

Amos Seek & Live

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[0 : 00] Timmy just read Amos chapter 4 and beginning of chapter 5 out for us. And what Amos says there should really change our view of God.

I say that and I think it's really important because there's way too many people sitting in churches, particularly I think in the Western world, where we believe that Christianity means that we should work hard at being really good.

And they believe that God exists to serve them and by helping them in life to make them feel happy and good and secure and at peace in life.

And they believe that even though God might have made the world, fundamentally God isn't active in his world unless I need God to come in and fix stuff, which is when we pray, when things aren't going so well, God come and fix this situation.

The rest of the time, they work on the assumption that God pretty much stays out of the way as I go on with my life. And when I need him, he'll come in and fix things up for me, bail me out.

[1 : 06] The God that we find here in Amos, in fact, the whole book of Amos, but certainly clear in Amos 4 and 5, is not like that at all. As we saw last week, Amos was sent by God to preach a message of judgment to the 10 tribes of north in Israel, about 750 BC.

Two tribes, Israel at this point has split into two, Judah down the bottom, two tribes, 10 tribes of Israel to the north. Judah has got the temple and the city and the north has got naming rights. Amos was sent by God from the south to the north to preach to a people who had become corrupt and complacent and self-centered.

That is, they were meant to be God's people, but they were no different than the nations around them. The justice system was corrupt. The rich exploited the poor. Their sexual standards were no different than the pagan nations. And yet at the same time, and Sam will probably touch on this a bit more next week, at the same time, their religion was, they were really serious about it.

They were deeply serious and committed to their religious practice. But instead of turning their creed into deeds, they've turned their creed into greed. Money and security had become their God.

[2 : 21] And at the beginning of chapter four, we get a feel for the state of this nation. It says, hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, bring us some drinks.

See, Amos here is not being particularly polite to the ladies of Israel. Bashan was the richest agricultural area in Israel.

It was the food bowl, if you like, of Israel. And the livestock from that area were plumped and round and well conditioned. They were the ones who got the best price at the market.

And in a time back in those days where the poor looked like they really needed to have a feed, sort of like supermodels, the rich, on the other hand, displayed their opulence, displayed their wealth by their figures.

They looked like they were well fed. And so what Amos is referring to here is the champagne set. They've surrounded themselves in lives of luxury.

[3 : 33] These are the desperate housewives of Samaria. And the problem is not so much with the champagne and the caviar and the thermomixers. It's in their luxurious lifestyles.

Sorry, I'm just picking the thermomixers. It's just the theme of mine at the moment. It's a cult. So I read that. Sorry, I read that somewhere. I read it somewhere.

I know I've got one. Sorry. The problem is, it's the fact that in all of this, they've lost sight of the poor and the needy and ultimately God.

They walk over the needy and they don't even notice it. Like they trample them under their feet. So what's God's response? The wall, the city wall, the walls of Samaria, the place of their fortress, the

things that they had built up for themselves.

Their place of their fortune and their security are going to have gaping holes in them. You see, what's described here is that Haman is up in the north, up above Samaria.

[5 : 00] And what is described here is what we saw last week that happened 28 years after Amos preached this message. Assyria, the greater nation of Assyria, up around where Turkey is nowadays, came down from the north and they destroyed the capital city of Samaria.

And they led 27,000 of the rich and the elite away into captivity. And one of the things they used to do, the Assyrians did, they were fairly brutal kind of people.

And one of the things they used to do was they would attach all of their captives together with chains. And they would attach the chains through the noses or through the lips of their captives and march them.

And that's what's described here. You're going to be carted away like fish hooks. Like if you've got a fish hook stuck in your mouth, you're going to be carted away through the walls of Samaria. Now, it's just not the women that he's picking on here.

In chapter 6, verse 1, Amos says this about the men. He says, Woe to you who are complacent in Zion. And then in verse 4 of chapter 6, he says, You lie on beds adorned with ivory and lounge on your couches.

[6 : 09] You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves. You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments. You drink wine by the volfil and you use the finest of lotions.

But you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph. You do not grieve over the ruin of God's people.

