

Seek Me and Live

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Date: 31 July 2016

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- [0 : 0 0] Heavenly Father, thank you so much for everyone who's here today and most of all that you're here. And God, you're not just our guest of honor. You are the reason that we're here.
- You're the reason that we sing. You're the reason that we pray. You're the reason that we stop to hear from you. God, we long for today, not just to be another church service, not just to be another thing in our schedule, but to meet with you the true and living God.
- And so God, for the sake of your son's name, for our good and for the good of this city, would you speak to us now through your word? Lord, speak, Lord. Your servants are listening. Would you speak to us through your word? Speak to everyone, including myself, from your word.
- In Jesus' name, amen. Amos chapter 5, verse 8. He 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 the moat on the surface of the earth, the Lord is his name.
- These words are words of power. They're words of beauty. They're awe-inspiring words. They are an ancient hymn that the people of God sung. They're beautiful words. They're words of hope and meaning and life.
- [1 : 0 8] Yet they're also very haunting words. And I'll share that with you and the meaning they're in as we go. So as we've seen week by week as we're going through verse by verse, chapter by chapter through Amos, we see that this is a book where God is sharing a very sobering message with his people.
- It was a time similar to today where the middle class is doing actually very well. The country of Israel was not at war with the countries around them. There's relative peace, just as we have in our day.
- There was headlines about stuff happening in other parts of the world, but their home was a place of safety. Their home was a place of security. And there were people like us who were very spiritual.
- They were very religious, just like we are at this church. They loved the liturgies. They loved the scriptures. They loved this stuff. And into that context, Amos brings a surprising word.
- These words of repentance, a warning of judgment. Verse six, Seek the Lord and live, lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph and it devour with none to quench it for Bethel.
- [2 : 1 1] Or you who turn justice to wormwood and cast down the righteous to the earth. There's such sobering words just before that in verse five. Seek me and live, but do not seek Bethel.
- Do not enter into Gilgal or cross over to Beersheba. What is Amos talking about? Bethel, Gilgal, and Beersheba were these cities that meant so much to the people of God. Not to the pagans, but to the people of God.

These were these places where they were pilgrimages toward. They were pilgrims toward these places. Bethel was a place where Jacob famously, he fell asleep with it. The only pillow he had was a stone.

And he had a dream, as you will probably remember, he had a dream of a ladder coming down from heaven. This was not a ladder of him climbing up to heaven. It was this beautiful ladder from God of the angels, of God's presence descending to him.

It was a place where God was saying to Jacob, I'm here, I've come down to you. This is the same place where years later, Jacob would be returning to the promised land. He's returning there, and he encounters God, and God gives Jacob the name Israel.

[3 : 12] And so for the northern kingdom of Israel, who Amos is speaking to, this is a place of their identity. This is a place where God has named them. And they would go on pilgrimages there, these spiritual pilgrimages.

They weren't going there to offer their children in the fires, as you'll see elsewhere, God addressing. They weren't going there to sacrifice to Baal or the Asherah poles. They were going there because this was a place where Yahweh had met with their forefathers.

Gilgal. Gilgal was the place when they crossed over into the promised land. This was the place where they built the altar with the stones, each one representing the twelve tribes of Israel.

This is where Joshua led them into, this was the gateway into the promised land. It's also the place where King Saul was anointed king. This was a place that spoke to them of the promise of God to bring them into this land that they were living in.

And so then in the following verses where he says, for Gilgal, verse 5, for Gilgal shall surely go into exile. Everything was good. They were not at war. They were not under threat.

[4 : 11] And God was saying, stop going to this place, Gilgal. I'm actually going to bring it into exile. And then Beersheba, of all of them, this was the most holy place. Beersheba was the place where Abraham, standing there, the pagan king prophesies over him, saying, surely God is with you.

This is the same place where Isaac, up until this point of Isaac's life, Abraham's son, God was Abraham, his father's God. But it is in Beersheba where God comes to Isaac in a dream and says, I am your God.

