

Worship Gone Wrong

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0:00] This is the AM service on August 24, 1997. The preacher is Dr. Paul Barker.

The sermon is entitled, Worship Gone Wrong, and is from Amos 5, verses 18-27. Almighty God, we pray that your word this morning will inspire in us lives of justice and righteousness, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

You may like to have open their passage from Amos 5, in front of you on page 747. The end of the world is nigh.

Religious cranks and enthusiasts in every age, often carrying sandwich boards on street corners, pronounce such things. The end of the world is nigh.

For in every age there is an interest in the end times, or the last days. It's how many religious sects began. The Jehovah's Witnesses, for example.

[1:13] But the end of the world was coming in 1840 or 50-something. Well, they're wrong, but sadly they still exist. Especially in our day and age, enthusiasm for the end times is heightening.

As we come to the end of a millennium, so comes a greater expectation in some circles that maybe now is the end of the age, and God is about to act. When the first millennium ended in 1000 AD, there were loonies all over the place, anticipating eagerly the end of the world.

And even in our own lifetimes, we probably remember groups of people going on Adelaide beaches and doing all sorts of bizarre things because they were convinced that the end of the world was about to happen. It explains why, for centuries, the book of Revelation has held so much fascination for people because of their eagerness to understand what will happen at the end of the world and when it will occur.

And of course there are dozens of movies and books of fiction about what the end of the world might be like. Neville shoots *On the Beach*, for example, about the end of the world after a nuclear holocaust and so on.

And in ancient Israel it was no exception. Not that they expected a nuclear holocaust, but they longed for the day of the Lord. They longed for the day when God would act decisively in world history and bring about the fulfilment of his purposes.

[2:36] And especially at the time of Amos, there was a heightened fervour for the end of the world because at that time the great enemy was Assyria to the north.

Their armies were increasing and getting armed, ready for warfare on the northern outskirts of the borders of Israel. And so the people longed for the day of the Lord because that would be the day, they believed, when God would come and act and that would mean vindication for God's people and the defeat and destruction of the enemies of God's people and God's own enemies.

Now it's certainly good to long for the day of the Lord. It's certainly good to have an eager expectation for it. And indeed both Old and New Testaments of the Bible urge us to long for it and to be ready for it.

Jesus said the same and the apostles of the New Testament also said the same. Indeed the Bible ends with the exhortation, Come Lord Jesus. So it is good to long for that day of the Lord when God would come, when the Lord Jesus will come and judge the world and bring about his kingdom.

But Amos in today's passage is critical of such longing. Today's passage begins in verse 18 by saying, Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord.

[3 : 59] Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord. Such a day, Amos says, will be the opposite of what you expect. You long for a day of salvation and rejoicing and vindication, but rather it will be darkness, he says in verse 18, not light.

It will be the opposite of what you expect. Indeed he goes on to describe it with grim humour in verse 19, a sort of ancient snippet of Jurassic Park or Jaws.

Just when you thought it was safe, along comes another danger. See what he says in verse 19. It's as if someone fled from a lion. Phew, relief, I've escaped the lion.

And then all of a sudden around the next corner, there's a bear. Oh, not another danger. And then they flee from the bear. They get home. They slam the door. They lock it. Breathing sighs of relief. You can imagine the perspiration pouring from the hero of the film.

And they put up their hand to turn on the light, metaphorically speaking, because they didn't have light switches in those days. And a serpent bites them and kills them. It's an ancient horror movie, isn't it? Somebody who's fleeing one disaster after another.

[5 : 02] And then finally they get home just when they thought it was safe. And they're bitten by a serpent. And done in. Unavoidable disaster and terror.

That's what the day of the Lord will be like for ancient Israel. Amos says. So he summarises in verse 20, Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness at all.

Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord, is what Amos says to ancient Israel. And if you were an ancient Israelite, you would be absolutely stunned by these words.

Because they'd been brought up with a biblical expectation of longing for the day of the Lord. That it would be a good thing to expect. And something to eagerly await and anticipate. It's as though their lives are rolling along happily and all of a sudden, without warning, comes this statement of woe.

You imagine you're in the midst of a happy marriage and you come home to find your spouse has left you. Completely unanticipated. Your life's shattered. Or you've got a job and you think you're doing very well and you've had recent promotions and pay rises and privileges and perks.

[6 : 13] And you come in one day and say, your services are no longer required. There's no build up to this, you see. That's what Amos' words are like. Life is going very well, thank you very much, in ancient Israel.

