (Exodus 33:19, KJV).
The name Amos means “burden” or “burden-bearer,” and the message he proclaims to Israel is surely one of doom and destruction. In that gloomy, heavy warning is little room for hope, for good news, for happy days. Yet at the end of his prophecy, Amos sets down his oppressive burden and describes the wonderful future Israel can have if the people turn back to God.

We find in the last chapter that the nation’s destruction will not be total: “Behold, the eyes of the Lord God are on the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the face of the earth; yet I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob,” says the Lord” (Amos 9:8). Although not bound by His past commitment, since Israel had broken the covenant, He will not completely wipe out the nation. He will show mercy to a few (Micah 7:18). He will spare a “remnant of Joseph” (Amos 5:15).

Other prophets expound further on the idea of a remnant being saved to carry on God’s way of life to new generations. Remnant brings to mind a scrap of cloth cut out from a larger piece of cloth. The basic concept is smallness. A remnant is a tiny representative of the original whole, in this case, of the entire nation of Israel.

Ezekiel pictures a remnant as a pinch of hair hidden in the fold of his garment (Ezekiel 5:1-4). Isaiah shows the remnant of Israel scattered to “the four corners of the earth” and having to be gathered one by one (Isaiah 11:11-12; see Jeremiah 23:3; 31:7-11; Micah 2:12). They are just a few grains of sand compared to all “the sand of the sea” (Isaiah 10:22), maybe only a tenth of the original population of the nation (Isaiah 6:13).

When Israel was conquered and enslaved by Assyria in 721-718 BC, many of the survivors were resettled “in Halah and by the Habor, the River of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes” (II Kings 17:5-6), that is, in northern Mesopotamia. Few, if any, of those transplanted Israelites ever returned to Palestine. Instead, they migrated primarily to the north and west into Europe and from there around the globe (Isaiah 43:5-6; 49:12; Jeremiah 3:12, 18; 31:8; Zechariah 2:6; 8:7). Thus, the prophesied return of the remnant is still future.

The regathered remnant of a future destruction will return to the land of Israel a beaten, broken, humble people, having suffered horribly at the hands of captors and oppressors all over the world (Jeremiah 31:8-9; Micah 4:6). Through their sufferings they will have come to understand the reasons for their slavery and captivity: their forsaking of God and His way of life. They will now be ready and willing to listen and obey the instructions of their God (Isaiah 10:22; Zephaniah 3:13), and reap the wonderful benefits of following Him (Isaiah 37:31; Zechariah 8:4-8, 11-15).

Jeremiah shows what a wonderfully joyous time this will be:

“Hear the word of the Lord, O nations, and declare it in the isles afar off, and say, ‘He who scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him as a shepherd does his flock.’ For the Lord has redeemed Jacob, and ransomed him from the hand of one stronger than he. Therefore they shall come and sing in the height of Zion, streaming to the goodness of the Lord—for wheat and new wine and oil, for the young of the flock and the herd; their souls shall be like a well-watered garden, and they shall sorrow no more at all. Then shall the virgin rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old, together; for I will turn their mourning to joy, will comfort them, and make them rejoice rather than sorrow. I will satiate the soul of the priests with abundance, and My people shall be satisfied with My goodness,” says the Lord. (Jeremiah 31:10-14)

“Sifted in a Sieve”

God truly desires this bountiful, happy life for His people. Yet the terrible punishment that He inflicts upon the people of Israel—war, famine,
pestilence, captivity, slavery, exile—is in itself a necessary and painful test of their professed faithfulness. “For surely I will command, and will sift the house of Israel among all nations, as grain is sifted in a sieve; yet not the smallest grain shall fall to the ground” (Amos 9:9). This parallels Romans 11:26, where Paul says, “All Israel will be saved.” God wants to give salvation to all Israelites, and these calamities are His last-ditch effort to get their attention and turn them back to Him.

