

THE MERCIFUL HAND OF GOD

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

By Danny Hall

Imagine a certain wealthy man. He isn't preoccupied with his wealth, and in fact is very generous, and loves to bestow good things on others. He's also very powerful, but he's goodhearted and chooses to use his power benevolently.

Now, this man is married to a wonderful woman, and he loves her very much. She's the apple of his eye, the woman of his dreams, someone he's been committed to for a very long time. He's lavished all kinds of good things on her to let her know just how much he loves her.

So imagine how it must feel for him to find out that this woman on whom he has poured out his love has betrayed him, and has united herself with another lover. In fact, he comes to find out that she's been uniting herself with a series of lovers. Imagine his devastation. His first reaction is to feel absolutely betrayed. His heart is broken. There are moments of anger. He can't believe this is happening.

Yet his love for her is undying, in spite of his broken heart. He does everything in his power to woo her back, to show kindness and mercy, to reach out to her. He is willing to forgive, to

restore their relationship, to call her back. Yet she keeps right on going. There are moments when she acts as if she really loves him, and she draws near to him in response to his wooing. But time after time she's allured away by thoughts of other men, by what seems a better way. She gets wrapped up in herself, and she keeps falling back into the same old pattern. Over and over again the heart of this man is torn between frustration, anger, betrayal, and unending love and desire for her to come back. He knows that the path she's on is not fulfilling her. He knows that she's going to end up in a place of destruction. So he keeps on reaching out and wooing her in spite of his broken heart and frustration. That story goes on and on, until finally he's almost at the end of his rope. He says, "If you don't come back to me and remain loyal, our marriage is doomed."

This story line shows up in all kinds of places—movies, books, TV shows. Perhaps you have even experienced this in the lives of friends or family, and you understand the emotions that go with it. We probably all understand what it feels like to be betrayed. We also understand what it feels like to be in a relationship and at times find our attention being allured away, although perhaps we haven't gone as far as the woman in the story.

But this story is not really that of human individuals. This is the story of God and Israel in the time of Amos.

One thing that has revolutionized my own perspective on my walk with God is the realization that when I do something that is displeasing to him, it's not so much breaking a rule as it is betraying a lover. This has helped me to think more seriously about how my life goes day by

day. For most of my life, I understood following Christ (even though it flowed out of a relationship with him) as basically following rules. My heart would gravitate toward that way of evaluating how I was doing spiritually. When I began to understand the deep relationship that God had called me into, disobeying him became something very personal. I came to understand a bit better what is at stake in my walk with the Lord.

God, in his compassionate desire to rescue people like us from the ravages of sinfulness, from the destruction of a life without him, planned to demonstrate to the world what life with him would look like. He called out a people for himself, the nation of Israel (marked out not because they were better than everyone else, but because God chose to place his affection on them), to be an example of living in relationship with him to the rest of the world. They would demonstrate how living with God is far more fulfilling and fruitful, far closer to what God designed for us, than living life without him. From time to time in the history of Israel, they got it right. But by the time of Amos, the nation of Israel had been living the same way everyone else did for a long time. So this book, as I've said many times, is about ninety-five percent negative in its tone.

Now, I've mentioned before that the book of Amos is a very stylized literary work. It has all kinds of wonderful patterns of organization that draw our attention to different points. The entire book is set up in what is called reverse parallelism, which simply means that it has a structure that points to a core idea. The passage we'll consider now, Amos 5:1-17, contains the core idea of the book. It falls right in the middle. This is the heart of what Amos is trying to say to the people of God. This passage itself is set up as a reverse-parallel structure, with a center to which our attention is pointed. As we explore this passage, I want us to capture a little bit of the heart of

God again—what is he calling us to, what is he offering us as his people. After we read verses 1-17 we'll go back and look at these parallel sections to see the points that Amos is driving home and that central focus that he points us to.

Hear this word, O house of Israel, this lament I take up concerning you:

**“Fallen is Virgin Israel,
never to rise again,
deserted in her own land,
with no one to lift her up.”**

This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

**“The city that marches out a thousand strong for Israel
will have only a hundred left;
the town that marches out a hundred strong
will have only ten left.”**

This is what the LORD says to the house of Israel:

**“Seek me and live;
do not seek Bethel,
do not go to Gilgal,**

do not journey to Beersheba.
For Gilgal will surely go into exile,
and Bethel will be reduced to nothing.”
Seek the LORD and live,
or he will sweep through the house of Joseph like a fire;
it will devour,
and Bethel will have no one to quench it.

You who turn justice into bitterness
and cast righteousness to the ground
(he who made the Pleiades and Orion,
who turns blackness into dawn
and darkens day into night,
who calls for the waters of the sea
and pours them out over the face of the land—
the LORD is his name—
he flashes destruction on the stronghold
and brings the fortified city to ruin),
you hate the one who reproves in court
and despise him who tells the truth.

