

Amos Chapters 3-4 – John Karmelich

1. If God is going to judge us, what does that mean? I assume I am preaching to devout evangelical Christians who already believe that Jesus died for every sin we will ever commit. So if that's true, why does God judge us? I'm asking, because that effectively is Amos's main question in Chapters three to six. The question for us Christians of course is why should we care? Does this affect our salvation or our lives here and now as Christians? Of course it does, which is why this text is part of the bible. Therefore, I'm asking you to pay attention as I try to explain why God judges us, and more importantly what is the criteria for that judgment?
 - a) Before I explain, let me briefly to explain the key difference in how Jewish people view the issue of salvation versus how Christians see it. The basic idea of Judaism is that God has a set of standards that we're to live by and salvation is based on being a good person, where in effect one's good deeds need to be significantly better than one's bad deeds. For us who believe that Jesus is God and died for every sin we've ever committed or ever will commit the key issue is gratitude. Because we are grateful for what Jesus has done for us we want to live differently enough that our lives make a difference for Him.
 - b) My question is, "if we do live that way, how are we judged?" What's the standard for that judgment and what difference does it make. If we're saved only by our trust that Jesus did pay the full price for our sins, why are we judged, and what's the criterion for judgment?
 - i) I can "cop out" and say that's how God called us to live and leave it at that. I'd like to take it a step further and realize why God calls us to live in a way different from how the world wants us to live. The key point is God wants to work through us to be His witnesses to the world. He wants nonbelievers to see the way believers live as a witness to nonbelievers, that His way is the best way to live out our lives.
 - ii) So am I saying being "moral" is good enough? Of course not. A lot of good moral people exist from other religions and nonreligious as well. I'm well aware that the only way people get saved is through prayer and people's hearts being opened to the love of Jesus. I'm reminding us that Jesus Himself told us to "love one another" as a way to be a witness to the world of how Christians are supposed to act.
 - c) That gets me back to my judgment question. Do we have to be perfect? No, just perfectly forgiven. However, God expects us to live, as He desires out of gratitude for what He has already done for us. So when we get to heaven does God say, "you sinned exactly 83,234 times so here's your home size for eternity because you messed up that number of times?" No, it doesn't work that way. The real issue is were we loyal to whatever God's called us to do as believers. If we believe we've been called to teach or serve in some capacity, were we faithful in that calling? Will there be eternal rewards based on that service? The bible says that there are, but the bible doesn't specify what they are. What the bible does teach us is effectively, "here's how I expect you to behave here and now, and we'll be rewarded eternally for our obedience or punished eternally for ignoring Him."
 - i) Is that fair? Hey I don't make the rules, I just study the bible and try to explain the best I can what it means. What I do get is the bible is really an instruction manual for how He wants us to live here and now, and it's His job to take care of us when we get to the next life.
 - ii) What's equally as important to get across, is that judgment isn't just eternal. There are also rewards and punishment in this life based on our faithfulness to Him. No it doesn't mean God expects perfection, but He does expect effort and He wants us to put Him first in every aspect of our lives. As I learned many years ago if we are going shopping, take God with us!
2. OK John, this all interesting, and I know it is important to think about all this stuff. What does it have to do with Amos Chapters 3 and 4? Thought you'd never ask. Let me explain:

- a) Amos is going to focus on people living in Israel when he lived roughly around 750 BC. He is giving a message effectively saying, "God expects you to live like "this" and instead you are living like "that"". The point is Amos gives us a lot of not so subtle clues of how it is God expects us to live as a witness for Him. Yes, we get specific condemnations of how the Israelites were blowing it. We also get a few clues by reading between the lines of just how God expects us to live as a witness for Him. That's what we get here.
 - b) Let me explain these chapters another way: Why is Amos in the bible in the first place? It is a good practical model of how expects us to live for Him as a witness for Him! Amos is not a "law recital". He doesn't say "God's law says this and you're doing that". Instead it's full of examples of "Here is how you are actually living right now, and that's not how God wants you (and us) to be a witness for Him.
