

Prayer

You have made wonderful things, O Lord; the infinite variety of words and music, the subtlety of colour and the complex changing of the seasons. We praise You for these things, and ask that we may never take for granted the wisdom and power by which You continue to sustain the world as well as save it; through Jesus Christ we pray; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

If possible, attend an art gallery (or similar on the internet). Pray for what this says about God and people

On-going prayers

- **Pray about the need for good church leaders.** Pray for your own church leader(s) and that he or she may have the opportunity to grow in knowledge and the things of God
- Pray for those who continue to struggle with the oil spill in the Gulf
- Give thanks to God for the wonders of the natural world

Meditation

Reveal Yourself, Almighty Lord in unambiguous truth.
Through creation, reveal the ingenuity of Your Spirit;
Through history, reveal Your plan for the whole world;
Through sin's exposure, reveal Your purity and holiness;
Through forgiveness, reveal the brilliance of love;
Through salvation, reveal the integrity of Your will;
Through redemption, reveal the passion of Your heart;
Through hope, reveal the bright vision of eternity;
Through awesome power, reveal complete control;
Reveal Yourself, for with You there is no misunderstanding.

Bible passage - Amos 5:1-9

¹ O house of Israel, hear this word that I take up against you, it is a lament.

² Fair virgin Israel is fallen,
no more to rise;
she lies abandoned on her land
with no one to raise her.

³ This is what the Lord GOD says:

The city that marched out with a thousand
will be left with a hundred,
and any which marched out with a hundred
will have ten left.

⁴ This is what the LORD says to the house of Israel:
Seek me and live;

⁵ Now, do not seek Bethel,
and do not go into Gilgal
or journey to Beer-sheba;
for Gilgal will surely go into exile,
and Bethel will come to nothing.

⁶ Seek the LORD and live,

or he will come on Joseph's house like a fire,
and it will devour Bethel
with no one to put it out!
7 O you who turn justice into bitterness,
and bring righteousness to a halt!

8 The one who made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into the morning, and darkens the day into night, who calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out on the surface of the earth, the LORD is his name, 9 who makes violence burst upon the strong, and brings destruction upon the fortress.

Bible Study

Review

Amos sings a funeral lament over Israel, and his song sums up all his feelings about the nation and the tragedy of her sins against God. Is there nothing between Israel and oblivion?

Dramatically, Amos changes the tone of his prophecy, and sings a funeral song for Israel. It is a song in which Amos projects himself forwards in time to look back on Israel after she has been punished, and it speaks of Israel's sins and her punishment as fixed in the heart of God. Yet the song also contains God's on-going plea for repentance and change, for even though Israel has rejected this call, God never stops reaching out to His people with this plea; '*seek me and live ...*' (5:4,6). For God stands above time and space and has all authority in earth and heaven (5:8,9).

When read, this passage does not come across in English as a song! However, it has been translated here with simple short phrases, as is common in Hebrew poetry. In the original language, these phrases follow each other with a rhythmic lilt, revealing the song that lies hidden in translation. We would love to know what kind of tune or melodic structure was sung in those days, but we must be content to focus on the message, not the medium!

Chapter five clearly marks a point of change in Amos' prophecy, but the change is more in style than substance. His song contains no new accusations about sin or information about God's punishment, it continues with the same themes we have read already. He attacks the shrines where sacrifices are brought to the Lord but people do not demonstrate a heart of worship (5:5,6, see previously 4:4,5). He declares God's punishment on Israel by war (5:2,3, see previously 2:14-16, 3:9-12, 4:3). As we read on in Amos 5, we will find yet more parallels, and they all reinforce the idea that this funeral song is a summary of Amos' prophetic message.

The first verse announces the lament, but this is where we come face to face with the drama of Amos' prophecy (verse 2 of chapter 5). He describes Israel as a fallen virgin, with no one to protect her. Now, until she was married, a young woman of those days would have depended upon her father for security, so Amos' picture of the abandoned virgin adds a sense of horror; why would a father do such a thing?

Then in the next stanza of the poem (5:3), Amos offers yet another fleeting military picture of defeat. Each previous prophecy has offered us a snapshot of this defeat, and here, Amos describes the plight of a returning army. Each military unit has been decimated to a tenth of its previous size, and the army as a whole has become incapable of providing the nations with protection. At this point, Israel has lost everything and stands on the brink of annihilation.

