

“Prepare to Meet Your God” (The Message of Amos)

May 3, 2020

Brian Watson

Many of us have been spending more time at home than we’re used to spending. Some of us have spent more time at home than we want to spend. A few weeks ago, my wife said she felt like she was “in prison.” Isn’t it strange to think that we don’t feel at home while at home? Shouldn’t home be where we feel best?

Perhaps what we’re longing for is something more than being home. Perhaps we’re longing to be in our real home, the place where we really feel best.

C. S. Lewis addressed this issue in his sermon, “The Weight of Glory.” He said that we have this “desire for our own far-off country,” our real home.¹ What we’re longing for cannot be found in this world. But still we try to find it here and now. We try to something that will satisfy our longings in beauty and pleasures. Some of us may try to find what we’re looking for in the past. If only we could back, then everything would be right. Lewis says, “But this is all a cheat. . . . These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself, they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.”²

We all need a people, a place, and a purpose. Without those things, we will never be satisfied. We were made to be God’s people, to dwell with him, and to live for him. What we really need to be satisfied is a right relationship with God. We were made for God. Being with him is our true home. Taking pleasure in praising him is our purpose. As Augustine prayed over sixteen hundred years ago, “You stir men to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”³

The story of the Bible is a story about leaving home and getting lost in our wanderings. It is a story about God calling us back home. He sends things into our lives to get our attention, to summon us back to himself—if only we would listen and return to him. It is a story about God

¹ C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Harper One, 2001), 29.

² *Ibid.*, 30–31.

³ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3.

coming to take us back home. And the end of the Bible is a depiction of that glorious homecoming, when all things will finally be well.

Today, we're going to focus on the part where God sends things into our lives to call us back to himself. I think that's appropriate in the age of the coronavirus. I don't know exactly why this virus exists, but I think it's possible that God is using this event to get our attention, to remind us of how much we need him.

Today we're going to look at the book of Amos, from the Old Testament. Amos is one of the so-called "minor prophets." However, I wouldn't use that name. Some people refer to the "major prophets," like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. They use that name because these are some of the longest books in the Bible. And then they refer to the "minor prophets," the last twelve books of the Bible, which are significantly shorter. But it's a mistake to think of these books as "minor." They are very important.

Let's get a little historical background for this book. It begins with these words:

The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake (Amos 1:1).⁴

Amos was a shepherd who lived in the eighth century B.C. During this time, Israel had divided into two kingdoms. The northern kingdom was called Israel, and during this time Jeroboam II was king (793–753 B.C.). The southern kingdom was called Judah, and during this time Uzziah was king (791–740 B.C.). Both kings reigned for over forty years, which meant that this was a time of unusual stability. It was also "a period of unprecedented prosperity."⁵ Both kingdoms were wealthy. But these kingdoms were surrounded by enemies. In particular, the northern kingdom was threatened by the Assyrian empire, which was becoming the world's superpower.

The book begins with a word of judgment against the nations around Israel and Judah. This is what the second verse of the book says:

And he said:

“The LORD roars from Zion
and utters his voice from Jerusalem;
the pastures of the shepherds mourn,

⁴ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

⁵ Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 423.

and the top of Carmel withers” (Amos 1:2).

Amos is sharing a word of judgment against the nations, a word from God, whose voice “roars” from Jerusalem.

First, there is a warning against Syria, represented by their capital city of Damascus (Amos 1:3–5). This was the country north of Israel. Then, there is a warning against the Philistines who lived to the west (Amos 1:6–8). There is also a word of judgment against Tyre, also to the west (Amos 1:9–10). Then, God promises to punish nations to the east: Edom (Amos 1:11–12), Ammon, (Amos 1:13–15), and Moab (Amos 2:1–3).

Why was God going to punish these nations? The Philistines helped Edom by exiling Israelites there (Amos 1:6). The Edomites fought against Israel (Amos 1:11). And the Ammonites did, too. In fact, Amos says “they have ripped open pregnant women” (Amos 1:13). That’s how brutal war can be.

Now, if you lived in Amos’s day, and you lived in Judah and Israel, you would be happy to hear that God’s judgment was coming against these nations. You would think, “Finally, God is doing something to punish these people!” It would be like a Christian who is a Republican hearing that God is going to punish Democrats. God was finally going to punish all the enemies that surrounded Israel.

But then Amos delivers some shocking news. God is going to punish Judah (Amos 2:4–5) and Israel (Amos 2:6–15). Why? Look at Amos 2:4–5:

⁴ Thus says the LORD:

“For three transgressions of Judah,
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment,
because they have rejected the law of the LORD,
and have not kept his statutes,
but their lies have led them astray,
those after which their fathers walked.

