



Seek God

God expects His people to seek Him and demonstrate His character.

AMOS 5:4-15

Three year olds love to play hide and seek. They want us to count while they run and hide. However, they typically pick places to hide where they can easily be seen—under the piano bench, poking out from behind the recliner, or behind the glass coffee table. They hide in easy places because they want to be found. As we begin a lesson about seeking God, it is good to note that He is not hiding in difficult places far away from us—because He, too, wants us to find Him.

What is something people must seek to find it? How does a person go about seeking that thing?

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

AMOS 5:1–6:14

When Israel divided into two kingdoms, Solomon's son, Rehoboam, became king of Judah, including the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. Jerusalem remained the capital city and worship in the temple continued. Jeroboam and the other ten tribes revolted and formed the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Israel was separated by political boundaries from the temple in Jerusalem, and Jeroboam knew that to hold the nation together, they needed their own place of worship. In the place of the temple, he established two centers of worship in Israel—Bethel and Dan—and fashioned two golden calves (1 Kings 12:28). The altars were conveniently located for people throughout the kingdom with Bethel in the south and Dan in the north. However, worship that is convenient but misplaced is not a good thing.

After establishing new places of worship, Jeroboam instituted new practices of worship. He established a feast in the eighth month that was designed to rival the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles in the seventh month in Judah (1 Kings 12:33). At this feast, worshipers offered sacrifices and burned incense on the altar, practices that modeled worship in the temple. The worship did not bring them closer to God but further separated them from Him (Amos 4:4). The people attended worship under the pretense of seeking God but did not seek Him in the way He wanted to be sought. They wanted a god on their own terms rather than the true God of Israel.

In Amos 5:18–6:14, Amos confronted the people of Israel with three misconceptions. First, they believed the Day of the Lord would be a day of salvation for them. Amos indicated it would be a day of catastrophe (5:18-20). Second, they believed they were secure in their relationship with God because of their repetitive meetings for worship and the offerings they presented to Him (5:21-27). Amos revealed to them that God had rejected their pretentious religious displays. Third, they thought they could trust in their military and affluence to protect them from their enemies (6:1-14). But there was nothing that could protect them from God's instrument of judgment He was going to bring down upon them.

As you read Amos 5:4-15, contemplate how merciful and gracious God is to call His people back to Him even during their rebelliousness and through a message of judgment.

EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

THE CHOICE (AMOS 5:4-9)

⁴ For the LORD says to the house of Israel: Seek me and live! ⁵ Do not seek Bethel or go to Gilgal or journey to Beer-sheba, for Gilgal will certainly go into exile, and Bethel will come to nothing.

⁶ Seek the LORD and live, or he will spread like fire throughout the house of Joseph; it will consume everything with no one at Bethel to extinguish it. ⁷ Those who turn justice into wormwood also throw righteousness to the ground. ⁸ The one who made the Pleiades and Orion, who turns darkness into dawn and darkens day into night, who summons the water of the sea and pours it out over the surface of the earth — the LORD is his name. ⁹ He brings destruction on the strong, and it falls on the fortress.

VERSES 4-5

Amos called the people to seek God rather than participate in idolatry. This came as an invitation from God: *Seek me and live!* In his previous sermon, Amos had sounded the note of judgment for Israel as a nation but emphasized that a remnant would be saved (chap. 4).

What did God mean by the invitation to seek Him? Whenever the phrase is used in Scripture it has one of three meanings. First, it could describe a prophetic consultation with the Lord (1 Chron. 10:13-14). This is what was happening when Amos preached, bringing the Word of God to the people. Second, it described a turning to the Lord in repentance and faith (Deut. 4:29). This meaning fit the message of the previous sermon Amos preached in chapter 4. Finally, to seek the Lord was to visit Him in His temple at Jerusalem (2 Chron. 11:16). All of these meanings reflected ways Israel needed to seek the Lord. They needed to listen to the prophet,

turn to the Lord in repentance, and stop worshiping in false ways at false altars.