They're celebrating, they're relaxing, and they should be grieving.

And the absolute height of their hypocrisy is that they think God's more interested in their sacrifices and their attendance at their church services and all their religious duty than he is in the state of their hearts.

Chapter 4, verse 4 is referring to their altar in Bethel. It's where they would go and do their rituals. Bethel literally means house of God.

So this is what they did when they went to the house of God. Go to Bethel and sin. That's what they did when they went to church. Go to Bethel and sin. Go to Gilgal and sin yet more. Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three years.

[7 : 14] Burn your leavened bread as a thank offering. And brag about your free will offerings. Boast about them, you Israelites, for that is what you love to do. Their religion was complacent.

It was smug. It was self-congratulating. And in chapter 5, verse 21, Sam will deal with more of this next week, but it gives us a bit of a sneak peek into what God thought about their religion.

And it turns out here that God hated going to church with these people. He says, What does God want them to do?

He wants them to live out who they are as his special covenant people. That's what he wants. And what is happening here in Amos chapter 4 is God actually throwing out warning sign after warning sign after warning sign in the hope that his people would remember his special relationship with them and they would come back to him in repentance.

So let's see how God does that. Let's start at verse 6. I gave you empty stomachs in every city and lack of bread in every town.

[8 : 48] Yet you have not returned to me, declares the Lord. I also withheld rain from you when the harvest was still three months away.

That's crucial because the three-month part is when the grain starts to form in the head. No rain at that point. Crops useless. As sent rain on one town, but withheld it from another.

One field had rain, another had none and dried up. People staggered from town to town for water, but did not get enough to drink. Yet you have not returned to me, declares the Lord.

Many times I struck your gardens and your vineyards, destroying them with blight and mildew.

Locusts devoured your fig and olive trees. Yet you have not returned to me, declares the Lord.

I sent plagues among you as I did in Egypt. I killed your young men with a sword along with your captured horses. I filled your nostrils with the stench of your camps.

[9 : 53] That's the rotting corpses of their children. Yet you have not returned to me, declares the Lord. I overthrew some of you as I overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah.

You were like a burning stick snatched from the fire. Yet you have not returned to me, declares the Lord. Five times we read there that God says, I threw the warning signs out at you.

I threw it at you. It should have been obvious for you to see so that you would return to me in repentance. It should not have been a surprise to them at all. They had God's word in front of them. It was all spelled out to them in black and white. You see, 500 years before this, 500 years before, just as Israel was about to come into the promised land, God speaks to them.

And in Deuteronomy 28, we have God telling them what would happen. He says, If you ignore me, you get in the land and you ignore me, I'll withhold the rain.

[10:58] He says, If you get in the land and you ignore me, you will go hungry. If you ignore me, I will send blight and mildew upon your vineyards. If you ignore me, the promised land that I'm bringing you into will spit you out.

God told them it would happen. And their only hope here is that they would turn back to God and repent. So God is saying here, I have been trying to get your attention. I gave, I withheld, I sent, I struck, I killed, I filled, I withheld.

God did it all. He did it all to his people. He's trying to get their attention.

Now imagine, my family sound asleep upstairs in our home at two o'clock in the morning, and someone decides to throw bricks through the bedroom windows. My immediate response would be, that's really antisocial.

Probably in a slightly more extreme form than that, at two o'clock in the morning. But what if downstairs is on fire, and those people are trying to get my attention?

[12:12] That changes it, doesn't it? And that's what God's doing here. All of these things came from the hand of God. He's calling them to listen, to read the signs, to see what's happening.

Look, look, look. Something is desperately wrong. And he's trying to call them back. He's trying to remind the Israelites of their covenant relationship.

These disasters were, yes, they did come from a God in a sense of judgment, but they were the severe mercy of a patient God. They were his tough love, if you like.

God has been throwing bricks through the window for Israel, but they hadn't returned. They hadn't repented. And so God says, in chapter 4, verse 12, Israel, prepare to meet your God.

And then, we get a description of what this God is like. This is the God who made the stars. This is the God who turns blackness into dawn. This is the God who speaks, and the waters fill this sea.

