

Amos 3:1-4:13

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[0 : 00] Well, happy Canada Day to you all from America. I am the representative of America in this situation, and it is a joy to celebrate this occasion with you.

Those of you that don't know me, my name is Jordan, and I am one of the ministers here. I'm just going to lay it all out on the table right at the beginning. We're about to talk about judgment this morning. God's right to judge.

And this is a theme that we kind of see all throughout Holy Scripture, especially in the Old Testament. There's this often repeated phrase where God says, vengeance is mine. It doesn't belong to anybody else.

Mine. The implication is that only God is holy enough, wise enough, patient enough to judge with justice and mercy. That's not a role that God gives to anybody else.

Even more fundamentally in the Christian faith, God alone has the power to save, and God alone has the right to judge. And our Scripture passage this morning from Amos chapter 3 and 4 brings us face to face with this reality, and I think we kind of inherently recoil against it to some extent.

[1 : 17] I think there's a lot of reasons for this, but we're very comfortable talking about human rights, those inalienable rights and freedoms that we enjoy and we protect based on who we are as those made in the image of God.

We're thankful for those things, but very rarely do we grapple with God's rights as one who has created us in his image. And so, today is about judgment.

And if you look at the Bible, there are many images that are used to describe God as judge. God is described as a consuming fire and a warrior in battle on the one hand. He's described as a prosecutor in the court of law and a husband jealous for his unfaithful wife on the other hand.

And he's also described as a father disciplining his wayward child. But here in the early chapters of Amos, God is likened to a roaring lion hovering over his prey.

And this roar thunders. It issues a warning to God's people. And we get that right at the beginning, chapter 3, verse 1.

[2 : 28] Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you. O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt.

Verse 2, chapter 3. You only have I known of all the families of the earth. And here it is. Therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities.

Now, if you came to church this morning to have a quiet and peaceful morning, I'm sorry, it's not going to happen. I kind of feel a little bit bad for you. This might be the wrong Sunday.

But I'm also very glad that you're here. I realize that a lot of us come to a passage like this coming from different places throughout the week. Some of us come tired and weary, and we need to know that God is holding us.

Some of us come complacent, spiritually sleepy, and we need God to awaken us. Some of us come seeking, understanding. We don't know who this God is, and we need him to reveal himself to us.

[3 : 35] And some of us have known this God for a long time, and we feel unsettled and unstable in our faith, and we need God to assure us and give us stability. So we come to this passage from many different places.

But the reality is, is that sometimes the things we most need to hear are the things that we least want to hear. And Amos 3 and 4 confronts us with those things, as Amos brings us into the grieving heart of God as he struggles with his hard-hearted people.

It was late in the morning on Boxing Day in 2022, and my father sat me down for a frank conversation, and this almost never happened, so I knew it was serious. My father says to 16-year-old Jordan, Jordan, I know how you're living your life, and you know that it's not what God

wants.

And you know that God wants a lot more for you. You should return to him. In two sentences, the conviction of the Holy Spirit came upon me and changed my life.

It was only a few years later that I sensed maybe God's leading me to be a pastor. And there's something about that that's happening here, as God grieves and laments over his people's hard-heartedness, and he speaks to them the difficult words, the intention being that they would turn back to him.

[5 : 01] And find life. So what Amos puts before us is the what, the how, and the why of God's right to judge.

What motivates God to judge? And we saw this right in the early verses. It's a surprisingly simple answer. The answer is that we are in covenant with the Holy One.

Did you notice how he started this way? It says in verse 3, The Lord is speaking against you, O people of Israel. Israel is this language that evokes God electing them out of all the families of the earth to be his special chosen people.

So it's election, God's goodness of election. And then against the whole family. And so now God is describing them as his adopted family. Election has led to adoption.

And then he says, I brought you up out of the land of Egypt. He's talking about redemption. The ones that he chose and made his children he redeemed from Egypt. And then in verse 2, You only have I known of all the families of the earth.

[6 : 06] It's communion. So right at the very beginning, we're actually being reminded of God's unique relationship and special covenant love for his people, the ones that he's about to judge.