It is exactly at this point that Amos reports God's final plea; '*seek me and live ...*' (5:4-6). He goes on (in verse 5) to appeal to His people to come to Him directly and not to think that their journeys to religious shrines at Bethel or Gilgal will help them. Indeed, not even their pious pilgrimages across Israel and Judah to Beersheba in the far south will benefit them; they must seek God Himself, not places or religious experience!

At this climactic point, Amos repeats the call of God, saying, '*seek me ...*' (5:6), and warns that the fire of God's final judgement is imminent. And as if to emphasise the message, Amos turns on the stubborn Israelites of Bethel, and in verse 7, he accuses them of turning justice sour and bringing all godliness and righteousness to an end in Israel (5:7). In this way, Amos rightly summarises the fact that failed law and empty religion will bring down a nation.

Amos' lament summarises the state of Israel in his day, but the prophet is deeply conscious of God's awesome power as Creator and Redeemer. This remarkable prophet has used all kinds of rhetorical skill in

declaring God's message, yet at the very height of his message of judgement and challenge, He offers exclusive praise to the God of Creation (5:8,9). He cannot be the victim of his own message of judgement! He must turn God!

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The structure of Amos 5
- The lament and the punishment (5:1-3)
- The call of God (5:4-7)
- The doxology (5:8,9)

Notes on the text and translation

V1 'O house of Israel, hear this word that I take up against you, it is a lament.'

Other translations:

'Hear this word, O house of Israel, this lament I take up concerning you' (NIV)

'Hear this word that I take up over you in lamentation, O house of Israel' (NRSV)

The meaning of the sentence is clear, it introduces this part of Amos' prophecy as a 'lament', and it is addressed directly to Israel. The order of the words is not important, but the meaning of it is, so I have translated the opening slightly differently to others in order to bring out this inherent meaning.

V7 '... and bring righteousness to a halt!'

Other translations:

'... and cast righteousness to the ground' (NIV)

'... and lay righteousness to rest in the earth' (New AV)

The Hebrew talks about righteousness being made to rest on the earth. From a literal point of view this makes little sense, and it reads more like an arresting metaphor. I have therefore translated this phrase with a degree more force than others, and suggest that it means bringing righteousness to a halt. If we simply translate the metaphor in English, people readily assume that it means something like this.

V9 'who makes violence burst upon the strong, and brings destruction upon the fortress.'

Other translations:

'he flashes destruction on the stronghold and brings the fortified city to ruin' (NIV)

'who makes destruction flash out against the strong, so that destruction comes upon the fortress' (NRSV)

The same Hebrew word is used in the first phrase as the second, meaning 'destruction or violence'. Most translations simply use the same word 'destruction', but it seems to me to be better to use the different senses of the word to give the whole verse more meaning, for it is logical to write that *'violence ... brings destruction'*.

Going Deeper

The structure of Amos 5

We have looked at this passage of Scripture so far quite simply, and if you were to read any other detailed book about Amos, it would now be explained to you that this part of Amos' prophecy is only half of a bigger poem of lament. The structure of this poem is called 'chiastic', and you can find a simple explanation of this form of Hebrew writing in the Dictionary of this website. This structure is set out below:

- (5:1-3) Announcement of lament
 - (5:4-6) Call to turn back
 - (5:7) Accusation
 - (5:8-9) Hymn of praise to God
 - (5:10-13) Accusation
 - (5:14,15) Call to turn back
- (5:16-17) Announcement of lamentation

There is undoubtedly something to be gained from this analysis of the poem, which includes today's reading and tomorrows. It shows us that what comes next in the poem is almost the same as what we have just read, and to western ears, this may sound repetitive. However, I tend to sit lightly to the implications of the chiasmic theory of this passage because once you have spotted the chiasm, it is easy to rearrange it in a number of ways, and various books on Amos do just this. This reminds us that this is a theory and it does not explain everything there is about the passage!

One interesting fact about this chiasmic lament is this. It stands at the half way point in Amos, and half way through it we find the words, '*the Lord is His Name!*' (5:8). There is plenty of evidence elsewhere in Amos that these prophecies have been edited into their present form, by whom, we do not know (perhaps Amos or a supporter?). It therefore seems that this editor has designed the book to give glory to God in the midst of its dire message. Perhaps it was indeed characteristic of Amos to give praise to God in the midst of His prophetic work!