 - c) I suppose my bottom line here is Amos is giving us examples of how God wants to be His witnesses to the world around us by both using positive and negative examples. As we go through this text, don't be thinking, "Oh those poor Israelites, they really blew it". Instead it's a self-examination quiz of "Am I living as God desires I live"?
 - d) So what do you call this lesson, "Understanding why God judges us and what will be the consequences of that judgment". I have to admit, I can't think of anything scarier that the idea of facing the God who created everything and being told "You're really blowing it at this moment in your life". Therefore, I encourage all of us to pay attention to how it is He expects to live as a witness for Him as we go through Amos here.
 - e) With that said, it's time to get to the specific's of these chapters.
3. Chapter 3, Verse 1: Hear this word the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel--against the whole family I brought up out of Egypt:
- a) As I said in the introduction Chapters 3-6 is one speech by Amos. Remember the chapter numbers were not added until many centuries after this book was written. Amos makes it clear what he says in this book was somehow communicated to him by God. The way we know that he wrote was God ordained, is based on the accuracy of the predictions that we will read in this book. Deuteronomy 18:22 states that if someone claims they are speaking what God told them to, the way we know if it is true is the prophet has to be 100% perfect in his predictions. All I'm saying is the way we can tell that Amos is a prophet of God is if what he says came exactly true as he predicted. Let's read on to find out if that is true.
 - b) If you read my opening lesson on Amos, you might recall that Amos lived in the Southern Kingdom of Judah and was called to preach to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. For those of you who are new, Israel was divided into two separate kingdoms at this time.
 - i) Even though Amos was called to preach to the "North", we get the impression that he is preaching to all Israelites, at least at this point in the message.
 - ii) Amos is starting with a history lesson. To paraphrase Amos, "Don't forget none of you Israelites would even be here in Israel in the first place if God didn't bring up your ancestors here centuries ago." Every now and then the bible reminds us that God Himself likes to remind us that we (yes us Christians) have been separated by Him to be a witness for Him and we're not to forget it as we go through our lives!
 - iii) With that said, God will continue to speak through Amos in the next verse.
4. Verse 2: "You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins."
- a) One of the hard things to grasp about both Judaism and Christianity is the concept of God choosing specific people. A question naturally arises that if God only picks certain people to be with Him forever, does that mean nobody else stands a chance of ever being saved?
 - b) If we accept the idea that if God is perfect, He must know all things even before if occurs. Therefore, why would God create people in the first place if He knew would be spending eternity in hell? I admit, it's a tough question to ponder.

- c) The best answer any of us can give is, "He is God and we are not." We can't comprehend all the things He knows. We can only comprehend what we learn and go from there."
 - d) A big part of the answer is "free will". If God gives us the free will to choose Him or not to choose Him. That means many people will freely choose not to ignore Him and as hard as we may try to convince people otherwise, many will choose to ignore Him. From His all-knowing perspective, He already knows who will and who won't choose Him, and once it is determined, He can't change that factor. A key point is God never tells us who is saved and who isn't saved. He just calls us to be a good witness for Him and by showing love to others, pray they accept His love and let Him guide our lives for His purpose.
 - e) The reason I get into all that theology here is that whether we accept it or not, God called the Israelites to be His witnesses to the world. I'm convinced that's a spiritual reason why so much of the world wants to destroy the nation of Israel is that their existence is a living witness for the God of the universe! Yes of course, I believe one is saved today through a trust that Jesus is God and died for our sins, but that doesn't change the fact that God did call the Israelites to be His witness to the world and they are His chosen people! Yes I do believe Christians are also separated the same way the Israelites were, so therefore as we read of God judging the Israelites here in Verse 2, that means pay attention Christians!
