

Seek Me and live!

- Amos 5:1-17
- We have been in Amos for 6 weeks now, and after Easter we will spend time with him for another 5 weeks, most likely. I for one am glad we have a break to celebrate the good news of the resurrection. But even as we walk through this judgment of Amos, we look at it from the vantage point of those who have been redeemed. Let the redeemed of the Lord say, “Amen!”
- Today’s passage is in part a song of lament. If you saw Billy Graham’s funeral, you will remember the mournful sound of the bagpipes at the end, as the family was filing out of the tent at the conclusion of the service. The man was dressed up in Scottish garb and playing “Amazing Grace,” but the sound was haunting, sad, even though the words of the song bring great hope. Well, there’s a lament for Israel here, and though a lament usually happens after a death, here the Lord sings it over Israel before the hand of judgment falls on them. Let’s look at verses 1-7 today under these two headings: The fall that is coming, the call that is given.
- **The fall that is coming**
- Again Amos tells the people of God to listen carefully to what God is about to say, and it is with weeping, perhaps, he says: “Hear this word that I take up over you in lamentation.” And then he writes in the form of a song, or poetry, about the fall that is coming. “Fallen, no more to rise, is the virgin Israel; forsaken on her land, and none to raise her up.” Some of you may remember those “I’ve fallen and I can’t get up” commercials years ago. The idea was to make sure the elderly person had that thing around her neck so that, if she fell, or he fell, and there was no one there, they could call for help with the push of a button.” Israel had no such hope. They had fallen, the would-be bride of Yahweh, had fallen, and there was no one to help her. In fact, the only one who could help her get back up was Yahweh Himself, but he was the one who was punishing her. Isn’t that true today? If we turn our backs on God and throw ourselves headlong into sin, how will we recover from that? Only by God’s grace. The terrifying thing is that there is a point of no return, as we see in Amos and throughout the Bible, when God, as Paul said in Romans, “gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.” That’s what happened with Israel. How bad will the consequences of their rebellion be?
- Verse 3: Horrific losses. 90% casualties. That’s because God will always keep his promises! In the blessings of obedience and curses of disobedience chapter I reminded you about last week, Deut. 28, this is what God says: “Whereas you were as numerous as the stars of heaven, you shall be left few in number, because you did not obey the voice of the Lord your God.” (Verse 62) And it gets worse from there. God reinforces this judgment at the end of this passage. Look at verses 16-17.
- The fall is coming. But why? We have already seen it, and God has already made His airtight case against them, but He reminds them in these verses. Plain and simple, it is because of sin. What is our greatest enemy? Is it a stock market crash? Is it another world war? Is it the spread of ISIS? No. Those are all ‘out there,’ and though they may happen and though they could cause great distress, those are not our greatest enemy. Paul didn’t write letters to the churches to warn them about the growing threat of the Roman Empire. Or business losses they may face. Or, terrorist attacks. No, he warned them over and over, in many different ways, about our greatest enemy: sin. Let’s just look at a few examples, and again, we have already seen these in previous chapters.
- Verse 7: In the mouths of the poor and the oppressed, the “justice” of Israel takes like sour persimmons. Verse 11, they trample on the poor. Verse 7 again, those who are trying to live for God, the righteous remnant, have become outcasts among their own people.
- Verse 10: They hate anyone who tries to correct them, and abhor anyone who speaks the truth. (Are we on a bullet train to that location as a culture here, and now?) Paul said in Galatians 4:16, “Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?”