This is the God who speaks, and he brings mountains down to nothing.

[13:19] This is the God who loves righteousness, justice, mercy, and compassion. So I want to ask you, the very first thing, how big is your God? How big was the God that you came here tonight with?

Is he big enough to be a God of righteous anger and compassion? A God who brings both blessing and disaster? Or is he just the God who jumps in and solves your problems when you need to solve a problem and just stay away from most of the time?

There are not many places in the Bible clearer on this issue than Isaiah 45, exactly who this God is. Isaiah 45, verses 5 to 7, It says, I, the Lord, do all of these things.

Is that your God? That is the God of the Bible. A God who, as you see in, for instance, the book of Romans, who has his heavy hand on his creation.

Has his heavy hand where he has set these frustrations at the creation into frustration that we might not put our hope in the things that God gives us, the things that he has made, but in actual fact have our hope in the God who creates all things.

[15:00] The bad things of our world are the nature of the world in which we live in under the heavy hand of God. It is our God, our creator, lovingly, mercifully throwing bricks through the window.

They say, come back to me. He's trying to get our attention to remind us that we need him and that hope and glory and joy and life is found only him. We need to seek him and come back to him.

And that's the essence of his appeal in chapter 5 of Amos. It says, seek me and live. Seek the Lord and live or he will sweep through the tribes of Joseph like a fire and it will devour them and Bethel will have no one to quench it.

Seek me and live. And Amos is saying this to Israel, saying, dudes, it's not too late. Repent.

Come back to God. God did all of these things to Israel and they should have seen the writing on the wall. They should have acknowledged it as being the hand of God. They should have feared him and turned back, but they didn't.

[16:11] Why? Because life was too good. And they just assumed that because life was good and things were flourishing, that's God, because that's what God does, doesn't he?

God just, he's there to support my life and my goals and my adventures. And these things that were sent by God were just seen as mere speed humps.

In an otherwise comfortable, self-indulgent life, they ignored God. They rejected his warning signs and 28 years later, fishhooks carted off to Assyria.

750 years later, after Amos, Jesus turns up in Israel and declares himself to be this same God in the flesh. It's God to come and dwell amongst his people.

The same God who made Israel his special people centuries earlier, has now come amongst his people. And when God actually turned up, Israel did, 750 years later, what they did in Amos' time and they rejected Jesus, is what they did.

[17:18] Luke chapter 12 to 14, if you've got your Bibles, flick over to Luke. Luke chapter 12 to 14, we have Jesus issuing warnings to Israel again and lamenting the state of Israel.

He says that Israel is desolate and will be until, they will be desolate, they will be barren until they recognize their Savior and their Lord.

And in chapter 12, verse 49, Jesus says that he has come to do God's will. And his mission statement is this, I have come to bring fire on the earth and how I wish it were already kindled.

In other words, the same language which is used in Amos as Jesus now uses here, language of fire, that is the judgment of God, is now here. And Jesus says, I wish it was already kindled.

In fact, I wish it was happening right now, is what he says. I've come to bring judgment and I want it to happen right now. And what he says is, a little bit, next verses on, anyone, anyone who's got eyes to see can see that that is what I am here to do.

[18:37] Notice who I am and what I've come to do. You'll be able to see that God is at work. He's doing something really important. And so right at the very end of chapter 12, Jesus calls people to settle their spiritual accounts with God.

And he says, a failure to settle the spiritual account with God will result in God extracting every single last cent out of you that you owe him.

And it's a debt which is incalculable that we can never pay back. And it's a picture of God's eternal judgment upon sinners. And that is what sets up this interaction that Jesus has in Luke 13, where he says, now there was some present at that time.

So hearing Jesus say this, there was some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. So there's some kind of political uprising in Galilee and Pilate comes along, squashes it, and he squashes it by killing everyone in church. That's kind of what he does. And so, and then it goes on, Jesus answered, do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered in this way?

[19:56] I tell you, no. But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or, those 18 who died when the Tower of Siloam fell on them, do you think that they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?

I tell you, no. But unless you repent, you too will all perish. In our world, there's two major ways that we respond to disasters in this world.