The lament and the punishment (5:1-3)

As we read this book, the opening words of Amos' lament come as something of a shock. His picture of Israel stands out, because it is entirely new in Israel. We can find reference to 'virgin Israel' in the prophecies of Jeremiah (18:13, 31:4,21) and Ezekiel (Ez 44:22), but these two prophets come after Amos. Also, they use this picture to describe God's relationship with Israel as like a man who marries a pure virgin. Amos uses the picture in a totally different way.

We have already seen how this picture tragically illustrates God's abandonment of Israel, but it suggests more. The death of a virgin is surely a tragedy because she has been cut off in her prime and before she could live fruitfully and bear children. In this way, Amos reminds his hearers that the death of Israel means that there will be no more descendants. The young woman Israel has died before she could bear the fruit God intended. Looking at Scripture as a whole, we are entitled to reckon that the intended fruit is surely witnessing to God in the world and being a means of God's grace to all, and a '*light to the nations*' (Isaiah 42:9, 49:9). Did Isaiah know these words of Amos and understand them, before he came out with his own prophecy, '*a virgin will conceive and bear a child ...*' (Isaiah 7:14)? It is possible

The connections between Amos and other prophets is extensive. If Jeremiah and Ezekiel did not use the picture of virgin Israel in the same way as Amos, they certainly used his idea of pronouncing a funeral dirge over the nation. Both these later great prophets spoke lamentations (Jeremiah 7:29f. and Ezekiel 19:1, 26:18, 32:2f.), and Jeremiah is well known for the additional writings often ascribed to him, the book of Lamentations.

The next verse in this lament is more interesting than we might think. Verse 3 describes the decimation of an army. You may have spotted the fact that the word 'decimation' which is in common use today describes this verse exactly, for Amos says the army is reduced to one tenth (Latin – 'decima'). Now it seems that Amos point is that an army that is so reduced is incapable of providing a defence, but the fact one tenth survive the fight could be significant. Throughout the whole of Amos, we are left asking the question, is there any hope for anyone in the midst of this disaster?

The call of God (5:4-7)

In truth, Amos always seems to prophecy the 'final solution' of God's absolute judgment, but at the same time, leave the door open for the possibility of repentance. For example, why does he describe God's call to repent here in a lamentation? The lament happens after death, so one would have thought that once the body is dead, there is no hope?

We must be careful and watch to whom Amos addresses his prophecies, for he formerly addressed Israel as a nation state, but here in this prophecy he seems to present God's appeal to individuals, offering his clear advice about how to find God. They will certainly not find Him, he says, by doing the religious rounds of the day and visiting Bethel and Gilgal (5:5), or travelling the longer distance across Judah to the homelands of Abraham and Isaac, in Beersheba. Specifically, Amos says that Gilgal will be exiled, and the sanctuary at Bethel will 'come to nothing'. Now the only circumstances in which a sanctuary such as Bethel would cease to be regarded as holy would be if the people who lived in the region did not believe in God! So this prophecy suggests that after her judgement, Israel will no longer be the residents in the Promised Land!

All this sounds horrific, but we should note that having been tempted to unpick the prophecy we have begun to think not just about the future of Israel as a state, but what will happen to individual people. Amos' lamentation has pronounced the death of Israel, but there seem to be hints that individuals will survive this judgement. Beyond the death of Israel as a state, people will be left who will face choices about how to respond to what has happened and how to re-connect with God. If God's plea '*seek me and live*' (5:4) cannot be responded to by a state that has died, but it can be heard by individuals who have experienced the trauma of judgment.

The doxology (5:8,9)

The praise of God found in verses 8 and 9 sounds a little strange to our ears because Amos describes God as the Creator of celestial constellations! Job is the only other writer who does anything similar (9:9f. and 38:31f.), and Amos praises God in similar ways three times (4:13, 5:8, 9:5,6). Why would Amos praise God in this way?

