

# Amos 4-6: Condemnation for Israel

## Introduction

In the previous three chapters Amos begins the book by a stinging prophecy against the neighbors of Israel and Judah. Then God's people are warned of His dissatisfaction with them. Amos was sent to bring a message to the northern ten tribes and by the middle part of chapter two they are clearly in focus. Israel needed to be aware of coming judgment. They were going to fall from rich prosperity to being subjugated as captives to an aggressive nation that would pull down their strength and loot their citadels, 3:11.

## Israel's constant refusal to come back to God

The condemnation of Israel continues into chapters four through six. Chapters four and five do seem to offer one last glimmer of hope of being spared from certain destruction: repent on God's terms. What we have in Amos seems to be God's last appeal to His people, hoping against all hope that they will turn to Him, but all the while knowing they will not. Cows of Bashan in Amos 4:1 was directed to the women of Israel and obviously was not a flattering term. These are the wives of the influential upper class in Samaria. They joined with their husbands in oppressing the poor and crushing the needy. Their interests were focused on their own pleasure and enjoyment of life, drawing their husbands in to spend more time banqueting and reveling. God says that the women of Israel will face certain judgment. They will be humbled. Being led away with meat hooks and fishhooks could refer to the Assyrian practice of piercing the lower lip of their captives with a ring. A rope would be attached to this ring and a person would be led off under complete control of their master. They would be led out of the city in single file through the holes in the city wall pierced through by the intruders. They would be completely humbled.

Verses four and five in chapter four point to the religious corruption in Israel. Hailey comments, "there was an abundance of 'religion' in the land, but no true piety and devotion to God."<sup>1</sup> All of what went on in their religion pleased them, but not God. Bethel (4:4) was one of the original places for worship set up by Jeroboam I (931-910 B.C.). Jeroboam did not want his people returning to Jerusalem (in the southern kingdom) to worship God, so golden calves and altars were erected at Dan and Bethel, 1 Kings 12:28-29. Gilgal (4:4) was the first camping spot of Israel after their arrival in the promised land. Most likely, calf worshippers had erected an altar and shrine in this place. Remember, the only place God commanded His people to worship was in the temple in Jerusalem. Anything else would have been displeasing in the sight of God. Not only is the place of their worship condemned, but the acts and motives behind their worship are brought to light. While bringing sacrifices, paying tithes, and having freewill offerings were part of the Old Testament law, the motives behind the worship were not pure, making their actions unprofitable. Using leavened bread in worship was condemned under the old law, Leviticus 2:11. Their freewill offerings were made in such a way to draw attention to the amount given and were done without any recognition of the sacredness of worshipping their Creator. This worship

was all about them and nothing about God. Verse five goes a long way in showing the condition of their heart: *For so you love to do, you sons of Israel, Declares the Lord God.*

From verse six through the end of the chapter, we read of five ways God tried to prod Israel back to obedience. His prodding went unheeded. This should have not been a surprise to God's people since they had been forewarned. In Deuteronomy 28-29, Israel was warned of certain and just consequences for a violation of the covenant with God. Israel had become so blinded by sin they failed to realize the punishment they received was the judgment of God. *Cleanness of teeth* indicates a lack of food. Amos goes further saying they had a *lack of bread*. We know there were several famines in the years before Amos. One of them was during the reign of Ahab, 1 Kings 17:12, and another during the reign of Jehoram, 2 Kings 4:38, 8:1. These may or may not have been the famines Amos is reminding the people of, but there is little doubt they could look back on their history and recount these devastating famines that decreased their harvests.

We are also told that God caused droughts to take place during their prime growing seasons, affecting the harvest. That this was part of the judgment of God is seen in that certain cities would suffer, while others would be spared, 4:8. Even this would not waken the people from their spiritual slumber. Next, God caused a "scorching wind" to blow. This was a strong east wind off the Arabian Desert which would have dried out their crops, gardens, and tender vegetation. Mildew would have been caused by dampness and very warm temperatures. On top of this God sent out plagues of locusts to devour their crops at various times... all with no reaction from Israel. Next, God sent pestilence and disease to afflict the people like what was commonly experienced by Egypt. Egypt had a reputation for disease, which is noted in Deuteronomy 7:15. This part of God's judgment is a direct fulfillment of the following verses in Deuteronomy:

The Lord will smite you with the boils of Egypt and with tumors and with the scab and with the itch, from which you cannot be healed, Deuteronomy 28:27.