People are getting on very well. The stocks and shares are up and so on. And all of a sudden, wham, bang, woe to you who long for the day of the Lord. It would shock the socks off the ancient Israelites.

Because the implication of what Amos is saying is that you, the very people of God, are in fact God's enemy. And so the day of the Lord for you will be a day of destruction, not glory and joy.

Amos' words are exposing false expectations, false hopes and false security. Why is he so critical? Why is Amos standing out here against so much else in the Bible and saying, woe to you for longing for the day of the Lord?

Well, as we've seen in recent weeks, the ancient Israel to whom he speaks is full of immorality, oppression of the poor, injustice and so on. Theirs was a worship that was complacent.

[7:22] They took their relationship with God very complacently indeed. They assumed that they were exempt from God's wrath and judgment. We are God's people, therefore he cannot judge us.

We're right to live our lives how we want, because God is on our side. We've also seen in recent weeks how devout ancient Israel was. They weren't a secular people, far from God, but rather people who practiced with punctilious observance every religious institution and ceremony that they could and that the law demanded.

They were people, it seems, who assumed that their religious fervor was what counted in the eyes of God. But notice what God himself says about such religious fervor, because now it's not Amos' words, but from verse 21, they're God's words himself.

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them, and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals, I will not look upon.

Take away from me the noise of your songs. I will not listen to the melody of your harps. Hate, despise, not accept, not look upon, not listen, not desire, all these religious observances of ancient Israel.

[8:45] It's strong, it's cutting language. God is rejecting his own institutions here, because what ancient Israel is doing is what God has demanded of God's people earlier in the Old Testament.

Various religious assemblies and festivals, notably three times a year, the Feast of Passover, the Feast of Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles, where ancient Israelites would make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem or to any other shrine to worship and make sacrifices there.

All of that, God says, that's your ceremony, your festival, not mine. And then the next verse, 22, talks about their sacrifices, their burnt offerings, where a whole animal would be burnt up on the altar as an offering to God.

He talks about their grain offerings, where not an animal, but some grain would be brought along and destroyed by fire as an offering to God. He talks about their offerings of well-being, which is where some of the animal would be burnt, some would be cooked for the priest, and the rest would become a great big party for the people who've come to offer it.

It doesn't matter what type of sacrifice they're offering, God says, they're your sacrifices and they're not acceptable to me. I don't want them. And they give me no pleasure, in fact, I hate and despise them.

[9:58] Strong language. Goes on from sacrifices in verse 23 to talk about their music and their songs. Take away from me literally the din of your songs. Now occasionally some of you might think some of the songs we sing in church are a bit of a din, a bit of a racket.

But this is not talking about the quality or the style of music. But rather it's talking about something more profound. It doesn't matter whether it's vocal singing or instrumental. It doesn't matter whether it's a harp or an organ or a guitar or whatever.

It's not talking about style or quality. But it's just talking about their music per se is unacceptable to God. He turns a deaf ear to it and he says, it's your music, not mine.

God disowns himself from all that they're doing. For him it is utter revulsion. Very strong language. You imagine if God were to say those things about Holy Trinity.

I hate, I despise your communion services. I hate and despise your book of common prayer or your new Australian prayer book or your covenant songs or your blue hymn book. I hate and despise the organ, the guitar, the flute, the overhead projector, everything about your worship.

[11:07] I hate and despise. Well, we'd be pretty shocked, wouldn't we? We couldn't imagine God saying that about us. Now I'm not meaning to indicate by that that God would say that entirely about us.

But what I'm trying to do is get you to feel the sense of shock that ancient Israel must have felt to hear these words. The very things they thought they were doing in obedience to God's law and doing fervently and zealously and eagerly is utter revulsion to God.

Why? Why? Why would not God say that of us? Oh, because what we do here is strictly Anglican and it's okay, it's authorised.

Or the people who lead it are trained. Or what we do here, that can't be unacceptable to God because what we do is based on the Bible. What we hear is biblical and what we sing and pray about is biblical.

So it must be right to God. But no, you see, ancient Israel could have said all of that as well. You see, what made their worship revolting to God was not actually to do with the worship itself but rather to do with their lives.

[12:20] Their lives practised immorality and that made their worship revolting to God. See, it doesn't matter whether we sing modern hymns or old hymns, whether we use a prayer book or not a prayer book or any other part of our worship at Holy Trinity on a Sunday.