It's his election and his adoption and his redemption and his communion with them. Interestingly, these are the same exact blessings that Paul lists in the exact same order in Ephesians chapter 1 that we Christians have in Christ Jesus himself.

And therefore, he says in verse 2, I will punish you for all your iniquities. So what are we seeing happening here? We're seeing that what motivates God's judgment is that it, the fact is that it takes place in the context of his great covenantal love and grace for his children.

Like a parent who grieves his wayward child and brings discipline to his child, God's love brings responsibility. And God's grace brings accountability.

And if we're honest with ourselves, I think there is something deep in us that resists this. As I was meditating upon this passage this week and I was going for a walk in the middle of the day, there's a point where I just said, Lord, I have to be honest with you.

[7 : 22] There is part of me that does not want to be accountable to you. And this is something that we see in Genesis chapter 3. In Genesis chapter 3, Satan not only tempts the humans to doubt the goodness of God, but he tempts Adam and Eve to deny that God will hold them accountable if they turn from him.

And this continues throughout our lives. We find ways to skirt and to hide and to sneak around and to deny and to distract and to numb ourselves from the simple fact that God is our creator, God is our redeemer, God has lavished us in his grace and love, but that does not let us off the hook. It means we are accountable to him. We belong to him. So in these early verses, we see that God is so committed to his people that he will not leave us to spiritually drift or to spiritual disease or decay or disinterest, but like a mighty lion, he roars to get our attention so that we may turn and find refuge and life in him.

So it's the context of covenantal love that is the motivation for God's judgment, but how is it that God judges? In verses 9 of chapter 3 through chapter 4, verse 5, we see that in times of plenty, the people of God turn away from him.

And then in chapter 4, verse 6, through 11, we see that in times of difficulty, the people of God refuse to turn back to him. And both of these dynamics are at play in their life, right?

[9 : 01] The turning away from God in times of prosperity and plenty. And then in times of austerity and difficulty, the refusal to turn to God and the insistence that we try to do things on our own.

I think it's part of the reasons why we tired ourselves out so much. And one of the things that we see in these verses is that how does God judge? He systematically dismantles every source of security and idolatry and luxury and religiosity and complacency that leads us away from him, seeking to drive us back into dependency on him.

And so we see Amos goes after this. God goes after our pride, our prosperity, our pleasure, and our public religion. The first, in verses 9 to 11, he goes after our power and our pride in our power. Amos, let me remind you, was writing in a time of great prosperity. There's a big wealth gap between the upper class and everybody else, but the stock market was rising, the housing market was flourishing, the trade market was doing great, and everybody had the sense of, wow, things are going really well.

And God, through Amos, highlights the fact that these, that his people feel strong. So multiple times, he talks about the strongholds.

[10:24] And in verse 11, he says, I will send an adversary that shall surround the land and bring down your defenses from you, and your strongholds shall be plundered.

Now, these strongholds were multi-story buildings that were erected for two purposes, to be residential mansions and to act as fortresses in battle. And what God describes here through Amos is that the people have erected these fortresses of strength, and they have filled them with treasures plundered from other nations, treasures that they have used violence to take from other peoples, they have filled in their fortresses of defense, so that nobody can take them, and that their security and money is protected.

So there's this great, not only power, but also this sense of pride in their power that we see here. A modern example that might hit slightly too close to home is, like, think of the Titanic, for example. The Titanic was supposed to be the unsinkable ship. It was built to be the unsinkable ship. So much so that they didn't even put enough lifeboats for everybody on the boat.

They thought, there's no way this thing can sink. And on its very first journey, it finds itself at the bottom of the sea. And even more recently, some wealthy business people boarded something called the Titan, a submarine named after the Titanic to go view the Titanic.

[12:00] This great pride in human ingenuity and ability, and tragically, their pride implodes on them quite literally, and trust in what man can make and what money can buy just dissipates in the depths of the water.

And so there's this constant temptation throughout life for us to build what we think is going to be indestructible, what we think is going to give us security, and what is going to protect us from all the woes of life, and to think that nothing is going to bring it toppling down.

And the problem that the Israelites have is that they have a God who is willing to bring it toppling down. And then we see even more that it's not just their power, it's their prosperity.

