

Failure to Heed the Warnings

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[0:00] This is the AM service on August 10, 1997. The preacher is Dr. Paul Barker. The sermon is entitled Failure to Heed the Warnings and is from Amos 4, verses 1 to 13. Any remaining children can go now to Sunday school. While we stand, let's pray. Amen. God, we thank you that you reveal yourself and have done in the past by speaking through your prophets. We pray now that your word will speak to our hearts for Jesus' sake. Amen. You may like to have open in front of you the passage from Amos chapter 4 on page 745 of the Pew Bibles in front of you. I remember once a preacher preaching and beginning his sermon by saying that he had about 17 points all beginning with the letter C.

[1:09] And I remember spending the whole sermon trying to guess what the next word would be. Because usually when preachers do that, there's a lot of forcedness about some of the words beginning with C. And I don't usually have sermons that have points all beginning with the same letter. But this is an exception. Three words, all beginning with W. And so that you concentrate, I'm going to tell you what they are at the beginning. Women worship and warnings. Women worship and warnings. Now these days we're on dangerous ground when we men address women. I never know whether I should call women women, or ladies, or girls, or lassies, or sheilas, or something else. Because in my experience I can get into trouble for any of those terms. Now Amos was wiser than I. He avoided all those terms and decided to call women cows. Now if you've heard the sermons from the last two weeks, you've already probably picked up that Amos was not all that politically correct.

[2:17] However, I must say that to call women cows, especially cows of Bashan, was probably not in itself a derogatory term, or a term of abuse or offence. We know, for example, in the Song of Solomon in the Old Testament, a love poem between a man and a woman, that they liken parts of each other to animals, and it seemed to be something of great beauty, rather than something of offence. So when Amos calls these women, you cows of Bashan, he's probably not in itself speaking offensively to them. However, his bovine metaphor is full of sarcasm. He's certainly speaking very sarcastically about these women. He's addressing wealthy women, ladies of luxury, leading lasses of the day. Now if you men think, well we've got it easy, wait till we get to chapter 8. But these women that Amos is addressing, the wealthy, the elite, the leading people of the nation.

[3:22] However, notice what he says about them in the end of verse 1. You oppress the poor, you crush the needy, you say to your husbands, bring something to drink. These women thought only of self-indulgence. These women were pampered pets. calling for their husbands to bring them another bottle of drink.

You can imagine if you were the dustman, on a Monday morning, opening up their wheelie bin full of empty gin bottles. These are women who are satisfying their own desires at the expense of the poor, and the needy of their own society.

They were dominating their husbands, mooing without a care in the world. But these lowing animals will be brought low by God.

Amos goes on to say that the Lord God has sworn by his holiness. God has sworn an oath against these women. It's not just that God is speaking a word of judgment, but so serious is it that God actually swears an oath in judgment against them.

[4 : 31] And he swears by his holiness, because these are women who have offended God's holiness. They are far from holy. God is and remains holy, and his holiness will not be violated by tolerating the sin of these women forever.

So if they behave like cows, God's going to treat them like cows. He swears an oath of judgment, and this is what he's going to do. In 30 years' time, after Amos' words, that came true.

The mighty nation of Assyria in the north conquered Israel. And we know from some of the reliefs that have been found of the Assyrian Empire that one of the ways they led out their captives was to tie them together with ropes, with hooks attached, and the hook would be placed through their nose or through their mouth, and they would be dragged along in a procession of captives.

Fairly painful and fairly gruesome. And the fishhooks is probably something about a harpoon, so that as they're being dragged along by these ropes with hooks in their mouth, perhaps one of their soldier captors has got a harpoon and is prodding them up the backside to keep them marching off to the conquered land.

A fairly terrifying picture of judgment against such women of Israel. Furthermore, we read in verse 3 that through breaches in the wall you shall leave each one straight ahead.

[6 : 10] The picture, it seems, is of the wall of Samaria being destroyed by the Assyrians, so that now it didn't matter which way you turned, there was a hole in the wall for you to go straight ahead.

You didn't have to walk through the city to get out the main gate. There were holes all around the city, and that's how the people would have left, by their captors, the Assyrians. And you shall be flung out into Harman, a place we don't quite know, but possibly either a word meaning a dung heap or dustbin, or possibly a town of the Assyrians to which these captors would be taken.

The city of high living brought down by God to a low death. All its security, all its strength, all its wealth brought to nothing by the judgment of God.

Thirty years after Amos spoke these words, they came true when the Assyrians conquered Israel. A terrible punishment for the wealthy women of Amos' day.

And yet also a reminder to us, surely, that there is an even worse judgment that awaits those who continue to reject the Lord God. For God's demands on us are no less stringent than then.

