

SUMMER 6 - Seek Me and Live!

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[0 : 01] Well, I was 18 years old. I'd been brought up in a Christian family. I knew who God was and I knew what God had done in Jesus. But I had drifted away in my teen years and then six months earlier I'd been involved in a serious car accident in which I was totally at fault. And as a result of my irresponsibility, I had put two people into hospital and I'd written off my mother's near new car. But the accident, the shame and the guilt stopped me in my tracks. And since then I had stopped drinking. Although I hadn't been drinking at the time of the accident, I knew that alcohol would have only made it worse and made me more irresponsible. I'd also stopped driving simply because of the fear and the guilt that I was feeling. I couldn't drive. And then as I began to hang around the edges of a church again, which I had not done for a long time. And so it was that on one day there was a church picnic on the day before my 18th birthday. And I went along because a girl I was interested in was going there. But as the day wore on, I stopped looking at the girl and began to watch other people. And there was a depth in their relationships that I didn't see anywhere else. So I hadn't seen anywhere else. There was a vitality of life that they had that I hadn't found anywhere else or observed in any other friends that I had. And I knew where it came from.

I knew that it came from God. And from my upbringing, I knew how to access this God and I knew what to do. And so that night I went home and I brought all my guilt and shame and sin before God. And I told him that I repented and I believed in Jesus and that I wanted the forgiveness that I knew that he offered in Jesus. And I declared that I wanted to live for Jesus from then on.

Friends, the next day was my birthday. And I woke the next day to a changed existence. My conversion was a dramatic one. I knew I was forgiven and accepted. And the impact was profound. Some characteristic sinful practices that I'd struggled with for years by God's mercy disappeared. And when I found out other sins that I wasn't aware of, I wanted to put them aside. On the psychological side of things, things were equally profound for me. The fear of driving disappeared overnight and I began driving within a week again. And I decided to lose weight that I'd been carrying for most of my teenage life.

And I lost about 18 kilograms in three months. Relationally, I stopped arguing with my sister to her immense frustration. Spiritually, I began reading my Bible voraciously and started praying earnestly. You see, in my own mind, I had found God. And with God, I had found a life worth living.

And I knew that He created me for this new existence that I was experiencing. And I found great joy in it. Friends, the story of the Bible starts and finishes with human beings in a garden with unfettered access to God. And it does that. It starts that way and it finishes that way because God wants us to know that His greatest desire for us is that we have untainted friendship with Him.

[3 : 33] This untainted friendship is what the Bible calls life. It is what you and I were created for. It is where God wants us to be, truly experiencing the life of relating to Him.

Now, I raise the issue of life and of God's purposes today because this is where the focus, I think, of this passage lies. And as we listen to Amos tonight, he will talk to us about God and about life and about true life. And he will tell us what that we should seek life. And he will tell us what that life is and how to find that life. And so with that in mind, I want you to turn with me with anticipation to the book of Amos. Let's see what Amos has to say to us. Now, today we're going to look as you heard from our Bible reading at Amos 5 verses 1 to 17. First, I want to remind you of the context of this passage that we're looking at. God's first word to the nation in Israel in Amos 2 was that they were living lives in rebellion to Him. Their worship, He said, was tainted. Their ethical practices were corrupt. He had been extremely generous and kind to them over their history, but they had treated each other with no kindness and no generosity, if not contempt for the poor.

In chapter 4, we're told that He had been long-suffering. He had given them many opportunities to repent, seven times over a complete number and more, and they had not taken any of them up.

And we're told in chapter 3 verse 2 that because He's their God and because they are His people, He is going to punish them. And at the end of chapter 2, God promises that He's going to defeat their army that they'd gloried in. He's going to destroy the symbols of their wealth, their luxurious houses. In chapter 3 verses 11 to 15, He describes how He's going to destroy the places of sacrifice and of sanctuary, their temples. He's going to come to meet His people face to face, chapter 4 verse 12. And when He does, do you know what He's going to do?