The smallest grain would be better translated “a pebble.” God puts His people through a sifting process, and the sieve is designed to catch the stones and other things that are not grain. In the metaphor, what passes through the sieve—the grain—will be saved. The pebbles caught in the mesh of the sieve are those God will destroy. “All the sinners of My people shall die by the sword, who say, ‘The calamity shall not overtake us nor confront us’” (Amos 9:10). Their words echo those of the Laodiceans in Revelation 3 who will be spewed from God’s mouth. Those caught in the sieve see no cause for alarm, no reason God should judge them. They are apparently unaware of what constitutes sin, of the penalty that falls on the sinner, or of the need of a remedy. They are complacent, careless sinners, living in a fantasy world of their own self-deception.

Turning to God in Faith and Deed

How can this calamity be averted? The solution is so simple and obvious that God seems to spend very little time on it within the book of Amos. In reality, every word of the book screams what Israel needed to do then—and needs to do today.

“Seek good and not evil, that you may live; . . . Hate evil, love good; establish justice in the gate” (Amos 5:14-15). A person does not need to seek God if He has already revealed Himself to him. Thus, seek means “to turn” to Him in repentance, not necessarily “to look for.” This is a way of saying, “Set aside your time and life for God.”

Seek in the Hebrew is imperative and has the force of a command. Seeking good, or seeking God (verse 4), is an act that we have to set ourselves to do; it is not a natural inclination (Romans 8:7). But it is worth the effort, for its product is life—not just physical existence, but life as God lives it (John 17:3). If we determine to seek good, and continue in it, the result—truly living!—will follow. Seeking the Lord produces godly life.

In living by every word of God, we should notice the order in which He lists these commands: “Seek good and not evil. . . . Hate evil, love good” (Amos 5:14-15). The action of turning to good precedes the emotions of hating evil and loving good. Holiness involves action and emotion: seeking and shunning, loving good and hating evil. He wants us to turn to the good and make it a target in our daily life. If we wait for God to infuse us with the right kind of feeling before we try to do good, then we will wait a long time because it will never come. We have to take action first by faith, and the corresponding right feeling will follow.

If holiness does not involve both action and emotion, it becomes something that we can put on and take off. We could hypocritically live one kind of life during the week, and on the Sabbath put on our holy look and go to services. Action and emotion combine to make a whole way of life.

Holiness is not just a way of life or a rule to live by. It also produces the very best quality of life—the way God lives eternally. God’s people have to think constantly of holiness, appreciating that He has chosen us out of this world and given us grace to be holy.

A major theme of the book of Amos is that we cannot take the grace of God for granted (see chapter 1, “The Responsibility of the Covenant People”). The Israelites complacently assumed that God wanted their companionship, but we must set our wills to seek Him daily, not just once a year during a pilgrimage or a feast. By nature we would rather do the opposite and wait for God to fill us with a desire to do His will. But only one who sets himself to seek the Lord and His holiness will receive from Him the infusion of grace by His Spirit. Bolstered with the Spirit of God (Ephesians 3:16), he can seek God in spirit and in truth (John 4:24) and truly live.

Peter says in Acts 5:32, “And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit [which] God has given to those who obey Him.” The Scripture clearly declares that God gives His Spirit to those who obey Him! One obeys first, and then the Spirit is given. God leads us to repentance by means of His Spirit, but if we do not begin to obey Him, He will not put His Spirit in us.

Also, what use is faith if we do not have to step out into the unknown before He answers? If we really trust God, then, in a sense, it is not the unknown. But we must act in faith first, trusting God that it is the right thing to do, then He gives the answer or the blessing. That is how growth takes place. He educates us by telling us what is the right thing to do. He expects us to do it, and as we do it, He fulfills what He promised. As we do it, He gives us the strength to finish it.

Thus, grace and obedience work together; they cannot be separated. God calls and redeems us by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8), but requires obedience through faith (II Corinthians 5:7; Hebrews 11)—living by His every Word (Matthew 4:4)—to maintain our privileged position (Hebrews 6:4-8; 10:26-31). By living righteously and seeking God, He gives us more of His Spirit to help us grow in grace and overcome sin through the knowledge of God (II Peter 3:18).

