

Amos 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 August 2021

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Amos chapter 4. Hear this, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, Bring, that we may drink.

The Lord God has sworn by his holiness that, Behold, the days are coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks, and you shall go out through the breaches, each one straight ahead, and you shall be cast out into Harmon, declares the Lord. Come to Bethel and transgress, to Gilgal and multiply transgression. Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days. Offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving of that which is leavened, and proclaim freewill offerings. Publish them, for so you love to do, O people of Israel, declares the Lord God.

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. 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. 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. I struck you with blight and mildew, your many gardens and your vineyards, your fig trees and your olive trees the locusts devoured.

[1 : 23] Yet you did not return to me, declares the Lord. 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. 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. Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel, because I will do this to you, prepared to meet your God, O Israel. 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.

Amos chapter 4 continues from chapter 3. The rich men of the land had just been addressed, the Lord declaring a judgment about to come upon their winter and summer houses, and their houses of ivory.

Now the Lord turns to their wives, who played a large part in inciting them to their oppression. The cows of Bashan, in verse 1, are described as well-fed, indulgent, and oppressive, crushing the poor and needy while being preoccupied only with their own pleasures.

[2 : 35] By comparing these wealthy women to the highest quality cattle, perhaps the prophet wants his hearers to consider what such cattle are destined for. Such animals are fattened in order that they might be slaughtered and eaten.

James chapter 5 verse 5 makes a similar point. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. Here it is their thirst for wine, and presumably feasts, parties, and a life of excess and luxury, that draws condemnation upon them.

Their husbands' crimes were far more overt, but their selfish, decadent, and entitled indifference to the poor and their need is presented as a driving force of the injustice that their class represented and perpetuated.

We find comparable condemnations of indulgent, wealthy women in passages like Isaiah chapter 3 verses 16 to 26. The Lord said, Because the daughters of Zion are haughty and walk with outstretched necks, glancing wantonly with their eyes, mincing along as they go, tinkling with their feet, therefore the Lord will strike with a scab the heads of the daughters of Zion, and the Lord will

lay bare their secret parts.

In that day the Lord will take away the finery of the anklets, the headbands, and the crescents, the pendants, the bracelets, and the scarves, the headdresses, the armlets, the sashes, the perfume boxes, and the amulets, the signet rings, and nose rings, the festal robes, the mantles, the cloaks, and the handbags, the mirrors, the linen garments, the turbans, and the veils.

[4 : 03] Instead of perfume there will be rotteness, and instead of a belt, a rope, and instead of well-set hair, baldness, and instead of a rich robe, a skirt of sackcloth, and branding instead of beauty.

Your men shall fall by the sword, and your mighty men in battle, and her gates shall lament and mourn, empty she shall sit on the ground. As Daniel Carroll notes, there is a glaring contrast between the way that these pampered women boss everyone around, expecting to have their every whim and desire catered to by their husbands and others, utterly unmindful of anyone else and the fate that awaits them.

They will be dragged away by hooks, powerless to resist, and completely humiliated. Describing their departure into captivity in such a manner underlines the poetic justice that they will be receiving.

They would be taken out through the breaches in the wall of their conquered city, and cast into Haman, whose exact location we don't know. As in verse 4 of this passage, Bethel and Gilgal were also singled out as places of particular cultic sin in Hosea chapter 4 verse 15.

Though you play the whore, O Israel, let not Judah become guilty. Enter not into Gilgal, nor go up to Beth-Avon, and swear not, as the Lord lives. Bethel was the site where the Lord had appeared to Jacob, and he had seen the vision of the ladder to heaven.

[5 : 21] Later, however, Bethel was the primary cultic center established by Jeroboam the son of Nebat, as a rival location to Jerusalem. There he had set up his golden calf and altar.

This was often presented as the foundational sin of the northern kingdom of Israel, the sin that had set them off on the wrong path at the outset. Gilgal was a site associated with the first entry into the land, a place where Israel had dedicated themselves to the Lord, set up memorial stones, and had practiced the first Passover in the land.

Yet it too had become a place associated with unfaithful worship. Here the Lord gives the people a satirical summons to worship. However, the summons is not really to worship, but to transgress. The people's sacrifices in these unfaithful cultic locations, however much they might multiply them, do not assuage the wrath of the Lord or gain his favor, but are transgressions that incite his anger against them.

In part, the fault might be seen as the perversion of the worship of the Lord through idolatry. Yet here in this context, there might be more of an accent upon the way that such worship was persistently falsified by the behavior of the people towards their neighbors, although the statement here is not narrowly focused upon the rich of the land as the previous judgments were.

[6 : 34] True worship must be confirmed in transformed moral practice. Where it is not, worship can be little more than the practice of whitewashing tombs, masking deeply defiling uncleanness, rather than dealing with it.

Such sites of worship can also be compared to dens of robbers, places that bandits and thieves would return to for safety. Israel and Judah often seem to approach their worship in such a manner. Jeremiah, for instance, prophesying immediately prior to the exile, condemned Judah for its presumptuous confidence in the temple, for its belief that it gave them immunity from serious judgment. Israel here, as addressed by Amos, seems to view its worship as a sort of flattery or bribery of the Lord, presuming that the multitude of their sacrifices would close his eyes to their oppression of the poor and their wicked self-indulgence.

