

March 1 Lesson 1 (NIV)

A CALL TO ACCOUNTABILITY

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 97

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Amos 5

AMOS 5:18–24

- ¹⁸ 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.
- ¹⁹ 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.
- ²⁰ Will not the day of the LORD be darkness, not light—
pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness?
- ²¹ “I hate, I despise your religious festivals;
your assemblies are a stench to me.
- ²² 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.
- ²³ Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.
- ²⁴ But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!”

KEY VERSE

Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream. —Amos 5:24

JUSTICE AND THE PROPHETS

Unit 1: God Requires Justice

LESSONS 1–5

LESSON OUTLINE

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- A. The Misuse of Worship
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

AmosAy-mus.

HabakkukHuh-*back*-kuk.

JeroboamJair-uh-*boe*-um.

UzziahUh-*zye*-uh.

Introduction

A. A Red-Letter Day?

A red-letter day is a day that is memorable in some way, usually because something positive occurred on that day. The term appears to be derived from the practice of marking holy days in red letters on church calendars. *The Book of Common Prayer*, issued in 1549, included a calendar with holy days marked in red ink. Some calendars mark Sundays in red.

In Old Testament times, many of God’s people in Israel viewed the coming day of the Lord as a red-letter day. They did not know exactly when it would occur, but they assumed it would be a happy, special day that they would always remember fondly.

B. Lesson Context

Today’s lesson begins a new quarter of studies on the topic “Justice and the Prophets.” The lessons in the first unit are drawn from the writings of Amos, Micah, Habakkuk, and Malachi. These four books make up one-third of the 12 Old Testament books that we call the Minor

Prophets. The word *minor* has nothing to do with their degree of importance. The term highlights the length of these 12 books; all are much shorter than the majority of books described as *major* (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel). Lamentation's inclusion in the major writings reflects the fact that the book was written by the major prophet Jeremiah.

The prophet Amos is unique among the writing prophets in two ways. First, he is a prophet who had another occupation to which he returned after delivering his prophecies (see Amos 1:1; 7:14, 15). Second, Amos was from the southern kingdom of Judah but was commanded by the Lord to speak his message in the northern kingdom of Israel (1:1). We do not need to imagine the reception that this outsider got when he prophesied against Israel (2:6–16; 7:10–17). Though he prophesied against several nations (1:3–2:5), Amos had the most to say about the sins of Israel.

Amos began his ministry around 760 BC. By then, God's people had been divided for approximately 170 years. Amos 1:1 mentions the two kings who were in power at the time of his ministry: Uzziah of Judah (also called Azariah; 785–734 BC; 2 Kings 15:1–3; 2 Chronicles 26:1–5) and Jeroboam (II) of Israel (786–746 BC; 2 Kings 14:23, 24). In Israel, an apathy toward God's laws had set in among the majority of the people. Life was good for them; the nation was prospering, and nations that often posed a threat to them (such as Assyria and Egypt) were weak and ineffective. What could this prophet possibly have to say to them? Why had he traveled from Judah to disturb their life of ease?

In the verses immediately preceding the start of our lesson text, Amos clearly revealed the cause of his ministry. At seemingly every turn, Israel chose evil over good (Amos 5:7–15). The prophet accused them of mistreating the poor (5:11). He then highlighted the people's numerous other sins (5:12–15): they punished those who sought justice, they accepted bribes, and they discriminated against the poor in lawsuits. With these admonitions still ringing in the air, Amos delivered the word of the Lord found in today's lesson text.

I. Dismal Day (AMOS 5:18–20)

A. Of Delusion (v. 18)

18a. Woe to you who long for the day of the LORD! Why do you long for the day of the LORD?

Woe is common in prophetic language. It introduces messages of warning and judgment (Jeremiah 22:13; Ezekiel 13:3, 18; Amos 6:1; etc.). Ideally, God's people should desire the day of the Lord, just as Christians desire the return of Jesus (2 Corinthians 1:14; 2 Peter 3:12).

However, Amos's audience longs for the day of the Lord for twisted, selfish reasons. Though they do not prioritize faithfulness to their covenant with the Lord, they believe that the day of the Lord will be a day of blessing for them. They have forgotten that covenant blessings are contingent on covenant faithfulness, and faithlessness will be met by judgment (Deuteronomy 28; 29).

The *day of the Lord* is a common theme in the Old Testament prophets (Isaiah 2:12–21; Ezekiel 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 2; Obadiah 15; Zephaniah 1:7–18; etc.). The verse at hand implies that in Amos's time the popular thinking surrounding the day of the Lord in Israel is gravely flawed. Israel believes that the Lord will arise on behalf of his people and defeat their enemies in a mighty display of his power on that day. Conveniently, God's people consider themselves exempt from judgment on that day because of their status as his chosen, covenant people (compare Judah's attitude in Jeremiah 7:2–11).