- Verse 12: too many sins and transgressions to count, unless you are God. HE knows! They afflict the righteous, they take bribes, and they turn aside the needy. They have not just been dabbling or playing with sin; they have given themselves over to as and have become its slave.
- As I was thinking about this text, I remembered a column I wrote probably ten years ago about how easy it is to play on the edges of sin, until it's too late. Here it is:
- I was intrigued by a news story several years ago of a man who raised and kept a four hundred-pound tiger in his New York City apartment. This self-professed animal-lover brought home the tiger as a tiny cub and hand-fed it with a bottle. The little cat that started out as a pet soon took over most of the apartment. The man's mother, fearing for her safety, had to move out of the apartment, taking the rest of her children with her. As the tiger grew more powerful and harder to control, its owner was eventually forced to move out of the apartment as well. He would return daily and open the door just wide enough to throw in a raw chicken. Eventually, New York City authorities were alerted when the tiger bit the man. In spite of all this, the owner still refers to the tiger as his "best friend." (Betsy Childs, RZIM) The Animal Protection Institute reported that a man's "pet" mamba snake bit him a half-dozen times on the forearm and wrist. It was discovered that this man possessed 26 poisonous snakes and 4 small crocodiles in his mobile home, along with his 4 small children. Finally, there is the story of the Japanese man who got out of his Land Rover and offered raw meat to a male lion in the southern part of Kenya. The man was killed when the lion accepted his offer. What do all of these stories have in common? Man's stupidity comes to mind. But they also illustrate the deadliness of sin, which desires to master all of us. In one of the opening chapters of Scripture, Cain is angry because God has not accepted his sacrifice. God tells Cain: "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it" (Genesis 4:7). I find this a chilling description of sin, perhaps its most vivid personification in the whole Bible. Sin crouches at the door, like a tiger, waiting to devour. Sin is not a religious concept that some pope or pastor dreamed up to keep people 'dependent' on the church. Sin is a reality that entered the world through Adam's choice to disobey God, and reigns in the heart of every person from birth. It brings death and separation from God unless sin itself is destroyed. It is not a toy or a plaything, even though we can be deceived to believe it is. Betsy Childs writes, "In spite of the destruction sin inflicts on us, it still continues to present itself to us as a friend. It reminds us that we invited it in and fostered it; it claims that it belongs to us, even as it is ripping us to shreds." What can we do about sin? In the case of the tiger in New York, the police were called in. They lowered a sharpshooter down the outside wall of the apartment building and shot the tiger with a tranquilizer through the window. This situation called for help from the outside. Our situation does as well. Hebrews 9 says, "...But as it is, He has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him." (Hebrews 9:26b-28)
- That's the fall that was coming. Now let's look at...

- **The call that is given**

- God starts his entreaty to Israel in verse 4. "Seek me and live." Then He tells them not to seek Bethel or to enter Gilgal or to cross over to Beersheba. Why? These were important places for the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But they will be of no help to Israel. Doug Stuart writes, "Their sanctuaries will be destroyed, their Savior will not." Their only help, their only hope comes from God. Their situation called for help from the outside. Amos speaks, and repeats the call in verse 6: "Seek the Lord and live." For many people, their help is found in a particular place. When they are down and troubled, they go to the beach. Or to the mountains. Or to the Cheesecake Factory. Or to the clothing store. Or to the ball field or the court or the golf course. Or to their phone. I understand that, and I have some favorite places of my own. But we are reminded by the text today that our help is in the Lord. When the

Psalmist says, "I will lift mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help," to quote from the old KJV where I learned it as a child, he is not referring to the mountains as the source of his help. What does he say next? "My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth." (Psalm 121) That's what Amos says in verse 8: our help is not found in a place but in the One who made every place! He made the universe and everything in it. He is the one who breathed life into the first human being, and created every single person in His own image. Seek the Lord and live. You can go to a famous church, like we did in New York once on a visit. You can walk where Jesus walked in the Holy Land, as I hope to do one day. But our hope is not found in Times Square church or in Jerusalem, even at the garden tomb where it is believed Jesus was buried. Our hope is found only and always in the Lord. Seek HIM, and live.

- Let me close with another story from *The Insanity of God*, by Nik Ripken. When he met in secret with 170 house church leaders, in China, they said to him, "Only about 40% of us have already been arrested and put in jail for our faith. Would you please share with (the rest of) us how to prepare for prison? What do we need to do to get ready to go to jail for our faith?" Ripken began to tell them stories of other church leaders he had met around the world who had suffered in prison for their faith. He told them about Dmitri and his seventeen years in prison, and how he wrote out all the Scripture verses he had memorized as an offering to Jesus, and how he sung his heart-song to the Lord in praise every morning. They sat and listened in rapt attention. Then when he was done, two men who had been to prison ran up and begged the others to listen carefully to what Ripken had just said. These men were shaking and sobbing as they confessed that they had gone to prison and then were made leaders after they got out, but they did not deserve to be leaders. For unlike those who had gone to prison and preached the Word to others and started churches and disciplined hundreds in prison, these two men had not. They said they went into prison not knowing how to pray. "We did not know the Bible! We did not know many songs of faith. We have to confess this to you today and beg your forgiveness. For three years we did not share our faith with one person. We hid our faith. The truth is, we failed Jesus in prison. Would you please forgive us?" Then they said this, that we need to hear. "You can only grow in jail what you take to jail with you. You can only grow in persecution what you go into persecution with."
- Prayer