[7 : 27] God demands of us holiness as he himself is holy. Jesus himself said such a thing in the Sermon on the Mount. Be you perfect or holy as the Lord your God is holy.

The judgment that awaits those who reject God is even worse than that that awaited such women. So let us also then take heed.

Women, secondly, worship. And here Amos is no less sarcastic when he deals with this issue. Come to Bethel, he says.

Come to Gilgal. Bethel, we saw last week, was the place, a central place for Israel in its worship. A shrine of where they would offer sacrifices but illegitimately breaking God's laws about where worship ought to be conducted.

Gilgal, similarly, it seems. Gilgal was the place where under Joshua the Israelites had crossed the Jordan River and entered the Promised Land. And there it seems for 700 years or so the Israelites have conducted worship of God.

[8 : 36] Amos is mimicking the priest's call to worship. If you've been to the Middle East you may have heard the Arab leaders calling their people by wailing over the loudspeaker from the minaret to come to worship at certain appointed hours.

And probably pilgrims as they would have arrived at Bethel or Gilgal would have heard the voice of the priest saying, come to Bethel, come to Gilgal. Maybe then gone on to say, come and offer your sacrifices and so on.

And Amos is mimicking those priests. Certainly the Israel of Amos' day was very religious, far more so than our society in which we live today.

Amos recognises that when he says, come, bring your sacrifices every morning. Not just occasionally at the major festivals but every morning. Come and bring your sacrifices.

A statement of the religiosity of his day and its great piety and devotion. Bring your tithes every three days. Well that's an extraordinary thing for people to do.

[9 : 38] Usually people would bring their tithes of harvest perhaps three times a year at most at the major times of harvest. and then every third year a special tithe was to be made.

But this is calling people to bring their tithes every three days. Again inviting people to great acts of piety and devotion. Bring a thank offering of leavened bread and proclaim free will offerings and publish them.

Amos recognises that his country is very religious. The people are very devout in their acts of public worship. And yet something is drastically wrong.

Despite the fact that he's addressing super spiritual people something is drastically wrong. For his words at the beginning of verse 4 are quite shocking.

Come to Bethel and sin. Come to Gilgal and multiply transgressions. It would be as if I stood up here and said come to Holy Trinity Doncaster and sin.

[10 : 40] And it would shock us. Because it would be one thing for me to say come to church on Sunday to worship God and offer up a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.

But it's another thing to say come to church and sin. Israel you see has failed to realise that by living immoral lives all the acts of piety in the world count for nothing.

It doesn't matter how religious devoted or pious or keen these people are in their religious devotion it counts for nothing because they live immoral lives feeding off the misfortune of the poor the needy the oppressed of their land accumulating wealth at the expense of others and so on.

Very religious people but their lives from Monday to Saturday don't match up. They love their religion Amos tells them that and reminds them that.

He finishes verse 5 after saying come and offer your sacrifices and so on for so you love to do. They were very keen in their religious practice but they loved religion and not God.

[11 : 59] They loved their sacrifice but not their neighbour and so in effect God is absent from their religion. There's no love for him there's no concern for God's glory God's laws or his holiness.

There's no worship as God wants for this is worship religious and pious though it is keen and beyond the call of duty though it is this is worship that is self gratifying self pleasing and not God pleasing.

So notice what Amos says about the sacrifices at the end of verse 4 he says bring your sacrifices every morning your tithes every three days not God's but yours because God doesn't want to have a thing about them.

They're your tithes your offerings and not God's. He's in a sense cut himself off from the acts of offering that they're bringing. Furthermore the Israelites are boasting in their piety.

So verse 5 says proclaim free will offerings publish them. Free will offerings were voluntary offerings that were to be an act of private devotion between the worshipper and God through the priest at the shrine or temple or whatever.

[13:17] But this is mocking people who are boasting in their free will offerings. I've given more to God than you have. I've given more to God than God wants me to do.

I've given freely this that and the other. The boasting of the religious zealot being mocked by Amos here. Furthermore their worship is according to their own rules and not to God's rules.

So Amos says in the beginning of verse 5 bring a thank offering of leavened bread. But according to the law of Moses at the beginning of the Old Testament they could only offer a sacrifice of burnt unleavened bread.

It was forbidden to burn leavened bread as a sacrifice. But these Israelites had made up their own rules rather than adhere to God's. You see they're playing games of ritual.

Their worship is smug satisfaction oozing from praying hands. But from praying on Sunday they turn immediately to praying on their neighbours.

[14:20] And that is what God is against. And the shocking thing is that their piety adds to their sin. It doesn't take away a bit of their sin it doesn't atone for their sin but rather it increases their sin.

