

A CALL TO SPIRITUAL INTEGRITY

***SERIES: THE CITY SET ON A HILL: LIVING AS THE PEOPLE OF GOD,
REFLECTING THE HEART OF GOD***

By Danny Hall

I love to sing, and there are songs that just lift your heart and point you to the Lord. Sometimes in the car I'll play one of my favorite CDs and sing along at the top of my lungs. But every now and then I stop and ask myself, "Do I really believe all that?" Have you ever thought about that? Week after week we sing songs of praise in church, but do we really believe that God is a great God when we sing those words? I also ask myself, "If I really believed that God was a great God, would I live the way I do?" Many times my life has not reflected what I sing about so easily. There are times when I'm worried, or distracted by things in this world that seem very attractive. I get my eyes off of the things that matter and get caught up in things that are self-indulgent. You and I have to think about whether we really believe the praises we sing to the point where it's making a difference in the way we live our lives, where we not only talk about trusting God, but we actually trust God.

That's the problem the nation of Israel had back in the day when Amos the prophet spoke to them. In this series on the book of Amos, we've seen that it's pretty heavy on judgment. About ninety-five percent of the book is negative. Sometimes it comes across as a barrage of chastisement as God brings to the attention of the nation of Israel the ways that they have gone

wrong. It can seem almost overwhelming. But I think the reason that the tone of the book is so stark and strong is because what is at stake is so important.

Let me review for a moment. We began looking at this book against the backdrop of what God is doing in history (Discovery Paper 4935). God is redeeming lost humanity. He created you and me in his image to live in fellowship with him, but when sin entered the world, that relationship was fractured, and everything went askew. Life without God has been the pattern for the human race all the way through, and as we saw in the opening oracle of the book of Amos (Discovery Paper 4936), life without God leads to ruin, destruction, pain, and all kinds of problems. But God in his compassion loved us so much that he formulated a plan of rescue to redeem us, to draw us back to him. A major part of that plan was to call out from all the nations of the earth a people for himself with whom he would live in vital relationship, who would demonstrate to the rest of the world in every area of life that there was a different and better way to live. God wanted Israel to be a light to the nations. But as we saw in the last message (Discovery Paper 4937), Israel missed their calling.

You and I, having inherited that mission as the church of Jesus Christ, are also called out to stand as a testimony to God's grace and love, to a life with God that brings hope and healing from the ravages of sinfulness.

Now we come to the middle of the book of Amos. This is a long section in which we're going to study several passages, looking specifically at the kinds of things that Israel was doing that caused them to stop being a light to the nations, at the behaviors and patterns that made God so

angry, disappointed, and brokenhearted. I think we may be surprised at the nature of the things that God was upset about. Now, the center of the book is 5:1-17, which we'll look at in the next message. Around that centerpiece there is an incredible description, from many angles, of Israel's life without God. I want to give you some snapshots from that, some symptoms of the core issue.

Economic injustice

The first snapshot is from 4:1-3:

**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!"**

The Sovereign LORD has sworn by his holiness:

**"The time will surely come
when you will be taken away with hooks,
the last of you with fishhooks.**

**You will each go straight out
through the breaks in the wall,
and you will be cast out toward Harmon,"**

declares the LORD.

Bashan was a rich agricultural area, and the cows of Bashan were considered the choicest of the herds of Israel. This is the picture he draws of the women of Israel. They are living in opulence while they oppress the poor. They're lying by the pool, saying to their husbands, "Dear, please bring me another drink." They're ignoring the plight of those in need. It's a picture of living only for themselves, having absolutely no concern for anyone else's life.

The men don't get off the hook, either. In 6:1-7 is another picture of the people of Israel.

**Woe to you who are complacent in Zion,
and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria,
you notable men of the foremost nation,
to whom the people of Israel come!**

**Go to Calneh and look at it;
go from there to great Hamath,
and then go down to Gath in Philistia.**

Are they better off than your two kingdoms?

**Is their land larger than yours?
You put off the evil day
and bring near a reign of terror.**

**You lie on beds inlaid with ivory
and lounge on your couches.**

**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 bowlful
and use the finest lotions,
but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph.**

**Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile;
your feasting and lounging will end.**

This passage points out two qualities of the leading men. First, they're terribly complacent and arrogant. I hear a note of sarcasm in Amos' voice as he says to them, "You're the notable men. People come to you, and you say, 'Look around—isn't our nation better, bigger, safer than all these others?'" But Amos warns them that the day of calamity is coming. Second, they have a lifestyle of luxury and opulence. They're lying back on beds inlaid with ivory, lounging on couches, dining on the best of the lambs, and drinking bowlfuls of wine. Once again the picture is of self-indulgence, consuming everything for themselves, living for the pleasure of the moment, turning a deaf ear and a blind eye to anyone around them who might be in need.

