

Prayer

Lord God, Almighty Father and Great Creator:
We give You glory for all that is beautiful, for You made it:
We thank You for Your work to overcome all the powers of evil:
We praise You for the hope of glory You have placed in us:
Lord God, Almighty Father and Great Creator:
We are Yours, for we love You: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Talk to a non-Christian about a topic affecting the church, e.g. the tragic church abuse scandal. Listen to what is said and pray about the issues raised.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for forgiveness.** *Pray in repentance for the wrongs done by your church (if you do not know them, explore the history of your church, using books or the internet).*
- *Pray for those who are victims of crime today*
- *Give thanks to God for His provision and sustenance*

Meditation

Don't stand back:

Don't let others try to do for you
what God would have you do,
And you will grow in spiritual confidence
as His loved and trusted servant.

Don't let your heart be distracted,
place your trust in Jesus Christ,
And you will draw on His amazing love
And find your strength and guidance.

Don't let the enemy catch you out
keep alert, keep constant watch,
And you will have control of every sin
that tempts you from within.

Don't let the world become your idol
don't serve its wants and needs
And you will be free to choose the path
Of life, by the Word of God.

Bible passage - Amos 5:18-27

¹⁸ How desperate for you who long for the day of the LORD! Why would you want this day of the LORD? It is darkness, not light; ¹⁹ as if a man fled from a lion only to come across a bear, or on entering his house placed his hand on the wall, and was bitten by a snake! ²⁰ Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?

²¹ I hate, I loathe your festivals, and I take no pleasure in your religious gatherings. ²² Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not receive them; and I have no regard for your specially fattened fellowship offerings. ²³ Away with your noisy songs! I will not listen to the music of your instruments. ²⁴ But let justice surge down like water, and

righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. ²⁵ Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings for the forty years you were in the wilderness, O house of Israel?

²⁶ But you honour deities and planets as your kings and idols, your 'star gods', which you made for yourselves! ²⁷ So I will send you into exile beyond Damascus, says the LORD, whose name is the God of hosts.

Bible Study

Review

Here are three prophecies that counter false religiosity at every level. Amos warns that God's coming will be a surprise, then he dismisses worship that does not come from the heart, and lastly, he ridicules those who practice idolatry.

When we read Amos prophecies, it is easy to forget that they must have been given at some specific time and place. Clearly, Amos was called to deliver God's message of judgement to the people of Israel, but in real life, Amos must have delivered this message in different ways according to the circumstances in which he found himself. For example, we can imagine Amos speaking in the open air when beginning his prophecies with the short sharp sayings found in chapter 1. But here, Amos seems to be addressing people who have gathered for worship, which is a theme that runs throughout the passage.

The first paragraph (5:18-20) is about the 'Day of the Lord', and like many other features of Amos' prophecies this is the first time that this phrase appears in Scripture. In his day, the people of Israel longed for the time that God would come and help them, and they called this the 'Day of the Lord'. The term summed up their hope that God would vindicate them as His people and conquer all their enemies. 'Not so!' said Amos (5:18), and prophesied that this 'Day of the Lord' would be far from what they imagined. With graphic imagery, Amos pointed out that God would come to judge them, and they would feel the pain of His coming, just like a man falling into the arms of a bear or being unexpectedly bitten by a snake (5:19). Amos had turned the idea of the 'Day of the Lord' completely on its head!

The second paragraph is a stunning attack on all that the Israelites did to worship God. Today, we find it hard to work out how people could have worshipped God by sacrificing animals, but this is what they did. It represented the giving of their lives and their livelihoods to the Lord, and although this is not mentioned here, they also valued the fellowship of the shared meals that accompanied official sacrifices. Whatever pleasure they gained from this worship, Amos said pointedly that God no longer took pleasure in it (5:21f.), and this would have been profoundly shocking to those who heard it.

Yet God had never been interested in ritual of acts of worship. As we are reminded by Moses in the books of the Law (Deut 30:6f.), God looks on the heart not acts of worship. So when Amos dismisses sacrificial worship he is only speaking out an ancient Biblical truth about the heart of a worshipper, which is just as much God's Word for His own day as it is for ours.