For the person who lives an immoral life but then comes to do a public charade of religious devotion is actually increasing their sinfulness because they keep on with their immorality.

They don't tie up the fact that morality and worship go together. Our sins are worse if they're papered over by a veneer of piety.

Well this is a fairly solemn warning for us religious people. It's a warning that we must be careful not to do likewise. That we must be careful not to have an outward appearance of piety thinking that it's going to cover up our internal lives of immorality.

We must be careful lest we love the church more than we love God. Lest we love the majesty of music more than the majesty of God. Lest we love a prayer book rather than prayerfulness to God.

[15:34] For God must be the focus of our worship devotion and our love. Not the external trappings and rituals of a Sunday morning or evening. We must be careful lest our motivation in worship is selfish.

Self-centered self-gratifying or self-satisfying for these Israelites were on an ego trip in their worship and we must be careful not to do the same. We're to worship in God's way not according to our own rules or devices or what pleases us.

We must be careful lest we also boast in our acts of super-religiosity. That we boast in our keenness our zeal our generosity in giving our commitment and so on.

You see this warning of Amos applies to the super-religious the really keen the really devout the people who've got spiritual words on their tongues thinking that they'll be seen to be pious and devout and admired by everybody else and yet their lives in private continue in immoral living despising the neighbour and without loving God.

Israel was certainly pious but open wide come inside its play church. Let us also then take heed.

[16:59] Women worship and now some warnings. One of our great dilemmas as Christians when we look at the things that happen in our world especially the disasters and atrocities of our world is to ponder why has this happened?

What is God doing here? What's going on? When we find illness or suffering the loss of a job or bereavement why?

Very often we ask to God why me? On a bigger scale when we see droughts and earthquakes plagues in the world or wars why?

What's going on here? When a landslide at Thredbo kills 18 people when a jumbo jet crashes in Guam killing a few hundred people why? What is God doing in this world?

It seems that Israel's recent history before Amos was a catalogue of some disasters. They'd had a famine it seems from verse 6 a famine that meant that they had cleanliness of teeth not because of an abundance of Colgate but rather an absence of food to make their teeth dirty.

[18:21] There was lack of bread in all their places. Secondly there was a drought that they had had. The rain had not come. The spring rains it seems three months to harvest.

The rains in April or May or June that were so necessary for the crops to come to fruition and harvest. None of that. The crops had failed. It seems that this drought was a little bit erratic.

Some cities got rain but other cities did not. Those that did not would go to those that have but there wasn't sufficient for all people. Famine and drought.

Thirdly there was blight and mildew and locusts. The destruction of their crops. The blight was the east wind that came hot drying and scorching the crops prematurely.

The mildew it seems is some sort of worm that gets into the crops and turns the green tips of grain pale preventing a fruitful harvest. And all the main crops, all the staple crops destroyed in this blight.

[19:25] So the grain is gone, the gardens are gone, the vineyards, the olives and the figs all gone. Fourthly there was pestilence and warfare. There was a pestilence like the one in Egypt when God had smitten the Egyptians with all sorts of plagues and problems.

There was also warfare where the young men were killed with swords and carried away, a stench rising up to their nostrils in verse 10. Famine, drought, blight and mildew, pestilence and warfare and fifthly and finally an earthquake.

Similar to what had happened when God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah back in Genesis 19. The land around it totally destroyed, the city destroyed and laid waste. It seems that this has also happened to Israel in the recent past.

At least five disasters that have befallen the Israelites in its recent history at the time of Amos. How is Israel meant to understand those events? Oh it's just chance, we've had an unlucky run lately.

Or maybe they would try and rationalise it. Well it's Palestine's fragile ecology at work. It is a disaster area, we know, earthquakes. Maybe they said it's the effect of global warming or the El Nino effect on our climate.

[20:45] Maybe they recognised that it was deforestation. As the trees were cut down, the climate was unstable. Or maybe they said, oh it's the devil that's done that.

It's evil forces in the world which we should fight against and counter. Or maybe like so many of us they just put it down to fate. We don't have much choice here.

Que sera sera. Well at the end of each of those five descriptions of disaster comes the clue to how we're to understand what they're about. For at the end of each one of them, five times then in total the refrain comes, yet you did not return to me, says the Lord.

For all of these disasters are from God, not chance or fate, not human error, certainly not some ecological problem, but from God.

Possibly many of us don't like to think of a God who's going to bring disasters like this. How can we attribute to God such evil things or bad things in our world? Most of us want a sanitized God, a boxed up God who's trimmed to fit our minds.