Finally, to draw out the point let's look at 8:4-6:

**Hear this, you who trample the needy
and do away with the poor of the land,**

saying,

**“When will the New Moon be over
that we may sell grain,
and the Sabbath be ended
that we may market wheat?”—
skimping the measure,
boosting the price
and cheating with dishonest scales,
buying the poor with silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals,
selling even the sweepings with the wheat.**

The wealthy and powerful are exploiting the marketplace. They're so enamored with the idea, they can't wait till it's time to go to market again, so they can use their rigged scales and the pressure of their economic position to exploit a few more poor people, and laugh all the way to the bank. Living at the expense of others, they're laughing in the face of all the need around them among their brothers and sisters who are of a lower economic class. This is a picture of a society gone crazy, totally out of sync. The nation of Israel is acting the same way everybody else does. That's what God is upset with.

Now notice, when God talks to the nation of Israel about their sinfulness, except for one brief reference in chapter 2, there is almost no mention of sexual immorality. That's not what has God upset; it's the exploitation of the poor, the economic injustice. That's what is driving God to say,

“I’ve warned you and called you back to myself, but you keep turning a deaf ear. So judgment is on the way.” God’s heart is that people matter. When we turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to need and consume all we receive at whatever level for ourselves, God’s heart is broken. That’s what life without God looks like. But he’s calling out for people to live a life with him.

Now I want to focus on what I think is the source of their problem in the second half of chapter 5. How did they come to be living like this?

False hope, false worship, false allegiance

We’ll start with 5:18-20.

Woe to you who long for the day of the LORD!

Why do you long for the day of the LORD?

That day will be darkness, not light.

It will be as though a man fled from a lion

only to meet a bear,

as though he entered his house

and rested his hand on the wall

only to have a snake bite him.

Will not the day of the LORD be darkness, not light—

pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness?

The first source of the problem is that they have a displaced hope. They're saying, "We can't wait for the day of the Lord to come!" In their minds the day of the Lord will be a dramatic movement of God, an intervention in history, on behalf of his special ones: "Come on, God, give it to them! They all deserve it." They're thinking that everyone else is going to get their comeuppance, as we used to say, while they themselves are feeling quite proud and secure in being God's people.

I'm afraid that sometimes you and I fall into that trap. We think because we name the name of Jesus and go to church every Sunday that somehow we're secure, that God must like us. We develop a complacent sense of being better than everybody else. "We're special. Surely God isn't going to judge us." But God isn't going to ignore what he's called us to be and do.

In 5:21-24 Amos picks up another portion of this.

"I hate, I despise your religious feasts;

I cannot stand your assemblies.

Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,

I will not accept them.

Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,

I will have no regard for them.

Away with the noise of your songs!

I will not listen to the music of your harps.

**But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!”**

Another source of their problem is empty worship. They’re still conducting religious festivals, offering sacrifices, and singing their hymns and psalms; in terms of outward expression, little has changed. But nothing that happens in the assembly of worship has anything to do with the way they live their lives. They’re just going through the motions. So God says, “I’m sick of your sacrifices, sick of your songs, sick of all of it! What I really want is for justice to roll down like waters, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” In this signature verse of the book, God is calling his people to get away from this hypocrisy. “I don’t want to hear all your religious malarkey. Is your life a kingdom life? Is your connection with me and your worship of me changing you into the kind of people who can be light in a dark world? Where are the voices for justice and righteousness? Where are those who I have called out to demonstrate a better way?”

It’s hard for us to hear, but God would rather that we not be in church if it’s only tipping our hat to him because we need to do a few religious things to feel good about ourselves, and it has no effect on what happens to us the moment we walk out the church door.

The third source of the problem is in 5:25-27:

**“Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings
forty years in the desert, O house of Israel?
You have lifted up the shrine of your king,**

**the pedestal of your idols,
the star of your god—
which you made for yourselves.
Therefore I will send you into exile beyond Damascus,”
says the LORD, whose name is God Almighty.**

They keep worshiping, but alongside their worship of God, they've introduced idols. They've made God a little tiny part of their life, and they've started including everything else that they think might be comfortable, or that allured them for a moment, and tacked it onto their worship of God.

Now, we may say, “Whew! I don't do that. I have no little fetishes or altars to idols that I bow down to at my house.” But I would suggest to you that in terms of our thoughts and our allegiances, whenever we mix anything with our focus on God, when we choose to make God a narrow part of our life and give our attention and allegiance to wealth, accomplishments, even family, pleasure, or whatever, then we've introduced idols alongside our worship of God.

So we have a picture of people whose hearts are divided between a little bit of God here and a little bit of self-indulgence there. They're only going through the motions in their religious observances. And they keep saying to themselves, “God isn't going to bother us, it's all those wicked people out there that he's after.” But God's cry comes back: “I want justice to roll, righteousness to flow! I want what characterizes my people to be transformed lives!” He wants

the kind of transformation that happens when people are connected with God through his grace and mercy.

That's what he wants for us as well—he wants us to live out our faith in demonstrable ways.

This principle is prevalent in Scripture. It goes all the way back to the story of King Saul. Saul did not do exactly what God wanted him to do, and then he tried to make excuses. The prophet Samuel spoke into his life in 1 Samuel 15:22:

“Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices
as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD?

To obey is better than sacrifice,
and to heed is better than the fat of rams.”

