



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Amos 4: 1-3

Amos

“Prepare to Meet Your God”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Let’s open with a word of prayer and then we will have our third lesson that in chapter 4 of Amos. Okay, let’s begin with a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we thank you for this time together this evening and the opportunity we have to be together and fellowship with one another, how great it is to be able to be together and open the bible and read the scripture together and consider a text in some length. And so as we do that from the Book of Amos we pray that you’d bless us and give us understanding of the warnings that the prophet gave to those ancient Israelites but also help us to see how they apply to us.

We’ll try to do that in our lesson, but the spirit of God is far more effective at that than any human teacher and I pray that He will open hearts to understand the things that the prophets said and that He would apply these things individually to each one of us and move us to be people that worship you from our hearts, not simply in a kind of rote or routine way and to be people that have a concern and a compassion for others. That can be lacking. It was in Israel, may it not be here. So bless us, Lord, open our minds, guide us in our thinking. We pray that all be done to your glory and our edification. We pray this in Christ’s name. Amen.

[Message] In Proverbs 1:7, we read, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Fools despise wisdom and instruction.” And what those fools look like is nowhere made clearer than in Amos 4. Over and over in the chapter, the disciple that God used against the people of Israel in the northern kingdom is recounted and each time the statement is made yet you have not returned to me.

The life of a fool is hard. We see that here. It's also cruel. It's selfish, it's thoughtless and we also see that here. That's how this oracle or prophecy in chapter 4 begins. It opens with a word for the cows. That's what Amos calls the rich women of Samaria. Cows don't think, they just eat until they get big enough to slaughter. “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 now, that we may drink!’”

Bashan was a fertile plain east of the Sea of Galilee. It was a lush pastureland known for its fine cattle. So Amos compares the wealthy women of Samaria, and you'll remember Samaria is the capital of the northern kingdom, he compares those women to cows because they were well-fed. But rather than be grateful for what they had received, rather than be helpful to others, they felt entitled.

It's not always true, but often I think wealthy people are not generous and are often detached from life like Marie Antoinette who was told that the peasants have no food and she responded, “Let them eat cake.” Now she probably didn't say that. In fact, it's almost certain that that's an apocryphal story, but nevertheless, these ladies in Samaria would have said that. That certainly was their attitude. They were all about their appetites and being satisfied. Their determination to have their every desire met is indicated in the command that they give to their husbands to go get them drinks.

It's not a request that they make. It's a demand. And that kind of life, an indulgent life leads to indifference toward others, even to the point of oppressing the weak, the needier segments of society. It did with these women. They had no concern for the poor. They were satisfied with their lives; they enjoyed their lives. They didn't care about others.

In John 12:8 Jesus told His disciples, “You always have the poor with you.” Now that's not a callous statement coming from our Lord. It's not a statement that suggests on His part that He didn't have a concern for poor people, He did. He Himself was poor. In Luke 9:58 He described His situation when He said, “The son of man has nowhere to lay His head.” He understood the plight of the poor better than anyone.

In fact, the Lord cares very much for the poor and the oppressed. He makes that clear right here in the Book of Amos. Now that's the moral issue that is being

dealt with in this fourth chapter. That was the issue that he saw there in Samaria and was so typical of so many in that land. The northern kingdom of Israel under Jeroboam II had become a wealthy self-indulgent society in which the rich got richer and the poor got poorer without any relief. So in verses 2 and 3, the oracle of doom is spoken against them, spoken against these selfish, self-satisfied women. And really, it extends beyond them, it extends to the materialistic Israelites.

And what he tells them in this prophecy is they're going to lose everything. They're going to be dragged out of the city like fish out of water. Verse 2, “The Lord God has sworn by His holiness, ‘Beyond, the days are coming upon you when they will take you away with meat hooks and the last of you with fish hooks. You will go out through the breaches in the walls, each one straight before her and you will be cast to Harmon,’ declares the Lord.”