He's going to send them off into exile. Amos is clear. You see, God's elect people have rebelled against Him. And because they are His people, He will come to them in judgment. And that judgment will be devastating in scope and reach. Now that's the context of Amos 5. Now what happens at Amos 5 is that Amos announces a lament. He imagines that he's somewhere in the future and that God's judgment has already fallen, already happened. And in my mind's eye, I can imagine Him performing this lament. He would probably have chosen some prominent religious or other site. I suspect that He would have done all the normal practices of lamentation. That is, He would have shaved His head. He would be wearing sackcloth. Perhaps He would be throwing dust and ashes around, you know, sitting in them and throwing them over His head and lamenting in a loud voice.

[6 : 30] He'd be wailing at the top of His voice in that sort of ancient Near Eastern style. And people would have been gathering around to see and hear what was happening. And the first words of the lamentation are these, Fallen, no more to rise, is made in Israel, forsaken on her land with no one to raise her up.

Friends, this is the genre of chapter 5. It is a lament. Now let me tell you how it's structured. You see, the structure of this passage is magnificently detailed. Let me show you. First, I want you to have a look at verses 1 to 3. You'll notice there the word lamentation is used, and it talks about lamentation and a bit about what that lamentation is. Now I want you to look at verses 16 and 17, the end of the passage. Notice the word lamentation occurs again there.

And notice there's also a description of lamentation. So that's the beginning and the end. Now look at verses 4 to 6. Verses 4 to 6 are a call to seek God and live.

Now scan down to verses 14 and 15. They are exactly the same in one sense. They too call on people to seek God and live. Now let's go back again to verse 6 where we left off and look at verse 7 which follows. Verse 7 is an accusation of injustice. Now sorry to do this scanning again, scan down to verses 10 to 13. And you'll find that it's matched where Israel is again accused of injustice. So where have we got to now? We've only got one verse or two verses left, haven't we? Verses 8 and 9 in the middle.

These central verses talk about God, the Creator and the Judge. They are in effect a hymn of the Lord, about the Lord, about Yahweh. Friends, when you put this system together, this pattern together, you come up with something that many people have noticed. Now if you turn now to the back page of your outline, so if you should have got an outline when you came in, I've put an example of it. This one's written by a fellow called Gary Smith in his commentary. And you can see the structure of it.

[8 : 38] Verses 1 to 3 are a lament about the death of the nation. It's matched by verses 16 to 17. Verses 4 to 6 are a call to seek God and live. And it's matched by verses 14 and 15, a call to seek God and live. Then verse 7 is an accusation of no justice. It's matched by 10 to 13, an accusation of no justice. And in the middle, this hymn about Yahweh, the Lord. Now friends, writing out the structure this way helps us to see what Amos is doing. It helps us to see critical elements of his argument. I wonder if you can see them. Perhaps I can summarize them in this way. First, what is he saying? He's saying, who is the one that most matters here? Verses 8 and 9. God. God is the one who is at the center of Israel's existence. God is the one who creates. He's sovereign over his created order. He's even sovereign over the fate of nations. Just as he creates stars and changes light into darkness or vice versa, he can also bring cities to ruin. The one who made Polites and Orion and turns deep darkness into the morning and darkens day into night. Who calls from the waters of the sea and pours them out on the surface of the earth. Yahweh is his name. Who makes destruction flash against the strong so that destruction comes upon fortresses. Here is the creator who can therefore judge the earth. Second, Amos was making very clear, isn't he, that Israel is guilty. So he's made that clear in verse 7, but he also makes it clear in verses 10 to 13. Look at verse 7. Amos says that Israel has turned justice to wormwood. They have brought righteousness to the ground. In verses 10 to 13, we're told that the very same people hate the places of justice.

That is the gates of the city.

That's a terrible thing to say, isn't it? You hate your law courts. Why? Because they deal out justice. That means that you love injustice. They abhor or despise those who speak the truth. They live in wealth. They trample on the poor and they levy grain from them. In verse 12, their many transgressions or sins include afflicting the righteous, taking bribes, pushing aside the needy in the gate. So the needy are coming there for justice and coming there and yet they're just shoved aside by the rich.

Their injustice, we are told, is so prevalent and overwhelming that as verse 13 says, the prudent shut their mouths and keep silent. In other words, you don't say anything because you will just get given the same treatment and so you just shut your mouth and you don't object and you just let it go on. So can you see what we've got so far? First, God is the one who matters.