And from that point forward, he is the God of Abraham, and he is the God of Isaac. He is your God and he is there with him. And this is also the place where Jacob, and they're coming years toward the end of Jacob's life, he's going toward Egypt, he's leaving the promised land.

There's an anxiety in that. And he comes to Beersheba and this is where God comes to him and says, he's going to bless and prosper them in Egypt. Do not fear, he will bring them back. And he says the same words, I am your God.

And so Beersheba was this place where it stood for the people of God as a reminder that God is not just the God up in the heavens, that he is there here with us, that he is our God.

[5 : 12] And so the people would go on these pilgrimages there. These were people, they weren't the ones flipping about religion. These weren't the ones like, ah, whatever. These were the ones who actually took their religion seriously. They loved their religion. And as they would go, they would sing hymns up on their way to these sacred places.

And the words we have before so that I started with, this is actually, it seems, this is one of the hymns they would sing on their way up. He who made the Pleiades in Orion. Sorry, I can't sing it for you. I don't know the tune. He who made the Pleiades in 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 who makes destruction flash forth against the strong so that destruction comes upon the fortress. These are powerful, awe-inspiring, beautiful words. And they're meant here from God through Amos as a reminder of how far these people are from God.

These beautiful words are haunting words because they're placed right in between God rebuking the people for how far they are from Him. Their lips, their lips, they honor God with their lips, with their words, but their hearts are far from God.

So just before verse 8, just before this hymn is placed in there, we see, Oh you who turn justice to wormwood and cast unrighteous to the earth. And just after the hymn concludes, they hate Him who reproves in the gate and they behoor Him who speaks the truth.

[6 : 26] It talks about them trampling on the poor, on them loving what God hates, on them hating what God loves, on the corruption and injustice. Their actions and their hearts, their lives are far from God.

So in between all of that, just right inserted, is this hymn. And it wasn't a hymn that Amos wrote. It wasn't a hymn that God was prophesying to His people. Rather, it was God reminding them of the very words that they are singing.

And so from all that we can tell in reading this, this hymn, these beautiful, powerful words, hauntingly, are actually said by Amos almost sarcastically.

In the midst of him saying, you are a people of injustice, you are far from God, as they're pilgriming down, on their pilgrimage up to Beersheba. And in the midst of saying all this stuff, and then he just inserts, He who made the play of these in Orion and turns deep darkness into the morning and darkens the day and tonight.

He's saying, these are the things you say. And what is it, the things that they're singing? These are all words, these are all images of God being the God that transforms. The language of Pleiades and Orion is referring to the constellations that are most visible, the turn of the seasons.

[7 : 28] So they're singing of God who changes the seasons and turns deep darkness into the morning and darkens the day and tonight. This is the God who not only transforms the seasons, but He also is the God who transforms the day by day, the day into night and night by day.

Who calls for the water of the sea and pours the mold on the surface of the earth. Not only the day by day and the seasons and all of this, but also the one time events of the sea flooding up over here and casting itself into there and pouring rain over there.

This is the God who is in control of all the events of our time. The Lord is His name who makes destruction flash forth against the strong. Not only the God over the seasons and the days and the nights and the weather, but also the God over the destruction of cities and by its correlation also the rebuilding of them.

This is the God who transforms. This is the unchanging changer, the one who changes us. And yet, it is placed right in the middle of these words from God saying, you are a people, you're so spiritual, you're singing hymns, you're going on these pilgrimages to these places where I've done great things in the past, yet you do not change.

The balance here of describing their sins in verse 6 and 7, of describing how far they are from God, then they insert the hymn about change and yet they're unchanged as it goes into verse 10 and verse 11 and verse 12 and verse 13, speaking to them of their sin.

[8 : 48] And the image here is that they're marching down to the place where they're remembering what God has done in the past. They're singing these hymns and then they're marching back home having sung those hymns and they're completely unchanged.

It is haunting these words of God being the changer and yet he not changing us. It's as if a friend of yours was to say, hey, you know, earlier today I was walking across Rito Street and a Mack truck just came and smashed me.