It would be absolutely revolting to God if our lives kept on in immorality. It doesn't matter how right it is technically but it's our living that counts.

And that's what Amos makes clear for ancient Israel. Let justice, he says in verse 24, roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

not a justice or righteousness that is to be occasional but something that's to be constant. For the picture here is of a river that runs all year.

In ancient Israel there were many, many rivers called wadis which would only run when the rain came. Soon as the rain stopped the torrent of water would gush past and the riverbed would dry up again.

[13:22] Similar to some rivers in Australian inland and outback. But not to be like that, he says. Justice and righteousness is to be like a river that runs all year. That flows and rolls all year.

It's actually got quite a sense of movement and strength about it. This is a mighty torrent that is being talked about here. Not a justice and righteousness that is a sort of theoretical something stuck in somebody's mind but something that is moving and active and practiced out there.

It talks about abundance of righteousness and justice. And a perpetuity of it as well. Not something that just comes on for a while and then goes in the dry season and comes back again.

But something that rolls on and on and on in the lives and practice of God's people. That's what God wants. And the absence of that is why Israel's worship is so revolting to God.

Now a couple of warnings here. One is that in some church circles today there is quite an emphasis on justice, social justice in the society. As though the practice of social justice is what we as Christians are meant to be full stop.

[14:36] But Amos' context for justice and righteousness lies firmly within a relationship to God. It is justice and righteousness that flows out of knowing God and imitating God.

For God is the God of justice and righteousness. righteousness. And Amos' conception throughout his book is that justice and righteousness will flow when there is a valid relationship with God.

He's not talking about just social activity as though that is the be all and end all of being Christian people or God's people. This is not a social justice gospel but a gospel that stems from a heart relationship with God.

But on the other hand if church attendance week in, week out does not lead our lives to change morally to exhibit justice and righteousness then all that we do on Sunday is not only a waste of time it is revolting to God as well.

For worship is not only empty it is worse if it is not accompanied by moral living. Jesus said that we are to worship in spirit and in truth.

[15 : 44] In part at least that means that we exhibit the fruit of the spirit that is moral character and live lives of truth. You see it's easy to lose perspective on things isn't it?

It's easy to put as the top priority how long the services are how comfortable the pews are whether the peating got put on about ten weeks ago to warm the church up or not. It becomes more important whether we use the book of common prayer or the modern prayer book or no prayer book whether we have the overhead or not the overhead an ancient hymn or a modern chorus whether we have the organ or the piano who leads the service who preaches they're the things that occupy our attention so often the external things but in the end they are unimportant for what is more important is what pleases God not what pleases us but what pleases God sometimes people at the end of church say to me I enjoyed the service this morning sometimes they even say I enjoyed your service this morning so it's mine well it's not it's God's and we're not here for enjoyment we're here for God's pleasure not our pleasure in modern times there are trends of religious entertainment people going to church to be entertained in some way

I think that's a very dangerous trend for what we do in coming together is in part basically primarily to please God not to please ourselves one of the dangers of the movements of church growth trying to connect with a secular society and bring people into Christian faith is that it's governed by what appeals to people go out in the streets and find out what appeals to them and then do that in church well we could fill this church ten times on a Sunday if we had a video showing the football over here and a line of pokies along the window but it wouldn't please God what we do must be God pleasing at heart not self pleasing for Sunday is about God's pleasure not our pleasure and nothing pleases God more than moral living lives changing under the impact of his word as we saw last week real worship valid worship must lead to a valid relationship with God knowing God well and knowing God well must lead to the imitation of God's character and justice and righteousness is integral to that character valid worship must lead to our lives being changed that more and more we become in the image of God more and more we demonstrate the character of God and the fruit of the spirit and so on for as the Bible says in several occasions to obey is better than sacrifice that's the priority for God obedience to him rather than the offering of meaningless religious ritual

Amos enforces that point in verse 25 he asks an odd question did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings the 40 years in the wilderness O house of Israel well the oddness of it is that the question in its syntax demands the answer no but of course Israel did offer sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness Exodus and Leviticus tell us that they did they not only give us the rules for sacrifice but there are instances in those books that show us that in the wilderness Israel offered some sacrifices to God the point of the question is not whether they did or didn't the point of the question is what was God's priority when he gave you the law in the wilderness offering sacrifices no it's not about religious ritual at heart it's about obedience to God's law loving God with all your heart soul and strength that's the heart of God's law that was given in the wilderness that's what's important that's what's primary for us as for ancient Israel as well indeed Jesus attacks his contemporaries in the same way that Amos does he says you tithe all these trivial things very diligently but you neglect the weightier matters of the law he says in the