The climax of this second paragraph comes towards its end, where God dismisses the rituals of Israelite worship as like '*noisy songs*', and says He will no longer listen to the music accompanying their worship (5:23). Instead of false worship He wants justice to '*surge down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream*' (5:24)! This powerful prophecy is both utterly dismissive of sacrificial worship and powerfully evocative of the moral obedience that God looks for in the heart of a believer. It is a passage like none other and is a clarion call for all who would offer God the true worship of the sacrifice of their lives.

The last paragraph adds a further surprise, for Amos castigates those who come to worship for their idolatry. Not only did the Israelites worship their God with unacceptable sacrifices, they also held on to various cultural beliefs about the gods, including a certain amount of astrology (5:26)! Amos exposes the duplicity of those who think they can worship God and practise idolatry at the same time, and this is enough to move God to final judgement. For these sins, the Lord will send His own people into Exile!

This passage helps us see that Amos was as much concerned about the right worship of God as he was about moral judgement and 'doing good'. Many say that Amos' primary concern was social justice, but this is not the case. He regarded social justice and the worship of God as inseparable, and he would not have been able to understand why anyone should think them different!

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The 'Day of the Lord' (5:18-20)

- False worship and right religion (5:21-25)
- Idolatry (5:26-28)

Notes on the text and translation

V18 *'how desperate for you who ...'*

Other translations:

'Woe to you ...' (NIV)

'Alas for you ...' (New AV)

It is always difficult to translate the Hebrew 'Ho', which is an expression of despair. The old English words 'woe', or 'alas' come close, but they are not words used in normal English. So I have attempted to translate the word by conveying a general sense of desperation. Here, Amos addresses people to tell them about the awfulness to come.

V22 *'for your specially fattened fellowship offerings'*

Other translations:

'you bring choice fellowship offerings' (NIV)

'nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings' (New AV)

The phrase in Hebrew here is 'peace offerings' using the Hebrew word 'shalom'. This word has a wide range of meaning, but here it carries the idea of an offering that re-establishes 'peace' between God and the one bringing the sacrifice. The peace offering as described in Leviticus 3 is only partly burnt before God on the altar. Most of it is shared amongst those who brought the sacrifice.

V24 *'and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream'*

Other translations:

'And righteousness like a never-failing stream' (NIV)

The Hebrew words used before 'stream' denotes constancy, which means that the concept here is that of permanence. Streams in Israel and many parched regions of the world are seasonal, and rivers or streams that run all the time are highly valued.

V26 *'But you honour deities and planets as your kings and idols, your "star gods"'*

Other translations:

'You have lifted up the shrine of your king, the pedestal of your idols, the star of your god' (NIV)

'You shall take up Sakkuth your king, and Kaiwan your star-god, your images' (NRSV)

This sentence is extremely difficult to translate because it contains what appears to be the names of various gods worshipped in Amos' day. This is reflected in the NRSV translation. However, the first names 'sakkuth' is used generally to refer to deities, and the second name 'kaiwan' is used outside the Bible to refer to the planet Saturn, though it is not known whether the ancients knew the planets as well as we do today. This translation here uses the general sense of the names to make a reasonably understandable sentence, which fits the general picture of Amos' complaint at that time in Israel's history.

Going Deeper

Application

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Do you look forward to the 'Day of the Lord', or do you dread it? What should a Christian expect?
2. In your opinion, is there any worship of God that is unacceptable today? What should be done about this?
3. If the Lord were to come through His people 'like a flood', what would be washed away?

Personal comments by author

Amos is a challenging prophet. He forces us back to the basics of our faith and appeals to all God's people of every age to remember that God does not tolerate either injustice in our dealings with others or false worship that is not exclusive to Him. In our world full of complexities and compromise, justice can be a hard thing to find, and exclusive allegiance to the living God is a rare personal quality. Nevertheless, we aspire to these things not out of blind faith, but out of realistic hope and expectation. For by following Christ and always being ready to confess our sin, we may follow this path even in this corrupt world.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Try writing down a list of those wrongs and sins which seem still prevalent amongst God's people today, and which create injustice within the church and in society as well. Pray about how sin is dealt with in the fellowship of the church today.*
- *Pray for the Lord to raise up prophets who will reveal the Word of the Lord today, and show us the sins of our age that we so easily fail to see.*

Final Prayer

Dearest Lord, You have seen and heard Your people commit sin, struggle with sin and confess sin over centuries; come rushing through us now like a great torrent of water, and by the power of Your Holy Spirit cleanse us anew and make us victorious. Thank You Lord: AMEN