The Mosaic covenant came with blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. The curses of the covenant had several different degrees of severity. In practice, they would become progressively worse as the people resisted the Lord's correction and failed to respond.

In the end, they would be violently vomited out of the land and returned to Egypt. In verses 6-11, the Lord lists a series of warnings that he had given his people. The very purpose of these judgments was cautionary, to encourage Israel to repent and to return to the Lord their God.

[7 : 52] As the Lord multiplied these warnings, his intent was their turning from their self-destructive path before it was too late. Just as parents can punish their children in order to save their children from experiencing the far more devastating consequences of a willful course of action,

so the Lord disciplined his people in order to divert them from their own ruin.

The Lord preserves his people in part through threats. Declarations of judgment are typically designed not to give people a fatalistic sense of their own doom, but to encourage them urgently, immediately, and wholeheartedly to return to the Lord, in hope that he will relent.

These verses describe a situation where, through inconsistent rainfall and local droughts, the Lord sought to warn the people before bringing a more general punishment upon them. As Jesus taught in the case of the Tower of Siloam and the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices, such disasters can be warnings to a people more generally that, if they do not repent, they will perish in a similar manner.

Drought-struck towns were here serving as the canaries in the coal mine, graciously designed to alert Israel to disaster that awaited them all. Such local disasters were reminders and alerts to Israel that they depended entirely upon the Lord's provision for them in his land, and they needed to get right with him.

As they failed to respond to these initial warnings, the judgments would ramp up. He devastated their crops. The exact form of the devastation isn't clear. It's possible that the two diseases that afflicted the crops in verse 9 afflicted the barley and the wheat respectively.

[9 : 26] This would be devastating, as these were the two staple crops. These were followed by locusts, which would have eaten what remained. All of these judgments should have recalled the curses of the covenant mentioned in places like Deuteronomy chapter 28, verses 38 to 40.

You shall carry much seed into the field, and shall gather in little, for the locusts shall consume it. You shall plant vineyards and dress them, but you shall neither drink of the wine nor gather the grapes, for the worms shall eat them.

You shall have olive trees throughout all your territory, but you shall not anoint yourself with the oil, for your olives shall drop off. As they failed to respond to the striking of their crops, the Lord took the lives of their animals and young men with pestilence and the sword.

So great was the death toll that the slain weren't able to be buried before the stench of their bodies became overpowering. In addition to the sickening smell, the inability to bury the bodies of the dead would have been a judgment in itself.

We might here think of the ways in which the judgments of the Egyptian plagues gradually escalated, and clearly the Lord wanted his people to make that connection, comparing the pestilence that he sent against them to the pestilence that he sent upon Egypt.

[10 : 37] A similar thing had happened to Israel, and like Pharaoh, rather than repenting, they had hardened their hearts. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities of the plain in Genesis was the great symbol of the Lord's final judgment, his cutting off of a wicked people.

At a few key moments in Israel's history, Israel had fallen to a similar state. At the end of the book of Judges, for instance, Gibeah had sinned in a similar manner to the city of Sodom, and the tribe of Benjamin had almost been completely extinguished as a result.

The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis chapter 19 was also a foil against which the blessing of Abraham and Sarah was more clearly seen. They had just been promised a son, but Sodom and Gomorrah were utterly destroyed and rendered absolutely barren.

The Lord had delivered the remaining people of Israel from this end like a bran taken out of a fire, much as Lot had been rescued from the destruction of Sodom, albeit not on account of their being credited righteous.

Once again, Israel was supposed to learn from their near ruin, to take the cautionary lesson, and to repent and turn back to the Lord. However, as in the case of the previous warnings, they failed to repent.

[11 : 45] And by this point, Israel had no excuse. They could not complain that they were unwarned. They had received ample warning. The Lord had given them warning after warning, without response from them.

Now they would have to suffer the great reckoning for their sins, coming face to face with God himself. The coming of the Lord's holy presence is the most devastating thing of all for a sinful people.

Preparing to meet with God here requires the people to ready themselves for confrontation with a holy God. We might think of the purification of the people prior to the Lord's arrival on Mount Sinai in Exodus chapter 19.

However, here there is also the sense of the Lord approaching as an enemy to bring judgment upon them. The chapter ends with a doxology, declaring the glory and the power of the Lord.

However, the doxology serves to underline just how outmatched sinful Israel is. The Lord is the creator of all and the master of all cosmic forces. Israel has been worshipping a domesticated God of the tribe, a God who underwrites their wicked society, rather than confronting it in its iniquity.

[12 : 50] Now, however, they will come face to face with the living God and must do business with him. The Lord treads on the high places of the earth, including the false high places like Bethel, and now the time has come for Israel's reckoning.

A question to consider. Where else in Scripture can we see the Lord's use of judgment as progressive levels of warning?