The latter meaning of seeking the Lord is found in verse 5, where Amos discouraged the people from going to *Bethel* or *Gilgal* or *Beer-sheba*. Amos had previously referred to Bethel and Gilgal (Amos 4:4). Beer-sheba was an ancient shrine of worship associated with Abraham (Gen. 21:14) and was still a shrine of worship in the days of the divided kingdom. Unlike the other shrines, it was in the southern part of Judah, not Israel. Amos indicated that *Gilgal will certainly go into exile, and Bethel will come to nothing*, though he said nothing about the fate of Beer-sheba. His message was to the Northern Kingdom, and so he indicated that Israel would be exiled while Judah would remain.

BIBLE SKILL: *Use a Bible dictionary to better understand the background.*

Read articles in a Bible dictionary about Bethel, Gilgal, and Beer-sheba. Note what events recorded in the Old Testament happened at these locations in Israel's history and consider how Israel allowed commemorating those events to become a substitute for their own devotion to the Lord. What should believers today learn from what Israel did in Amos's day?

VERSES 6-7

If Israel refused to turn from their false worship at false altars, God would *spread like fire throughout the house of Joseph*. Fire was synonymous with the judgment of God, and even the sacrifices offered by fire on foreign altars at *Bethel* would not save them. The *house of Joseph* was a clear reference to the nation of Israel, which included the defection of the largest tribe, Ephraim, which was named for Joseph's son.

In verse 7, Amos described their worship as turning *justice into wormwood*. Wormwood was the most bitter of plants, and by worshiping with impure lives on false altars the people had changed sweet justice into bitter injustice. God desires worship on His terms from lives that are surrendered to Him.

What are substitutes that people seek instead of God, and how do those substitutes fall short of true worship?

VERSES 8-9

God was not a localized deity present only in Jerusalem, Amos identified Him as the One who *made the •Pleiades and •Orion*. These were two well-known constellations. The God the Israelites needed to seek was in charge of the heavens. Baal worshipers thought Baal sent the rain, but it was God who *turns darkness into dawn and darkens day into night*, and *summons the water of the sea and pours it out over the surface of the earth*. *The LORD*, not Baal, was *his name*.

Amos declared that God *brings destruction* on those who think themselves to be *strong*. Even the strongest people are not immune to the judgment of God. Neither is the *fortress* strong enough to withstand God's judgment. Israel may have considered themselves stronger than Judah, and they were politically and economically stronger at times. But what were they in comparison to God?

How does focusing on God's rule over all things created impact a person's worship?

KEY DOCTRINE: *God*

There is one and only one living and true God. (See Exodus 3:14; 1 Timothy 1:17.)

THE REALITY (AMOS 5:10-13)

¹⁰ They hate the one who convicts the guilty at the city gate, and they despise the one who speaks with integrity. ¹¹ Therefore, because you trample on the poor and exact a grain tax from him, you will never live in the houses of cut stone you have built; you will never drink the wine from the lush vineyards you have planted. ¹² For I know your crimes are many and your sins innumerable. They oppress the righteous, take a bribe, and deprive the poor of justice at the city gates. ¹³ Therefore, those who have insight will keep silent at such a time, for the days are evil.

VERSES 10-11

The refusal to seek God not only manifested itself in the wrong places the Israelites went to worship but also in their lack of character. Their lives at the altar were polluted by their lives at the *city gate*. The *city gate* was a reference to their business transactions.

The perverted justice of the Israelites was seen in their attitude toward *the one who speaks with integrity*. They loved to *trample on the poor* by collecting a *grain tax* from them. The word *trample* can be used of one who levy's taxes, indicating they were targeting the poor with taxes they couldn't afford. Because Israel refused to care for the least in their society, God would take action against them. He would cause them to *never live in the houses of cut stone*. The Israelites were using their oppression of the poor to build grand homes. But because their nation was going into exile at the hands of the Assyrians, they would never inhabit them. The Israelites had planted *lush vineyards* but would not see the fruit. Payday for our sins always arrives, and in that day what will it matter what we have profited because of our own sin?

