



BETHEL
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A Survey of the Book of Amos, Part 4

Amos 8:4-6, “ Hear this, you who trample on the needy
and bring the poor of the land to an end,
5 saying, “When will the new moon be over,
that we may sell grain?
And the Sabbath,
that we may offer wheat for sale,
that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great
and deal deceitfully with false balances,
6 that we may buy the poor for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals
and sell the chaff of the wheat?” (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, 2001)

If you look at the history of a nation, a people, or a tribe, you will note that oft-times their sins are thematic. As such, you can read in history books these things: “During this time, substance abuse was a problem...”- whether it be drugs or alcohol. Or perhaps, “In the latter part of the century, modernism confounded the church...”

We see it amongst God’s people, both Israel and Judah, in the 8th century B.C. For example in Micah written in 735 B.C. God asked this, “My people, what have I done to you, and how have I wearied [or burdened] you? Answer Me.” (Micah 6:3) In Isaiah 740 B.C., God said, “Yet you have not called on Me, O Jacob; but you have become weary of Me, O Israel.” (Isaiah 43:22)

Can you imagine being “burdened” by God? Finding His callings to be a task? His worship is just a heavy yoke? His ministry is an inconvenience? Prayer is merely a duty?

Such questions are apropos today in our land, for truly God, His word, His high standards for worship, His call for holiness, and much more have become a burden to many people in many places! We no longer delight in God. We delight in the *religion* of God.

- We love His worship... when it is done our way.
- We love preaching... when it tickles our ears.
- We love His service... when it is convenient or fulfilling.

But suggest that God dictate how He ought to be worshipped, preach the full counsel of God’s word, exhort people to give up not just a morning but a day to invest in the Lord and His body, and you will be accused of placing a burden on God’s people.

And this was the case in the Northern Kingdom at the writing of the book of Amos. Israel was in the midst of an enormous “revival” for the first time in over 140 years. God was being worshipped by name in the sanctuaries that dotted the land; nevertheless very few had actually turned to God (Amos 4:8). The practices and proclivities of Israel when they worshipped Baal hadn’t changed, even in the revival. It now was just packaged under a different name, “Yahweh” instead of the Asheroth. And; this is why God sent Amos to rebuke the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Let us continue of our study of the “rebuke” Amos gave to God’s people. We are going to look at how Amos takes them to task on account of their being wearied/burdened by God.

When God is a Burden, Amos 8:4-14

Amos 8:4-5a, “Hear this, you who trample the needy, to do away [the Hebrew here is שָׁבַת (*šābat*)] with the humble of the land, saying, ‘When will the new moon be over, so that we may sell grain, and the sabbath [same word as before], that we may open the wheat market...”

The indictment of Amos at this point clearly revolves around the word “sabbath” which is used

twice in this verse; "...to do away... sabbath." Now notice that this word can be used transitively or intransitively; in fact, let me give you the grammar used here.

When a verb is intransitive it has no direct object. For example when we say, "Mary slept" there is no object for "sleep." Hence "sleep" is said to be intransitive. In contrast, a transitive verb has a direct object; as in, "Jeff threw the ball." This sentence has a direct object, "ball" hence, it is said to be transitive. The same thing is seen in Amos 8:4-5 with the Hebrew the word "Sabbath;" it is used both intransitively and transitively. When used intransitively (without an object) it denotes the idea of ceasing, coming to an end, or stopping. When it is so used, it is translated as "sabbath" which, as we have seen, is an ordinance in which God calls His people to "cease" their regular six-day activities. When used transitively (with an object) it has a completely different translation. It denotes the idea of severing or putting to an end. In this case it typically speaks of the consuming of someone or something for one's own purpose which results in the extinction of the thing being consumed.

In Amos 8:4, 5 both words are used in contrast to one another. In verse 4, the people are indicted for their "doing away/sabbatizing the humble;" specifically their taking advantage of the poor and needy. In verse 5, the people are indicted for their "sabbath-contempt;" specifically that they can't wait to get God's "onerous" requirement of the sabbath over so that they can "sabbatize" the poor and needy. Do you see the pun?

This tells us that this is the central issue that is facing Israel at this time! Rather than delighting in God, the nation delighted in itself. The people of God USED the ordinances, institutions, and ceremonies prescribed by God unto their personal end. Then when these same ordinances or ceremonies stood in the way of their sinful lusts, they were viewed as a burden!