 - f) The reason I gave that long introduction about Christians and judgment to start the lesson is because that's what God's doing here through Amos. Again, not all judgment by God is a one-way ticket to hell! Judgment can also mean the loss of being a witness to Him or to suffer some sort of group punishment such as the loss of a church or a country.
 - i) As I also said in my introduction, I can't imagine anything scarier than having the God of the Universe tell me I'm in big trouble for being a bad witness for Him!
 - ii) Therefore, I ask you to pay attention to why Israel is in big trouble here, not for us to learn ancient history, but to realize that we Christians can be judged for how we have or have not been a good witness for Him.
 - iii) Bottom line, with a lot of nervousness, we need to plow on!
5. Verse 3: Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so? ⁴ Does a lion roar in the thicket when he has no prey? Does he growl in his den when he has caught nothing? ⁵ Does a bird fall into a trap on the ground where no snare has been set? Does a trap spring up from the earth when there is nothing to catch? ⁶ When a trumpet sounds in a city, do not the people tremble? When disaster comes to a city, has not the LORD caused it?
- a) I remember a popular saying a generation back that goes "Is the Pope Catholic?" The point of that expression is that what someone is saying should be as obvious as the fact that the leader of the Roman Catholic Church would be Catholic himself?
 - b) My point is all the questions in Verses 3 to 6 are things that are obvious. Let me explain:
 - i) Can two people go for a walk together unless both agree to go for that walk?
 - ii) Do lions roar when they catch something to warn animals to keep away?
 - iii) Would a bird be caught in a trap unless a trap was set in the first place?
 - iv) If one was living in a walled city, and all of a sudden a loud trumpet sounds that means a message is about to be delivered, wouldn't that mean everyone there has to be a little nervous about what is the big announcement?
 - v) Finally if a big disaster comes to God's chosen people, wouldn't the first thing we would ponder is, "What did we do wrong that allowed this to happen?"
 - vi) In other words, for all these questions, "Is the Pope Catholic?"
 - c) So now that Amos has everybody's attention by stating what is obvious, what is he really trying to tell us? Patience, we've got four chapters and two lessons of text to explain this!
6. Verse 7: Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets.
- a) I have to admit, this verse has always been one of my favorites in the bible. The point here is God is saying, He doesn't do anything without prophets announcing it in advance!

- b) Does that mean if I'm going to trip and fall down later, God somehow revealed it to me in advance? Of course not. Nor does it mean every major tragedy in world history is told in the bible somewhere! What it does mean is what happens to God's chosen people (that is you and me) on a grand scale, is predicted in the bible. Speaking of saying the obvious:
 - i) Think about how much text in the Old Testament hints and speaks of what Jesus is will do in His First Coming. I'd argue that every single event tied to what Jesus did in His First Coming is either directly predicted, or hinted at within the pages of the Old Testament. I'd also argue that the reason that the bible spends so much text in both the Old and New Testament telling us details of the events surrounding Jesus Second Coming, is so people can recognize it when it occurs.
 - ii) One of the keys to reading the bible is to realize the land of Israel and the Israelites are the central focus of much of the bible. To use the Chinese as a counter example the bible does not predict the entire history of China. However, the bible does tell a lot of Jewish history in advance if for no other reason than to show us that God is outside of time and wants us to know key historical events before they occur so we can recognize them when they happen. These predictions are not written so we'll become experts on the history of the Israelites. They're written for people to learn how we can draw closer to God and what He expects of us as believers.
 - iii) In the meantime, Amos is telling us, that disaster is coming for the Israelites and it will be revealed to them through prophets like Amos.
- 7. Verse 8: The lion has roared-- who will not fear? The Sovereign LORD has spoken-- who can but prophesy? ⁹ Proclaim to the fortresses of Ashdod and to the fortresses of Egypt: "Assemble yourselves on the mountains of Samaria; see the great unrest within her and the oppression among her people." ¹⁰ "They do not know how to do right," declares the LORD, "who hoard plunder and loot in their fortresses."
