

Let Justice Roll Down

A Sermon on Amos 5:18-27

by
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1. Introduction

2. The Israelites Held a False Hope (vv. 18-20)

a. The Israelites looked with great fervor to the coming Day of the Lord for salvation, but to them it would be a day of woe (v. 18a).

i. The prophet begins this section with an incredibly shocking message to Israel once again: he pronounces “woe” upon the one who is longing for the Day of the Lord (v. 18).

1. The pronouncement of “woe” upon anyone is never a good thing in Scripture, but it is an especially bad thing for the Israelites hearing this from Amos.

a. When you’re hearing this come from the mouth of a prophet, it is tightly connected to Divine judgment.

b. What’s more unique here is that woe is being pronounced upon are those who are longing for the Day of the Lord.

2. This day of judgment will be fulfilled partially in the very near future for the Northern Kingdom, but it will also be fulfilled completely in the Last Days.

a. The Northern Kingdom is being judged, and so much like you see in Amos 5:17, God will visit them, but as we know, He will visit them in judgment.

b. Any good Hebrew knew the Day of the Lord was supposed to be a great and joyous day for them.

b. The Israelites proved to hope falsely in the Day of the Lord due to their rebellious and idolatrous hearts (vv. 18b-20).

- i. Amos looks at these people who have great hope in the return of the Lord at the end of this age and he says to them, “Woe to you!”
 - 1. “For what purpose will the day of the Lord be to you? It will be darkness and not light; as when a man flees from a lion and a bear confronts him, or he goes home, leans with his hand against the wall, and a snake bites him. Will the day of the Lord not be darkness instead of light, even gloom with no brightness in it?”
 - 2. To the people of Israel, he says that day should not be a means of comfort to them, but a thing of terror—and the simple reason for this is that their judgment is unavoidable.
 - a. Then he gives a simile for what that day will be like for them.
 - b. The point of this section is to simply show that no matter what lengths they go to avoid the judgment of God, He will be waiting for them.
- ii. All of this is designed to shock them and pull them out of their stupor.
 - 1. They have little to no understanding that all of their hopes and expectations are going to betray them.
 - a. Amos is doing it all with a singular goal in mind: these people are unbelievers who have fooled themselves into thinking they are children of God.
 - b. They are guilty of incredible crimes against God and humanity—and all the while they still hope that on the Day when God destroys the enemies of His people, He will be on their side.
 - 2. They presumed falsely that God’s promises were for them, and this is a constant danger of many who likewise call themselves Christian today.

- a. Many beloved, and I do mean many, profess to love Christ, and yet they falsely presume that they are Christians.
- b. We can likewise be found guilty of holding to the various false hopes this world is dying to get you to believe and cherish.

3. The Israelites Maintained False Traditions (vv. 21-24)

a. *The Israelites maintained their traditions with great fervor, but the Lord despised their vain traditions (vv. 21-22).*

- i. Piece by piece, the prophet dismantles every instance of Israel's religious hypocrisy.

- 1. Per the Law of Moses, the Israelites were commanded to attend several feasts and festivals throughout the calendar year.

- a. I'm not going to get into the specifics of what each of these festivals were for because that's not really his point in bringing them up.
- b. However, you will likely recognize the names of each of them from your bible reading.

- 2. The various festivals and feasts they were commanded to observe were:

- a. The Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread (Ex. 12:1-30; Lev. 23:4-8, Num. 28:16-25).
- b. The Offering of the First Fruits (Lev. 23:9-14, Deut. 26:1-10).
- c. The Festival of Weeks (Lev. 23:15-22, Num. 28:26-31).
- d. The Festival of Trumpets (Lev. 23:23-25, Num. 29:1-6).
- e. The Day of Atonement, which was the most significant (Lev. 16, 23:26-32, Num. 19:7-11).
- f. The Festival of Tabernacles (Lev. 23:33-44, Num. 29:12-40).

- ii. Now, some debate on whether or not they would have attended all of the festivals they were commanded to observe under the Law, but I believe they did.
 - 1. The reason for this is relatively simple: the prophet doesn't indicate that they didn't. Instead, all we have to ask is what does the text say?
 - a. "I hate, I reject your festivals, nor do I delight in your festive assemblies."
 - b. The point is: they were faithful to attend all of these festivals, but notice He tells them how he hated, rejected, and did not delight in any of it.
 - 2. And then He moves on to point out that even their personal offerings were even despised in v. 22.
 - a. He says, "Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them; and I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fattened oxen."
 - b. These offerings were all voluntary offerings designed to express appreciation for all that God had done for them as a people.
- b. *Instead, the Lord commanded the Israelites to forsake these things and pursue justice and righteousness (vv. 23-24).*
 - i. God commands them in v. 23, "Take away from Me the noise of your songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps."
 - 1. If it wasn't bad enough that all of their offerings were rejected by God, He then tells them that their songs are basically a cacophony of noise to Him.
 - a. So here you find the Israelites making a grand celebration with their songs.