What prophets like Amos point out is that being the covenant people does not come without obligation. Elevated status before God also elevates the degree of accountability to him (Amos 3:2; compare Luke 12:47, 48). True, God's unique relationship with Israel provides them with special blessings and privileges, but it also comes with a solemn responsibility for faithful obedience to him. The people in Amos's day have come to expect the privileges, but they have abandoned the responsibility.

18b. That day will be darkness, not light.

Because of their false beliefs, the people will find themselves surprised that *the day* will be *darkness* for them, *not light* (compare Isaiah 5:30; Jeremiah 13:16). They would have cheered the judgment that Amos proclaimed on their enemies (Amos 1:3–2:5). The darkness and judgment that the other nations will experience will also fall on Israel, for Israel is no different from those nations (contrast Exodus 19:6).

B. Of Danger (v. 19)

19. 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.

Amos illustrates the plight of the people with two darkly humorous pictures. In both images, *a man* believes himself to be safe right before he meets his doom. He discovers that *a bear* is as deadly as *a lion* (compare Lamentations 3:10) and not even the man's *house* can keep him safe from *a snake* that has slithered inside (compare Deuteronomy 32:24; Ecclesiastes 10:8).

Two lessons should be drawn from these scenarios. First, like escaping a lion only to meet a bear, it is impossible to hide from judgment on the day of the Lord (compare Job 20:24; Isaiah 24:17, 18; Jeremiah 15:2, 3; 48:44). As the saying goes, "You can run, but you can't hide." In Amos's illustration, even one's own home, which might be considered a truly "safe place," will provide no refuge from what the day of the Lord will bring. The apostle John pictures individuals from all walks of life crying for the rocks to hide them from the Lamb on "the great day of their wrath," but such cries are futile (Revelation 6:15–17).

Second, the day of the Lord and its accompanying judgment arrive without warning. A person believes him- or herself to be safe from harm, when unanticipated danger strikes. Both Jesus and Paul use the illustration of the thief in the night to describe the sudden and unexpected nature of the day when Jesus returns (Matthew 24:42–44; 1 Thessalonians 5:1, 2). Paul adds that people will be claiming "peace and safety" when inescapable sudden "destruction" comes (5:3).

C. Of Darkness (v. 20)

20. Will not the day of the LORD be darkness, not light—pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness?

Amos reiterates his earlier point that the *day of the Lord* will be a time of *darkness, not light*. The Hebrew word translated *pitch-dark* comes from the same root word that describes the "total darkness" that fell upon the land of Egypt for three days during the ninth of the 10 plagues (Exodus 10:22). The judgment delivered shortly after that day resulted in the Israelites' being delivered from their enemy, from slavery to freedom. The day of the Lord, however, promises to be a reversal of both what Israel had experienced and what they expect to happen once more (see Ezekiel 7:7; Zephaniah 1:15).

II. Disappointed God

(AMOS 5:21–24)

A. Not Religious Ritual (vv. 21–23)

21. “I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me.

Though Amos has been speaking for God up until now, the Lord himself steps in to express his extreme displeasure with Israel’s *religious festivals* (see Exodus 23:14–18; 34:22–25). These would include annual feasts like Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23). Though the Lord had ordained these feasts for his people, he now refers to them as *your* (the people’s) religious festivals. The Lord does not want to be associated with them in any way. God rejects mere observance of days.

The Lord voices his disdain especially for the people’s *assemblies* (Leviticus 23:36; Numbers 29:35; Deuteronomy 16:8). The Lord hates how the people have twisted religion to their own ends instead of honoring the assemblies as he intends (compare Leviticus 26:30, 31; Hosea 2:11).

Israel scorns anyone who tries to correct the people’s wicked behavior and promote what is upright and good (Jeremiah 44:4, 5). Amos challenged the people to hate what is evil and love what is good (Amos 5:15, 20, 21; compare Isaiah 5:20).

The language of being offended by the smell reflects the Old Testament sacrificial system. The Lord had stated that he took pleasure in the aroma of offerings presented to him (examples: Genesis 8:21; Exodus 29:18; Numbers 29:2). In Amos’s day, however, the pleasing aroma has become a *stench* in the Lord’s nostrils. This is the first of three sensory reactions the Lord has to the worship of the unholy, faithless people.

22. “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.

The three offerings noted here are required by the Lord as part of the Old Testament sacrificial system. *Burnt offerings* are foundational. These are completely consumed by the sacrificial fire, except for the skin (Leviticus 1:6–9; 7:8). A burnt offering is to be offered every morning and evening for all Israel (Exodus 29:38–42).

Grain offerings are offerings of flour and oil. The best part of the grain is to be given to the Lord through this offering (6:14, 15). This offering celebrates that the Lord is the provider of what the land produces.

Fellowship offerings are shared by the priest, the one who brought the sacrifice, and others (Leviticus 7:15, 16, 28–36). Thus the offering becomes part of a communal, or fellowship, meal. The word *choice* refers to the best of the herd or flock that was used for the fellowship offering.