The answer lies in the life and times of Israel and the people who lived in Canaan in those days. Ancient people of all kinds used to attribute great power to the stars and the constellations, and part of the way that they understood 'the gods' was to ascribe to them power over these celestial bodies. The whole of Genesis is written to stand against such religious speculation, declaring firmly that God is in charge of all His creation, and that the days the seasons and all the world of life is dictated not by celestial bodies but by a benevolent God. In this prophecy, Amos stands foursquare in the Israelite tradition of ascribing all creation to God, but he is remarkable in that together with Job and the writer of Genesis, he is the only Biblical writer to describe the stars and constellations as coming under the authority of the supreme God and Lord of all.

In this text, God is not just higher than the stars, He is also the one responsible for controlling the waters, just as in the Genesis account of Creation (5:8), and the One who turns night into day and day into night. By inference, this makes Him the God of the seasons, which have their own pattern of day and night (see Genesis 1:14). Verse 8 is only a small part of Amos' great prophecy, but its strong connection with Genesis is a remarkable feature of the prophecy, and it begs all kinds of questions about how familiar the people of his day were with the stories of Genesis as we know them now.

Of course, Amos purpose was to declare the authoritative 'name of the Lord' (5:8), the One responsible for all things, and ultimately responsible for the punishment that was to come of Israel. He alone had the authority to bring violence on earth and control it for His purposes (5:9).

Application

It is not common for anyone to find much hope in Amos, for on the surface, his prophecies are profoundly gloomy. His main message is always that Israel is about to be judged by God and this will come in the form of some kind of military action that will bring bloodshed and horror. If we are to get anything out of reading this book, then we must come to terms with this awful message and what it means. However, there is arguably a message of hope in Amos. Some scholars think that this message of hope only surfaces in the last chapter, after Amos raises the prospect of hope through God's raising of the '*booth of David*' (9:11). But I would suggest that it can be found, albeit tentatively, in other places, and chapter 5 is one of those places.

This passage suggests several things about the message of hope. Firstly, it comes only after God's punishment of Israel for her sins, signified here by the death of Israel, the 'fallen virgin' (5:2). Secondly, the message of hope is addressed to individuals who are seeking God, rather than to the structured state that was the old northern kingdom of Israel. Thirdly, the message of hope is a call to 'seek God' in whom life may be found. This is a profoundly Gospel message, and it challenges us today to think that God has had the elements of His Gospel message in His mind for centuries.

The Gospel does not arise as if by magic in the first century AD. This has been God's plan from the beginning, and He has always called people to turn to Him and live. He does this today by calling people to look at Jesus and find their hope in Him. Moreover, when the Gospel is preached, the words '*seek me and live*' (5:4) are not taken from Amos inappropriately. If Amos could catch a glimpse of the Gospel in the midst of the tragedy of the sins of Israel, then the Gospel can surely cut through the wretchedness of our world today. That is, if we, like Amos, will believe the impossible.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What do you think is meant by Amos' words 'seek me and live'?
2. Amos has been accused of using what we might call 'hell fire and damnation' techniques. Can they ever work?
3. Discuss how it is possible to praise God in the midst of a dire personal trouble.

Personal comments by author

Amos spoke with such conviction he prophesied as if his own prophecy had already come true! Now that was conviction! Some, however, have said that Amos was deluded, and merely exaggerated what was

going on in Israel. Clearly, Amos was deeply affected by the sin within the worship life of God's people, and spoke out because of this. Now each one of us will feel deeply about some things in the life of the church, or about matters of faith. Our own convictions are important, and if we submit them to God for His use, then they can be turned to good. In my own life, I have realised that I must submit my deep feelings about the state of the church and the state of theology as it is taught in training colleges, to Him. Then, and then only can He use this concern in me for some good in the world, just as He used the prophet Amos.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Amos was clearly affected by what he perceived as the wrongful worship of God within the shrines of Israel. Forgetting issues to do with music and worship styles, is there anything wrong with the 'heart of worship' amongst God's people today? If so, forget about mere criticism of this, what will the consequences of it be.*
- *Pray for any people you know who are seeking to worship the Lord their God and find it hard to feel that they can indeed worship Him in the services provided by local churches.*

Final Prayer

Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, we ask that may we never be oppressed by the troubles we endure, but offer You the fruit of our life of faith. We offer You the words we say, the deeds we do, the love we share, the hopes we have and the joys that brighten our lives. Lift our hearts we pray, this and every day; AMEN