Second, Israel is guilty. Now look at the third critical element here and the third element is that justice is a certainty. They may love injustice but God, well he loves justice and justice is a certainty. It's made clear in verses 1 to 3 and verses 16 and 17. Verse 3 tells us of a decimation of the armies of Israel. For thus says the Lord God, the city that marched out a thousand shall have a hundred left and that which marched out a hundred shall have ten left. And then verses 16 to 17 tell us that God is coming in judgment and that it will mean both and what it will mean both in the cities and the countryside. Verse 16, therefore thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the Lord, in all the squares there shall be wailing and in all the streets they shall say, alas, alas, they shall call to the farmers in mourning and those skilled in lamentation to wailing. In all the vineyards there shall be wailing for I will pass through the midst of you, says the Lord. And he's passing through to judge. The fourth critical element is found in verses 4 to 6 and 14 to 15 and together I think they are calls to repentance. You see God calls upon his people to seek him and in verse 15 he holds out the hope that God will act with characteristic mercy. Look at Amos holding out hope to them. In verse 15 he says, and it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. So then we have four critical elements in this lament. God is the one who matters, central thing. Israel is guilty. Judgment is a certainty and therefore the nation should seek God. Four critical elements.

[13:20] What I'd like you to do, what I'd like to do now is to look a bit more closely at this fourth element. Because it is quite important. And I'd like to look at Amos in detail and to see if we can find out a little bit more about what it actually means to seek God. So to begin, look at verses 4 to 6.

Now in the Old Testament one of the things that you did when you wanted to seek God is that you went off to the place where you thought God, well if he didn't dwell, that was a place you made contact with him. And that is you went off to the temple. And that's where God was found you see, and so that's where you went to seek him. You may have offered a sacrifice, or you may have talked to a priest or a prophet, but look at verses 4 to 6.

Did you notice something striking about them? Did you notice something that is missing? Well the striking thing about verses 4 to 6 is that Amos tells us that it is not in Israel's religious sites that the people should seek God.

Now let me just explain this a bit. It could be that Amos is telling these northern tribes that their shrines are not legitimate. After all you see in Deuteronomy chapter 12 God had said that when they entered the land he would appoint a religious site to which they could go and worship. And when they entered the land it was clear that the endorsed religious site was Jerusalem. It was clear that Jerusalem alone was the place where God's people should go to seek God.

[14:45] That's captured in the speech you might remember by Solomon in 1 Kings 8. So it could be that when Amos talks about Bethel and Gilgal, he's saying your sites, you won't find God there because they are false sites.

That could be what's going on. However the rest of the book is clear that the weight of God's criticism is not on the location of worship, not on where the shrines are.

No, God is critical of what happens when they go there. He's critical of the type of worship they conduct. You see it is full of pomp and ceremony but devoid of genuine devotion.

So what I think is going on here is that the people are being told to seek the God who's coming to meet them in judgment. And they should be people who are not known for their religious practices but for their dependence upon the God who is coming.

They should be people who love him and love his ways. They should be humble. They should trust him. That's what it means to seek God you see. And God's making that clear here.

[15:48] And when they seek God they will find life. Now we who live this side of Christ, we know where it is that God can be found, don't we?

You see we know that God's not found in temples or sacrifices or rituals or church buildings. We know that God is revealed in Jesus Christ.

And those who seek God in Jesus, we know, will find him. Seek and you shall find, says the Lord himself. And they will find richness in life.

But now let's return to Amos. And let's have a look at this second passage in Amos 5 that talks about seeking God. Flip down to verses 14 and 15. And God says these words through Amos his prophet.

Now I want you to notice a few things here.

[17:00] First, the answer to seeking God doesn't just mean changing locations, does it? It cannot just mean that. The passage doesn't indicate that. It doesn't mean, oh well from now on I'll go down to Jerusalem and it'll all be okay.

Having changed myself, having changed what I do, I've just changed locations. Now that's not going to sort out the problem. There's more to seeking God than changing location. Jesus makes that clear himself, doesn't he, in John 4 where he talks to the Samaritan woman.

He says it's neither here nor there that really matters. It's what you're doing. It's whether you're worshipping God in spirit and in truth. Truth. Second, do you see the difference between verses 4 and 6 and these verses we're looking at now?

Look at verses 4 to 6. They talk about seeking God. But what are you seeking in these verses?