Now the location of Harmon is not known. Probably it was off to the east in Assyria. What is known, though, is the rough treatment that these rich women and men would experience. They would either go into exile, led away with fish hooks or meat hooks in their noses or Amos may mean that their dead bodies would be dragged out of the city with meat hooks through the breaches in the walls. There are some rather gruesome pictures of Assyrian wall reliefs in these palaces of these Assyrian monarchs would be lined with these stone reliefs. Not statues, but bas reliefs in which you have these images of war and all kinds of things. And some of those depict these kinds of things.

There's some that I've seen that have in which these captives are being led away with ropes attached to rings either in the people's noses or in their jaws. Now that's how the Assyrians treated their defeated enemies and they celebrated them in wall reliefs and displayed their power. They were a cruel people and that's what was going to happen to these rich people, these rich women, these self-satisfied individuals.

Either way, whether their dead bodies were carried out or they were led away into captivity, it would be an end to their luxurious lives. That is what the Lord promised, and you'll notice he did so by his holiness. He did so by his very being and character. The word of the Lord makes it certain that it's going to happen anyway. But to make the certainly of it, as it were, he swears in that way, by his holiness.

So the women of luxury would be given an undignified departure from Samaria, dead or alive. Well, the people of Samaria were callous and self-indulgent, but they were also very religious. We've made that point in the past lessons. It's true, we see it here, we see it all through this book. They went to the shrines regularly. It was false worship. It was an empty show, but there was a lot of it.

So in verses 4 and 5, Amos calls the people to worship in a mocking way. He tells them to go to Bethel and transgress. Go to Gilgal and sin more. Gilgal was the first place that the nation camped after it entered the land. You remember it miraculously crosses the Jordan, God stops it, it was flooding. But when the priests took the Ark of the Covenant they put their foot in the river swollen with water, and as soon as the sole of their foot touched the water, the water stopped and backed up miles away and they were able to cross over on dry ground just as they had crossed over the Red Sea.

And so they came through that river into the Promised Land. The first place that they went was to Gilgal and that place became sacred to them and it became a popular site of worship. Bethel was also sacred in early biblical times. It was where Abraham camped when he first came to Canaan. It's where Jacob had his famous dream of the ladder extending up to heaven. It was chosen by Jeroboam I to be the alternate sanctuary to the temple in Jerusalem where he set up the golden calf, the other one he set up in the north at Dan.

In the time of Jeroboam II, which is the time that Amos was prophesying, it was the main shrine of the northern kingdom. So when he told the people to go there and sin, it was a shocking statement to them, just as if it would be if someone got up here on Sunday morning in the pulpit and said, “Now let's all bow our heads and sin. Now let's open our bibles and sin some more.”

But that's what they were doing when they went to these sacred places. Amos wasn't telling them to do something new, something that they hadn't done, he was simply exposing what they were doing. They weren't worshipping the Lord. They were worshipping, they certainly weren't worshipping the Lord. They were engaging in idolatry with pride in their hearts.

And so in verse 5 Amos said, “‘Off a drink offering also from that which is leavened and proclaim free will offerings, make them known for so you love to do, you sons of Israel,’ declares the Lord God.” Now these offerings that he describes

here in verse 5 were legitimate offerings. They were offerings that were prescribed in the law. They were offerings that showed gratitude to God for deliverance and they were tithes that were required of the people.

So the problem was not just that these people went to Gilgal or they went to Bethel and they worshipped golden calf or they engaged in false worship and idols because there were also idols there as well. It wasn't just that. This is a kind of synchronistic religion where they would obey the law. They thought they were doing quite well, and so it's not just that there was idolatry there, but there was deadness in what they were doing. There was repetition in what they were doing. It had become so routine to them that it was meaningless, it was just a formality.

But they were so pleased with themselves. They would proclaim that they had done it. They wanted people to know that they were religious, that they went to the shrines, that they gave the offerings. They boasted in it. They were Pharisees doing the same thing that the Pharisees would do centuries later. Worship can't be separated from motive. What we do outwardly can't be separated from the heart and the soul.