You trample on the poor
and force him to give you grain.

**Therefore, though you have built stone mansions,
you will not live in them;**

**though you have planted lush vineyards,
you will not drink their wine.**

**For I know how many are your offenses
and how great your sins.**

**You oppress the righteous and take bribes
and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts.**

**Therefore the prudent man keeps quiet in such times,
for the times are evil.**

**Seek good, not evil,
that you may live.**

**Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you,
just as you say he is.**

**Hate evil, love good;
maintain justice in the courts.**

**Perhaps the LORD God Almighty will have mercy
on the remnant of Joseph.**

Therefore this is what the Lord, the LORD God Almighty, says:

“There will be wailing in all the streets

and cries of anguish in every public square.
The farmers will be summoned to weep
and the mourners to wail.
There will be wailing in all the vineyards,
for I will pass through your midst,”

says the LORD.

Once again, the tone is very harsh and negative, but woven into this sermon are words of hope and mercy. The cry at the core of this book is for the nation to wake up and hear what God wants to say to them. And if we as the people of God, the church, do indeed inherit Israel’s role of being light to the world in the midst of the darkness of life without God, then the message of Amos comes home to us to consider how we are representing God in our world. How are we being light in our world? What might God want us to hear in this sermon?

Let’s examine the parallel structures. The beginning and the end of the passage go together, then two other sections parallel each other, then two more, driving us toward a central idea at the core of these seventeen verses. I’m going to walk you through the points he’s making in these parallel arguments to bring us back to the all-important core idea.

First of all, verses 1-3 and verses 16-17 are parallel.

Mourning in the offering

These passages are each a lament for the coming destruction. This has been a theme repeated over and over again throughout the book of Amos. Because of the sinful hardness of the Israelites' hearts, because of their unwillingness to listen to the voice of God spoken through his prophets and through all kinds of acts that he has done among them to try to get their attention, there is a judgment, a purging, on the horizon. There is going to be a time of absolute accountability for their behavior. And in that time, there is going to be much wailing and mourning. Let's look at these passages more closely. First, the opening call to lament in verses 1-3:

“Hear this word O house of Israel, this lament I take up concerning you:

‘Fallen is the Virgin Israel,
never to rise again,
deserted in her own land,
with no one to lift her up.’

This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

‘The city that marches out a thousand strong for Israel
will have only a hundred left;
the town that marches out a hundred strong
will have only ten left.’”

And then verses 16-17:

“Therefore this is what the Lord, the LORD God Almighty, says:

‘There will be wailing in all the streets
and cries of anguish in every public square.

The farmers will be summoned to weep
and the mourners to wail.

There will be wailing in all the vineyards,
for I will pass through your midst,’

says the LORD.”

Bracketing the central call of the book is this recognition that a time of mourning is upon them. The word translated “lament” in verse 1 was actually used of a funeral dirge. The idea was of absolute brokenheartedness, sorrow, and grief. The people of Israel are being told that they’re going to be in deep mourning over the destruction of their land. They have come to believe that as those marked out by God, no matter what they do they will find God’s favor, that somehow God will just ignore their sinfulness, and nothing bad will ever come to them. They think all they have to do is tip their hat, so to speak, from time to time, do the external things that God has asked them to do. But God has warned them otherwise time and again, and now he is saying that there is impending doom, a time for weeping and mourning.

But interestingly enough, within this call to weep and mourn and this prediction of coming doom, there is a hint that this is all leading to his mercy. Once again, verse 3:

“This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

‘The city that marches out a thousand strong for Israel

will have only a hundred left;

the town that marches out a hundred strong

will have only ten left.’”

Even though he is angry with them and has had to call them to repentance over and over again, even though his disciplinary judgment is coming, he promises that they will not be totally wiped out. He will not abdicate his covenant with them. Yes, a thousand will be reduced to only a hundred, and a hundred to only ten, but within this promise is the idea that there will be a faithful few who have not rebelled against him, a remnant he will recognize whose hearts have remained at least open to his calling, who will be preserved in the midst of this. We hear God’s voice of mercy.

The second set of parallel ideas is found in verses 4-6 and 14-15.

“Seek me and live”

Verses 4-6:

“This is what the LORD says to the house of Israel:

‘Seek me and live;

do not seek Bethel,

do not go to Gilgal,

do not journey to Beersheba.

For Gilgal will surely go into exile,

and Bethel will be reduced to nothing.’

Seek the LORD and live,

or he will sweep through the house of Joseph like a fire;

it will devour,

and Bethel will have no one to quench it.”