⁵ So I will send a fire upon Judah,
and it shall devour the strongholds of Jerusalem.”

Judah rejected God’s word, his law. They didn’t keep his commandments.

Then, look at Amos 2:6–8:

⁶ Thus says the LORD:

“For three transgressions of Israel,

and for four, I will not revoke the punishment,
because they sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals—
7 those who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth
and turn aside the way of the afflicted;
a man and his father go in to the same girl,
so that my holy name is profaned;
8 they lay themselves down beside every altar
on garments taken in pledge,
and in the house of their God they drink
the wine of those who have been fined.

The rich and powerful in Israel bought and sold people. They “trampled the poor.” There was also sexual immorality. Father and son had sex with the same woman. This might have been connected to pagan worship practices. Strange as it may seem, sex was part of the worship in some religions. And the people committed idolatry, which is spiritual adultery. God was supposed to be their only object of worship, but they cheated on him. They worshiped at all kinds of altars built to worship foreign gods.

These are specific charges against a specific people at a specific time and place, but these are some of the major sins in the Bible: using and oppressing people, usually through some kind of economic means; committing sexual immorality; and worship false gods. In fact, you could say that misusing money means that your god is money. Having sex outside of the only proper context for sex—marriage between a man and a woman—means that sex is your god. When anything other than the true God becomes the most important thing in our life, the thing that causes us to love, trust, and obey it, that is our god. That is what we’re worshipping. But we were made for God. And God has every right to punish us when we’re destroying ourselves by failing to live according to his design.

Failing to love God and live for him is also a failure to acknowledge what he’s done for us. God says that he brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt and sustained them until he led them to their own land (Amos 2:10). For all of us, he has given us life and sustains our lives. He is our Maker, the one who sustains every breath and heartbeat, every second that we live. Yet we run away from him.

In chapter 3, we read this:

¹ Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel,
against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt:

² “You only have I known
of all the families of the earth;
therefore I will punish you
for all your iniquities (Amos 3:1–2).

God reminds Israel that he rescued them from slavery in Egypt. And he says that of all the people on the earth, they alone were the ones he “knew.” Now, God is omniscient. He knows everything. He knows everything about us. What this means is that the Israelites were the only ones he made a covenant with. He revealed himself to them. He gave them promises that were tied to his commandments. If they would trust him and live life on his terms, they would live. But they didn’t.

So, God says, because you were my special people and turned away from me, I will punish you. The reason why they are going to be punished is because they should have known better. God had been exceedingly kind to them, and they didn’t appreciate him.

So, God warns them of punishment, punishment that will come through their enemies. He wants them to know that when enemies defeat their cities, it is because he has brought that about. In Amos 3:6, God says,

Is a trumpet blown in a city,
and the people are not afraid?
Does disaster come to a city,
unless the LORD has done it?

Nothing happens unless God has somehow planned it, or even caused it, to occur. That was true of the judgment that would come upon Israel.

But God doesn’t punish because he is unloving. He punishes in order to correct us. He was sending disaster upon Israel to get their attention.

Let’s look at Amos 4:6–13:

⁶ “I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities,
and lack of bread in all your places,
yet you did not return to me,”
declares the LORD.

⁷ “I also withheld the rain from you
when there were yet three months to the harvest;
I would send rain on one city,
and send no rain on another city;
one field would have rain,

- and the field on which it did not rain would wither;
8 so two or three cities would wander to another city
to drink water, and would not be satisfied;
yet you did not return to me,”
declares the LORD.
- 9 “I struck you with blight and mildew;
your many gardens and your vineyards,
your fig trees and your olive trees the locust devoured;
yet you did not return to me,”
declares the LORD.
- 10 “I sent among you a pestilence after the manner of Egypt;
I killed your young men with the sword,
and carried away your horses,
and I made the stench of your camp go up into your nostrils;
yet you did not return to me,”
declares the LORD.
- 11 “I overthrew some of you,
as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah,
and you were as a brand plucked out of the burning;
yet you did not return to me,”
declares the LORD.
- 12 “Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel;
because I will do this to you,
prepare to meet your God, O Israel!”
- 13 For behold, he who forms the mountains and creates the wind,
and declares to man what is his thought,
who makes the morning darkness,
and treads on the heights of the earth—
the LORD, the God of hosts, is his name!

God gave his people famine, bad crops, pestilence, and military defeat—“yet you did not return to me.” That is such a sad refrain. God caused these things to fall upon Israel so that they would return to him, but they didn’t.

I want us to see that God has the power to control all these events. He controls the weather. He causes rain to fall, and he also causes drought. He can direct kings and armies. He uses these things to bring people back to himself.