There's the moralistic, legalistic, religious approach, which instinctively assumes that when I've, when something disastrous, some crisis hits my life, I've done something wrong.

I cannot tell you the number of people who I face who have, who've got some problem in their life and their immediate response is, I must have done something wrong. I can't think of what I've done wrong.

I must have done something wrong. We put the blame on the individual. Another name for it is karma or the, what we generally refer to as what goes, what goes around, comes around.

[21:01] The other response, so one response lays it on the responsibility of the individual. The other response is the skeptical, irreligious response where we blame the universe generally or God.

The purposelessness of the universe, you know, they're really unlucky, bad timing, wrong place, wrong time, that kind of stuff or we just simply blame it on God. And this view works on the assumption that most people are good, hardworking and deserve a decent life.

The first one assumes you do something wrong, you deserve to pay for it. The other one assumes we're good, we're hardworking, deserve a decent life. This means that some people don't get the good life they deserve.

Life stinks, it makes no sense and the universe or God is unfair and doing something terribly wrong. So it's either I'm doing something wrong or God's doing something wrong.

That's generally the two ways we split it. And Jesus comes along and says, no, that's not wrong.

That's right. That's all totally wrong. He said, no, is what he said.

[22 : 06] He said, no. He said, that's not the way to look at it. He says, both of those alternatives don't work.

One makes you incredibly proud or smug because no disasters happen in my life and I'm getting what I deserve. I'm doing all right. I'm not doing anything wrong. Proud and smug. The other makes you totally despondent.

Don't know if I'm going to step out today. I'm going to get splattered by a bus no matter what I do. It doesn't matter how I live. Anything. A rock can fall on me. Who knows? And in verses 3 and 5, Jesus says, no.

But if he just lifted it at that, the crowd would go, well, that's a relief. Thanks for that. Fantastic. Let's move on. But he adds. He says, no. And then he adds, but unless you repent, you too will all perish. Why do you have to add that bit? Why does he add it? Because he's saying something really tough. And it's probably one of the hardest things that Jesus says.

[23 : 10] This has been the category of hard things Jesus says. What he's saying here is everyone deserves to have the tower fall on them.

Not just that 18. Everyone deserves to have the tower fall on them. He's saying if God gave us what we deserve, if he, going back to the end of chapter 12, if he extracted the very last cent out of what we owe him, we all would have towers fall on us with no mercy whatsoever if he gave us what we deserve.

He's showing us something really important here. Something that, frankly, our human hearts don't want to accept. There isn't a single person who has ever received even a small fraction of the consequences of the stupid and the wrong and the proud and the selfish things that they've done. not a single person. I cannot tell you how many times I have escaped certain death because of the stupidity of my actions.

I grew up with motorbikes, explosives, and guns. Just to give you an idea. Stupid actions. God has rescued me. God has rescued me.

[24 : 36] God graciously again and again and again and again does not give us what we deserve. And yet, on the other hand, if we really saw what was truly wrong with our hearts, the pride, the anger, the deception, the envy, the denial, the greed, we would actually know that God owes us nothing.

He doesn't owe us anything and he certainly doesn't owe us a comfortable life. That is not the purpose of his mission. We are much more flawed and lost than our hearts dare believe and yet, what we'll see in a moment in Jesus, we are much more loved and cared for and protected than we could ever dream possible.

Notice it's Jesus who's doing the talking here and notice who it is that he's talking to. Jesus is addressing people who have witnessed a tragedy but they haven't experienced it themselves. They've seen towers fall, they've heard about it but it's not falling on them. He's warning these people because when you are going through a smooth patch in your life, you're seeing disaster somewhere else but it's not happening to you, you're in a very dangerous spiritual territory is what he's saying.

what he's saying here is there's no greater spiritual crisis than to have no crisis in your life. That was the problem for Israel and it's a problem for us.

[26 : 23] The default mode of the human heart is it's self-justifying. That's what it does and there is no better time for self-justification to happen than during the calm times, the safe times, the comfortable times, the prosperous times because in that moment we get greater and greater confidence in ourselves and our ability and we don't need God.