This brings us to the problem that God's people no longer sought God's fellowship.

God's People No Longer Sought the Fellowship of the Lord

Amos 8:4-5a, "Hear this, you who trample the needy, to do away with the humble of the land, saying, 'When will the new moon be over, so that we may sell grain, and the sabbath, that we may open the wheat *market*...'"

Let us never forget that "the sabbath" and "new moon" festival (which also was a sabbath) were given unto our benefit. In this context, consider three passages that speak of the sabbath.

Exodus 31:17, "It is a sign between Me and the sons of Israel forever; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day He ceased from labor, and was refreshed."

This is an incredible passage for it explains why God "ceased" from His six-day work. Why did God cease? According to this text, it was to be refreshed. The term "refreshed" נָפַשׁ/*naphash*; is close to the word in Hebrew for "breath" or "life," נֶפֶשׁ/*nephesh*. It was *nephesh* that God "breathed" into man and so made him alive (Genesis 2:7). In line with this, נָפַשׁ/*naphash* is used in terms of

being refreshed; of having life breathed back into one's being, of being revived, renewed, and invigorated. When used of God it references a self-delight by which God communes with and so enjoys Himself. Now not surprisingly, the idea of “refreshment” for a person is intimately united with being “revived” by fellowshiping with God!

Acts 3:19, “Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.”

Once again the idea of refreshment is use. Here the word Peter used was “refreshing” the same word used in the LXX for נָפַשׁ/*naphash*. From this we see that for the Christian, salvation is the same as being “breathed into by God” or being “revived in God.” In other words, when God saves a person, it is as if God once again “breathes life” into that person! And that is the idea behind the Sabbath.

Exodus 23:12, “Six days you are to do your work, but on the seventh day you shall cease from labor in order that your ox and your donkey may rest, and the son of your female slave, as well as your stranger, may REFRESH themselves.”

From this we see what ultimately is behind the Sabbath ordinances in Scripture. By the command of God, we are called to cease from the work that occupies us during the week so that we might delight ourselves in the Lord! Yet in Amos’ day this calling to delight in God had become a burden, an obstacle to their self-fulfillment, self-pleasure, and selfish wants and desires. That was the first problem.

God’s People Lived unto their own Gain and Pleasure

Now we will consider the second problem, God’ people lived for their own gain and pleasure.

Amos 8:4-6, “Hear this, you who trample the needy [that is, consume them unto your selfish gain], to [sabbatize] the humble of the land, saying, ‘When will the new moon be over, so that we may sell grain, and the sabbath, that we may open the wheat *market*, to make the bushel smaller and the shekel bigger, and to cheat with dishonest scales, so as to buy the helpless for money and the needy for a pair of sandals, and *that* we may sell the refuse of the wheat?’”

This passage reflects a gross, aberrant, and uncontrolled preying on the weak and helpless. God gives the weak, poor, and needy to a church body so as to prompt the strong, healthy, and rich to minister. Spiritual gifts and advantage are NOT there for self-enjoyment, BUT for serving the saints unto the glory of God!

The people in Amos’ day missed that. Like sharks at a feeding frenzy, they raced to the market in order to steal from the very ones God called them to help. According to the text they made the bushel smaller which made their bank accounts bigger. They adjusted the scales by which gold and silver would be weighed, making it appear that there was less of the precious metal than was actually there. When the poor were unable to pay their bills, the rich sold them into slavery.

“The refuse of the wheat” refers to the wealthy bagging the wheat swept up from the ground (which would be mixed with all sorts of foreign objects like dirt, chaff and sticks¹) and selling it at the same price as regular grain. Talk about avarice gone wild! A life given to such selfishness testifies to years of unchecked sin. This was the sad condition of Israel at this time.

From this we see the awful condition of Israel around 765 B.C. and so “The Problem.” God no longer was the delight of His people! What thrilled the typical Israelite was doing their own thing in their own way. Israel worshipped the gods of power, pleasure, and self-help with the language and religious practices of God. The people were forsaking their calling to bless the body of Christ in order to use the body of Christ unto their own end. When a command or an ordinance of God got in the way, God’s people became weary/burdened, *“How hard it is to serve the Lord? His standards are too high!”*

When God’s people fall away from the Lord so grievously; when God becomes a burden to His people, punishment is not far behind.

God’s Eight Punishments

1. Lightly Esteeming His People

Notice two expressions in these verses.

