

Bible Study for Texas for 6_8_51903

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Amos 3:9-4:3; 5:10-15; 6:4-7; 8:4-6

Prophetic words to the filthy rich

By Bill Shiell

What could cause degradation in a nation of God's chosen people? Amos looks to the root of the problem in the focal passages for this lesson, as he brings judgment on the injustice caused by the lifestyles of the rich and famous followers of God.

Chapter 3:13 is the third of four oracles Amos preached against the wealth of the people in Israel or Samaria. Each oracle has the same characteristics, and we can discuss them together. Each one mockingly discusses the characteristic of the people that made them so pretentious and echoes a reference from the Pentateuch that showed how they violated God's law. Each example builds on the other, providing further reasons why Samaria will be conquered by enemies, and these enemies will be the agents of God's wrath on the people.

Lifestyles of

the rich and famous

We can read several identifiable characteristics of the lavish lifestyles of the people during Amos' time. Their homes were filled with furniture (3:12). The houses were adorned with ivory (3:15) and were built to enormous proportions (3:15). They owned homes for different seasons—one for winter, another for summer (3:15). They successfully grew vineyards (4:11) and other crops (8:5) but cheated others out of a fair market price. Women especially enjoyed the fruits of the opulent lifestyle (4:1).

Amos focused on the region of Bashan (4:1-3). Known for its fertile land to the east of the Jordan valley, the heavy rainfall created a rich cropland filled with tall, strong trees (Psalm 22:12). Amos uses the region of Bashan as a metaphor of God's destruction. Instead of the people's growing strong like the trees of Bashan, they have fattened themselves like cattle prior to slaughter. They desire to fill themselves continually with drink, lounging and imbibing in their own wicked designs, a plan that eventually will backfire on them.

In their minds, the people were not only rich, but they thought they were famous—protected by God because of their ethnic ties to one another and their covenant relationship with him. Amos announced that covenantal agreements and fame or protection in the eyes of other nations were not permanent guarantees of peace and freedom. The covenant was only as good as the people's willingness to fulfill their part of the agreement, to follow God's laws. Israel thought God's agreement with them was for the lifetime of their race, whether they did anything wrong or not. In God's mind, the people had so routinely violated the terms of the agreement his patience had finally run out.

God's response to the people

God was particularly infuriated with the people because they violated one of the conditions of the covenant, their holiness. As God's chosen people, they had been called out to be a reflection of his holiness,

separated from others to be an example for the nations surrounding them. They were to set God's standards, modeling for others an ethic that coupled moral responsibility with social justice and righteousness. Because Israel chose to rest on their laurels, Amos was forced to become God's mouthpiece, stating the people had violated the holiness codes set up by God. We get the sense of how serious this concern is in 4:2, when the Hebrew can be translated, "My Lord God swears by his holiness." This holiness motivated the Lord to correct the covenant family.

The responsibilities

of God's family

Amos models for the believer today two critical responsibilities of God's spiritual family.

Leaders must speak. The opening verses of chapter 3 allude to several cause-and-effect relationships, such as a lion roaring and a trap being tripped. Amos related his prophetic calling to these kinds of familiar operations in society. Amos' life has a cause-and-effect relationship with the Lord. The Lord speaks, and he cannot help but follow through by speaking to the people.

The leaders of the 21st century must speak in ways similar to Amos. Just as we find it natural to cheer when our favorite sports team scores, the prophetic voices of today should find it natural to speak when the lifestyles of believers become so opulent their spiritual lives are clouded by their material possessions.

Early Baptists like John Bunyan wrote of this prophetic urgency when he boldly prayed: "Oh, that those who have heard me speak today will see as I do-what sin, death, hell and the curse of God really are, and that they might understand the grace and love and mercy of God, that it is through Christ to them no matter in what condition they are, even if they are his

enemies."

God's family also is accountable. Just as marriages and family systems require accountability and faithfulness to the agreements we make together, so God's family necessitates accountability to one another and a holy God. We have a very special relationship to the Lord; as the church today, we are God's chosen.

Just like the Israelites chosen by God on Mount Sinai, we are now responsible for our own choices. Our most important responsibility is to follow the example of a holy God and see the worth and dignity of every person created in his image, including the poor. Bribery, slavery and adultery all transgress the first order of God's good creation. By trampling on those who are the least, we risk running over the very Christ who said, "Whatever you have done unto the least of these, my brothers, you have done unto me."

The word from Amos is not optional. As General Montgomery, commander of the forces in North Africa during World War II, once said, "Orders no longer form the basis for discussion but for action." The family of God must take action now to avoid the imminent judgment (3:2).

On July 14, 2000, Warren Bailey died. Most people probably did not read his obituary; but unknown to most people in his hometown of St. Mary's, Ga., Warren Bailey had left \$60 million to the local Methodist church. According to the Associated Press story, Bailey operated a local family-owned telephone company. He became quite wealthy over time but divorced after several years of marriage and died with no children to inherit the money. He chose to give most of his estate to the church with no strings attached to the gift.

This inheritance presented a wonderful opportunity for the church and their pastor, Derek McAleer. Most churches might crater under the

responsibility of this kind of estate, but the church voted to give the majority of the money away. They divided the estate into various kinds of trusts and accounts designated to assist the impoverished and needy in their community and to go toward nonprofit groups and other churches to assist them with their projects. None of it was designated for future building construction or for the general fund of the budget.

Could Warren Bailey and the members of St. Mary's church have been modern-day prophets like Amos, willing to give for the good of the community? They certainly became responsible members of God's family.

Questions for discussion

- ◆ Amos challenges us to set new priorities in our finances. What would Amos say if he were a member of your church's finance committee? How would his influence cause you to evaluate your church's budget priorities?

- ◆ Christians are not immune to the temptations of materialism. If Amos were to stop by your home, what material goods would you be ashamed to show him, for fear he might have something negative to say about them?

- ◆ Amos describes God as a holy God. How should that characteristic of God be reflected in our choices today?

- ◆ Can you see areas of injustice in our judicial system that favor the rich over the poor? What ways can the church be used today to provide equal opportunities for justice at every level of society?

- ◆ The Dallas Morning News reported that average giving to churches dropped by almost \$150 per donor from 1999 to 2000, and the giving of the average Christian dropped by 19 percent within the same period. What do these statistics reveal about Christians' attitudes to

generosity and giving today?