Now verses 14-15:

“Seek good, not evil,

that you may live.

Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you,

just as you say he is.

Hate evil, love good;

maintain justice in the courts.

Perhaps the LORD God Almighty will have mercy
on the remnant of Joseph.”

In both of these passages there is a resounding call to the people: “Seek me, return to me!” It is both an offer of mercy and a call to repentance. But each passage has a different emphasis. In verses 4-6 the command is twice given to seek the Lord, not Bethel, Gilgal, or Beersheba. In Amos’ day these three places in the land of Israel had been set up as alternative worship sites to Jerusalem, where God had established his temple as the center of worship for the Israelites. When the kingdom was divided in the rebellion against the monarchy and against God, the temple in Jerusalem, which was in Judah, was inaccessible and undesirable to the ten northern tribes of Israel who had formed a separate kingdom. So they set up other places of worship at sacred sites from their history. Bethel was where Jacob wrestled with God and God changed his name from Jacob to Israel. It had great spiritual significance to them as a place where God’s life-changing power could be. Beersheba was where Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all experienced God’s presence with them and received promises from him, and was symbolic of God’s abiding presence. And Gilgal was the base of operations from which they began to conquer and inhabit the Promised Land, and therefore it was a place that signified God’s promised inheritance to them. All of these sites held for them a sense of promise, of God’s redemptive and life-changing power, of his very presence among them, of the inheritance he had given them. But what had happened was that they had substituted a ritualistic adherence to their history for really connecting with God.

We too may try to recapture past glory or past experiences, in an effort to jumpstart our spiritual lives when they become unsettled. “If I could just go back and be like that again, or at least pay some sort of homage to my personal spiritual history...” We do this apart from any sense of repentance in connection with God.

The Israelites kept flocking to these sacred sites, even though God had instructed them to worship at the temple in Jerusalem. Their worship had become a matter of performing rituals in the hope of somehow reconnecting to a glory they had lost. So God calls them to forsake this false, ritualistic worship of the past, and reconnect with him, the living God. “Seek me and live!”

In verses 14-15 the emphasis is different. There he says,

“Seek good, not evil,
that you may live.”

The relationship between these passages is one that Amos has drawn throughout this book: faith in God always changes us. It’s impossible to be connected to the living God and not be affected in the way we live.

Verse 14 is reminiscent of the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:33: “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Again, we’re asked to find right living out of right belief. In the context of Amos, right living equates to treating others justly. One of the characteristics of people who are connected with God is that they no longer live for

themselves, but for God's glory and for the good of others. But in Israelite society this had been turned on its head. They were living for themselves, even exploiting others to benefit themselves.

In 1 John 1:7 the apostle John echoes this wonderful idea of connection with God and its outworking in our lives. John has just made that beautiful statement, "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all." That is, he is pure and holy. Then he says, "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another." It is characteristic of kingdom people connected with God that they live their lives for the good of other people. They have become like God, who extends himself relentlessly for the good of others.

So at the heart of this merciful call to return is to seek good. Then notice what he promises:

"Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you,
just as you say he is."

I love that clause. You see, the nation would say, "God is with us! He is our God." And many times we as believers claim, "God is on our side!" Sometimes we've even merged that idea with our politics. "God is on our side" is a banner we love to wave! But what God says here is, "If you will turn to me, repent and seek me, allow me to change your life, and seek justice, then I will be on your side, not just because you say so, but because your hearts are right, because you have sought me in order to live."

I've shared before that my life verse from the Old Testament is 2 Chronicles 16:9: "For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him." God is on the side of those people whose hearts are his. These words were given to King Asa by the prophet Hanani. Hanani's very next words were, "But you betrayed him." The same thing was happening in the day of Amos. But God calls his people to seek him, to seek justice, and he says, "When you do that, I'm going to show myself strong to help you be the people I've called you to be." This parallel passage opens up the merciful heart of God. He calls us to repent and seek him. Even at the eleventh hour before Israel's projected judgment, at the last moment, his call to his people is, "Seek me, seek my righteousness, and you will live!"

As we move closer to the center of this text, on either side of it there is a rehearsing of the sins of Israel, in verse 7 and verses 10-13.

Justice forsaken

Verse 7:

"You who turn justice into bitterness
and cast righteousness to the ground...."

Verses 10-13:

“You hate the one who reproves in court
and despise him who tells the truth.

You trample on the poor
and force him to give you grain.

Therefore, though you have built stone mansions,
you will not live in them;
though you have planted lush vineyards,
you will not drink their wine.

For I know how many are your offenses
and how great your sins.

You oppress the righteous and take bribes
and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts.

Therefore the prudent man keeps quiet in such times,
for the times are evil.”