It was crazy. I was on my back and all the wheels went right over me and man, it was scary. And you're like, and then you went to the hospital and they're like, no, no, I just kept walking.

I had things to do. You'd be like, well, you really were hit by a Mack truck? Really? I don't see any bruises. I don't see any broken bones. You're still alive. I don't really think this is the case. And as they're singing of God being the one who transforms seasons and days and nights and the waters and destruction of cities, they're singing of God being the one who changes and transforms yet there are people unchanged.

God through Amos is saying, really? You're a broken people. You're wealthy, you're safe, you're secure, you're spiritual, but your hearts are so far from me.

[10 : 00] Have you really, do you even know me? You see the love and the pain in God's heart as he's looking at these people who, again, they're so sophisticated and yet so far from him.

Verse 4 and 5, seek me, seek me and live. Do not seek Bethel, don't enter into Gilgal, cross over to Beersheba. You're going on these great pilgrimages, you're singing these hymns, but you're not seeking me, God is saying.

You're seeking the stuff of God, you're not seeking God. And the stuff of God, as precious as the hymns are and as wonderful as it is to go to these places and to remember what God has done, God is saying through this, I'm here to not just, be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, not just be the God that anointed Saul, not just be the God that brought you into the promised land, I'm here for the promise for you.

I'm here to be your God, God is saying, not just your father's God, I'm here for you. Seek me and live. It's easy for us to see the reality of injustice and the trampling of the poor and because these are a people in the past, it's easy for us to see them as some primitive people, some barbaric people, but these are the people of God.

In Israel at this time, go look it up, they're a sophisticated nation. This was a time of relative prosperity, of safety, of security. The economy was doing well, things were going well and they were spiritual people and not just like some random pagan spirituality, they were actually singing the hymns of God, going to the place where God had done things and yet they weren't seeking God, they loved the stuff.

[11 : 39] I can remember I was in high school, I was going to so many different church meetings, I loved church stuff and I'd go to worship nights and I'd listen to great preaching but there was a moment where it began to hit me that I loved the stuff of God but I didn't actually love God.

And I'd see it in the jokes that I would tell and the things that I would laugh at and in my behavior toward my fellow man or woman, like I was a church guy but I wasn't really a godly man.

I loved the stuff of God but I didn't actually know God. Just earlier this week on Thursday, I was driving up to Camp Iowa and there was a young man on the side of the road hitchhiking so he stopped, he jumped in and then like 30 seconds we started talking about God.

I'm not even sure how it came up but we were talking about some stuff and he was saying, oh man, he's 14 years old and he's like, man, I don't get atheistic agnostics, I just don't get it. How can they not believe in God? Just look around us.

It's beautiful out there near Camp Iowa. You got just lakes and trees and he's just like, look at this, clearly God exists and I love church. And they were chatting a bit and I said, okay, you love church, you believe in God, would you say that you know God?

[12 : 49] He's like, I don't understand, I don't get God, I don't, for me it's really, I just love the church, like the vibe I get in church. It's like, it's where I feel, I feel so alive there. I love church. He's like, but, I'll do chat a bit more, he's like, yeah, I don't know God.

I don't pray to him, I don't, I don't know him but I know I love church. And that, I see, I saw myself in him as a teenager.

I saw myself and I was, I would have been one of the guys, like some of you are, that you're the one who, you know, all the parents want their kids to be you because you're not swearing and if you laugh at inappropriate jokes, it's quiet enough that nobody realizes that you think it's funny and like you're not, I found, I loved what God hated and I hated what God loved and I came across Amos chapter 5 as a teenager and he's saying, God is saying, hate evil, love good, establish justice and so there, far from God, I just started saying, God, help me to hate what you hate and love what you love my heart is far from you, my heart is far from you, I remember, I remember being, some of you know Dominion Chalmers just a few blocks away, I remember being there at a worship service and everyone was just worshiping God and it hit me, I love the stuff of God, I love the songs, I love when the bass drum is just going boom, boom and you just feel like, you just feel your hair stand up on it and you're like, ah, but it wasn't actually God that I loved, I remember just getting on my knees and just saying,