The ritual of Israel's worship was designed to teach the people through its form and through its repetition. Over and over again they were to do these things, they were to have annual feasts. They were repeated annually because the repetition was to teach them. That's why we have an evening meeting every Sunday night. Some people said, “Well, the repetition and you keep doing it. I take the Lord's Supper every week, that's too much. You need to do it four times a year because you do it every year,” and I've heard people make this point, “it becomes repetitious and then it's just rote and it's empty.”

That's like saying, “Well, if you read your bible, don't read it too much or then it'll become rote. You don't need to do it too much.” Just the opposite is true. The reality is if we do it routinely like that, it can become that. Guard against it. But the way to avoid that is not to stop doing it. Now these people were going through the rituals as they were intended to do, and the law specified these things to be repeated because through the repetition they were reminded that they had been slaves in Israel and God redeemed them. And every Sabbath they would remember about resting and the Lord's rest and what they were to hopefully enter into through faith and hymn.

There was that, and it was designed to teach that. But as I've just said, and as I think we see here, the danger in that is that if it's not practiced carefully and with faith and we don't give real thought to what we're doing, then it can become just a routine. The Lord's Supper which I think should be celebrated weekly and we should all be there weekly, regularly, can become routine.

And I'll bet you we've all experienced that and we all struggle with that to some degree. We don't avoid that by not going. That's the wrong thing to do, that's the opposite thing that we should do. But we need to understand that that's a problem and it was certainly a problem with Israel. Things had become routine and they were very satisfied with that, satisfied with themselves. They thought they were just fine.

But God's not pleased with that. He wasn't pleased with their worship, isn't pleased with ours when we fall into that, which in Israel's case was false, not only in its form with the golden calf there and all the other idols, but in its offering. It was carnal, it was prideful. It was pretend piety. We are to worship God out of love for Him. That's to be our motive. We're to worship out of love and gratitude.

And I think we can make an argument, and if I can apply it to the Lord's Supper or to the ministry of the word service on a Sunday morning and I won't make the application to Wednesday night. I don't know that I could do that from the Bible. But certainly the author of Hebrews tell us not to forsake the gathering together of God's people. And we're not to do that.

That alone is reason to be at church. You're supposed to be at church. You've been commanded to be at church. So be there if for no other reason than that, but that won't please God. What pleases God is a heart that longs to be there and longs to be with God's people and longs to worship the Lord God. So real worship is worship that's done out of love and gratitude. And that will be reflected not only in worship but behavior. And I mean by that a behavior towards others, care for others, specifically care and concern for the weak and poor.

These people, these people in Samaria, these wealthy self-satisfied people, to quote Isaiah, were grinding the faces of the poor evidently. Remember, Isaiah's a contemporary of Amos so this was a problem in the north and the south because this is happening at the same time. People in the north were doing what the people in the south were doing. They were living a self-satisfied life at the expense of others and

then, to use Isaiah’s very graphic language, were grinding the faces of the poor. And God hates that.

Our relationship with God will be reflected in our relationship with men. God doesn’t ignore any of this, pretend piety or cruel conduct. He didn’t ignore it in Israel and to get the attention of the people and lead them to repentance, He gave them famine. He gave them cleanness of teeth in all their cities and lack of bread, and all of that was for the purpose of turning them to Him. But it didn’t. The Lord says, “Yet you have not returned to me.” All through the rest of the chapter that statement is a refrain. It is repeated over and over. It’s repeated five times. “Yet you have not returned to me.”

And each time that is a response to God’s discipline, His attempt to get them to return. Yet Israel has disobeyed God; they won’t return. And from the beginning God told Israel that there were consequences for disobedience. I mean long before Amos came to the north, long before Isaiah was preaching in the south, centuries before that, God had told them what would happen if they were disobedient. In the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy he clearly states the blessings that obedience would bring and the curses of disobedience.