 - a) Verse 8 makes an interesting comparison. It's like saying if a lion roars, that roar is heard for a good distance. The second sentence then effectively says if God has spoken, how do we know an event was God-ordained unless a prophet tells us? In other words, if God is working in some mighty way, it'll become obvious just as a lion's roar is a noticeable and distinguishable sound.
 - b) Let me give you something to think about: Why does God use prophets in the first place? Why not just make hundreds or millions of people aware of what He wants? Why pick a specific person and speak through them? My first thought is "If God is God, who are we to question His methods?" Next is if God revealed to "everyone there" what He's going to do, doesn't that violate our free will to choose Him out of our free will? I just figured that God likes to work in a way that the evidence of His existence is obvious if we're willing to go study it, but He wants us to come to Him by faith, and then learn by studying all of the evidence that He is there and He speaking through the prophets.
 - c) With that philosophy out of my system, let me explain how Verses 8 and 9 connect:
 - i) First realize that God is speaking to the Israelites, even though the text lists Egypt and Ashdod (the main city of the Philistines at that time). Let me paraphrase as it might help to understand: "Hey you neighbors of Israel, come up to the Northern Kingdom and see how the Israelites there are acting. See how they're living in big luxury at the moment."
 - ii) If you know your history, it was the Assyrians that destroyed the North Kingdom soon (a few decades) after Amos wrote this. So why mention the Philistines or the Egyptians here? What's going on is God's telling the neighbors of Israel what they have to be on the watch for: The "big kid on the block" is the Assyrians and they're going to be pulling their weight around, so everyone else around there needs to be aware of them, and not just the Israelites.
 - iii) That leads to the important question: What did Israel do wrong? We'll get to that!

- d) Before I move on a few comments on Verse 10. Here we actually get the first reason why God is going to corporately judge the Israelites. It starts with a general statement that the Israelites "Don't know what to do right." Obviously that's a general statement and usually means there is more to come. The rest of the verse just says, "who hoard plunder and loot in their fortresses." Let me discuss what that verse means.
 - i) Whenever I'm not sure what a verse means, the obvious first thing to do is look at the surrounding verses and see if it makes sense in context. The previous verse is a call to the surrounding nations to watch what's about to happen to Israel. All I'm saying is the previous verse doesn't help to understand what Verse 10 means. The next verse talks about how an enemy will plunder their fortresses, so that's a clue!
 - ii) To understand Verse 10, time for a little history. Archeological digs were done for Samaria (capital of "North" Israel) before it the Assyrians destroyed it. What was noticeable was some neighborhoods were very wealthy and some were very poor. (Gee, what has changed?) Which leads me to a little lecture on financial success:
 - iii) God's not anti-success. Money is "neutral" in that it can be used for God's glory or it can be used for personal enrichment. There are many wealthy individuals who have funded Christian causes. The issue here is the poor were robbed in order to make the rich "richer". That'll become more obvious as we go.
 - iv) Let me explain it another way: If I make a product that poor people like and sales of that product made me rich. That's not an issue assuming what I sell isn't illegal drugs as an obvious example. The issue here was literally stealing from the poor in order to make the rich "richer" and that's the underlying issue.
 - e) So are you saying the only criteria for God's judgment is stealing from the poor? Of course not. It's just an obvious example of how God will judge people fairly. That's why Amos is using it as an obvious example of why Israel is being corporately judged.
 - f) Speaking of judgment, it's about to get "hot and heavy" in Verse 11:
8. Verse 11: Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: "An enemy will overrun the land; he will pull down your strongholds and plunder your fortresses
- a) We're obviously back to the prediction that the Assyrians are going to destroy Israel.