God, God, you're too precious to be my parents, God, God, I know my parents know you and I've heard amazing sermons of these men that know you just on my knees saying, God, I need to know you, I know about you, I need to know you, I need to know you and I got up from my knees that day and nothing had changed, didn't seem like God had heard me, I just remember getting the next day in my room just ominous, God, I need to know you, I need to know you, I love the stuff of God, I love church, I love the conferences, I love all that stuff but I don't know you, I know my heart is far from you, I know where no one else sees and I love what you hate, I hate what you love, you have my words but you don't have my heart, I give you my time but I haven't given you my life and I have to pray would God not answer the prayer of a young man just saying, God, hear me but he didn't and so I continued day after day,

God, I remember being grade 12, still like, I think a year later, I'm in the library at school, I had a friend outside, they're doing their thing and I just would open up to Psalm 25 and just cry out to God and say, God, I need to know you, I believed in God but my parents, they knew God and my pastors, they talked about him, I had friends, I just, God, I need to know you and I can look up my life and see life unchanged, God, you are the unchanging changer, you're the one that transforms not only seasons, you transform hearts, transform my heart, I didn't get why he wasn't answering me, then I reread Amos 5, seek me and live, see God is so much more, he's so, he loves you and he loves me so much, he doesn't just want us ever to be people who simply give him our words, who just love the liturgy or who people who are simply living like polite or even very kind and compassionate lives, that's all good stuff, that's all very good stuff but what he wants more than anything is our very self and he wants us not just to seek him for a life that's changed, he wants us to seek him and so Bethel,

[16 : 26] Gilgal, and Beersheba were very good things and God was saying, seek me, don't seek church in the Messiah, don't seek that, don't go out searching, oh you just want to get that incredible worship experience, you want to get the field, God's saying, no, seek me, seek me, know me and in God not coming through for me right away and him not answering that prayer right away, he was allowing me to be able to be one who sought after him and sought and sought and at first really, I think I was seeking him more for his stuff but over time I began to seek him and somewhere along the way he came through, he will be faithful, he is faithful and he will, he delights to answer that prayer and now to stand here, not just as your pastor but as your brother in Christ and to say, I know God, that it doesn't matter what happens, what trauma stuff has been thrown at me, there's a joy that I have that's unshakable, there's a peace that I have that it doesn't matter what is going on that there's still a peace, not just the absence of pain or anything, a peace even in the midst of pain but more than anything it's not the joy that I love or the peace that I love or the purpose

God has given me, it's himself he's given me. As some of you know, Jason Byers, pastor at Celebration Church and I love his refrain, the giver is the gift, the giver is the gift, the greatest gift we have from God isn't the peace or the joy or the meaning or our friends or our family or community or any of the great things of God.

The greatest gift we have is the giver himself, he has given us himself and that's what Bethel and Gilgal and Beersheba had been all about. Bethel, the place where God provided a ladder not for Jacob to try to climb up to God but where God had climbed down to him and this is what separates Christianity and the gospel, this is what separates the true and living God from all other religions and spiritualities.

Every other religion and spirituality is about climbing away to God. If you, in Hinduism, in Buddhism, if you can just learn to think right, if you can just learn to detach yourself rightly, you'll be able to enter into nirvana. In Judaism, my family background, 613 laws, if you do those mitzvahs, if you do enough of them, you're going to make it, you're going to make it to heaven and Islam is five pillars and your obedience to those five pillars which are all, like they're very precious things, caring for the poor, they're good stuff but it's by you doing those things that you're going to help the balance of your life, the good things, away the bad and you get to heaven and every type is climbing to heaven and if anyone here is an atheist, agnostic, I want to say welcome, I'm glad you're here but your life is also a reflection of that same climbing of the ladder where it's not through these spiritual, metaphysical stuff but by getting enough success, by earning enough, by achieving enough, by establishing yourself enough, you're climbing your way to meaning and to significance, to your heaven but the reality that you know is that it doesn't work.