Those calamities are listed here first as famine, then drought, scorching wind, mildew and devouring caterpillars, plague, finally the sword and overthrow, political defeat. This is what God warned of long before and after much patience on the part of God, He brought on the land difficulties to turn the people back, to bring them really to the end of themselves and cause them to look to Him. But they didn’t.

Israel didn’t connect the trial with the curse of the law, maybe because they didn’t know the law. Maybe it wasn’t simply they were indifferent to the law, but they’d become ignorant of the law and their hearts have become dull. Whatever the reason was, they didn’t make the connection and respond. So Amos reminds them of all of this, all the ways God afflicted the people beginning here in verse 6 with famine and then in all the cities.

The New International Version translates this empty stomachs and that’s the idea, but it’s really a little more graphic, and if you’ve got the New American Standard Bible then it reads literally which is clean teeth. “I gave you also cleanness of teeth.” No one needed dental floss or toothpicks because there was no food to eat. It’s a very realistic kind of down-to-earth way of describing famine. God caused it.

This isn't something that just happened. God's behind it all, that's the meaning, "I gave you clean teeth." I gave you clean teeth because I didn't give you any food. I brought famine on the land.

It's not a random accident of chance or just the way the weather works, that's kind of the way the world looks at things. Not at all. God's sovereign over this; God did this. That's what He says. He's sovereign over the weather and as a result of that was able to keep them from eating. It's not because He's cruel, it's not because He's the author of evil, He's certainly not that. He is a father who disciplines His children. He was doing that here. He was seeking to turn them from their wicked way and turn them to Him, but they did not return.

That word turn, not return is the word turn and that word turn in Hebrew is a word for repent as in looking this way and turning that way, looking toward evil and turning away from it to God, that's what He's seeking to turn them to Himself and turn them to obedience and to a genuine heart of faith, they wouldn't. Not even a famine in all the cities could make them disillusioned with their false ideas and their wayward life.

So next we read in verse 7, God gave them a drought. "Furthermore, I withheld the rain from you while there were still three months until harvest. Then I would send rain on one city and on another city I would not send rain. One part would be rained on while the part not rained on would dry up." In Deuteronomy 28, we have a whole list of these curses that will come on a disobedient people. But in Deuteronomy 28:23, the Lord promised that if they did not obey Him, "The heaven which is over your head shall be bronze, and the earth which is under you, iron." It's a graphic way of saying I'm going to dry everything up.

God's true to His word. In this case it was evidently a very controlled drought, perhaps I would think so that they would see just how controlled it was. It rained on one city, one town and then over here no rain and these people say, "It's raining over there. Let's go see it. Let's go get some water." And that's the picture you have. Verse 8 describes people in these drought-stricken cities staggering to the town that has water. That's a hard life to have.

We don't know anything like that. I had just filled up a glass of water the other day when I sat down to read this and was working on this and I just happened to have gotten some water and was drinking it and thinking about that and realize we

take this for granted. That's such an easy thing to get up, go get a drink of water, go over to the drinking fountain there, have clean water in our houses. We take it all for granted. Just open the tap and we've got water. Just get a bottle. They have bottled water everywhere now. We don't give a thought to it.

God could shut that off in a moment. We are utterly dependent upon Him. We are as dependent upon Him as they were; we just don't realize it. He controls the weather, the sunshine, the rain, the water supply. Well, He gave them enough. He gave to Israel enough water to fill the cisterns in a few cities so that the people would survive, but He did it in such a way to make it clear, at least it should have been clear to them, that He was controlling it all. Well, it wasn't clear to them. They had hardened hearts still. As a result, they didn't learn the lesson.

Moses told them that God would turn the skies to brass and the earth to iron if they were disobedient, but they didn't make the connection between scripture and circumstances. So in verse 9, Amos tells them that God gave the vegetation blight and bugs. “I smote you with scorching wind and mildew; and the caterpillar was devouring your many gardens and vineyards, fig trees and olive trees; yet you have not returned to me,’ declares the Lord.”