Now, you may think, “Oh, that’s just the Old Testament. God in the New Testament wouldn’t do such a thing.” But look at Luke 13:1–5:

¹ There were some present at that very time who told him [Jesus] about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² And he answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? ³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. ⁴ Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

People tell Jesus that Pontius Pilate has slaughtered some Jews. That’s a form of moral evil, the kind of evil that people do to each other. Jesus asks if this happened because these Jews were worse sinners. The answer is “no.” And he says something like that will happen to everyone who doesn’t repent, who doesn’t turn to God. Then Jesus mentions how eighteen people died when a tower fell. We don’t know why the tower fell. Maybe it fell because it was poorly made. Perhaps the people who made it made it on the cheap, or they didn’t calculate how strong the tower needed to be. Perhaps it was a minor earthquake that caused the tower to fall. It could have been a form of natural evil, the bad things that happen in nature. Again, he says that the people who died that way weren’t worse sinners. But everyone who fails to repent, to turn back to God, will experience something similar.

In short, every time that some evil occurs, it is a reminder to turn back to God. The reason why these evils occur is that humans turned away from God from the very beginning. God made us to love, trust, and obey him and we don’t do that. We want to be our own gods and goddesses. So, God uses evils to punish us, to get our attention, to cause us to turn back to him.

This reminds me of some of the words of C. S. Lewis in *The Problem of Pain*. First, he addresses our problem with God. Because of our evil nature, we don’t really want to know God as he truly is. He writes,

What would really satisfy us would be a God who said of anything we happened to like doing, ‘What does it matter so long as they are contented?’ We want, in fact, not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven—a senile benevolence who, as they said, ‘liked to see young people enjoying themselves,’ and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, ‘a good time was had by all.’⁶

Then, Lewis says that God isn’t that way. God is love, and real love doesn’t coddle. Real love isn’t afraid to let someone suffer, if that is necessary. If your child needs a painful shot to be

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 35–36.

immunized, you don't withhold that treatment because she doesn't like needles. Lewis writes, "Love, in its own nature, demands the perfecting of the beloved; . . . the mere 'kindness' which tolerates anything except suffering in its object is, in that respect, at the opposite pole from Love."⁷ God wants us to experience the very best in life, which is him. But, in our natural state, we don't seek him. That is particularly true when things are going well, when we seem to be in control of our lives. To know that God is God and we are not, we must come to the end of our illusion that we are at the center of the universe. We must come to the end of thinking that we're God, that we're in control. God uses pain and suffering to bring us into that position. As Lewis famously writes, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."⁸

So, after these words of warning in Amos, God says to Israel: "Seek me and live" (Amos 5:4). "Seek the LORD and live" (Amos 5:6). And,

- ¹⁴ Seek good, and not evil,
that you may live;
and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you,
as you have said.
- ¹⁵ Hate evil, and love good,
and establish justice in the gate;
it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts,
will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph (Amos 5:14–15).

God tells the people to seek him, to seek good and forsake evil, so that they may live. Now, this doesn't mean that we can return to God by doing good things. We cannot get to God through our own efforts. We know this from the rest of the Bible. Our sin, our rebellion against God, runs deep and it taints every part of us and everything we do. We can't drive out the evil from within us. But if we seek God, we will want to do what is good.

But when we return to God, it's more than just paying lip service. God wants more than just for us to do a few religious things. He wants our hearts. He wants changed lives. Look at Amos 5:21–24:

- ²¹ "I hate, I despise your feasts,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
- ²² Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;

⁷ Ibid., 36.

⁸ Ibid., 83.

- and the peace offerings of your fattened animals,
I will not look upon them.
- ²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs;
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.
- ²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

One of the sins of Israel was religious hypocrisy. They thought they could worship God and also worship other gods. They thought they could go through the motions by praying and singing and offering sacrifices to God, and then go and live like all the pagan nations around them. But that isn't pleasing to God. In fact, God says he hates that. He hates religious festivals when they aren't done from the heart. He hates singing, even songs that are about him, if it comes from unclean lips. He doesn't want sacrifices made by people who aren't sacrificing their whole lives. Instead, God wants people to love him and to live according to his word. That's what justice is.

You may notice that Amos quotes Martin Luther King, Jr. here. That's a joke, of course. Martin Luther King quoted Amos as a call to justice. But this justice isn't just "social" justice. There's only one form of justice in the Bible, and that is loving God and loving people the way that God wants us to. If we do justice in the public square but do immoral things in our private lives, that isn't justice. It won't do to provide for the poor and then engage in sexual immorality, for example. God isn't impressed by that. He sees our condition. He demands righteousness.

And that leaves us in a bind. We aren't perfectly righteous. We are not just. Even when we try to praise God, there's still some taint of sin. Amos knew this. When he was shown visions of judgment in chapter 7, he says, "O Lord GOD, please forgive!"