Our Sovereign, Omnipotent God

Seek good and not evil, that you may live; so the Lord God of hosts will be with you” (Amos 5:14). Amos introduces to his audience “Yahweh,
the Omnipotent God,” the God of hosts or angelic armies. In the Bible, when a man was confronted by a spirit being, he often became unnerved and unglued (Isaiah 6:5; Daniel 10:7-8). Amos wants his audience to think about what it would be like to be confronted by God Himself.

To do this, he uses a ploy to puncture their pride, which is the real cause of their lukewarm attitude in their relationship with God. Between verses 14 and 20, he repeats God’s name eleven times to emphasize to them the One they had failed to know.

Amos draws as much attention to God as he possibly can without hammering his audience over the head. In the background is the rhetorical question, “Can a person walk with God and not really be aware of His holiness, greatness, and majesty?” These people carelessly assumed that they were at peace with God, but how could they really know if they were when they had no idea what He is like? Amos’ ultimate purpose is to show them that the one they were worshipping is not the true God at all. If they knew the true God, it would be obvious to them! And they would repent.

Another example of repetition is Amos’ use of “Lord God” twenty-one times throughout his book. One commentator translates Lord God as “Sovereign Yahweh.” When “Sovereign,” suggesting owner and master, is combined with “Yahweh,” indicating the Covenant God, it means that He has every right to master, is combined with “Yahweh,” indicating the Sovereign Yahweh.” When “Sovereign,” suggesting owner and master, is combined with “Yahweh,” indicating the Covenant God, it means that He has every right to expect the obedience of the covenant people, and that He will keep His promises to them, whether blessings or cursings (Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28).

Amos wants us to have faith in God and to understand that He has the right to do as He pleases. Our salvation is important to Him. He is a merciful ruler who will bring His covenant with us to pass even if it takes a painful chastisement.

In Romans 11:11-36, a section titled “Israel’s Rejection Not Final” in the New King James, Paul explains how the Gentiles have been grafted into the natural olive tree (Israel). In verses 25-29, he shows that the Sovereign Yahweh is at work—He has not forgotten His people. Though He punishes them for their rebellion, His plan for them in the end is to give them salvation.

We need to apply this understanding personally. Sometimes His purpose covers thousands of years:

But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. (II Peter 3:8-9)

With us, His purpose covers the whole of our converted lives. God’s will is to save us after He creates His mind and character in us. If He must cause pain and suffering through trials of our faith to produce His character in us, He will. But He prefers that we seek what is good and right so that He has no need to test us so severely.

The World Under God’s Reign

Finally, after so many threats of punishment and destruction, God reminds His people that wonderful blessings and abundant lives lie just on the other side of these dark days. After their repentance, He will lead them back to the Land of Promise and help them rebuild their ruined cities and shattered lives. This never occurred after their expulsion from Palestine by the Assyrians in 718 BC, so this wonderful Millennium of restoration and prosperity lies ahead (compare Jeremiah 30-31 and Micah 4:1-7 with Revelation 19:1-20:6). In this future time, the Israelites will quickly regain their preeminence in the world, and never again will they be devastated and driven away. They will live in true peace and security forever under God.

“On that day I will raise up the tabernacle [house] of David, which has fallen down, and repair its damages; I will raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old; that they may possess the remnant of Edom, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name,” says the Lord who does this thing. (Amos 9:11-12)

In II Samuel 7:1-17 God makes a covenant with David, establishing his house, kingdom, and throne forever. He adds in Jeremiah 33:17, “David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel.” This latter promise comes at the end of a prophecy about “a Branch of righteousness” coming from David’s line (verse 15). A similar prophecy in Isaiah 11:1-5 leaves no doubt that the “Branch” is the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Many scriptures show that when Christ returns, He will rule forever as King of kings upon the throne of David (Isaiah 9:6-7; Revelation 19:16). He will make the resurrected David king over Israel, and each of the twelve apostles will rule a tribe under him (Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:29-30).