Let me translate that into our situation: To obey is better than to show up at church on Sunday for empty worship. To obey is better than to sing. To obey is better than to throw a little tip to God in the offering plate. Our ultimate sacrifice of praise to God is our lives, our allegiance to him and to his causes.

I want to explore what this might mean for us as followers of Christ in two New-Testament passages. The first is a very severe teaching from Jesus' heart, and the second is some practical advice from the apostle Paul.

Kingdom people care about suffering

The teaching of Jesus is from the end of the Olivet Discourse. It's a penetrating summation of all that he has said in that sermon. Matthew 25:34-46:

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

“The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a

stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me,
I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a
stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

“He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of
these, you did not do for me.’

“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

It couldn't be clearer that Jesus connects our eternal destiny to the way we treat people, particularly those in need. That's difficult for us who believe the New Testament teaches a gospel of grace in Jesus Christ, that apart from our faith in God's gracious work in Christ, and the forgiveness that comes with that, we have no hope. We teach and preach that we can't work our way to God. I believe that's true. But it's also very true that kingdom people who walk in a relationship with God are a certain kind of people. Their attitudes, actions, perceptions, and perspectives toward others have been altered by God's life-changing grace. Kingdom people care about the suffering of the marginalized people around them. Jesus leaves no doubt that people who will spend eternity with him are people who care for the poor and the marginalized and the hurting. Those people matter to God, and they have to matter to us.

Now, we live in a participatory democracy in the U.S., unlike anything that existed in Bible times, and so we have little instruction for that. We are left to deduce from principle, from our convictions, from our walk with Christ how we are to participate. Because we have been invited to be a part of the public square, I believe we ought to speak truth into that about righteousness, about things that matter. But one of the things that grieves my heart is that so many Christians now think that the way to achieve transformation in our country is to gain political power, to get more people elected who think the way we think. Far too many of us have invested our hope in political solutions.

But the greatest transforming power available in the universe lives inside of us! We have the power of God's presence, the Holy Spirit himself. What would happen if you and I, in the power of the Holy Spirit, committed together as the people of God living in community and living for others, actually did what Jesus is teaching, and what Amos called the nation of Israel to do? Talk about transformation of society! Where Christians have chosen to live that way, societies have been transformed, and that's the hope for us. I don't say we should stop participating or speaking in the public square, but we don't have to despair if our judge didn't get appointed or our representative didn't get elected. With the transforming message of Christ and the Holy Spirit living in us, we can make a difference. We can demonstrate life with God. And life with God is characterized by compassion, caring, sacrifice, meeting the needs of people, championing the cause of the downtrodden, and proclaiming the glory of Christ in both deed and word.

Early in the twentieth century, in the face of all kinds of theological debates, evangelical Christians rightly championed the cause of the truth of the gospel, but they began to focus on that

so much that they ceded away any sense of social responsibility or connection with the needs of the poor and marginalized. They just preached the gospel. So a false dichotomy was set up between the simple gospel of Jesus and what was called the social gospel. But the Scriptures know no such dichotomy. There is only one gospel, and it is the full gospel: the gospel of the saving grace of God that transforms people's lives, and transforms whole societies when people live their lives for Christ. Robert Lewis, in his very fine book, *The Church of Irresistible Influence*, talks about this great divide between the social gospel and the pure gospel:

“Now that the evangelical church has entered a new millennium, it must jettison the either/or construct that has shaped, defined, and plagued us. It is time to re-embrace the both/and that alone gives us a clear strategy of how to build strong churches that serve as bridges of irresistible influence—bridges that are supported by the steel girders of truth *and* proof, of proclamation *and* incarnation. Bridges allowing for the transport of common grace to the needy as well as amazing grace to the receptive.” (1)

What a beautiful picture of the church!

Now let's look at Paul's word of practical application in all of this. How are we to think about our material possessions and wealth? We all have money that we've been entrusted with and things we've accumulated. God blesses us at different levels, but the truth is, we all wrestle with what to do with what we have.

Set free to do good

Paul gives us a word of wisdom in 1 Timothy 6:17-19:

“Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.”

There's truth in the old saying, “Here today, gone tomorrow.” Don't put your hope in whatever riches you have. Rather, put your hope in God. He is the only constant in your life, the only thing you can be sure of. If the stock market crashes, or you lose your job tomorrow, or the real estate market collapses and none of us have any equity left, and what we've been counting on for retirement goes up in smoke, are we going to despair? If our hope is in our wealth, we will. That's why Paul says to hope instead in God. He's the One who will take care of you. And then, because your hope is in God, you can hold all your wealth loosely, and that sets you free to do good with it, to be generous. God is going to provide what you need. So when God gives you something, use it for good, for his glory, to help people. That's living a life of faith and demonstrating to the world that desperately needs to see light in darkness, that there is a God

who can be trusted, who redeems and transforms, who gives hope and life in the midst of this darkness.

Notes

1. Robert Lewis, *The Church of Irresistible Influence*, © 2001, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI. P. 211.

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Fourth Message

Danny Hall

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