Sermon on the Mount no later on in Matthew I mean religious zeal is alright but there are more important things obedience to God's law demonstrating justice and righteousness well then what's God going to do for ancient Israel since its worship is invalid and in effect no better than pagan worship God's going to give them over to such pagan worship that's what he means in verse 26 you shall take up sack of your king and Kiwan your star god your images which you made for yourselves who are those strange names in the middle of that they're Assyrian gods idols that people would make out of wood or stone or metal and then bow down and worship there's no evidence that Israel already worshipped these Assyrian gods in the time of Amos rather what this is is a sentence of accusation about what will happen God's judgment against them you want to live lives that are pagan you want to have worship that's effectively pagan I'll give you pagan worship you're going to go and serve the

[20 : 40] Assyrian gods what that means is that Assyria is going to invade you and conquer you and destroy you and you will become servants of the world empire of Assyria in fact Amos makes that plain in the last verse of the chapter therefore I will take you into exile beyond Damascus Damascus is in the northeast and beyond Damascus is Assyria and 20 to 30 years after Amos's words that's where Israel went Israel's mistake you see was not to expect that God would judge it they thought that because they were the people of God they were exempt from God's judgment they would never have to face it and therefore they lived lives of complacency thinking well it doesn't really matter we're God's people he's on our side he's not going to judge us for what we do you see they confused assurance with complacency they had assurance that they were God's people but that meant that they practiced lives of complacency and that's a great mistake that Christians still today make if I tell my Ridley class of theological students that they're not going to be examined on this part of the course they're not going to study it and learn it they'll be complacent about it but if I tell them you will be examined on this then they're supposed to be at least rather keen to learn that topic of work you see when we think we're going to be judged by

God pushes us out of our complacency ancient Israel confused assurance and complacency there are some people today some Christians today who deny that Christians will be judged by God I think they're wrong the Bible seems to say they're wrong but the evidence that they think that is the declining standards of morality accepted by the church churches all around the world are tolerating more and more immorality and injustice and lack of righteousness in its behaviour what that is evidence of is the fact that they don't think God is going to judge according to God's standards there are plenty of people Christians among others who deny that God will judge anyone let alone Christians but they're living in a universalist fool's paradise the Bible makes it clear that God will judge and judge all and there are some Christians who so emphasise the grace of God his forgiveness time after time after time that they just keep on sinning time after time after time complacently expecting

God's grace never to dry up honey but the same Lord that Amos expected would come and intervene has promised to us that he will come and intervene and judge but our eagerness for that day must never lead us into complacency of thinking that we'll just be okay as we are we are to practice holy living as we anticipate Christ's return As the New Testament says, we ought to be living lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God.

For we will all face the judgment seat of Christ one day. There is no place for longing for the day of the Lord or the day of Christ's return without ethical living.

That's the point of the book of Revelation, isn't it? Not to give us puzzles to fascinate us about when it will happen and what it will be like, but rather to galvanise us into Christian morality.

[24:15] And that's the point of heaven all through the New Testament. We may think we don't know much about heaven, but read the New Testament and it's there almost on every page. But it's not there to tell us or to feed our information about what it will be like and what colour the grass is going to be and what the menu is like.

But rather it's to galvanise us into being ready for it time and time again. But let me also offer a word of comfort.

Such scrutiny of God on our lives ought not to negate our assurance as Christian people. It ought not to lead us into distress about how our relationship with God stands.

For remember that Amos is addressing himself not to those who are already troubled about whether God accepts them or whether they're right with God, but rather to those who are complacent in resting in the fact that they are accepted by God, but with complacency.

Sure, none of us can stand equal to God's standards on that final day. But you see, our assurance derives from the one who is perfect rather than imperfect.

[25:30] From the one who died on a cross to take away our sins so that we can stand righteously before God on that day. That's where our assurance derives, not in us or our ability, but rather in Jesus Christ.

For it's in him that we stand righteous in God's eyes. It's in him that we find our acceptance by God. And it's in him that we will be acquitted on that final day of judgment.

And it's because we're in him, if we're Christian people, that we strive to be like him. For justice and righteousness flow from him.

And it's because we are in him that we can have the utmost assurance. For it's in him that we find real hope, real expectation and real security.

And it's because we're in him that we can say, come Lord Jesus, eagerly. Amen.