While they prayed to the golden calves, God sent insects to eat the crops which would affect the food supply and prolong the famine. After that, He sent plagues and swords. Verse 10, “I sent a plague among you after the manner of Egypt; I slew your young men by the sword along with your captured horses, and I made the stench of your camp rise up in your nostrils; yet you have not returned to me,’ declares the Lord.”

Plagues and wars often go together, especially when populations are shut up within a city during a siege and people can't dispose of the dead and they can't dispose of the refuse and there's nothing left to eat but rats. Read a book on warfare, oh, some months back and it was different aspects of it and one was the siege and how that was the tactic of it all and how you made sure that the poor people stayed in. You didn't want them fleeing because you wanted them in eating the food and everybody eating the food so that there was no food left. And it described all the horrific things that went on within a city in that kind of condition.

That may be what he's describing here in verse 10. But it may be a little different. It's like the plagues of Egypt it seems. And God sent them. And because

Israel, and this seems to be the suggestion, the very clear suggestion, had become like Egypt which you'll remember opposed Moses, wouldn't submit to Moses' demands. Because of that, the Lord gave the plague. But war and plague didn't persuade Israel any more than it did Egypt, any more than it did Pharaoh. Pharaoh kept hardening his heart and God hardened his heart and that seems to be the condition of these people. That seems to be what he's saying. You're no better than those Egyptians I brought judgment on. You're my people, the people I saved from that place and you're no different from them.

So in the final calamity the Lord gave to the people, He overthrew them just like He did the Egyptians for that matter. He says in verse 11 He treated them not like the Egyptians, He treated them like Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot and his family were delivered from that destruction and Israel was delivered from the overthrow, the Lord said, "Like a firebrand snatched from a blaze." Like it's right in the blaze and He snatches it out, that's how He delivered Israel from the overthrow, the military defeat.

But even that narrow escape didn't affect them and turn them to the Lord. Again and again they didn't make the connection between their awful condition and the warnings of the bible. These things are happening just like the Lord said they would, but they don't make the connection. It's not easy to interpret providence because bad things happen to good people.

I think there was a rabbi that wrote a book, something like that. I read the book years ago. It wasn't a very good book, so. But they do, bad things happen to good people. God allows the righteous to suffer. We experience sickness and setbacks just as Job did. Still, it's a wise thing to ask oneself when hardship happens is God telling me something. Often it's not because of sin. But sometimes it is and I think when it is and God's disciplining us, it's obvious. I don't think a person in that condition going through that experience will not make the connection if he's really thinking about what he's doing or what she's doing, what's happening in that person's life. God does discipline us.

Well, the secular world doesn't think like that. Calamities are the product of chance and just the natural order of things. Men don't give a thought to God. But He is sovereign. Israel didn't recognize that or didn't give a thought to the Lord or question itself. They didn't repent. The people were materialists and pleased with prosperity and they're very comfortable with this false worship.

They didn't think biblically. They couldn't. They had departed from the word of God and couldn't understand what was happening to them. So they were like the fool of Proverbs 27:22, “Though you pound a fool in a mortar with a pestle along with crushed grain, yet his foolishness will not depart from him.” Now that's a real fool. A fool is one that can't turn from his folly. He doesn't see the need, doesn't have the desire, he can't do it.

When people reject or when they simply ignore the word of God, they may not out and out reject it, they just may not pay attention to the word of God. They may say, “Yeah, I believe in the bible, I just don't read it.” When they do that, it will affect them. It will affect you if you stop reading your bible, if you don't give any attention to it. If you don't care about the scriptures, it's going to affect you. You're not going to be spiritually nourished. And it'll affect your thinking so that you can't think correctly, you can't think wisely, you must become a fool.

That was Israel. His foolishness did not depart from him. So the chapter ends with the solemn message Amos tells Israel in verse 12, “Prepared to meet your God.” Before the Lord gave Israel the law, He met the nation at Mount Sinai. It's the same word there about meeting Israel on Mount Sinai meeting that's used here. This threat, I'm going to meet you now. You haven't listened to what I've said. You haven't responded to my discipline, now I'm going to meet you.

