

Prophecies of a Fig Pincher

PART 3: ATONEMENT (AMOS 5:16-27)

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It is good to be together this morning! We do plan on partaking of the Lord's Supper together right after we study the word of God, so if you need the elements for the Supper, those are available in the entryway, right inside the front door. And then, following the Lord's Supper, we plan on singing several songs together before we dismiss [for class].

As we begin, we'd like to summarize God's plan for saving us. Most of us get to a point in life where we choose to sin, and we get to a point in life where we are held accountable for sin. This, by the way, is why babies and young children do not need to be saved from sin: They haven't sinned yet! The rest of us, though, we know better, but we sin anyway. God anticipated this, and he sent his only Son as a sacrifice. He died on the cross, he was buried, but he was raised up on the third day. In response, we hear and believe that good news. This is not something babies are capable of doing, but instead, we need to be old enough to hear and understand. Then, we turn away from sin; and again, this not something little children need to do; they are innocent to begin with. Then, we confess Jesus as being the Son of God; we publicly proclaim our belief that Jesus is the Christ. And then we allow ourselves to be buried with Jesus in baptism, an immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins. And once again, this is a decision, a commitment to follow the Lord, and this is why we do not baptize babies here at this congregation. This is why we don't have a single example of infant baptism anywhere in the Bible – babies cannot make that decision. Besides, most infant baptism in the world these days is not baptism at all – it is not an immersion in water, but it usually involves sprinkling a few drops of water on the head of an angry baby. I say this to emphasize: If you were baptized as a baby, your baptism looks nothing like the baptism God has commanded, and you need to be baptized as God demands – an immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins, following belief, repentance, and a confession of faith. This is important. Why do we emphasize this so much? Because it is important!

Today, we are thankful for the good example set by Latoya Shelton. Louis Smith preaches at the Colonel Glenn congregation in Little Rock, Arkansas, and he says, "What an Awesome God we serve! Had a young lady reach out to me about wanting to know more about the Lord's church and Salvation; after studying the word together, she gave the Lord her life today. Please welcome our new Sister in Christ; Latoya Shelton. May God receive the Glory!" Since I've mentioned infant baptism this morning, I should point out that in nearly two years of sharing examples of people obeying the gospel, not once have we seen a picture of a little baby getting sprinkled on the head, and the reason is: Infant baptism cannot be found anywhere in the Bible. So, if you were baptized as a

baby and for some reason think you are okay with God, please get in touch so we can study the word of God together.

This morning, we are concluding our brief series of lessons where we are just getting a taste for the prophets by looking at Amos 5. Two weeks ago, we learned that Amos was a fig-pincher, a caretaker of fig trees, he was not a professional prophet by any means, but he was a farmer called by God to leave his home in the south to go up and to prophesy to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. By way of very brief review, Amos is represented by the purple band on the timeline up here, showing that he prophesied in the mid-700's BC.

We started with the first nine verses of Amos 5, and noted that the message starts like a funeral, lamenting the death of the nation, and this is God's **JUDGMENT**. They seem to be rather strong at the time, everything seems to be fine, but everything is not fine. We then had something of an opening invitation as Amos tries to explain that ultimately, the solution to this problem is to seek the Lord. And this is where Amos reintroduces the Lord to these people. It has been so long since they have known the Lord, Amos has to say, **"The Lord is his name."**

Last week, we found that Amos gets specific, as he brings an **INDICTMENT**. So as to remove all doubt as to what they have done, he explains the charges: They hate anybody who brings correction, they oppress the poor, they pervert justice, and on top of this, even those who claim to be wise are silent (they go along with this). The solution is that they are to seek good and hate evil. Very simple.

Today, we come to the last paragraph, and we are summarizing this section with the word **ATONEMENT**. Atonement is the idea of making things right with God. Years ago, someone explained this by breaking the word down – atonement is the idea of being "at one" with God. AT-ONE-MENT, then, is the concept of being "at one" with the Lord. Instead of being separated from God due to our sin, we are now "at one" with God. In this last paragraph, then, the prophet Amos explains what is necessary to be "at one" with the Lord. And as with the previous paragraphs, he follows a pattern: He describes the problem, and then he proposes a solution. So, let's keep an eye out for this as we look at Amos 5:16-27,

- ¹⁶ ***Therefore thus says the LORD God of hosts, the Lord,
"There is wailing in all the plazas,
And in all the streets they say, 'Alas! Alas!'
They also call the farmer to mourning
And professional mourners to lamentation.***
- ¹⁷ ***"And in all the vineyards there is wailing,
Because I will pass through the midst of you," says the LORD.***
- ¹⁸ ***Alas, you who are longing for the day of the LORD,
For what purpose will the day of the LORD be to you?
It will be darkness and not light;***
- ¹⁹ ***As when a man flees from a lion
And a bear meets him,
Or goes home, leans his hand against the wall
And a snake bites him.***
- ²⁰ ***Will not the day of the LORD be darkness instead of light,
Even gloom with no brightness in it?***
- ²¹ ***"I hate, I reject your festivals,
Nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies.***

²² ***“Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings,
I will not accept them;***

And I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings.

²³ ***“Take away from Me the noise of your songs;
I will not even listen to the sound of your harps.***

²⁴ ***“But let justice roll down like waters
And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.***

²⁵ ***“ Did you present Me with sacrifices and grain offerings in the wilderness for forty years, O house of Israel? ²⁶ You also carried along Sikkuth your king and Kiyyun, your images, the star of your gods which you made for yourselves. ²⁷ Therefore, I will make you go into exile beyond Damascus,” says the LORD, whose name is the God of hosts.***

So again, in this passage we have the PROBLEM, and then we have God’s SOLUTION to the problem.

- I. **But let’s start with the PROBLEM, let’s start with what is PREVENTING these people from being “at one” with God, and the problem is that the people are trying to be at one with God on their own, without actually considering God in the process – they are crying, they are wailing, they are going through the motions of worship, but they aren’t actually changing their hearts – and for the purpose of our study, I’m summarizing this with the equation WAILING + WORSHIP ≠ SALVATION.**

In verses 16-17, we have some wailing, don’t we? In the plazas, in the streets, even the farmers get involved here. They call in professional mourners. They are paying people to wail for them. There’s wailing in the vineyards. Everybody is wailing. They think this wailing is what God really wants, so they think they are prepared for judgment: God wants wailing, we have wailed; therefore, we are saved! And yet, in verses 18-20, Amos describes these people as looking forward to the day of judgment, thinking they are prepared, but it turns out they are not prepared at all. Apparently, wailing is not exactly what God is looking for! So, they look forward to the day of the Lord, but when it comes, they don’t exactly get what they are expecting, do they? For them, that day will be darkness and not light. The prophet Amos continues and compares it to a man who runs from a lion and gets eaten by a bear! He compares it to a man who comes home after a hard day’s work, leans up against a wall, and gets bitten by a snake – an unwelcome surprise. This is what awaits those who think God is looking for wailing. They wail, they think they are good to go, but they are not good at all. The wailing is not doing it.

In fact, starting in verse 21, God continues by smacking down the other things they were trying – festivals, solemn assemblies, burnt offerings, grain offerings, peace offerings, songs, harps, sacrifices – and all of these things are somehow offensive to God! Notice the language: I hate, I do not delight, I will not accept, I will not even look at, take away the noise, I will not listen. Those are some strong words. And I would point out that God has actually asked for all of these things in the past. In the Law, God had at one time demanded festivals, and assemblies, and offerings, and songs, and sacrifices. Now, though, these acts of worship are offensive to the Lord. So, what’s the deal with that? Why is God so upset, even when the people seem to be doing what he has commanded?

The answer is found down at the end, in verses 25-26, as God reminds them of their time in the wilderness. Yes, they offered sacrifices and grain offerings in the wilderness for forty years, but what? ***“You also carried along Sikkuth your king and Kiyyun, your images, the star of your gods which you made for yourselves.”*** Do we see

what's going on here? They are worshiping God, but they are also holding on to the false gods from their past. In other words, they are not worshiping God whole-heartedly. There is some hypocrisy going on here. All of this singing, and prayer, and sacrifice, then, are merely superficial.

So, they are singing, and praying, and making offerings, and attending these religious festivals, they are hoping for the day of the Lord, but the prophet says: You're like a guy who runs from the lion, only to be eaten by a bear. Your future is not quite as bright as you think it is! Today, we might imagine these people singing a song like, "When We All Get to Heaven," when none of them will actually ever get to heaven. Or we might imagine them enthusiastically singing a song like, "There's a Great Day Coming," when that day will not be quite as great as they think it will be. They think that WEEPING + WORSHIP = SALVATION, but they have left out SINCERITY; they have failed to love God from the heart. We think of Jesus in Matthew 15:7-9, when he said, ***"You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you: 'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.'"*** This is what is happening in Amos. Their worship is merely external, even to the point where their singing is described as ***"noise."*** God doesn't want it. Their worship is offensive to God.

I think of what we might refer to today as a "white elephant" gift. Do you know the origin of that description? I didn't, until I looked it up this week. Apparently, many years ago, the king of Thailand was in the habit of giving expensive and useless gifts to people who irritated him a little bit. As far as I can tell, "white" doesn't necessarily refer to the color of an elephant, but it's an unfortunate translation of a gift that is ostentatious. So, if I'm a king and I don't really like you, and I want to see you squirm a bit, I might give you a one-of-a-kind-type gift that's really expensive to take care of, a white elephant. And as a gift from the king, everybody is watching, everybody knows, so you can't really get rid of it. But what do you do with an elephant? We have a hard time feeding a beagle in our family. How would we feed an elephant? It would be an embarrassing financial disaster! And that is the origin of the term "white elephant," and it came to describe a gift that nobody wants. Well, that's pretty much the way Amos describes worship in this passage. The people are offering sacrifices, and prayers, and songs, but God is not interested. Their music is merely ***"noise."*** Their worship is offensive to God.

And the reason is: Their hearts are not right! Instead of truly feeling sorrow and turning away from sin, these people have hired professional mourners. They have out-sourced their worship. They are hypocrites, merely worshiping God on the outside. God, though, can see what's on the inside. I think of opening the fridge and finding some kind of glass container or maybe a Ziploc bag with food that is obviously spoiled inside of it. The container does not hide the condition of the food. In the same way, God looks through our outward appearance, and he sees what is on the inside. On the outside, I might be singing, "Oh, How I Love Jesus," but God knows whether I really believe that. God knows whether I really live like I love his Son.

So, this is the problem. Amos has to explain that WAILING + WORSHIP ≠ SALVATION.

II. Well, this brings us to the solution, and we find it in verse 24, as we find that what God really wants is WHOLE-HEARTED OBEDIENCE.

So, instead of a white elephant gift, instead of empty and hypocritical ritual, what God really wants, comes in this appeal from Amos (in verse 24), ***"But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."*** This phrase was paraphrased by Martin Luther King, Jr., in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail." He was answering the objection that people thought he was an "extremist." He quotes this passage to ask whether Amos was an extremist, and he uses this passage to suggest that perhaps, yes, Amos is being rather

extreme here, but God truly wants justice and righteousness. And the Lord wants justice and righteousness not just in small doses, but he wants these qualities rolling down like waters, rushing like an ever-flowing stream. In other words, this is to be who we are, all the way through; we are to be abounding in justice and righteousness – not little token acts here and there to be seen by the people around us, but this is to be our constant mission in life. We think of Paul encouraging us to present our bodies as living and holy sacrifices (in Romans 12:1). Justice and righteousness is to be who we are, all the way through. Anything less is offensive to God; anything less is a white elephant; anything else is rejected by the Lord.

Justice and righteousness are to be powerful and driving forces in our lives. And this is where we think about the picture of a river – rolling waters. Rivers have a way of doing whatever they want to do. A river will flow where it flows; there is no stopping it. I think of the Elwha River out near my sister's place in Washington State. Years ago, they removed a dam up in the mountains to try to restore the environment and to allow salmon to get re-established in the area. And the transformation has been amazing. But one challenge has been maintaining access to that area. They build these nice roads, but the river doesn't really care about our nice roads! The river always wins. The river has continually washed out any efforts to maintain access to that area. Those waters are truly **"rolling down,"** and the water always wins. Amos also pictures righteousness as an **"ever-flowing stream."** The word he uses here refers to a "wadi," a seasonal stream in the desert, where rain would create a temporary raging flood. But, instead of it being temporary, Amos says that our righteousness is to be **"ever-flowing."** There is to be an overwhelming and never-ending supply of it. Righteousness is to be a dominating force in our lives.

I would also point out that justice and righteousness are things we do. This is in keeping with the other prophets. We think of Micah who calls on us in Micah 6:8, **"...to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."** Or we think of the prophet Isaiah when he says in Isaiah 1:17, **"Learn to do good; Seek justice, reprove the ruthless, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."** Justice and righteousness, then, are not just thoughts, but these are qualities that **"roll down."** These are actions we take continually. Justice and righteousness are practical. We think of what Jesus said in Matthew 25:35-36, **"For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me."** Those who are pleasing to God don't just talk about justice and righteousness, but they commit acts of justice and righteousness. They do things. They sacrifice. They use their time. They put miles on the car. They prepare food. They make clothing. They visit. They see pain and suffering in this world, and then they do something about it.

And, in fact, this is something we can do. Over the past two years it has been really easy to pull back and to wait until things get "back to normal," but the challenge of this passage is: We need to be doing good right now! And it may be a bit overwhelming. I have some regrets over the past two years. But we do have the ability to make a difference right now. We find a way to serve, and then we serve. Last week, I mentioned the possibility of serving as house-parents at Shults-Lewis, moving to Valparaiso, Indiana, being a mom and dad to kids in some challenging situations. Some of you have asked about mission works to either support or to be involved in personally. I have suggested Son-Light Children's Home down in Haiti or the Jos School of Biblical Studies over in Nigeria. When we commit to justice and righteousness, no challenge is truly out of reach. Justice and righteousness take us to the fatherless and the widows. Justice and righteousness will take us to the hospitals, nursing homes, and prisons. Justice and righteousness will take us to the poor.

This, then, is God's solution. This is how we truly make atonement. This is how we become "at one" with God. Worship is important. It's important that we give, and sing, and pray, and come together. But to do these things

without doing justice and righteousness? This is offensive to God. What he really wants is whole-hearted obedience. He's not looking for a trickle of righteousness or maybe a little spurt of justice here and there, but he is looking for ***"justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."***

Conclusion:

And this is where we come to the end of this passage. The prophet Amos sees a problem; he is communicating this concern from God. God's judgment is that their worship is offensive. The people are singing, and praying, and giving, but God is not listening. Amos, then, passes along this message, that **WAILING + WORSHIP ≠ SALVATION**. But thankfully, Amos doesn't leave it there, because in his great mercy, God explains what is necessary. What God is really looking for is for ***"justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."*** And this is our mission today. God has not changed. He is worthy of our worship, he has asked for our worship, worship is important; but we dare not worship without doing everything in our power to do justice and righteousness in our everyday lives. And this is our challenge for the coming week, to look for ways to do justice and righteousness.

I am thankful for your kind attention today. I'm thankful for those of you who braved the weather and the uncertainty of life to be here today. And I am certainly thankful for those of you who have taken the time to join us online or on the phone today. I am also looking forward to a time when we can all be together again.

Before we partake of the Lord's Supper, let's close this study by going to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are a God who loves justice and righteousness. We are thankful for the opportunity we have to worship you together as a Christian family this morning. We are thankful for your servant Amos – for his courage in preaching a message of judgment to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. We are thankful for how his words continue to challenge us today, nearly 2800 years later. We pray for wisdom as we do what we can to do justice and to do righteousness in the world around us.

Bless us, Father, as we do what we can to represent you well. We pray that we would honor you in everything we do.

We come to you this morning in the name of your Son Jesus. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com