

Prepare To Meet Your God! (Part Four)

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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 among the Israelites. Their attitudes were 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 and His 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 Satan’s power, 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 the Devil’s threats and resist them. But without God’s power and truth, we fail even to realize that Satan is tempting us. We become powerless against spiritual foes. Our rejection of God reveals itself when we fail to live in faithful obedience to Him. As we reject Him, 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 one's 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). Much like what happens so often 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 the court found a person guilty, he 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 property (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 significant role in keeping the United States economically and socially stable for generations! America’s agrarian heartland was the backbone of the nation. The instability that inevitably results will lead it 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 stipulates that the lender had to return it 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). 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 lack of law and order did not overly disturb the man on the street. He did not seem to realize that the cancerous immorality plaguing the country from *within* would result in her being crushed and destroyed from *without*.

However, when the time came to defend the nation from foreign invasion, Israel would have no strength (verse 11). God says in Ezekiel 7:14, “They

have blown the trumpet and made everyone ready, but no one goes to battle.” Because the people were so preoccupied with their self-interests, they did not respond to the external threat of invasion, and the nation fell easily.

In our generation, we have seen that America’s adversaries could not conquer it on the battlefield when its general level of morality was high. But as American moral fiber weakened between 1950 and today, they began to destroy it in the business world. Its foes in World War II, in becoming its allies during the Cold War, learned American ways and now rival or outpace the U.S. in many economic categories—not only in heavy industry, but in highly technological matters as well.

As American economic power is being sapped by moral cancer, its fighting spirit is being drained, too. Americans seem no longer able to present a united front on any matter. In addition, as the United States fills the role of sole superpower, as its troops are deployed all over the world, its military strength is exploited and thinned. In its moral and social malaise, Americans find it increasingly difficult to rouse themselves to action as a nation. America’s allies know it is often a weak branch to lean on.

Behind all this is God, who sees the corruption and warns 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, the Israelites finally reached the point where they called evil good and good evil (Isaiah 5:20). This refers not only 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 selfish ambitions. They may have been embezzling from their company or overcharging their customers, but they went to worship services every week! That is why God says He will destroy the religious system, too (Amos 3:14).

Cold, calloused, indifferent, the ordinary 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. Years ago, the media even called the “Baby Boom” generation the “Me Generation,” and a popular magazine found in supermarket checkout lines was boldly titled *Self*. Society has only become more self-centered in recent decades.

Notice the repetition of “palaces” and “houses” in Amos 3:9-11 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 also 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 in speech, sexuality, and criminal behaviors, even violent ones.

Apparently, God built safeguards into women to ensure that some measure of right ideals, standards, and practices are passed on to the next generation, providing a measure of stability to a society. With their mindset of aggressive ambition and their desire to compete and conquer, men 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 rapidly on its way down.

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 must work these days just to make ends meet. Primarily, Amos is speaking to the greedy, power-hungry, ruthless women we often see portrayed on television and in movies.

Amos impolitely calls them a 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 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 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 LORD. (Amos 4:2-3)

The word translated “fishhooks” is relatively obscure in 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 describes the same scene in Isaiah 3:16-26. Because of their oppression of others 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 they 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 retribution against them or their families. For 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 short sentence. In our nation today, crime does pay! No wonder witnesses are afraid!

We find in America a 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! Such things are impossibilities. Just as ridiculous 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 they oppressed 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 6, Amos balances complacency and disaster, boasting and fear, showing that they result from rejecting God and idolizing the 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 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 8:4-6)

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 out 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 day's end, the businessman would sweep up the bruised 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 attitudes 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 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 people's 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 everyday 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, so there was enough for everyone.

Justice to Wormwood

When God looked at Israel, what did He see? He saw “children who are corrupters” 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 exhibit 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 correct 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.