You're seeking good, aren't you? You see, seeking God is paralleled to seeking good.

What I think this means in part is that part of seeking God is actually to seek the things of God, the good things. The things that belong to God, the things that characterize God.

[18:07] Third, I want you to notice that seeking God is contrasted with seeking evil. Verse 14. Seek good, i.e. seek God.

That's what's paralleled with earlier on. And not evil. Fourth, I want you to notice the contrast in verse 15. To hate evil is to love good.

To hate evil is to love good. And fifth, and finally, I want you to notice that the goal of seeking good is still the same. What is it? Life. Verse 14.

Seek good and not evil that you may live. And the meaning of life is spelled out here. The second half of verse 14.

The second half of verse 15. What is life? Well, it's a situation where God is with us. Where we experience his mercy rather than his judgment. Friends, can you hear what's being said here?

[19:04] Seeking God is about seeking him personally. But seeking God is also reflected in seeking God's ways. It is reflected in hating evil, even as he hates evil.

It's reflected in loving good, even as he loves good. To seek God is therefore to seek good. It is to seek the things associated with him. To seek God is to hate evil.

And this is true whether we're Old Testament people or New Testament people. So Amos 5 verse 15 is almost directly quoted in the passage we read from Romans 12.

Almost directly quoted in the New Testament. Turn to Romans 12. So Romans chapter 12 verse 9. And I'm going to read the whole thing again. Because I want you to hear what he says. And see if you can hear the echoes of what we've learnt from Amos. So Romans chapter 9. Sorry, chapter 12 verse 9.

[20:05] Let love be genuine. And here's the almost direct quote. Hate what is evil. Hold fast to what is good. Love one another with mutual affection.

Outdo one another in showing honour. Don't lag in zeal. Be ardent in spirit. Serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope. Be patient in suffering. Persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints.

Extend hospitality to strangers. All those things that you should be doing back in Amos, I think.

Bless those who persecute you. Bless and don't curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice.

Weep with those who weep. Sigh with the poor. Live in harmony with one another. Don't be haughty. But associate with the lowly. Do not claim to be wiser than you are.

Don't repay evil for evil. But take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God.

[21 : 06] For it's written, vengeance is mine. I will repay, says the Lord. No, if your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they're thirsty, give them something to drink. Now, friends, if you do that with your enemies, what are you going to do with your poor brothers and sisters?

That's what Amos should have been doing. Or the people in Amos' day. For by doing this, you will heap burning coals on their heads. Don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Why? Because God is good.

And if you love God and seek God, you will do good. You won't become overcome by evil because God's not overcome by evil. But you will overcome evil with good because you love good.

Paul has just finished telling his readers about God's great act in Jesus Christ. And in Romans 1 to 12, he's told them, this is what God has done for you and his people. And now he's telling them, this is how you ought to respond to each other.

You ought to respond to God's love by loving. You ought to be people who hate evil. You ought to be people who cling to what is good. Your focus is on living rightly. So both in the Old Testament and the New Testament, seeking God means the same thing.

[22 : 10] It means loving God and loving your neighbor. And that is why when Jesus is quizzed and he's asked, what's the greatest commandment? The two greatest commandments are what?

That we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, strength and mind. And love our neighbor as ourselves. Seek God and seek good.

The two belong together. Love God. Love good. Hate evil. Love good. Love God. Hate evil. So that in mind, let's return to where we started.

What has Amos told us about life? Well, he's told us that life is found in relating to God. It is found in the service of God.

It is found in loving what God loves and hating what God hates. And that is what I found when I became a Christian. And that is what I've found every day since.

[23 : 13] I've not always been as good as I could have been, but I know what I was created for. I was created for him. I was created for life with him.

And you were created for him. You were created for life with him. We were made for God. And we will find no rest until we find rest in him.

We were made for life. And we will find no life until we find life in him. Amos has also made it clear to us, hasn't he, that there is an alternative to life.

And what is that alternative? Well, that alternative is death. It is the opposite of life. It is the place of no mercy, no protection, no peace, only God's judgment. But worst of all, see if you think

judgment's been so harsh these last few days, you know what the worst thing about judgment is?

The worst thing is, the place of judgment is a place where in one sense God is absent. He's not because he's exercised judgment. But death, you see, is to be separated from God.

