

AMOS—WEEK 4

PAY ATTENTION



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Cover Picture is by James Tissot (1836–1902)

Amos was the owner of a flock of sheep. Tissot shows him with a stick and a dog.

Israel has ignored clue after clue that the LORD is offended by them.

The coming punishment will get their attention for sure though.

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Thank you.

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Amos, Week 4 — Pay Attention
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1 Amos 3:12

Thus says the LORD:

*“As a shepherd takes from the mouth of a lion
Two legs or a piece of an ear,
So shall the children of Israel be taken out
Who dwell in Samaria—
In the corner of a bed and on the edge of a couch!”*

Once again, Amos uses horrifying poetic imagery to describe events. When *a shepherd takes from the mouth of a lion two legs or a piece of an ear*, not much is left of the sheep. *So shall the children of Israel be taken out.*

There’s an important point in this about the LORD keeping His covenants. His covenant is with the nation of Israel. Having most of the Israelis die at the hands of an invading army doesn’t break that covenant.

But having nothing left would. What matters is the nation. That’s who the covenant is with. All the individual people are going to die eventually anyway. As long as a remnant remains, the LORD has kept His side of the covenant. Even if the remnant is so small that it’s like a shepherd saving just a piece of the ear of a sheep from the jaws of a lion, the covenant is still on.

So, brutal punishment that kills a lot of people is perfectly okay. The *children of Israel* need to learn that God is serious. If terrible destruction is what it takes to pound this lesson into them, then so be it.

But don’t miss the absurdity of a shepherd saving a piece of an ear from the jaws of a lion. If you were a shepherd, would you do that? Of course not. You’d have to tangle with a lion for almost nothing.

This absurdity highlights God extraordinary love for His people. Like the parable that describes a celebration over finding a lost coin, or the one describing a shepherd leaving 99 sheep to find a wandering one, absurd situations are cited to give emphasis to the point.

God will not abandon His people.

The same lesson applies to us. God will not abandon His covenant with us either. But the lesson on misunderstanding the covenant applies to us too. Like Israel thinking they won’t endure great hardship, we think we won’t either. But the covenant is not one of comfort; it’s one of salvation.

Where does the Bible say we won’t suffer for Christ?

Nowhere.

2 Amos 3:13–15

*“Hear and testify against the house of Jacob,”
Says the Lord GOD, the God of hosts,
“That in the day I punish Israel for their transgressions,
I will also visit destruction on the altars of Bethel;
And the horns of the altar shall be cut off
And fall to the ground.
I will destroy the winter house along with the summer house;
The houses of ivory shall perish,
And the great houses shall have an end,”
Says the LORD.*

Some Hebrew poetry details are important here. First, the Hebrew word translated as “hosts” (tseh-vah-ote, צְבָאוֹת) doesn’t mean the male version of hostesses. It means armies. The introduction of that name for God here is intimidating, by design.

The horns on the altar getting cut off is important too. Horns are part of God’s altar design.

“You shall make an altar of acacia wood, five cubits long and five cubits wide—the altar shall be square—and its height shall be three cubits. You shall make its horns on its four corners; its horns shall be of one piece with it. And you shall overlay it with bronze.” — Exodus 27:1–2

So, this isn’t some pagan altar; it’s a true covenant one. The horns being cut off and falling to the ground is symbolic of the LORD rejecting their sacrifices, just like He did with Cain’s sacrifice.

The next two lines describe symbols of wealth. Separate winter and summer houses are a luxury. A house of ivory is incredibly decadent. But all these *great houses shall have an end*.

These great houses are the problem. They’re symbols of oppression.

Back then, with no machines, no electronics, and no patents, it wasn’t possible for a single individual to do something that had all that much value—that significantly benefitted the whole civilization. Thus, wealth was evidence of having garnered the profits of a lot of manual labor, which had to have been done by other people.

God hates that.

Charity is essential to Christianity partly because selfishness is so much a part of fallen human nature.

Charity is war on selfishness.

3 Amos 4:1–3

*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 wine, let us drink!”
The Lord GOD has sworn by His holiness:
“Behold, the days shall come upon you
When He will take you away with fishhooks,
And your posterity with fishhooks.
You will go out through broken walls,
Each one straight ahead of her,
And you will be cast into Harmon,”
Says the LORD.*

This passage starts out with an insult. The cows of Bashan are notably plump. Calling the Israeli women *cows of Bashan* implies that they’re lazy.

They *oppress the poor* and *crush the needy*, all while expecting everyone, even their husbands, to serve them wine like a butler. In the late 20th century this lifestyle was depicted as eating bonbons and watching soap operas. (Note: the Hebrew participles in these three lines are all feminine, indicating that this passage is just about women.)