In verse 15, I will strike the winter house along with the summer house. So we've got a snowbird lifestyle here. We've got summer homes and winter homes. And the houses of ivory shall perish. Think about houses laced with ivory. I mean, this is the sort of stuff you'd see in Western Living magazine or Lifestyle magazine. And the great houses shall come to an end.

[13:14] So God is looking at their greatest things of power and prosperity and saying, I'm going to bring them down. But in verse 11, the way in which God brings them down is a sense of irony and poetic justice.

Because in verse 11, it says that their strongholds are going to be plundered. And remember, their strongholds are what held their plunder. So what was built by plunder, God is saying, is going to be taken down by plunder.

What they took from others is going to be taken from them. Their wealth and prosperity is going to come into an end in the same way that they amassed it. In other words, their judgment will mirror their sin.

And God continues on. You all okay? You with me? It just gets more intense. This is unrelenting. So God goes after their power and their pride in the power and their prosperity.

But then he goes after their pleasure, their hedonistic lifestyle. And we see this in chapter 4, verse 1. Hear this, you cows of Bashan. If you ever want to insult somebody, I recommend using that.

[14:19] Cows of Bashan. It's great. I was this close to starting my sermon with, if you get the cows of Bashan, you get everything. But then I thought it would be too vague and too weird.

And he says, cows of Bashan, interestingly, were known for their quality and strength in those days. So it's not immediately a diss. But what he goes on to say is that these Israelite upper class women are actually using their quality and their strength for selfish purposes and self-indulgent purposes. Not for the sake of others and not for the glory of God. So you cows of Bashan, verse 1, who are on the mountains of Samaria, who oppress the poor and crush the needy, who say to your husbands,

bring that we may drink.

The image is of those who are pursuing a luxurious lifestyle and indulging themselves in food and drink to their heart's desire while neglecting the needs of the poor next door to them.

And God says, I will take you away in my holiness and you will be cast out, verse 3, into Harmon.

And then in verse 4, God goes from power to prosperity to pleasure to their public religion.

[15:37] He goes at the very place where they think they are honoring God most. And he actually mocks them. And he says, what you do in my name is actually a transgression against me.

Come to Bethel, this is God mocking them, and transgress to Gilgal and multiply your transgressions. Bethel and Gilgal were two places of worship that the Israelites set up themselves. God did not say worship here. They chose to set up sites of worship there. Meaning they're trying to come to God on their own terms, not his. And then he says, bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days.

Offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving of that which is leavened. And if you know in the Old Testament, the one thing you never do is offer a sacrifice to God of leavened bread.

You always offer unleavened bread. So they're specifically deciding to worship God in the way that seems fitting to them, but not in the way that God has prescribed. And then it goes on in verse 5, and proclaim free will offerings and publish them.

[16:46] There's this sense in which God is saying, you love to display your ways of worshiping me to the world because you are more interested in the approval of others than you are of holiness and righteousness before me.

And you can hear Jesus speaking to the Pharisees here of outward religiosity but inward whitewashed tombs. And he says, for so you love to do, O people of Israel, declares the Lord. And if we were to skip over to verse 14 of chapter 3, we would see even that there are horns on the altar of Bethel. There shouldn't be horns on the altar.

Horns come from images of animals. And images of animals should not be placed on the altar. That is idolatry, the presence of God. It's kind of like that story.

What God is describing here is just so blatant that it's almost astonishing that sometimes people can become, God's people can become so blind that they can't see it.

[17:51] It was like during the French Revolution when Notre Dame was captured by the revolutionists. They tore down everything that was on the altar in Notre Dame and they erected a statue of Lady Liberty on the altar.

as if to replace God in the ways that they were going about their lives. And God says, this too, I will bring to nothing.

I will not stand for it. Now what is the purpose of God dismantling power and prosperity and pleasure and public religion?

Why does God do that? He's just there to get back at his people. See, the answer comes in the next seven verses in verses 6 through 11.

We discover that God brings them from times of prosperity into austerity in order that they may turn and seek him and live.

[19:01] And so in verses 4 to 6, Amos lists the catastrophes that hit the news headlines of his day and he actually says these are ways of God trying to reach out and speak to his people.