- b. But God tells them, “Stop. I will not hear it.”
- 2. The first thing this brings to mind is the modern Christian music scene.
 - a. You have a tremendous number of talented musicians who sell out at their concerts and yet the theology put forth in these songs is abysmal.
 - b. Then take a look at their lives—if they’re not defecting from the faith, many of them are caught up in all sorts of evil, which is the same idea in Amos.
- ii. Then God gives them a second charge here that carries the force of a command. He says, “But let justice roll out like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”
 - 1. He once again uses the singular pronoun here, which means He’s not referring to the whole Northern Kingdom. God is calling individuals to repentance.
 - a. God is telling them that all of their vain traditions have only further stored up the wrath of God against them.
 - b. Again, the nation has no hope of redemption, so God calls individuals from within her to repentance. And how?
 - i. They are to stop the empty performance of religious ritual and let justice roll out like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
 - ii. The prophet builds the entire passage around this central idea of an ever-present flow of justice and righteousness that should be characterizing the nation rather than injustice and unrighteousness.
 - 2. The two terms “justice” and “righteousness” are incredibly significant, but unfortunately, they often get twisted simply

because of all the social justice garbage floating around in the church right now.

- a. Both of them carry a legal and a moral sense to them, so He's not talking about being made righteous as a result of faith, but a proper application of the Law given by Moses in the courts, and in their personal relationships.
 - i. In other words: justice refers to the fact that they have a system of justice in place, and that is the Law.
 - ii. Righteousness refers to just basic, moral conduct. A sense of right and wrong—and again, the Law informs them of this, but God Himself has revealed this by how He has dealt faithfully with them for generations.
- b. God is not telling them to abandon their sacrifices, the festivals, or the songs altogether—He is telling them, however, that they must adhere to the weightier matters of the Law, and that they must uplift mercy, kindness, and equity.
- c. But once again, the problem is that we look down our noses at Israel, when in reality we are characterized by many of the same qualities of injustice and unrighteousness.

4. The Israelites Worshipped False Gods (vv. 25-27)

- a. *The Israelites were zealous in their religious devotion, but it was to a plurality of gods (vv. 25-26).*
 - i. Amos pulls back from his call for their repentance to indict them once again—this time, by way of a rhetorical question.

1. “Did you present Me with sacrifices and grain offerings in the wilderness for forty years, house of Israel?”
 - a. The prophet is asking the question tongue-in-cheek; they offered sacrifices throughout their time in the wilderness for 40 years.
 - b. They were a zealous and religious people after all—but they were not devoted to Yahweh alone, which is what v. 26 then clarifies for us.
2. “You also [that is, in addition to offering sacrifices to Yahweh] carried along Sikkuth your king and Kiyyun, your images, the star of your gods which you made for yourselves.”
 - a. We know Israel had a problem with idolatry in the wilderness because of the incident with the golden calf, but what you might not catch is that this verse gets picked up again in the New Testament by the first Christian martyr in Acts 7.
 - b. Stephen’s usage of this text may seem to present some difficulties at first glance simply because he uses different names than Amos does.
 - i. However, Stephen is using names familiar to his audience, whereas Amos is doing the same thing.
 - ii. There is also a little bit of wordplay that Amos uses here to ridicule the false gods Israel has been worshipping.
- ii. Amos is saying essentially the same thing the martyr Stephen did. Israel has always had a problem with false worship.
 1. It didn’t stop with the golden calf for those in the wilderness for 40 years, and as you read your Old Testament, you’ll see time and again how the Israelites continue to go after false gods.

- a. These false gods go by various names, but they all represent the same issue: Israel was perpetually guilty of failing to worship God alone.
 - b. But likewise, they are perpetually guilty of worshipping the same false gods, from generation to generation.
- 2. It is all summed up by unbelief. The false gods they worshipped are the fruit of their unbelief.
 - a. Another way to put it is that the nation of Israel, as a whole, never loved God and God alone.
 - b. And so, as a result, we come to what he now says of them in v. 27.
- b. *As a result of their idolatry, they would go into exile just as the Israelites did during the Exodus (v. 27).*
 - i. The point Amos makes here is that just as they are guilty of the same sins of their ancestors, they will face the same punishment.
 - 1. They went after false gods, and just as the Israelites were led into exile as a result of their idolatry, this generation would also go into exile.
 - 2. Here we find the first specific reference of where they will end up in exile: beyond Damascus.
 - ii. Amos then concludes this oracle of judgment with the fateful words once again: thus, says the Lord, whose name is the God of armies.
 - 1. Once again, God reminds them of who He is: He is the God of all the heavens and the earth.
 - 2. He is the Sovereign One who will send them into exile.
 - a. And one final time, I remind you all of the fact that we can easily be guilty of the same folly as Israel was here.

- b. The same temptations that were present for them are present for us all today, for how quickly and easily do we give our affection to things that ought not captivate us?

5. Conclusion

Small Group Questions

1. In what ways do you see yourself in the same light as Israel? How can you see God's patience and kindness toward you in this?
2. According to Amos 5:23-24, what is to be the defining characteristic of God's people? What does this look like for you practically in your particular context and vocation?
3. Have you grown in your understanding of God's wrath as we have been making our way through the book of Amos?
4. At the end of the sermon, I gave three types of people: the unbeliever, the unrepentant, and the one who despairs over their sin. Where you do see yourself and why?