It’s one thing to be blessed, it’s quite another to gain blessings by taking advantage of others. God is pleased to give His people a bountiful harvest and other blessings, but they need to follow His ways.

Instead, they make their own blessings at the expense of others. This shameful behavior offends God’s holiness. That’s why He doesn’t just punish them; He swears, *by His holiness*, that they will be punished.

And the imagery of their punishment is particularly degrading. Their conquerors will use hooks to drag them away. Cattle sometimes have hooks or rings through their noses to control them. The implication here is that the invading Assyrians will do this to the women of Samaria and their posterity (children).

That’s quite a fall from the lazy afternoons they’ve grown accustomed to.

The lazy bonbon-eating image is how many people visualize heaven. That’s miles from the truth.

It’s beyond this writer to speculate on the details of life in heaven, and we don’t have room here anyway, but heaven will be anything but the slothful existence many folks envision.

It will be glorious.

4 Amos 4:4–5 (ESV)

*“Come to Bethel, and transgress;
to Gilgal, and multiply transgression;
bring your sacrifices every morning,
your tithes every three days;
offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving of that which is leavened,
and proclaim freewill offerings, publish them;
for so you love to do, O people of Israel!”*
declares the Lord GOD.

At first, this passage doesn’t make sense. What is God saying here?

Let’s tease that out. The passage begins by telling the people to come to Bethel and Gilgal and transgress (sin). Okay, that must be sarcasm. Let’s see what that’s about.

Next, He says, *“bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days.”* Those are the transgressions, but they seem anything but sinful. How can this make sense?

Next, we get, *“offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving of that which is leavened, and proclaim freewill offerings, publish them.”* Bingo! Leaven has no business being in a sacrifice. They’re doing it wrong. Plus, the words *“proclaim,”* and *“publish”* indicate that they brag about their “creative” (i.e., *freewill*) offerings.

The LORD has specified how He is to be worshipped. Doing it some other way doesn’t get you partial credit; it gets you condemnation. Israel should know this because of what happened to *Nadab and Abihu*.

Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. — Leviticus 10:1–2

The people are worshipping God in ways that they should know are offensive to Him.

This applies to us. Worship should be in accordance with how God wants to be worshipped. There are many things that feel worshipful to us. They may be fun and entertaining and even make us feel closer to God, but that does not guarantee that they’re appropriate for worship.

Christian worship should follow the *Creation, Rebellion, Redemption, Restoration* pattern of the gospel:

Creation—God calls us to assemble and worship Him; He acts and we worship, just as we did at first.

Rebellion—Early in the service, we consider how we have fallen and not lived up to His standards.

Redemption—After we admit wrong, God offers grace and forgiveness.

Restoration—In preaching, God teaches us how to experience and bring about restoration in our lives, relationships, and communities. Especially in Communion, we have a foretaste of living with God again, seeing Him face-to-face, even eating with Him. This is a foretaste of the restoration of all things.

5 Amos 4:6–8

*“Also I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities,
And lack of bread in all your places;
Yet you have not returned to Me,”
Says the LORD.*

*“I also withheld rain from you,
When there were still three months to the harvest.
I made it rain on one city,
I withheld rain from another city.
One part was rained upon,
And where it did not rain the part withered.
So two or three cities wandered to another city to drink water,
But they were not satisfied;
Yet you have not returned to Me,”
Says the LORD.*

This was supposed to get their attention. The LORD brought famine *in all your places*. The *cleanness of teeth* is a reference to not eating.

More importantly, He brought a strange pattern of rain that makes no sense. Rainstorms can be localized. That’s normal. What’s not normal is for the rain to fall in the same spot all the time, so that one city will be in drought while there’s plenty of water just next door.

The drought in one city, while a neighboring city had rain, was so that *two or three cities wandered to another city to drink water*. Imagine the conversations these people would have had. Surely, they wondered why this is happening. The hand of God is unmistakable.

Yet nothing came of it. *“Yet you have not returned to Me,” Says the LORD.* They couldn’t see His hand in front of their face.

They didn’t want to.

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. — Romans 8:28

We often miss the complexities here. We think this means, *“for [comfort] to those who love God.”*

Thus, we think that Romans 8:28 can’t be referring to something like an annoying, impossible rain pattern. That’s anything but good right?

But God’s higher ways and higher purposes include trials. Sometimes, they are to grow us. Other times they are just to get our attention. They always *work together for good to those who love God*.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Have you ever been rescued?
2. What is your favorite charity?
3. What is your vision of heaven?
4. What's the difference between worship and just praise?
5. When has something bizarre made you think of God?

Items for prayer: