

Prayer

You have made wonderful things, O Lord; the infinite variety of words and music, the subtlety of colour and the complex changing of the seasons. We praise You for these things, and ask that we may never take for granted the wisdom and power by which You continue to sustain the world as well as save it; through Jesus Christ we pray; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Books

Pray for God to raise up successful Christian authors who will write books that excite people about the good news of God in Jesus Christ, within today's world of scepticism and denial

On-going prayers

- *Pray for the work done by Christians in Muslim countries*
- *Give thanks for all that the Lord has been able to do through you*
- *Pray for Afghanistan, for the rule of law and democratic processes*

Meditation

Reveal Yourself, Almighty Lord and all-powerful God;
Show us who You are, in unambiguous truth.

Through creation, reveal the ingenuity of Your Spirit;
Through history, reveal Your plan for the whole world;

Through sin's exposure, reveal Your purity and holiness;
Through forgiveness, reveal the brilliance of love;

Through salvation, reveal the integrity of Your will;
Through redemption, reveal the passion of Your heart;

Through hope, reveal the bright vision of eternity;
Through awesome power, reveal complete control;

Reveal Yourself, Almighty Lord and all-powerful God;
Let there be no misunderstanding with You.

Bible Study - Amos 5:1-9

¹ Hear this word, O house of Israel, that I take up against you; a lament. ² The fair virgin Israel is fallen, no more to rise; lying abandoned on her land with no one to lift her up.

³ This is what the Lord GOD says: The city that marched out with a thousand will be left with a hundred, and any which marched out with a hundred will have ten left.

⁴ This is what the LORD says to the house of Israel: Seek me and live; ⁵ but do not seek Bethel, and do not go into Gilgal or journey to Beer-sheba; for Gilgal will certainly go into exile, and Bethel will come to nothing. ⁶ Seek the LORD and live, or he will come on the house of Joseph like a fire, and it will devour Bethel with no one to put it out! ⁷ Oh yes, you who turn justice into bitterness (wormwood), and bring righteousness to a halt!

⁸ The one who made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into the morning, and darkens the day into night, who calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out on the surface of the earth, the LORD is his name, ⁹ who makes destruction flash out against the strong, so that destruction comes upon the fortress.

Review

Amos' prophecies continue to strike at the heart of the nation of Israel and its deadly attraction to the worship of the Ba'als, which it practiced alongside the worship of the God of Israel. All this was plain for all to see at Bethel, one of the principle shrines of the country, where Amos was prophesying (see 7:10f.). Amos had

already said that the punishment for such appalling two-faced religious sacrilege would be the destruction of Israel in war (2:12-16, 3:9-11), and our reading today says more about both the problems of Israel and the punishment the Lord had prepared to inflict on His people. Within it, we can also hear the voice of God calling in vain for His people to repent.

The first verse begins as if this is a new prophetic word from Amos, with the arresting words 'hear this word, O house of Israel ...' (5:1). This verse begins a prophecy which continues from verse 1 to verse 17 of chapter 5. The structure of this is complex, and the prophecy is divided in two, centred around verses 8 and 9. For now, it is enough to know that the features of verses 1 to 7 are repeated in a slightly different form in verses 10 to 17 (see next study). The whole prophecy takes the form of a lament (5:1); that is, a song sung in grief at the passing of a soul. With phenomenal daring, Amos gave this prophecy as if Israel had already received her punishment, war had taken place, the nation had been defeated, and God was weeping over the death of His beloved nation. This explains the dramatic words; 'fair virgin Israel is fallen, no more to rise, lying abandoned on her land with no one to lift her up' (5:2). This is not a description of an event that has happened, but a prophetic lament painting a picture of the devastation of war; 'the city that marched out with a thousand will be left with a hundred ...' (5:3). It is a warning, but the prophet did not believe it would be heard, at least, not in Israel.

Amos' prophecy continues with God bewailing what could have happened if only Israel had listened to Him. He had said to His people, 'Seek me and live!' (5:4), He had told them to receive from Him all they needed, but the great sanctuaries of the land had become a snare because the people had abandoned the Lord for the worship of Ba'al. Looking ahead to the nation's defeat on the battlefield (5:3), Amos dramatically warned that Israel's great sanctuaries would come to nothing; even Bethel, Gilgal and Beersheba (5:5). These places had enormous significance; Bethel was the place where Jacob had seen God (Gen 31:13, 35:7); Gilgal was the place where the people of Israel were rededicated to the Lord before entering the Promised Land (Joshua 5:9), and Beersheba was the southernmost city of the land, associated with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (see Gen 21:14,31, 26:23, 46:1). The Lord wanted no more of the religiosity that had grown up around these shrines. He wanted a relationship with His people, not mere religion. He had a relationship with the forefathers, and He still wanted the same from their descendants, not people who venerated the past.

At the end of our passage (5:8,9), the prophecy changes dramatically. This has caused some to think that they were added later, but I doubt this. It is far more likely that after such a dramatic prophecy, Amos spoke words that read like a liturgy of praise to God, and it is possible that these words were part of a liturgy of prayers said at funeral occasions in ancient Israel, praising God for His governance of the Universe and creative power. They were words that have the same power as what is said today at a funeral service; 'from dust we came and to dust we return' (Eccles. 3:20). In sadness and grief, Amos said that God was Lord of all; He could create (5:8), and He could also destroy (5:9).

Amos held back nothing in His condemnation of Israel, and this use of a funeral lament and liturgy is just one way in which he dramatised his prophecy. As we read through Amos, we find that he used every possible literary technique at his disposal to warn God's people of their judgement. He knew that they were condemned, and he undoubtedly placed himself in great danger by speaking in this way; demonstrating in his own life the danger in which God's people now placed themselves. At great personal cost, he did not hold back God's Word.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. As we might understand it, Amos appears to say; 'seek me and live, but do not go to church!' Is this a fair understanding of verse 4? If so, what does it mean?
2. Amos was prepared to use what we might call 'hell fire and damnation' techniques. Can they work?
3. Discuss how it is possible to praise God in the midst of a funeral service.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Amos spoke with such conviction he prophesied as if his own prophecy had already come true! Now that was conviction! Some, however, have said that Amos was deluded, and merely exaggerated what was going on in Israel. Clearly, Amos was deeply affected by the sin within the worship life of God's people, and spoke out because of this. In what ways is it possible for a Christian to worship God falsely at church today? Make some notes about this, and place them in your Bible as a warning to yourself in times to come.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Amos was clearly affected by what he perceived as the wrongful worship of God within the shrines of Israel. Forgetting issues to do with music and worship styles, is there anything wrong with the 'heart of worship' amongst God's people today? If so, forget about mere criticism of this, what will the consequences of it be.*
- *Pray for any people you know who are seeking to worship the Lord their God and find it hard to feel that they can indeed worship Him in the services provided by local churches.*

Final Prayer

Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, we ask that may we never be oppressed by the troubles we endure, but offer You the fruit of our life of faith. We offer You the words we say, the deeds we do, the love we share, the hopes we have and the joys that brighten our lives. Lift our hearts we pray, this and every day; AMEN