He will bring back on you all the diseases of Egypt of which you were afraid, and they will cling to you, Deuteronomy 28:60.

God also allowed Israelite soldiers to fall in battle of which the corpses were allowed to lay on the ground causing an intolerable stench. Finally, God caused the complete overthrow of some of their cities. The remains of their cities were small, insignificant, and worthless. And still, Israel did not return.

Because of their continual rejection of God, He says through Amos: *Because I will do this to you, Prepare to meet your God, O Israel, 4:12.* God was going to bring a terrible and unavoidable judgment on them all. What exactly is this judgment? Amos does not specify. When the judgment came, there would be no escape. But even in these words, it seems as if God is holding out for one last chance in that they will turn to Him.

## Seek God

As we move into chapter five, Amos laments over Israel. Doom is coming. God is going to pour out His judgment against the people. They needed to prepare. Israel (the virgin, 5:2) was going to fall and would not rise again. None of her allies would move to save her. As a fully functioning nation wielding political

influence, her days were finished. Her cities would be decimated—only a small number of Jews would remain. Everyone and everything would suffer.

In 5:4-6, God offers escape from judgment, urging the nation to repent. They needed to seek the Lord in Jerusalem, not Bethel and Gilgal. In other words, they needed to seek God on His terms, in His ways, and submit to His conditions. There was no hope in deliverance through their golden calves. The cities where these shrines had been built would be destroyed. If they failed to come to God, He would *break forth like a fire which would consume with none to quench it*, 5:6.

What was supposed to be right and just had been turned into “bitter” injustice that hurt everyone involved. God would pour out vengeance on those who perverted justice. *Wormwood* stands for evil and wrongdoing. These were the ones who had cast down righteousness as a worthless and unprofitable thing in Israelite society. God, who creates the weather, has power over the stars, and brings a new day everyday would bring certain and swift judgment on the unsuspecting people of the northern kingdom.

## Four serious charges

Over the next few verses, Amos points out more areas of guilt.

### ***Hatred of reproof and those who speak with integrity, 5:10***

How much does this speak of their society? How much does this speak of our own? When truth is cast down and trampled upon, serious consequences will follow.

### ***Mistreatment of those less fortunate, 5:11***

While taking advantage of the poor at every turn, the rich took every opportunity to increase their riches, building homes of well-hewn stone. Those who made plans to live in them would not have the chance because of the judgment of God.

### ***Numerous transgressions, 5:12***

Their sins were great in number.

### ***They lived in evil times, 5:13***

The times were so bad that righteousness was constantly oppressed. Those who knew the truth and walked uprightly kept silent because of the times in which they lived. The power held in certain places could have been physically dangerous for them to speak out for truth and righteousness.

## Seek good that you may live, 5:14

Israel, in 5:14, is called to turn from its evil ways and seek God. *Hate evil, love good, and establish justice in the gate!* 5:15. This would be a complete reversal of actions for the people, yet God holds out that they will be moved to repentance. For God to be moved away from bringing judgment upon them, they needed to love God, goodness, and righteousness with the same intensity they had loved evil.

Did Amos realize that the calls for repentance were falling on deaf ears? Some believe so because of the usage of the word therefore in 5:16. The sound of wailing and mourning would be heard through the streets and hillsides of their country. While they assumed that God was with them, He had long left them. When He passed through, the next time there would be a much different result than they expected. Israel would suffer as it never had before.

Those who were looking forward to a coming day of the Lord to heap up punishment and retribution to their enemies would be surprised to see that the day of the Lord had been reserved for them. It would be a day of sheer terror and darkness. There would be *no brightness in it*. No one would escape this judgment. One calamity upon the other would follow them until they were destroyed, 5:19-20.