Now when He met them on Mount Sinai, He came down to the top of that mountain in fire and smoke and there was thunder and lightning. The mountain shook and the people trembled. They were terrified. Now that was when the Lord God made a covenant with Israel. And that was when Israel responded by saying - and they swore, they made an oath, all the words which the Lord has spoken we will do. You know it wasn't very long after that that they made a golden calf and they spent the rest of their history sinning, doing just what's taking place here.

Well, listen, if it was a terrifying experience when God came to meet the nation in order to make a covenant with them, what would it be like when he came to meet the nation for breaking that covenant? He would not come to counsel them, He would not come to discipline them. He had done that, they had not responded, so Amos summoned them to judgment and that was a terrifying thing. That at least should have been the response of this summons to judgment in verse 13.

“For behold, He who forms mountains and creates the wind and declares to man who are His thoughts, He who makes dawn into darkness and treads on the high places of the earth, the Lord God of hosts is His name.” Verse 13 explains why it is so terrifying and why Israel should be trembling. God is powerful and His power would be directed against the nation. All these things they have experienced were disciplines. Now something other than that is coming.

That’s the one who they were meeting. Five statements in verse 13 are given about God which show Him to be all-powerful. He creates mountains and the idea is the one who creates the highest mountains creates the lowest hills. The one who creates the topography of the world is the creator of all things from the greatest certainly to the lowest, the simplest. He creates everything. He treads on the high places. He treads on the mountains. In other words, they’re under His feet. That was a sign of conquest. That was a sign of rule, something was in subjection under a conqueror because he or she was under his feet.

And that’s the whole picture that we have of the world, the universe we could say for that matter. It’s all under Him. He governs the material world and all of the forces of it. He creates the wind from a gentle breeze to a raging tornado. He makes the weather that causes the world to be fruitful or to have a famine. He rules time, He creates light and darkness. He makes the dawn into darkness. He controls the sun and the moon and the stars and all of the things that mark time.

He determines time. He rules history. This is the one they were to prepare to meet. He was coming to them in judgment. Well, what about us? Because it all applies. Those ancient Israelites were wealthy but ungrateful and unfeeling. They didn’t care about the poor. That happens in the church. We have examples of that in the scripture. We have an example of that, a prime example of that in The Church of Corinth.

In 1 Corinthians 11:20-22 the problem is explained. The rich were arriving at the love feast which was evidently a dinner that they would share and then they would have the Lord’s Supper at that meal. The rich would arrive early, the poor, many of them were probably slaves would get there late due to their work or whatever. They weren’t able to get there as early as the rich and what the rich were doing is eating all the food before the poor arrived and then they were getting drunk.

So Paul tells us many of them slept, that is they died under God’s discipline. God cares about the poor in His church and He cares about our treatment of them. He cares about our hearts and how we worship Him. He sees everything on the outside; he also sees everything on the inside. We’re to do that, we’re to worship Him from a pure motive. When we do that, we set our minds on the Lord and His glory, and when we seek His kingdom and seek at first, we behave properly and He blesses us with everything we really need and everything we should want.

Well, we see the terrible consequences of not doing that in Israel. Don’t think we can’t fall into the same problems that they had. So our prayer for ourselves should be that the Lord keep us from that, that he would give us hearts that are pure, that worship Him gladly out of gratitude and love and that’s expressed to one another that we live in a way that is a blessing and a help to those around us. Well, let’s close with a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we thank you for this great text from Amos. What a really an amazing series of chapters this is with magnificent language and very convicting language to us so many centuries, a millennia later. But we can learn from it. We learned that we can fall into the same problems, that’s human nature regardless from that give us hearts that are pure and worship you from that purity. Thank you for all we have in Christ. I pray these things in Christ’s name. Amen.