The rungs of the ladder just seem to break every time, we can't do it, we can't climb up, we'll never achieve enough, we'll never be enough and so the ladder at Beersheba or Bethel was the ladder of God coming down to us which separates Christianity from all other religions and spiritualities of the earth.

[19 : 28] There's nothing else like it where God himself climbs down to us where all of us realize that that balance is always going to be skewed against us that we've never able to do enough good to away the bad and the anxiety of all of that balance that Jesus, that his scale was fully tipped to the good that he was the one that speaks of calling them to justice and to mercy, to love what God loves and what God hates and to do good.

Jesus was the one that did that completely. The balance completely in his, weighed in his favor. And the gospel message is that, that Jesus gives that life, that gives that being able to be there in heaven, not just in heaven but being with God on earth, that he gives us that, that he makes us so fully alive in him.

Seek the Lord and live. If you're anything like I was in high school or even still, so much like today, and when you find there's a part of your life where it's not as it should be, where you need to be seeking the Lord, to hear the command, seek the Lord and live, it can be so frustrating.

I'm trying. I'm trying to seek the Lord and live, but I find that I keep on falling in love with the stuff of God, but not God, the liturgy and the songs and all these things. How do I actually have a heart that's changed? How do I actually come alive in him?

How do I live? But the commands of God themselves are power. When God said, let there be light, it's not like the earth was like, oh, snap, I gotta be light now and turn itself on.

[20 : 51] No, the very word of God, the very command of God, let there be light, is also the creative power of God. The light received power to shine. The same seek me and live, it's the same thing going on when in John chapter 11, Lazarus is dead in the tomb.

He's been dead for several days. This is not a man who can inspire himself to stand on up no matter how much he tried. This is a man who's dead in grave clothes and Jesus comes and says two words, come out.

And the dead man comes out of the tomb. He comes alive. There's nothing Lazarus could do to make himself see God and live, but in the very call from God, he comes alive and he comes out.

The same thing for the little girl in Mark chapter 5. She's dead in bed. Jesus kneels down beside her bed, takes her hand of a young dead woman and says, little girl arise and the girl comes alive.

The command to seek God and live is an impossible command for you and I to follow. We are dead, spiritually dead. It's an impossible command except the one who commands us also in this very command, breathe that life into us.

[22 : 01] Now even as he makes us alive in him, even as he breathes his life into us, we still have to respond to it. You know, the story in John chapter 11 would have been very different if Lazarus lying there in the tomb, if he's lying there and Jesus is like, Lazarus, come up!

And he opens his eyes and he's like, oh my goodness, I'm dead. This is grave clothes? Oh snap. Man. And just closes his eyes and continues to stay living as the dead.

And I know that I've definitely done that where God is, he's right there and he's there, his grace that enables us to be able to cry out to him for life and receive that life, to seek him. And yet we're living a life where he has said, live!

And you and I are just like, in our grave clothes, staying in the places where there's death and decay. And God is saying, come on out! The impossible is possible because of who Jesus is.

And that call, that call to be all that God calls us to be, it's a call not to sound like meaning and grace apart from him. That's what the people wanted. They wanted all the stuff but they didn't want God. It's a call to give your life so fully to God.

[23 : 02] Not just to seek the stuff of God but to seek God. To seek him and live. To seek him and live. And so the haunting words in Amos chapter 5, because of what Jesus has done, because of his, not just calling us to live, but him giving us his life and making us alive in him, we can join in this ancient hymn and sing it, or read it, and see the beauty in it.

The beauty of our God. He, who made the Pleiades and Orion, turns deep darkness into the morning, and darkens the day into night, who calls for the waters of the sea, and pours him out on the surface of the earth. The Lord is his name, who makes destruction flash forth against the strong, so that destruction comes upon the fortress.

As this continues on, and he goes on back to the rebuking, the end of this passage that Anna read to us, verse 16, and it repeats it three times in one of the names of God. Therefore, thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the Lord.

