

Prepare To Meet Your God! (Part Six): Complacency And Laodiceanism

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“Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall,” writes the apostle Paul in I Corinthians 10:12. Using different words, Amos issues the same warning to the Israelites under Jeroboam II. 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 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, people who were 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, prompting the apostles to warn Christians about its dangers (Hebrews 2:1-3; 5:12). These warnings are just as relevant today. With such a complacent attitude prevalent in the society around us—and the return of Jesus Christ on the near horizon—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 to the consequences of their actions.

How does the prophet know what kind of witness to provide to God’s people? “[God] 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 showed him His glory. 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 collaborate.

God inspires, but He does not dictate as if the prophet were simply a tool like a typewriter or loudspeaker. He makes the prophet aware of Him, 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 doubts about their lives? Yes!
- » What kind of circumstance? When people are doing wrong and do not realize it.
- » How, then, should he correct them? Typically, the best way is to be gentle and ask questions. He sows doubt by making them think that if they continue on their current path, the future may not be as rosy and secure as they imagine. 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 to charitable causes than all the nations of the world combined? We feel we are a separate, distinct, and greater nation than others. The Bible was deeply ingrained in our people's thinking 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, emphasis ours). 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 plainly that God was *not* walking with them. They were deceived!

The Israelites were wallowing in wealth and power, 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 (Revelation 3:20).

Should we allow ourselves to relax because we are part of God’s true church? The Jews in Jeremiah’s time relied on the Temple’s presence for their 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 a chiasmic format, that is, the first verse corresponds to the last, 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's citizens were following their examples.

The ordinary Israelite looked to the wealthy, powerful, and influential as models for 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, the 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 an idiotic 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, a judgment from God, 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: Their pride produced 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 God curses the leader 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 turmoil in 1936 over Edward VIII's determination to marry the American divorcée, Wallis Simpson. Yet his brother, George VI, who refused to leave London during World War II, rallied the nation during its darkest hour. This principle of leadership holds true in any enterprise, from small to large.

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 and a follower, depending on the circumstances. 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, a leader's first consideration 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 with God (II Corinthians 10:12). By 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 believe they can do just about anything and remain under God’s “grace.” Some think they can “get away with murder”! But they are wrong! Yes, God will fulfill 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.

It is very encouraging to know that He promises to remain with us through all the calamities, changes, opportunities, and even the failures that we experience. 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. However, 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 He will not accept us (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; read 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, preaching 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 to his preaching and spoke to each other about it. 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 such a witness and enables him to prophesy further. Additionally, his response instructs us regarding the nature and function of a prophet.

This passage 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, His faithful prophet, and 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 church? Revelation 3:14-22 shows that the Laodiceans are sincere when they claim to be

spiritually complete, lacking nothing, 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 must 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, whereas Christ was righteous by always doing good as well (Acts 10:38).

The problem of the Laodicean is selfishness, self-concern. His opposite, the Philadelphian (which means "brotherly love"), is commended by God for his obedience and for doing good. His religion is outward 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 self-centeredness led them to be very harsh toward the needy and the poor. They ignored doing good works and serving their brothers.

The Prophet Tested

Apparently, Amaziah felt he needed to speak out and defend "that old-time religion." In the priest's accusations against God's prophet, Amos was tested in several ways. The allegations were pointed, designed to raise the prophet's anger and hatred so that he would respond in a way that would "show his true colors." Amos' true colors did surface—showing that he was a true man of God!

Amaziah portrayed him as disloyal, which is often the first charge 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 baseless.

The priest accused Amos of saying that Jeroboam would die in battle (Amos 7:11). He was tricky. To prove that Amos had said this, he quoted the prophet's actual words: "Israel shall surely be led away captive" (Amos 5:27; 6:7). In reality, the prophecy made no specific mention of Jeroboam II. Amaziah's false accusation was supported by something 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 twisting of truth is one of Satan's frequent ploys.

A second way Amos was tested was 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 II 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 “prophecy 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 usually prove stronger than the influence of God’s Holy Spirit. Frequently, if one leaves the church, others in the family will follow.

As one member of the family rises or falls, so do the others. Because of his bold denunciation of God’s 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 narrow, 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 scandals and corruption are common news items. Our families are falling apart while politicians and pundits 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 God’s approval and 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 LORD 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 LORD, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. (Isaiah 55:6-7)

Now is the time!