Amos 8:7a, 8b, “The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob... 8b Indeed, all of it will rise up like the Nile, and it will be tossed about, and subside like the Nile of Egypt”

With these words, God is mocking His people. The “pride of Jacob” is a reference to Bethel (which, recall, Jacob named). At this time, the Northern Kingdom’s boast was in the fact that Jacob communed with God at Bethel! He was their ancestor and so the poster child of their religious revival,

You know how Jacob had a vision of God... how special He was to the Lord? Well guess what? The very place where Jacob communed with God is in our territory! That makes us special! Yes, Judah may have the temple... but we have Bethel! This most certainly makes us the delight of the Lord!

Now normally God swears by His own existence because it is unceasing, as in Amos 6:8. Yet here, the Lord swore by “the pride of Jacob” which apparently also was unceasing, so great was Israel’s boast! Do you see it? God is mocking the arrogance of Israel!

We see this is in Amos 8:8. The latter part of this verse, the “rising up like the Nile” and the “tossing about” and the “subsiding like the Nile of Egypt” have a lyrical bounce to them such that they are believed to be the words of a hymn written at the time (in fact, it is quoted again in Amos 9:5). Evidently someone wrote a “best seller” (cf. Amos 5:23; 6:5) which reflected the longing that the Northern Kingdom had for the Day of the Lord. At this time, the sinful nations, “...will rise up

like the Nile, and it will be tossed about, and subside like the Nile of Egypt.”

God through Amos He quotes back the lyrics of this popular song in reference NOT to the destruction of Israel’s enemies, BUT in reference to Israel itself! The message is rather simple: Israel you are so proud! You think you are so great! Yet in the words of one of your pop-songs, “I am going to toss you about such that you will subside like the Nile of Egypt!” Do you see the levity with which God viewed Israel here? It reminds me of what God promised His people in 1 Samuel.

1 Samuel 2:30b, “...those who honor Me I will honor, and those who despise Me will be lightly esteemed.”

2. Exacting Judgment, v. 7.

Amos 8: 7, “The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob, ‘Indeed, I will never forget any of their deeds.’”

James Montgomery Boice comments on this verse:

You and I forget things, especially the wrong we have done. In some ways it is good we do, because we would be unable to function in this life if we remembered all our faults all the time. We have to forget some of the past to get on with life. But God does not forget. He remembers everything... (Boice, 2006, pp. 177, Vol. 1)

That is what God is saying here. Not one sin committed by the most insignificant Israelite would escape God’s notice. Such is another form of punishment given to a people who have become weary of the Lord!

3. Natural Disaster

Amos 8:8, “Because of this will not the land quake and everyone who dwells in it mourn? Indeed, all of it will rise up like the Nile, and it will be tossed about, and subside like the Nile of Egypt.”

Again, what Israel sang in reference to their enemy, God sang in reference Israel! What was the punishment? Earthquakes. Which as a natural disaster are but a type of judgment that has and continues to strike the earth.

Now why in this context are they sent?

The earthquakes were sent because of the apostasy of the people of God! Frequently after a natural disaster strikes a land, the false prophets in a land will say, “This is because the nation is evil!” How they have missed it! Wars, rumors of wars, natural disasters, and the like oft-times are a statement of judgment against the people of God in that land! This was clearly the case at the time of the writing of Amos!

4. Solar Eclipse

Amos 8:9, “‘And it will come about in that day,’ declares the Lord God, ‘That I shall make the sun go down at noon and make the earth dark in broad daylight.’”

This is in reference to a solar eclipse which occurred in Israel in 763 B.C two years following the writing of this book! When this eclipse hit the land, Israel would know that far from enjoying the status of a “privileged nation,” they in fact were the object of God’s displeasure!

5. Removal of Grace

Amos 8:10, “Then I shall turn your festivals into mourning and all your songs into lamentation; and I will bring sackcloth on everyone’s loins and baldness on every head. And I will make it like *a time of mourning* for an only son, and the end of it will be like a bitter day.”

Did you know that one of the things that makes sin enjoyable on this side of the grave is God’s grace?! It is true. By grace, God doesn’t give us what we deserve every time we sin. (cf. Romans 2:4-5) In fact, in hell people have their sin to the utmost, yet clearly there is no pleasure or enjoyment. As a result we conclude that what gives sin its “passing pleasure” (Hebrews 11:25) on this side of the grave is the grace of God which withholds the sting of sin.