Why might a person believe that God would overlook the mistreatment of the poor and unethical gain because of that mistreatment?

VERSES 12-13

The sins of Israel were *innumerable*. Though Amos did not list them all, he did refer to three representative sins of the nation.

First, they *oppress the righteous*. To *oppress* someone was to cause distress in their lives by hindering them or impeding them. They held the poor down by their restrictive actions. Second, the Israelites took a *bribe*. By referring to the poor as *righteous*, Amos indicated that they were innocent of the crime, but the Israelites accepted a bribe to convict the poor. Third, they deprived *the poor of justice at the city gates*. They deprived them the opportunity to have their plea heard and tried.

Because the poor could not have their day in court, they were silenced by their oppressors. However, God would turn the tables on the Israelites when it was their day in court. They *who have insight* into what was taking place would be silent under the judgment of God. They would sit in silence as God exacted His judgment upon them. They would be unable to defend themselves, as the poor were currently unable to defend themselves. Far from oppressing the Israelites, God was exacting justice against them.

Why it is easy to remain silent in the midst of injustices around us? Why is it difficult to remain silent when we are in the middle of God's discipline?

THE SOLUTION (AMOS 5:14-15)

¹⁴ Pursue good and not evil so that you may live, and the LORD, the God of Armies, will be with you as you have claimed. ¹⁵ Hate evil and love good; establish justice at the city gate. Perhaps the LORD, the God of Armies, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

VERSES 14-15

True repentance is accompanied by action, and Amos called the people of Israel to *pursue good and not evil*. To seek the Lord (v. 4) was also to *pursue good* (v. 14).

God sought a remnant of people to follow Him, and they would not be able to do so until they addressed their oppression of the poor. Israel *claimed* that *the LORD, the God of Armies* was with them. But that claim was false as long as they continued to walk in disobedience to Him. By all outward standards, the Israelites were

religious, but their worship was misdirected and their lives were ungodly. True religion was about more than rituals. It was about a relationship with God that reflected itself in one's relationship with others.

They needed to change the mechanisms that held back the poor from changing their plight.

Amos again directed the people of Israel to *hate evil and love good*. Far from loving those they oppressed, the Israelites expressed their disdain for the oppressed by their actions toward them and lack of justice for their cause. The place to start seeing change was the place where oppression was the greatest—at the *city gate*. They had to *establish justice* at the place where much of the wrong had been done. Saying they were sorry would not be enough. They needed to change the mechanisms that held back the poor from changing their plight.

If the Israelites would turn from their sin, then God would *be gracious* to them. The use of *perhaps* is a reminder that God's grace cannot be earned, bought, or bartered. It is a sovereign act of God alone, who shows mercy on those whom He desires (Rom. 9:18). We cannot barter for His grace; neither can we buy it. We must repent and trust Him. If the nation was willing to confront its own sin, then God would perhaps spare a *remnant of Joseph*. A remnant was a portion rather than the whole. God's judgment awaited Israel in 722 BC with the invasion of Assyria. Amos held out hope that some would avoid that wrath by turning from their evil ways and throwing themselves upon the mercy of God. Those who loved good and upheld justice would indicate they were sincere in seeking God, and therefore they would live.

Why are loving good and upholding justice indicators that a person is seeking God?

APPLY THE TEXT

- All people must choose to trust God.
- Believers should expect God to take action to discipline His people.
- Believers are to be characterized by loving good and upholding justice.

What does pursuing good and establishing justice look like in your Bible study group? What principles should guide your group as you seek God by seeking to do those things?

Look for ways you may be seeking a substitute for God rather than seeking the Lord. How can you more fully seek the Lord in your life.

PRAYER NEEDS