[21 : 57] We want to rationalize the disasters of our world. We put them down to the weather or human error or something else. Sometimes we want to attribute them to the devil. How could we attribute something bad to God?

It must be the devil that's doing it and we've got to fight against him. Or many of us I suspect in our world today just put it down to fate. As though this world is set in motion and what's going to happen is going to happen independent of what we do.

And yet none of those answers is correct according to Amos. It's certainly not fate because Israel is being called to respond in a particular way. We have freedom to choose and our choices have some effect in the things that God does in this world.

There's no escaping the fact though that it is God who has brought these things. So verse 6 says I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities. Verse 7 I withheld the rain from you.

Verse 9 I struck you with blight and mildew. I laid waste your gardens. Verse 10 I sent among you a pestilence. I killed your young men with the sword. I carried away your horses.

[23 : 02] And verse 11 I overthrew some of you as at Sodom and Gomorrah. This is God speaking and it is God making it absolutely clear that he's the one who's done it. It is God's deliberate action to bring these disasters on Israel.

Why? In part it's punishment. That's made clear. But it's punishment tinged with grace. It's not God unleashing the full reign of his wrath and anger against the sin of his people but doing so in a limited and restricted way.

Punishment tinged with grace so that those who survive have opportunity and encouragement to change their pattern of life. It's punishment which is a warning of things to come.

And so often to us the same. God treats us as children and it's from his loving care for us as his children that he chastises us. That he brings us warnings so that we can change and live lives of godliness and holiness in response to him.

So often like the Israelites we fail to heed the warnings. But Israel ought to have realised. They ought to have understood what's going on because each of those five things is threatened way back in the early part of the Old Testament in the passage I read last week in Deuteronomy 28.

[24 : 25] If you disobey the Lord then these are the things that will come upon you. Famine, drought, blight, mildew, locust, pestilence, sword, earthquake, they're all there.

They should have known their Bibles and if they'd known their Bibles they would have understood the warnings. And surely heeded them. But not one of those disasters led them to repent of their sin.

That's what the word return means. To repent of sin, to turn away from it and turn back to God. But not one of them led Israel to give up its sin.

They had no effect at all on Israel's stubborn infidelity. Blinded by sin and ignorant of their Bibles sin and they failed to heed the warnings that God sent.

See, Israel was complacent in its religion. Complacently contented, satisfactorily sleepy, dozy, unable to see what God is doing in their world.

[25 : 25] But now Amos says God's patience has expired. It's run out. It's not going to last forever for that's not real patience as we saw last week. And so he says in verse 12, therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel, because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel.

Not a sanitized, box-up, trimmed-up God that's harmless and comfortable like an old father Christmas, but rather the God who is the creator of all, the God whom he has described in verse 13, for lo, the one who forms the mountains, the one who creates the wind, the one who reveals his thoughts to mortals, the one who makes the morning darkness and treads on the heights of the earth, the Lord, the God of hosts is his name.

That's the God that Israel is to be prepared to meet. The God who's the creator of all, the sovereign of all, present in all things, the one who has power over all things, that is the God who will judge Israel for its sin.

So take God seriously, Amos says. Don't be complacent in the sight of this holy God. Just as Israel hundreds of years before with Moses were terrified when God spoke to them on Mount Sinai and gave them the Ten Commandments, they asked Moses to go up the mountain, they said, we're too afraid to go up and meet with God lest we die.

That's the God that Israel is about to meet in judgment on its sin. Who can then but be afraid of such a God?

[26 : 55] How do we respond then to the disasters of our world and day and age? do we just ask why? Do we say lucky me that it wasn't me?

Poor chaps, poor families. Maybe we complain to God when we get sick or lose our job. God, it's not fair. Maybe we should heed the warnings because Jesus like Amos said the same thing.

Jesus was asked about one of the headlines of his newspaper. Tower in Siloam near Jerusalem had fallen down killing a number of people. What's going on? They said to Jesus.

And the answer he gave them? Repent lest the same thing happens to you. He didn't go into whether they were guilty or not guilty, the people who were killed, but he said it's a warning for you.

Repent lest the same thing happens to you. And that's what Amos' words to Israel were. These things that have happened, we can never know for certain necessarily, whether it's somebody's guilt or not.

[28 : 02] But the question is how do I respond to God because of this event or experience? So whenever we experience some trouble or suffering or problem, whenever we read about it in a newspaper or see it on television, the first question to say is what am I to change in order that I'm ready to meet God?

Make the events of this world strengthen us, ready, holy, to meet a holy God. The lion has roared.

Who can but fear? Let us also then take heed. do Burst me oil ■■■ me god say