Well, what happens when God slightly removes this preserving grace? We read of such things as David wrote.

Psalm 32:3-4, “When I kept silent *about my sin*, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was drained away *as with the fever heat of summer*.”

We see it in Proverbs.

Proverbs 5:22, “His own iniquities will capture the wicked, and he will be held with the cords of his sin.”

Such a removal was experienced by God’s people at the time of Amos. They had the festivals, the ordinances and the sacrifices but at some point God would lift His grace so that Israel no longer would derive pleasure from these things. Rather, there’d be the frightening burden of unforgiven sin! We call this, “The Dark Night of the Soul!” This undoubtedly is why in Hosea (written just fifteen years later) Israel had abandoned the worship of God wholesale for Baal.

6. Removal of His Word

Amos 8:11-12, “‘Behold, days are coming,’ declares the Lord God, ‘When I will send a famine on the land, not famine for bread or a thirst for water, but rather for hearing the words of the Lord. And people will stagger from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east; they will go to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, but they will not find *it*.’”

What a dreadful punishment to live in a land where churches and pulpits abound with articulate preachers with inspiring messages, all of which are void of truth! Such would be another sign of God's displeasure. People will stagger from north to south, continent to continent but rarely would they hear the word of the Lord. The result would be a weakening of faith such that the Christian's vitality would be drained. Instead of walking "on high places," they would stagger.

7. Removal of their Future

Amos 8:13, "In that day the beautiful virgins and the young men will faint from thirst"

The designation of "beautiful virgins" and "young men" is a reference to those on whom the future population depended. Instead of flourishing, marrying, growing, and multiplying, the entire generation would "faint!"

Isaiah 51:20, "Your sons have fainted [same word], they lie *helpless* at the head of every street, like an antelope in a net, full of the wrath of the Lord, the rebuke of your God."

The idea of "faint" is a "failure to thrive." Because of their sin, Israel's future would be bleak indeed. Their young men and women would not marry and be given in marriage. Rather, they'd be left alone to flounder! Yet this would only be for a time for soon after, the destruction of the nation would occur.

8. Destruction

Amos 8:14, "As for those who swear by the guilt of Samaria, who say, 'As your god lives, O Dan,' and, 'As the way of Beersheba lives,' they will fall and not rise again"

Though Israel was in the midst of a revival of the religion of Yahweh, nevertheless beneath the surface was a heart of idolatry. Though they flocked to the various and sundry high places which dotted the land, nevertheless Israel relied upon the false deities associated with Samaria, Dan, and Beersheba. Let's consider each of these references.

Though the text reads, "As for those who swear by the guilt of Samaria," a better word for "guilt" our day would be the word "shame." The false deity associated with Samaria was so despicable, Amos refused to name it. Rather, he referred to it simply as "the shame of Samaria." It was by this God's people swore!

Furthermore notice that in the northern part of Israel, there was the altar in Dan, erected by Jeroboam I (1 Kings 12:29, 30). Though in the few years prior to the writing of Amos Yahweh was being worshipped there on account of the revival, it was only in name. If the truth were known, God's people continued in the service of the false god associated with this altar.

Beersheba was the city in which Abraham settled in the far south of Judah. Yet in Amos' day blessing and good fortune were associated with a religious pilgrimage to this site. In other words the trek had become a "good luck charm." This too was an abomination to God.

Beneath the veneer of the worship of Yahweh raged an idolatry which would soon come into full bloom. And so on account of this whole-sale rejection of God, the Lord promised the wholesale destruction of Israel!

This is the sober warning given to Israel through Amos at this time! What an awful message, yet what a needed one today! You don't need to go far in your inspection of the state of the church in our land to discover many if not all of the marks of punishment which were promised here.

- The church no longer has a heavy presence in the world- truly it is lightly esteemed!
- As to natural disasters, we need not look very far. You can read about them in the newspaper almost every week.
- As to the removal of the preserving grace of God, does not the church today resemble the prediction given by Paul:

2 Timothy 3:2-5, 7, "For men [speaking of people in the body of Christ] will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God; holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power... always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth."

- How about God's word? Is it the focus and substance of church pulpits today?
- And what is the spiritual state of the young men and women of the church in our land- our spiritual future? To quote the title of Ken Ham's book, they are "Already Gone!"