And yet over and over again as God reach out and longs to bring his people close to him, they refuse to receive the grace he's offering. So in verse 6 it says that God sent famine and yet the people did not return to me declares the Lord.

In verses 7 and 8 God sent drought and yet the people did not return to me declares the Lord. In verse 9 crop disease and yet the people did not return to me. Verse 10 epidemics and war and yet the people did not return to me.

In verse 11 earthquake and yet the people did not return to me. Notice five times this repetition. It's almost like you can hear the frustration in God's voice as he gives freedom of choice to his people and then agonizes when they use it so poorly.

According to Amos, these catastrophic events are sort of divine speech where God not only sends prophets to tell his people to return, but God actually sends situations economic and political and personal where his people would have to turn to depend on him if they wanted to get through it and live, and yet they refuse to do so.

[20 : 32] And it brings us to something that is very serious and devastating about the nature of human sin. That human sin not only spoils creation, but it refuses grace.

Human sin not only spoils creation, but it refuses grace. It's not only that we turn away from God in times of prosperity, it's that we refuse to turn back to him in times of difficulty, no matter how much it crushes us and leads nowhere.

And as God's patience is exhausted year after year, and his love resisted for too long, God says that is enough. And in verse 12 of chapter 4, he says, Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel. This is the Israel he has chosen in love. Because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel. This is really fascinating.

Because the image here is not of God casting his people out and forsaking them forever. The image here is of God bringing his people close to them, and them having to come face to face with the holy and righteous and pure and almighty creator of heaven and earth.

[21 : 55] It's an image of judgment as revelation of the judge as the creator. And his right as creator over all of his creation.

So if you see this in verse 13, it says, For behold, he who forms the mountains and creates the winds, it's God as the creator of all things, and declares to man what is his thought.

It's God as the revealer, the one who knows all things, and who makes the morning darkness and treads the heights of the earth. It's God who is Lord over all things. The Lord, the God of hosts, literally the God of armies, is his name.

As we take a closer look at this judgment, we realize that the ultimate purpose of this judgment is to reveal the judge of Israel as the creator of the entire earth.

And to reveal his supremacy over all creation. That all things have come from him and all things owe their existence to him. And to resist his grace is the greatest of all tragedies.

[23 : 07] And so what we see is that judgment is not just giving human beings, God's people, what they deserve. Judgment is a revelation of the creator. It is meeting one's creator in his holiness and in his power and in his goodness and in his purity.

It's interesting that in the first four chapters of Amos, holiness is the only attribute of God that is explicitly named. In verse 2, in chapter 2, verse 7, they profane my holy name, he says.

And in chapter 4, verse 2, the Lord swears by his holiness. This portion of scripture is about the holiness of God's love for his unholy people.

Because without holiness, love lacks moral integrity and accountability. And without moral integrity and accountability, love lacks lasting fidelity.

That is precisely what God longs for from his people. Precisely what he has offered them. So what motivates God to judge?

[24 : 17] It's his covenantal love and holiness. How does God judge? He goes after all our pride and power and prosperity and pleasure in public religion that keeps us away from him. And why does God judge?

Because he is the creator over all. And it's only as we come to the New Testament in Christ that we discover just how deep are the creator's commitment to his creation.

How willing and how far and how long the creator is willing to go to save us. We discover in the New Testament that the Lion of Judah becomes the Lamb of God.

The one who roars over his people becomes silent before his persecutors who cry, crucify him. He who knew no sin becomes sin. The judge is judged in our place and the creator is crucified for us.

And it's also in the New Testament that we discover in the wake of Jesus Christ that with more grace comes more responsibility and accountability. It was Jesus himself who said, to whom much is given, much is required.

[25 : 32] Now the Apostle John assures us that if you have strayed from God, you can return to him knowing that you have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. The Apostle John assures us that if you confess your sins and oh, how we need to confess our sins.

He is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. The Apostle John assures us of these lovely gospel realities and yet the author of the Hebrews also warns us, do not turn away from the extravagant grace that you have been given in Christ.

Do not take it for granted. Or he says, it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God. For our God is a consuming fire.

My brothers and sisters, I speak these things to you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen. Amen. Amen.