This reference to David would bring Israel’s “golden age” to an Israelite’s mind. This was the time before Israel split from Judah and David’s dynasty, when her wealth, peace, and power were at their heights. God proclaims that the people would not have to look to the past in longing for Israel’s golden age—it is still future and will be so much more golden!

Edom (Amos 9:12) represents to Israel what Babylon does to us in the church, that is, everything that is hostile to God. It represents the world, all of mankind. Edom, it seems, never forgave Jacob for stealing the birthright from Esau (Genesis 27), so...
throughout her history, she constantly opposed Israel. When Edom, Israel’s archenemy, and the rest of the world are humbled under the hand of God at Christ’s return, then all mankind can be converted.

In Acts 15:16-17, James quotes Amos 9:11-12 as the church’s authority to work for the conversion of the Gentiles, and this is indeed its sense. Amos uses possess in the sense of “conquer.” The dynasty of David, and Israel in a larger sense, will conquer the rest of the world, not through arms, but through the Word of God (Isaiah 49:6), producing for those captive nations an equality with Israel. Israel can possess the remnant of Edom and all the Gentiles because, when the King from the household of David comes, He will accomplish the major conversion of the Gentiles (Isaiah 11:10). They, too, will be His people.

This is the grand purpose God is working out! He is orchestrating events so that one day in the future, all mankind—all who have ever lived—will be offered the opportunity to become members of His Family! He wants all His children to be able to have the glorious, fulfilling, wonderful life that He lives. There can be no higher purpose!

Peace and Bounty

That time is just ahead!

“Behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord, “when the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him who sows seed; the mountains shall drip with sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. I will bring back the captives of My people Israel; they shall build the waste cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink wine from them; they shall also make gardens and eat fruit from them. I will plant them in their land, and no longer shall they be pulled up from the land I have given them,” says the Lord your God. (Amos 9:13-15)

Jesus Christ returns in power and great glory to take up the reins of government over His people. In contrast to the calamitous natural disasters that prevail under man’s dominion (Amos 4:6-10; 8:8), nature responds positively to the rule and reign of God! The curse of sin is lifted, and man begins to produce an Eden-like paradise over the whole earth. The Israelites return from the nations of their captivity and rebuild the Promised Land in beauty and splendor.

This is the end of insecurity. Peace results when people obey God’s government (Isaiah 9:6-7). Never again will a man be robbed, killed, oppressed, or lose his inheritance, not only in Israel, but in all nations as Christ’s rule expands. We can look forward to such a wonderful World Tomorrow!

In their proud affluence and self-reliant power, the ancient Israelites tried to find security in their homes and possessions, in their sincere but false religious zeal, in their mistaken conception of their standing with God. But God says that true security comes from Him. All blessings flow from Him (James 1:17), and He is eager to give them. He just has His priorities set differently than man: “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (Matthew 6:33).

Are you—personally—prepared to meet your God (Amos 4:12)? If you were called before His judgment seat today, would He pronounce a positive or negative judgment upon your life? Would He say, “I never knew you; depart from Me” (Matthew 7:23)? Or would He say, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21)?

That is the crux of Amos’ strong and urgent message! How well are you prepared for God’s judgment right now?

For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God? Now “If the righteous one is scarcely saved, where will the ungodly and the sinner appear?” (I Peter 4:17-18)

Amos has answered these questions. In the verses of his book, we can see the end of those who do not believe, and we also get a quick glimpse of the awesome blessings of those who do. How long do we have to show God whether we believe or not? Only God knows—but any one of us may die at any time. Our period of judgment will then be over. Ezekiel writes,

“Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,” says the Lord God. “Therefore turn and live!” (Ezekiel 18:31-32)

Now that we have heard the message, we have time to apply it. Though similar conditions to Amos’ day are evident in our own nations, the punishments for sin have not yet fallen upon them. The warnings, however, are intensifying and quickening. Take the opportunity to act while it is still available!

“Seek the Lord and live!”
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