Truly we live in a dark age at a serious time. The church is going into eclipse in America. How we need to pray and labor for faithful churches! The future is not bright! Yet lest we leave here over-burdened, would you notice finally the promises contained in this chapter of judgment.

The Twofold Promise

Amos 8:9, "'And it will come about in that day,' declares the Lord God, 'That I shall make the sun go down at noon and make the earth dark in broad daylight.'"

This is an oft-repeated theme in judgment-passages in the Old Testament; the sun going down at noon and darkness in broad daylight.² What ultimately is in view when such a promise is given? Based on the rest of Scripture, we'd have to say at least two things: First, the final Judgment when the apostate and unbeliever will be cast into outer darkness. (cf. Jude 6, 13; Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30) Secondly, the cross of Christ where our Lord hung on a tree for three hours in darkness (Matthew 27:45) at this time truly, the "...sun [went] down at noon and ma[d]e the earth dark in broad daylight."

You say, does this mean that the judgment promised to Israel in Amos 8 was met out at the cross?

No! In fulfillment of God's promise, Israel was wiped off the face of the earth in 722/21 B.C. The nation bore its punishment as will most of those living on the earth today. Yet there were some living at the time of Amos and in our own day for whom the judgment of Amos 8:9 was but a foreshadowing of the judgment Christ bore on their behalf! Who are they? They are those who look not to themselves, but Christ's work on the cross as the satisfaction for their sin.

Galatians 3:10, "For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them.'"

The word in this context for "cursed" is strong. It involves the judgment of Amos 8 and a whole lot more. Truly, if you sin against God in any way, you are under the curse of judgment! Yet notice Galatians:

Galatians 3:13, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us- for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.'"

Yes, the judgment of Amos clearly is a picture of the final judgment that is coming to this land. But it also is a beautiful fore-shadowing of the cross of Christ, a cross which, if you and I will look unto, will save us! Truly before us this morning is both life and death!

- Death if we forsake the Lord in our lust for pleasure.
- Life if you will trust the Lord and so live unto His glory and praise.

Speaking of the latter, that is Good News! In fact, with the sacrifice of Christ in mind, notice another glorious promise that can be derived from Amos 8.

Amos 8:14, "As for those who swear by the guilt of Samaria, who say, 'As your god lives, O Dan,' and, 'As the way of Beersheba lives,' They will fall and not rise again."

What at first reads as a universal decree of judgment actually has an important condition! As in the end times where God's judgment first will begin with the household of God (1 Peter 4:17), so it was in Amos' day. It is God's plan prior to judging those outside the church to clean house first! Yet, don't miss it,

- It is ONLY those who "swear by the shameful thing in Samaria" that will be judged.
- It is ONLY those who serve the false god of Dan or place their hope and confidence in religion.

It is the chaff that God first removes from His people in judgment. As such, the object of the punishment detailed here once again is NOT the genuine child of God, BUT the sham Christian, the one...

- In love with the religion of Christ.

- Whose hope and confidence is in themselves, their works, and so their effort.

These were, are, and will be the object of God’s wrath when it comes. Yet to the genuine child of God, “...who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood, and has not sworn deceitfully. He shall receive a blessing from the Lord.” (Psalm 24:4)

What a sober, yet glorious truth! We live in an evil day where church after church is compromising the truth! Mysticism is on the rise and continues to creep into churches which just ten years ago worshipped God with integrity and in truth! The church has become a “product” which is marketed, bought, and sold. The church is driven by pleasure and the pop-experience, the demand to be entertained and appeased continues to grow. So what is a faithful church to do? We must NOT be frightened or tempted; RATHER we must...

- Be sober and so spiritually vigilant at all times.
- Remain steadfast and immovable when it comes to the truth of God’s word, His worship, and His service.
- Guard our hearts- watching over them with all diligence.
- Not grow weary in doing well.
- Raise our children with the ability to think, and so engage the culture in which we live.
- Not be consumers, but givers of our lives unto the Lord and His purpose.
- Place our hope and confidence in Christ alone as the satisfaction for our sin.
- Let us not play with religion to get a spiritual high. Rather let us utilize religion that we might see Christ, trust Christ, serve Christ, and so glorify Christ.

End Notes

¹ The common term for this product would be “wheat screenings” the trash screened off the wheat.

² Compare Isaiah 13:10; 59:9-10; Jeremiah 15:9; Mic. 3:6; Amos 4:13; 5:8.

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About the Preacher

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