 - b) Let me ask an obvious question: How do we know Amos didn't write this after Assyria did their damage? How do we know that Amos didn't claim to be a prophet of God for the fame and wrote this after it occurred? For starters, the book was accepted as part of the bible within a short time after the captivity. That's a start. Next Amos gives us details about the Northern Kingdom that would have been hard to know after it was destroyed. A prophet was only considered a prophet if he was 100% accurate in his predictions. All I'm saying is the historical evidence supports the time and accuracy of this book.
 - c) That little speech leads me back to these verses. Verse 10 tells us that the wealthy within that kingdom got that way literally from stealing from the poor.
 - d) Notice how the "crime fits the punishment". The corporate sin was stealing from the poor. The punishment was the wealthy neighborhoods were looted. Again, when the Assyrians starved out the Israelites, they're reward was to keep what values they found. The point's that God can allow us to be harmed if it suits His purpose.
 - e) So are you saying if we get robbed, it is of God? Of course not. However I am saying that God is more than willing to punish us in ways that are appropriate for the sins we commit if we ignore Him as a witness for Him. God can "take us out of the ballgame" if we fail to live as He desires as He did to these Israelites back then and as He did to a husband/ wife couple who were a bad witness to the early church. (See Acts 5.) Bottom line, "Don't mess with God as at the least it affects our witness for Him."
 - f) Coming back to the Israelites, I'm sure they thought, God can't kick us out, He brought us here in the first place. Yes we're sinning but He loves us and must forgive us. Again what we must do is separate eternal judgment from corporate judgment. Yes God will do that!

9. Verse 12: This is what the LORD says: "As a shepherd saves from the lion's mouth only two leg bones or a piece of an ear, so will the Israelites be saved, those who sit in Samaria on the edge of their beds and in Damascus on their couches.
- a) Well, one thing I can say by now, Amos likes lion references. I believe this is the third one in this chapter. Remember that Amos is a shepherd so he'd be familiar with lion attacks.
 - b) One thing one learns from studying the bible is that God likes to work on our level. What I mean is God gives us examples we can relate to. Amos can relate to lions, which is one reason why we get these type of references.
 - c) OK, enough of the background, what does this mean? As I explained back in Verse 8, if a lion attacked one of the shepherd's sheep, a shepherd needed to bring back evidence that the lion attacked it. (Let's say the shepherd needed accountability for the sheep number.) All I'm saying is if a shepherd lost a sheep he may need to prove how it was lost.
 - d) Since a shepherd like Amos understand all of that, as would most Israelites living where shepherding was a common profession, what Amos is saying is just as a only a piece of a sheep would be left after an attack, so only a few living in Northern Israel (Samaria is the capital) will survive.
 - e) Amos uses a second reference too. It's the idea of living comfortably when it refers to one being on the edge of the bed or on a couch. At the time Amos wrote this, the King of the Northern Kingdom had conquered Damascus (In Syria), which is why there is a reference to the Israelites in that city.
 - f) Confused? Let me make it simple: The "North" Israelites living in luxury no matter where they are, are about to be wiped out where only a few survive. The idea of the "piece that the lion didn't eat" is a reference that only a "piece" of those Israelites will survive. It does not matter where they were at that time. The same with "nice couches" in their homes.
 - g) Now that I cleared up that mess, let's move on to Verse 13.
10. Verse 13: "Hear this and testify against the house of Jacob," declares the Lord, the LORD God Almighty. ¹⁴ "On the day I punish Israel for her sins, I will destroy the altars of Bethel; the horns of the altar will be cut off and fall to the ground. ¹⁵ I will tear down the winter house along with the summer house; the houses adorned with ivory will be destroyed and the mansions will be demolished," declares the LORD.
- a) As you can tell, this is not getting any easier!
 - b) In order to understand these verses, one has to have a little knowledge of history. Let me begin as I promise, this explains a little why Israel is being judged and yes, what it means for us in judgment. Here goes:
 - c) The first thing one has to understand is the "altars of Bethel". This requires another quick history lesson. When Israel first split into two kingdoms the king of the North didn't want his people to go down to Jerusalem in the Southern Kingdom to worship God. Therefore, they set up altars in the North to honor a false god. One of the main altars was located in a place called Bethel. Which surprisingly leads me back to God's judgment. Let's just say that the Israelites should be aware who the true God was since He got them to where they live in the first place. Turning to other false gods is a prime reason for judgment.