## Empty and vain worship

Their worship to God was an absolute abomination. So much so that God said, *I hate, I reject your festivals, Nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies*. God would not accept their burnt offerings, grain offerings, and peace offerings. Their songs were nothing but noise of which God would not listen. Their worship was void because it lacked true devotion to God. Their hearts were far from Him. Jesus would charge the people of His day with the same charges in Matthew 15:9.

God did not want just their worship . . . He wanted their hearts. If He had their hearts, then justice and righteousness would have characterized the nation. Justice would have been seen in the way they lived their lives outwardly: with godly practices in their personal and social lives. Righteousness was more “internal” in nature—indicating the desire to engage in godly conduct.

Verses twenty-five through twenty-seven tell us the awful truth: Israel had never given themselves fully to God. Even while worshipping God during the forty years in the wilderness, God’s people toyed with idolatry. (See also Ezekiel 20:5-8.) They secretly carried along shrines to their idols and worshipped the “star-god.” In the original Hebrew these gods are called Sikkuth and Kiyyun. The names of these gods were known to the people as *Sakkuth* and *Kaiwan*. Note that the spelling of the names of both is changed from “a” to “i” in the text. The names of pagan gods were deliberately misspelled in Hebrew literature to mock the idols and further illustrate their shamefulness. *Sakkuth* and *Kaiwan* were associated with the worship of Moloch, an Ammonite deity. Moloch represented the sun-god and was also known as the god of time. *Kaiwan* is also called *Chiun* in the New King James Version. Amos 5:25-26 is quoted by Stephen in Acts 7:42-43. Here *Chiun* is called *Rompha*, and it has been suggested that these names are interchangeable for the same star-god. While Israel was convinced of the need to turn away from idols (Joshua 24:16-18), they were never fully converted to the Lord as seen here in the writing of Amos.

## A warning to apathetic and unconcerned people

As Amos preached, much of his preaching would have fallen on the ears of indifferent people. They could have cared less about impending judgment. Amos’ message would have seemed so out of place with those who had it made. The people took great security in their fortresses and military capabilities. Who could possibly withstand them? The leaders of Israel are urged to look at neighboring cities in the

countries around them. These neighboring cities were comparable to their own and they would soon be swallowed up by the great Assyrian army (if they were not already).

In 6:3-6, Amos gives us some insight on why his message would have been received with a yawn. The people were too busy reveling to even notice the continual strengthening of their enemy: Assyria. Judgment might be coming, but surely it would not happen during their day. These were people who encouraged violence, engaged in abundant self-indulgence, and focused only on self-gratification. Amos said these would *now go into exile at the head of the exiles, And the sprawlers' banqueting will pass away*, 6:7.

Because of the great arrogance of the Northern Kingdom, God says they will be cast away. Everything the nation took pride in sickened God. It seems that the city of Samaria was in view in verse eight. The Israelites took great pride in their city. During the reign of Jeroboam II, the city walls were strengthened greatly. In some places the walls were as much as thirty feet thick. While Samaria was a formidable fortress, it would take Assyria three years to overthrow the city, God says He would *deliver up the city and all it contains*, 6:8.

Not only would the people suffer death by war, but pestilence would overtake them as well. A graphic picture is painted in verses nine and ten. Large families would perish. Death would hover over the people. Dead bodies would be placed in the outer part of the house where the undertaker could come to carry off the bodies. During a siege, burial of the dead was not possible. This would require their bodies to be cremated. These perilous times would come about at the command of the Lord. Everything would be destroyed. Invaders were coming that would destroy the entire northern kingdom. All the territory gained by Jeroboam II would be swallowed up by the Assyrians and the nation of Israel would be destroyed forever.

## Lessons for Today

### ***Women play a key role in determining the morality of a society***

Women often serve as a spiritual and moral conscience for men. The importance of their role is undeniable. Usually, as their conduct goes, so goes the nation. The women in Israel during the days of Amos pushed their husbands to engage in acts of unrighteousness and encouraged them to slack off in their responsibilities. This says much about the low level of morality in the country. What of our own? Where are we headed?