I want to point out three things in these verses. He reminds them where their hearts are. First, they have ignored justice and righteousness. People matter to God, and the way we treat people matters to him, too. But this nation turns a blind eye to issues of justice and righteousness. Second, he says that this is so bad that what few voices of righteousness there are, are persecuted. Those who speak for righteousness and justice are ridiculed and told to shut up. So the prudent man, the one who is trying to do right, keeps his mouth shut because the times are so

evil. Voices for righteousness are quelled. Not only is the nation plummeting headlong into injustice, but those voices that would call them back to righteousness are dampened. Third, he says, “You’re living opulently on the backs of the poor.” We saw in the last message (Discovery Paper 4938) that with rigged scales they’re manipulating the poor economically. Out of that they have created opulent lifestyles. But his word to them is, “You’re not going to live in your mansions, and you’re not going to drink the wine from your vineyards, because judgment is coming.”

That brings us finally to the central verses, 8-9. They seem almost parenthetical to the flow of all this, but they are the key to the whole passage.

Remembering who God really is

“(He who made the Pleiades and Orion,
who turns blackness into dawn
and darkens day into night,
who calls for the waters of the sea
and pours them out over the face of the land—
the LORD is his name—
he flashes destruction on the stronghold
and brings the fortified city to ruin)...”

This is the God with whom we have to do. Right in the middle of this, he says, “Yahweh [translated “the LORD”], the covenant God, is his name.” He points to the fact that Yahweh is sovereign over all creation. He places the constellations in the sky, he brings darkness from light and light from darkness, he’s the controller and orchestrator of all that has been created. In verse 9, this One who is the Lord of the entire universe is also therefore the righteous Judge of all things. What Amos is saying here at the core of this message is, “Don’t forget with whom you are dealing!”

Because we relate to God through faith and he’s not physically present, often in our daily lives it’s very easy for us to put God off to the side somewhere. We know in the back of our hearts and minds that we ought to pay attention to him, but he just does not seem relevant or present in our day-to-day living. Therefore it becomes easy for us to think that nothing big is going to happen to us. Israel has gone generation after generation with this unrighteous mindset, to the point of impending judgment. Amos simply reminds them, and us, “He is the Lord.”

One of my favorite authors is Philip Yancey. In writing a book that came out a number of years ago, *Disappointment with God*, he was trying to deal with some questions people asked: “Why doesn’t God answer prayer?” “Why does he seem silent?” “Why isn’t God showing up?” In preparation he spent a couple of weeks alone, and during that time he read the Bible from cover to cover. After reading it, he says, “I encountered not a misty vapor but an actual Person. A Person as unique and distinctive and colorful as any person I know. God has deep emotions; he feels delight and frustration and anger.” (1). God is not dispassionate about us and as he will act. Sometimes when God shows up, he speaks righteousness and calls us to repentance. Sometimes

when God shows up, things get destroyed. Judgment falls. We forget that he is the sovereign Lord and Judge who has the right to call us to account, particularly those of us who name the name of God.

Now, what does this message mean to us? First of all, it says that we have to measure our sense of faithfulness against our self-absorption. The organizing principle of life for most of us, most of the time, is ourselves. I quoted earlier from Donald Miller's book *Blue like Jazz*. I was rereading a section of that this past week, and it hit me again very strongly. He says, "The overwhelming majority of the time I spend thinking about myself, reassuring myself, and when I am done there is nothing to spare for the needy. Six billion people live in this world, and I can only muster thoughts for one. Me." (2) Everyone else is a minor character who exists to make my story better. That's the way a lot of us live our lives. The way we have to measure our sense of faithfulness to God is in contrast to that. As we live for ourselves, the call to follow the sovereign Lord is muted.

These words are printed on the wall at the front of our church: "You are not your own; you were bought with a price" (1 Corinthians 6:19b-20a; RSV). They remind us of the incredible price that God paid in his relentless love to draw us out of our sinfulness and into the wonderful freedom of relationship with him. The resounding fact that comes down through all of Scripture is that Jesus is Lord, and the single organizing principle of my life must be not me, but his lordship. Amos is calling the nation of Israel to reorganize their lives around the sovereign lordship of Yahweh. In the language of the New Testament, Jesus is Lord. To what extent am I willing to say that this story is not about me but about the Lord Jesus Christ? God invites us to participate in the

grandest story ever told, the story of the lordship of Christ. We get to be characters in his story. That's so much richer, so much more fulfilling, so much greater than a story that's just about me!

Notes

1. Philip Yancey, *Disappointment with God*, © 1988, Zondervan Books, Grand Rapids, MI. P. 52.
2. Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz*, © 2003, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN. P. 22.

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Amos 5:1-17

Fifth Message

Danny Hall

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