 - d) OK, what about us devout Christians? Remember the issue is being a witness for God. If we stop using some of our time as a witness for God, why would we deserve any better of a fate than what they suffered? The issue isn't salvation it's our witness. When the North Israelite Kingdom stopped being a witness for God, you can see what was their fate.
 - e) Now that I've scared everyone half to death (doing my job!), there is one more reference in these verses that require a little historical explanation. Remember when I said earlier that there were rich and poor neighborhoods found when archeologists dug up the area where this conquering took place? Yes, they found houses adorned with ivory! Even though the Assyrians took what they could of value, it shows you just how much wealth they had at that time if evidence of ivory covered houses still existed in those archeological digs!

- f) OK John, so some Israelites a long time ago, lived in luxury and ignored God. There are a lot of people in the world today who fit that description. Why are we Christians judged if they get away with that? The answer is they don't! I'm convinced that a lot of people will enjoy this life and that's all they get for eternity. Remember that money is neither good or bad. It's the love of money that's the root of evil. My point of all of this is simply that God has one standard for believers and another for unbelievers. His standard for unbelievers is that they trust in Jesus for their salvation. Once one makes that commitment we do get eternal rewards based on what we did with that knowledge. Remember our judgment is not about how many people we saved. It's our loyalty to what God's called us to do!
 - g) OK then, so what am I supposed to do? Ask God what He wants of you just for today. I like the idea of what are we good at and how can we use that talent for God's glory? All I am saying is there is no set answer for everyone. Our eternal rewards are based on what we do with our salvation. The "how" isn't as important as the effort itself. Assuming we seek Him and ask for His will to be done, and go from there.
 - h) OK then, enough lecturing for one chapter. Let's move on to Chapter 4!
11. Chapter 4, Verse 1: Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, "Bring us some drinks!"
- a) I'll be the first to admit, that once one really understands what Amos is trying to say to us, it's scary stuff as it's very condemning. Time for a big breath of air and a reminder that we live in an era that Christians call "God's grace". It doesn't mean we get to avoid judgment but it means we are saved strictly based on our trust that Jesus already paid the full price for every sin we'll ever commit. The judgment aspect is a "motivational method" that we do use the time God's given us for His glory and not just to enrich ourselves. Believe it or not, that reminder of what it means to live the Christian life, fits well into Verse 1.
 - b) Now remember that Amos was a "country boy" who raised sheep. My point is he liked to use analogies that he could relate to. For Amos to call people, "The cows of Bashan" was a major insult. Many commentators believe Amos is picking on the women who were living in luxury there and then. That's why the reference is feminine oriented. He isn't implying that women then were worse than the men. He's implying the wives were enjoying living in luxury and were telling their husbands, "Keep it up, so we can keep living this way."
 - c) If you think about it, this verse is condemning to both men and women living this way. It is another case of judgment as the condemnation is about oppressing the poor in order to live that way in the first place.
 - d) Oh, and to finish the references, Mount Samaria was the capital of the Northern Kingdom. It is like using "Washington DC" as a reference to the United States.
 - e) What if you say, "That's not me, I'm not rich" or I haven't oppressed poor people. Amos is not saying oppression is the only sin in the bible. He is saying that sin has become so bad, it is a reason for God's judgment coming down hard at this time and at that place.
 - i) God wants us to know about this sin issue as an example of why He is so tough on His people (that's you and me) because He expects us to live as witnesses for Him, and not live like the world around us.
 - ii) I also want to stress again, that money is "neutral" in the bible. God isn't against us being financially successful. His issue is how did we get that way and what are we doing with the resources we have been blessed with?