How can we be forgiven by God? Perhaps the clue comes in Amos. In chapter 5, God says there will be a "day of the LORD," a day of "darkness, and not light" (Amos 5:18). This will be a day of punishment, but it's also a day of salvation. In chapter 8, we read these words:

"And on that day," declares the Lord GOD,
"I will make the sun go down at noon
and darken the earth in broad daylight." (Amos 8:9)

On the day of the Lord, a day of punishment and a day of salvation, the sun will go down at noon. Darkness will cover the earth at a time when there should be broad daylight.

This day of the Lord came almost three thousand years ago, when the only righteous man who ever lived, Jesus of Nazareth, was put to death. Jesus, the Son of God, was sent "to seek and

to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). He came from a far-off country, from heaven, to bring people back to their God. He did this by living the perfect life that we should live but don’t, and then by dying in our place, taking the punishment for our sin that we deserve. When Jesus was crucified, darkness came upon the land at noon, a sign that he was enduring the wrath of God that we have earned. He didn’t do this for everyone. Only those who turn to Jesus in faith, who seek the Lord, are forgiven of their sins and will live with God forever.

We know Jesus is the one who brings us back home to God because in chapter 9 of Amos, God promises that after punishment, there will be a day of rebuilding. Look at Amos 9:11–12:

- ¹¹ “In that day I will raise up
the booth of David that is fallen
and repair its breaches,
and raise up its ruins
and rebuild it as in the days of old,
¹² that they may possess the remnant of Edom
and all the nations who are called by my name,”
declares the LORD who does this.

God promises to rebuild “the booth of David.” That’s a reference to David’s kingdom. David, the second king of Israel, was a great king. But David had already died, and his kingdom was divided. Yet God promised that a descendant of David would come and build a kingdom that will never end. This perfect king would defeat Israel’s enemies and bring about peace and justice that would last forever. We know from the New Testament that Jesus is that King. And he is calling a remnant of people “from all nations” into his kingdom. This passage is quoted in the Acts 15 when Jewish Christians are trying to figure out how Gentile Christians should live. The point is that the true Israel is everyone—Jew, Gentile, American, Chinese, black, white, male, female, rich, poor—who is united to Jesus by faith.

And those people will go home. They will live with God forever in a perfect world. Look at the end of the book, Amos 9:13–15:

- ¹³ “Behold, the days are coming,” declares the LORD,
“when the plowman shall overtake the reaper
and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed;
the mountains shall drip sweet wine,
and all the hills shall flow with it.
¹⁴ I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,
and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them;

they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,
and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.
15 I will plant them on their land,
and they shall never again be uprooted
out of the land that I have given them,”
says the LORD your God.

This garden imagery reminds us of the garden of Eden, where humanity was first “planted.” We were kicked out of the garden because we didn’t love, trust, and obey God. How do we get back to the garden? Jesus. We’re told that he will come back to earth one day to make everything right. Those who trust in him will live in this perfect world. The images here are just a taste of what this perfect world will be like, a world of prosperity and pleasure. But most importantly, it will be home because our God dwells there.

Why do things like viruses occur? Why is the world disrupted economically? We could provide naturalistic answers, answers that only appeal to what we can see with our own eyes. Or, we could say, “Well, there’s no good reason.” Or, we could spend our time blaming politicians. But ultimately, God sends these things to get our attention. They are the megaphone he uses to rouse a deaf world. Are we listening? Are we turning back to God?

God lets us go our own way, running away from him to pursue our false gods. But God uses difficult events to bring us back to him. Will we answer his call? If you’re not a Christian, I urge you to turn to God while there is time. Learn about Jesus and follow him. If you want to know what that would look like in your life, send me a message and I’ll help you any way that I can. Christians, take God seriously. Don’t just pay him lip service. He deserves more than that.

Turn to God while there is time. If we continue to run away from God, he may very well let us go our own way—forever. And that will be a dreadful thing. Even in the book of Amos, there is a famine that is worse than lack of food, and there is a drought that is worse than lack of water. Amos 8:11 says,

“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord GOD,
“when I will send a famine on the land—
not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water,
but of hearing the words of the LORD.

The most horrifying thing is not to have God in your life, not to hear from him. Now, if you’re not a Christian, you may think that you don’t have God in your life and that you don’t hear from him now. But that’s not true. God is everywhere and all of creation speaks of God (Ps. 19:1–6).

But there will be a day when all who have rejected God will be removed from him entirely. To be cut off from God means to be cut off from love, beauty, truth, light, and life. It's worse than we can ever imagine.

But God has come to do everything you need to be put back into a right relationship with him. And right now, he is calling you back home. Come to Jesus, the truth, the life, and the way back to your God.