We become self-made people and what does Jesus say to do in the dangerous times, the safe times, the comfortable times, the secure times? He says repent.

That's what the call is here. Repent and the most important time to repent is in fact when things are going well. it's in those times we become complacent, self-assured, self-secure, self-confident.

You see the essence of sin in the Bible is where we substitute God for ourselves. We don't need a sovereign God to run life our way and it's in those days of comfort and safety and ease that we're

most likely to say we don't need God, we've got life worked out ourselves.

That's what Israel did in Amos' time and in Jesus' time, they become complacent, they become self-righteous, self-justifying and very religious. The real hope of their hearts had become the comforts that they were enjoying, they had given their hearts and their allegiance to the blessings God had given them and taken it away from God himself.

[27 : 54] And so like Amos before him, Jesus walks into this situation, he calls Israel and us to repent, and that's where Jesus leaves us as he goes on to tell this little parable in the very next verses in Luke 13.

Starting at verse 6, it says, a man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, for three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and I haven't found any.

Cut it down. Why should it use up the soil? Sir, the man replied, leave it alone for one more year and I'll dig around and I'll fertilize and if it bears fruit next year, fine.

If not, then cut it down. So there's this owner of this tree, looking for fruit, finds no fruit from the tree. Fig trees bore fruit in the third year so it's totally reasonable that the owner would expect fruit from this tree.

There's no fruit. The owner is patient with his fruitless tree. It's given one more chance before the chainsaw comes out. The person who tends a tree is going to try and make it fruitful before it cuts it down.

[29 : 15] So this tree I've got in the backyard over at home, it's a lime tree and when I first moved there about eight years ago, I had about four or five limes on it.

I didn't know what they were actually initially. Found out they were good for G&T.; And apparently. So this tree, I thought, well, I'd like a lot more limes than that.

So I decided to look after it. So dug around it, fertilised it, constantly put trace elements in it, all the stuff you're meant to do for citrus trees.

And ever since then, not a single fruit has come on this tree. Years have been waiting. I've even taken Luke 13 out to the tree and read it to the tree.

One more year tree is all I'm going to give you. But no fruit yet. I'm just obviously patient with this poor tree. So, but the point here is that God's patience is long, but we should never be jam on it.

[30 : 19] Even God's patience has an end. fruit. What he wants here is fruit. And what's the fruit that he wants? Repentance. How do I know that? Because that's what he calls us to do in the early verses of Luke 13.

He calls us to repent. And what God's wanting here from Amos, from Israel in Amos' time, again here from Israel in Luke, and what he's calling us to here as well, is a life of repentance and faith. And repentance and faith, sorry, repentance is the fruit of faith. Now, many people, religious people, think that repentance is what you do when you've done bad things.

But the Bible says all of life is repentance. Repentance is all of life. The first of Martin Luther's 95 thesis that he nailed to the door at All Saints Church in Wittenberg about 500 years ago, which started the Protestant Reformation in which we stand as a church, the very first of the 95, he wrote this.

I'll read in English because I can't read German. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said repent, he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.

[31 : 34] And he was particularly kicking against the idea you just come to church, you say you're sorry, and then you leave church and you live how you want to live for the rest of the week.

Religious understanding of repentance is I'm atoning for my sins once a week, just say sorry and that's it.

Gospel repentance is fruit of faith in God. Religious repentance is what I do when I fail. Gospel repentance is what I do when I succeed. All of life is repentance and the fruit that God is looking for in Luke 13 is repentance.

You cannot separate repentance from faith. That is, the idea that you can say, Jesus, forgive me for my sins, but I don't want you to be in charge of my life, is a destructive delusion.

Repenting of any error means going in the opposite direction by practicing the virtues that are directly opposite to the vice. Repentance is the pathway to having sins forgiven and restoration of relationship with God.

A refusal to repent is the road to destruction. Anything, anything can be repaired except for an unwillingness to repent.

[32 : 54] Any wrong can be made right, but not if you don't admit that it is wrong. Disaster looms for the unresponsive. That is the message of Amos chapter 4.