For God to refuse to *accept* these offerings that he has commanded indicates that something is terribly amiss with the people who are bringing them (Isaiah 1:11–15; Jeremiah 14:11, 12). It is especially ironic that the Lord has *no regard* for the fellowship offerings that are intended to establish a sense of closeness between God and his people. The Hebrew suggests that God refuses to even see these offerings—the second of the three sensory reactions first mentioned in Amos 5:21.

23. “Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.

The Lord’s strong disapproval also applies to the music presented by the people at their worship assemblies (compare Amos 6:1, 5). Whether the music is vocal, expressed through their

songs, or instrumental, played by the *harps*, God wants no part of it. Just as the offerings are a stench in his nostrils, the *music* makes him want to cover his ears.

What is the reason for such harsh words directed against actions that the Lord has specifically commanded in his law given through Moses? The problem is that worship practices such as the sacrifices and the music have become an end in themselves. The people of God are merely going through the motions and words of worship, divorcing that worship from any real impact on their daily conduct. The words of Isaiah, which Jesus will apply to the Pharisees of his day, could be spoken by Amos to his audience: they are people who “come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Isaiah 29:13; compare Matthew 15:7–9).

B. Meaningful Worship (v. 24)

24. “But let justice roll like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!”

While the people have become quite content with shallow gestures of worship, the Lord expects and deserves much more. Amos specifically highlights the issues of *justice* and *righteousness*. Justice concerns the fair, lawful practices of a society that honors the Lord. Practicing justice requires a person to be actively concerned about not only knowing what is just but also choosing to do it. An individual who really cares about justice becomes passionate about making sure that it is carried out in his or her surroundings and in the lives of others (see Jeremiah 22:3; Micah 6:8).

That the northern kingdom does not uphold justice is clear from the indictments that Amos brings against the people (see Lesson Context). Such conduct makes their so-called acts of worship nothing but a sham. No wonder the northern kingdom is ripe for divine judgment! This is why the day of the Lord that the people so fervently desire will be a time of darkness rather than light (Amos 5:18, 20).

Righteousness is closely tied to justice. To live righteously is to make certain that God’s standards of what is right guide one’s daily decisions. When justice and righteousness are pursued habitually day after day, they flow like waters in a *never-failing stream* (compare Isaiah 45:8). But how can this happen when the people have clogged the flow through their stubborn and rebellious hearts and their contempt for God’s righteous standards?

The call to exercise justice and righteousness has echoed through the centuries to God’s people of every era. The laws set forth by Moses laid out what those qualities should look like in the promised land (for example, Deuteronomy 15:1–18; 24:14, 15, 17–22). Joshua affirmed these laws (Joshua 1:7–9; 24:14, 15). Isaiah will be bold in decrying the empty worship of his audience (Isaiah 1:10–17). Jeremiah will describe those who make the Lord’s temple in Jerusalem a “den of robbers” (Jeremiah 7:8–11), mouthing the words “the temple of the Lord” like a mantra that can save them (7:4), while treating the people in need around them with the utmost scorn. God’s desire for justice and righteousness is not a fad; his people do well to take him seriously.

Conclusion

A. The Misuse of Worship

Diet Eman was a young Christian girl growing up in Holland when Adolf Hitler invaded the country and began his horrible persecution of the Jews there. Eman, along with some fellow

Christians, determined to do something about this injustice and became part of an underground movement to rescue the Jews in Holland.

But Eman also tells the story of a rail line that was used by the Nazis during World War II to transport boxcars jammed with Jews and others whom the Nazis considered “undesirables.” Many times the trains were sidetracked for hours while the people inside begged for food, water, and mercy. There were no bathroom facilities for the journey, which could last four days or longer. Along the train’s route was a small church located close enough to the rail line to hear the cries coming from within the boxcars. The church people attending services were deeply disturbed by these “distractions,” so they began singing more loudly so they would not have to hear them.

We are likely not in a setting where a train filled with suffering people is traveling by the place where we worship. However, our place of worship may well be in a community where many people are hurting and in need. It is certainly located in a community that needs righteousness to be practiced daily. We cannot allow ourselves to think that we have somehow fulfilled our Christian duty by simply attending worship services and then returning to our routines while ignoring the needs of those around us. Feast days and burnt offerings are not part of our worship observances, but do we offend the Lord today with our closed eyes and deaf ears to the hurts of those around us?

Christians should consider Jesus’ call to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13–16) as a call to practice the kind of lifestyle encouraged by the prophets. Righteousness cannot be practiced in isolation from other people; it requires contact with the world, a world that is often characterized by injustice and unrighteousness. To be salt and light is to have a noticeable impact on our surroundings, and that is what followers of Jesus have always been called to do. Without these practices, we too may see the day of the Lord not as a day of celebration but as a day of judgment to our great shame.

B. Prayer

Father, may *justice* and *righteousness* be more than mere words to us; may they be part of our daily conduct. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

We worship God through the offerings of our daily lives.¹

¹