And the translators and the NIV, the ESV, the NLT, all these ones, they tame it down for us. They refer to it, they refer to God as the Lord of hosts. But they're actually, with the real name of God, this isn't controversial, Google it.

It's, thus says the Lord, the God of armies, the Lord. And he repeats it three times, the God of armies, the God of armies. What's Amos doing right here? He's saying to the people, look, you're so wrapped up in yourselves, you're so wrapped up in all your spiritual stuff, yet you're so dead, but look to the one, the one who transforms and changes and breathes life.

[24 : 31] Look to him, who is the God of power, the God of armies. Look to him. He is the one you are to fear and he is the one you are to love. He is our hope. The other night at camp, we're going through, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, we have a worship evening and each night is a different theme of a name of God.

So on Thursday, we're doing God of armies. And so we're singing, we didn't have a lot of songs to choose from because there's not a lot of songs about God of armies. It's such a common name for God in the Bible. You need to change that. We need to write more songs, Deborah.

But the, we sang the song, God of angel armies. Some of you know it. It goes, the God of angel armies is always by my side. And we almost didn't sing it.

And when it was done, I just spoke for a couple seconds saying, guys, the problem with this song is it makes it sound like this, the language of this God of power and might, the God of armies, is kind of like, he's our homeboy.

He's just this thing right beside, like, it almost makes it sound like he's our Cinderella servant. You know, Cinderella, go get my shoes. Cinderella, go get my brush. And it sounds as if it's just, we kind of can just snap our fingers at God.

[25 : 32] I don't know about your prayers. When I listen to my prayers, it can easily sound like that. God, I need you to, I need you to heal me. I'm saying, God, would you please help me have a good day? God, would you, would you please speak through me as I go preach?

I'm just like, listing off these things I want God to do. And it's like, I'm saying, the God of angel armies, he's by my side, he's at my bidding. But if you look at the imagery the Bible uses, and it's, go look it up, it's such a common name for God in the Bible.

It's again and again, the God of armies, the God of armies. One of the greatest presentations of what that means is in the beginning of the book of Joshua, just before Jericho. Joshua, the leader of the people of Israel, is, he's there, they're near Gilgal actually.

He's there and he's, he's seeking God. What should I do? Jericho has big walls. I don't know what to do. And all of a sudden, there's the most fierce angel he's ever seen, or fierce soldier he's ever seen. Just dwarfs Joshua.

And Joshua does what you and I would have called out, like basically, friend or foe. He says, are you for us or against us? And the response is, neither. And he says, he's the captain of the, of the armies of the living God.

[26 : 33] And he calls Joshua to come be on his side. The God of angel armies isn't like, isn't on our side in that sense, but we're on his side. And in that, there's such comfort and strength and power and life.

As we don't seek to make the God of armies our servant, but rather we say, God, you are, you are the God of power and might who transforms seasons, who turns the darkest night into day and the day into night.

You, the unchanging changer, I'm yours. Would you pray with me? God, we confess that it's so easy for us to enjoy church and do all this spiritual activity, to sing the songs even with passion, to be moved by the liturgy, maybe even convicted by a sermon, but for us to just let our seeking of you end there, seeking the stuff of God, but not you yourself.

God, for some of us, it's our parents who know you, it's our friends who know you, it's our pastor who knows you, but we ourselves don't know you. For others of us, we knew you, but somewhere along the way, you've become a memory.

You've become the God that was there with us in Beersheba or Bethel or Gilgal, but we're not walking with you today. Lord, would you help us to hear your voice afresh saying, seek me and live.

[27 : 55] That you're not commanding us to do something that we cannot do, but that you are in your very command empowering us through the gospel to live a life so fully alive in you. And so God, would you save us from ourselves?

Would you save us from trying to make you our servant? Lord, we want to be on your side and we thank you that because of what Jesus has done in his death and resurrection in real time, real space, that we get to seek you and live and live life with you so fully alive for your glory.

In Jesus' name, Amen.