It's the message of Luke 13. And that's the toughness of Jesus' words in Luke 13 verse 9. If it bears fruit next year, fine, but if not, cut it down.

Even God's patience has an end and his judgment will fall. Now the most interesting and I think the marvellous thing about this little story, the fig tree, is that apparently there are two people involved in this little story.

There's the owner of the fig tree and there's the person who cares for the fig tree. The owner who wants the fruit and the carer who wants to give it one more chance. In fact, it's one person.

The owner of the tree is in fact the one who tends the tree and it's this person who is wrestling with themselves over the fate of their tree.

[34 : 03] I want it to bear fruit, but I will cut it down. There is a desire for both justice and mercy.

The owner of the tree is at the same time the one to be escaped, the one that the tree means to escape from because it doesn't want to be cut down and yet it's also the one in which the tree might find refuge.

The same Jesus who said this hard word is also the same Jesus who opened up the way back to God. He's the one who said, my mission is to bring fire, but he's the one who put himself under the flame.

He made it possible for us to seek God and live. Jesus is the one who allowed the ultimate tower of God's judgment to fall on him instead.

He allowed himself to be cut down by God, the massive tower of God's eternal justice. What we deserve for trusting everything else apart from God and ignoring God came down on him on the cross.

And so the reason God can be so patient with us and good to us and give us good things that we do not deserve day in and day out is because Jesus Christ got what he didn't deserve.

[35 : 27] He was cut down so that we don't have to. And the reason that God will never give the Christian what they deserve but something infinitely better is because God gave Jesus what he didn't deserve.

Something incredibly bad. Cut down to death and abandoned by God, pushed aside so that the great tower might fall on him.

and he says to Israel, and we get to look on as he says this to Israel, look, look and see what I am doing.

Look at the cross and marvel and see something significant that's happening at the cross here. See the justice of God on display as mercy for you.

see the justice of God poured out on the cross and flee to the cross. Don't ignore the cross, read the signs, see, look at the cross and see what your sin and your injustice deserves.

[36 : 44] That's what you should be getting when you see Jesus on the cross. Look and see what you should be getting and flee to Jesus. Find refuge, as I said last week, in the lion who roars.

He is a safe place. Now in the last number of weeks, I preached on loving our neighbor and the need to live below our means.

For the gospel of Jesus demands a change in the stand of our lifestyles. I preached on the spiritual battle that we're involved in and the need for us to be Bible saturated people, committing this church consistently, its leaders, its mission, its vision, its finances to God in prayer.

There's been a lot of challenges in the last number of weeks that I've been preaching and I want to ask you, what has changed? What have you done?

What's changed for you? Because to hear the word of God and to ignore it and for nothing to change, isn't that what Israel's been accused of here in Amos?

[37 : 59] Of ignoring the word of God? This is a great sermon. In fact, we're actually going to see they were very religious in church all the time. They presumed on the patience of God.

They took his patience as an excuse for complacency. They actually just assumed God was on their side because he wasn't doing anything too bad to them. Money and security become their true God. Money is what they actually served and in the pursuit of money they lost sight of what's right and they especially lost sight of God.

Now let me tell you that as I said last week or the week before, we saw an incredible response to the mission project, a one-off response. We've got a card for it. But the church finances have not changed at all.

At all. We're currently \$37,000. I got it wrong. I said \$34,000 this morning. \$37,000 behind. That's a repentance issue.

It's not a bank balance issue. It's a repentance issue. It's a spiritual issue. The New Testament word for repentance means the changing of my mind so that my values, my views, my goals, my ways, my behavior, my lifestyle change.

[39 : 16] All of life changes, live differently. And this radical change is both an inward change and an outward change. It's my mind and my judgment.

It's my will and my affections. It's my behavior and my lifestyle. It's my motives and my purposes. Everything is changed. That's what repentance is. It's not just saying sorry for doing some bad stuff. It's the radical reshaping of my mind because that's what the gospel demands. It's Lord and Savior Jesus demands my entire life. So friends, as Amos said to Israel, I say to you, seek the Lord and live.

Theologian