### ***Self-centered and carnal worship practices do not please God***

A lack of worship was not the problem. Israel had that down to a science. Continual offerings, sacrifices, and rituals were performed, all in the name of God. But these actions were not accepted by God; in fact, they made Him sick and disgusted. Israel had never given their heart to God and after centuries of coaxing, God had finally reached His limit. Considering this, there are many lessons for us. While we must worship God *in truth*, we must worship Him *in spirit*, John 4:23-24. We must not concentrate so much on the form of worship that we remove our hearts from our offerings to God. Also, Israel had created a form of worship that was convenient and pleasing to itself. They did not want to worship God in Jerusalem, so they erected shrines in Bethel and Dan. Their corrupted form of worship did not please

God in the least. So many today have corrupted worship into a religion of convenience and entertainment. Could God be saying, *Take away from Me the noise of your songs....?* (Amos 5:23)

### ***Sin can blind us to the chastisement of God***

Throughout chapter four God lists the ways He had tried to prompt Israel to repent and turn back to Him. Deuteronomy 28 and 29 lists certain penalties for violation of the covenant. God explains through Amos that He had brought about these punishments because they were violating the covenant made with Him. While these judgments crippled the nation, they were blinded in that they did not recognize that God was trying to tell them something. Sin is blinding and can lead to arrogance. We can be blinded to calls to repentance. Let us beware of the deceptiveness of sin.

### ***God continually holds out for man's repentance***

As we read through these chapters, we get the idea that had Israel repented, God would have relented from the certain punishment He was going to bring upon them, even at this late date. But while God hoped for their repentance, for them to *have life* they would need to seek God on His terms and in His place. They could not expect to find God in the golden calves at Bethel and Gilgal. They needed to go to Jerusalem, where God was, and seek Him in the way He wanted. Likewise, we cannot make up our own rules in coming to God. We must go through Jesus and make a full-fledged commitment to serve God. Only in this way will God accept us.

### ***The times of today are very similar to the days of Amos***

There is nothing new under the sun. Man is no more sinful today than he ever has been. Sin has just as much a grip on our society as it did during the days of Amos. While we must realize that fact, it is interesting to compare our society with what Amos experienced. Americans have largely become rich, arrogant, and secure. Could our society be *too busy* to listen to and consider God's message? Is God's truth too antiquated and simplistic for our sophisticated society? While we sit in luxurious homes with every modern convenience, have we been *brought near the seat of violence*? Our culture would do well to learn from history. Societies that lose respect for righteousness and truth will ultimately perish.

### ***Apathy can deafen us from the plain and simple teaching of God***

We can imagine Amos teaching with power and urgency. But yet it got only a yawn from the people at large. Israel had neglected the great blessings of God and had become self-satisfied and content. There was no need to worry; even if a day of judgment was coming, it would not come in their lifetime, 6:3. This apathy led to their destruction. Throughout Scripture we are warned of the danger of apathy, but yet it has a grip on too many Christians. Let us remember the words of the Hebrew writer:

For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it, Hebrews 2:1.

## **For discussion**

1. What important role do women play in society?

2. Read 4:1-5. Describe the actions of Israel's worship.
  
3. Read 4:4-5. What phrases give an indication of the motives of the people as they approached worship?
  
4. What five ways in 4:6-13 did God seek to move Israel back into compliance with the covenant?
  
5. In chapters four and five do you see any glimmer of hope for a chance of repentance from Israel? Why or why not?
  
6. What does wormwood stand for?
  
7. Had Israel given their heart to God, what would have characterized the nation? See 5:24.
  
8. Who did Sikkuth and Kiyyun represent?
  
9. Read 6:3-6. Describe the attitude of the people of Israel.
  
10. What would be God's response to the reveling and banqueting?

11. What stands out to you as an important lesson you can apply from Amos 4-6?

(Endnotes)

1 Hailey, Homer E., A Commentary on the Minor Prophets (Louisville, KY: Religious Supply, 1993), p. 104.