[24 : 25] That is what is so bad about death. It is to be away from all the good that comes from the presence of God. That is a death without Christ.

It is to be absent. A death without Christ is to be absent from all the good that God has to give.

Now, with that in mind, I want to ask, what is it that will separate us from this sort of life?

Well, this passage has made it clear. The opposite of seeking God is not so much running away from God, although that's possible. It's more about just refusing to seek him, refusing to practice what is good.

In other words, the thing that will separate us from God is our own rebellion and our own disobedience. That is what will take us out of the presence of God.

Our sin. That's what the sacrificial system in Leviticus emphasizes. It says once sin gets into the equation, God cannot stay around unless you deal with it.

[25 : 22] So let me close today's talk by drawing all of this together and talking about repentance. You see, we have talked about the fact that God created us for life.

And we have talked about the fact that we often think and act in a manner that is displeasing to God. We've talked about the fact that that creates separation from God and from the life he intends, from real life.

So what needs to happen for me to return to God and to life? What do I need to do? Well, the first thing we are told from the New Testament is that we should seek God in Jesus.

For in Jesus, true life is found. Yes, we should turn to Jesus and we should bind ourselves to him.

And we should grasp the forgiveness that is available through him, his death and the life that comes

through it.

But friends, we should not just stop there. God also wants us to change our direction and our actions. God doesn't want us to do what the ancient Israelites did.

[26 : 27] He doesn't want us to treat God and forgiveness as some sort of talisman that we sort of, or some means of manipulating God that we wave under God's nose. No, God wants us changed.

He wants us to have changed lives. He wants us to seek God and to hate evil. He wants our repentance to issue in positive seeking of good and positive hatred of evil.

You see, life is not just found in forgiveness. It is ended in forgiveness, but life is found loving and living God's way.

It is found in obedience. So let us seek God together. Together, let's embrace the life God offers.

Friends, do you believe what Amos has said tonight?

Do you believe that God has acted through and has spoken through Amos? Do you believe that coming close to God means actively putting distance between you and the sin that plagues you?

[27 : 26] Do you believe this? Friends, this is what Jesus is talking about when he talks about cutting off the hand that causes you to sin. That's what he's talking about. He's saying that hand causes you to sin.

Metaphorically speaking, cut it off. That is, get rid of it. Be rigorous with it. Living the Christian life is about drawing near to God, but it is also about rigorously dealing with the evil that is present in our lives.

It is about having a hatred of evil and a passion for good. Friends, so much of Christian faith is so innocuous. No hatred of evil.

No strong passion for good. That's who we are. That is what we are created for. Friends, will you search out your lives? Will we search out our lives?

Will you put your mind to identifying those things you know that God hates? And will you wage war on them in the strength that God supplies?

[28 : 29] Will you ask your friends to support and help you lest you be hardened by sin's deceitfulness? Remember that to seek God is not simply about turning up to religious events and locations and being religious.

Remember that seeking God is not simply, you know, singing fine religious songs in adoration. No, friends, no. To seek God is to shun evil.

It is to turn away from evil. To love the Lord Jesus is to hate the things that he came to die for and did die for. And to hate them with a vengeance.

And to put them aside with vigor. No, seek God and live. Turn aside from evil. Let's pray together.

Father God, we know that your love is overwhelming and genuine and deep.

[29 : 39] So, Father, please help us to hate what is evil and to hold fast to what is good. Help us to love with mutual affection.

To outstrip one another in showing honor. To not be reticent or lagging about in our zeal. But to be ardent in spirit.

Serving you with vigor. And earnestness. And earnestness. Help us to rejoice in hope. Be patient in suffering. Persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints.

Extend hospitality to strangers. Help us to bless those who persecute you. To bless those and don't curse. To rejoice with those who rejoice. Weep with those who weep.

To live in harmony with one another. To not be arrogant or haughty. But to associate with the lowly. Help us not to claim to be wiser than others. Help us not to repay evil for evil.

[30 : 41] But to take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. Oh, Father, please help us not to be overcome by evil. But to love good as you love it.

And to overcome evil with good. Father, most of all in our congregations. In our family lives. Please help us to be like this. Father, we pray this so that your son might be glorified.

We pray this in his name.