 - iii) Now that I've beaten to death what the crime was, it's time for the punishment:
12. Verse 2: The Sovereign LORD has sworn by his holiness: "The time will surely come when you will be taken away with hooks, the last of you with fishhooks. ³ You will each go straight out through breaks in the wall, and you will be cast out toward Harmon," declares the LORD.
- a) I'd like you to realize how literal Amos' prediction came true. Those Israelites who were not killed by the Assyrian invasion, were literally marched hundreds of miles away to go live in new places, never to see their families again. However, it gets worse:

- i) To make the Israelites cooperate in that march, the Assyrians would put fishhooks in their mouths (there is nothing new about facial piercing!) and connect them by a fish line from one person to the next.
 - ii) The Assyrians would break through the city walls and marched away.
 - iii) The reference to Harmon is not known. Commentators I suspect it simply refers to where captives were taken as a gathering spot before the commanders decided the location where the captives would be taken.
 - b) So how did Amos know all of this in advance? I suspect God told him. It's possible Amos did hear stories of how the Assyrians captured people and "fish hooked" them to go. Still, to predict this was going to happen to "God's people" is a reminder that God allows those he's called to suffer sometimes for disobedience.
 - c) That leads to another tough question: Is all suffering to Christians punishment by God? I would definitely say no. Remember God's purpose of allowing us to go through any hard situation: To draw us closer to Him. My favorite prayer when I find out about one who is suffering and they are a Christian, is Father, help them learn what You want them to learn from this situation". Then I offer to help if I can.
 - d) In the meantime, the Israelites who lived 2,700 years ago are in big trouble!
13. Verse 4: "Go to Bethel and sin; go to Gilgal and sin yet more. Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three years. ⁵ Burn leavened bread as a thank offering and brag about your freewill offerings-- boast about them, you Israelites, for this is what you love to do," declares the Sovereign LORD.
- a) I need to give a little more historical background here in order to explain the situation:
 - i) The Israelites who lived in the Northern Kingdom at that time, were still Jewish, and were still religious, but they performed their rituals to their false gods.
 - ii) They were even bragging that they went through these rituals. It's like saying we can't be in trouble with God, look at all the good things we do here for Him!
 - iii) The religion of the Northern Kingdom was a mixture of rules and regulations that were taught in the bible but were not to God or not done in the way He desired.
 - iv) I should also explain a little about "tithing". The term literally means to give one tenth of one's income. God required the Israelites to actually given two and one-thirds of their income. The "three year tithe" was used to pay for the festivals. A few of the English translations say they brought it every three days. Either way it is saying the Israelites were sincere in their religious beliefs.
 - b) As the old saying goes, "One can be sincere in one's beliefs but still be sincerely wrong."
 - i) In Jesus day, there were groups that were devoutly religious and obeyed the law as best they could. They were called Pharisee's. I see these verses here as similar to how the Pharisee's might have responded to Jesus.
 - ii) Remember that Jesus never condemned the Pharisee's for obeying God's laws. It was a criticism for adding to God's laws with their own rules and regulations.
 - iii) When you study the gospels, you sort of get the sense Jesus went out of His way to perform miracles on the Jewish Sabbath, as if He wanted to rub it in that God isn't limited to work as the Pharisee's required people to live. Jesus did not condemned them for obeying God's laws, but for trying to prove their worth to Him. If we are going to trust in a God that's perfect, then His standard must be perfection. That is why we believe in a perfect payment for our sins in order to be forgiven.
 - c) I know I'm preaching to the choir here, but I want you to see how easy it is to fall in a trap of trying to prove our worth to God. That's what the Israelites living in Amos time did. It is what the religious people living in Jesus time were doing. Pause to consider some good deed we did recently: Did we do it to show God how good we are, or did we do it based on gratitude for what He's done for us? My sole point is it's easy to fall into the prove our worth game, and it's something that has to be fought all our lives as a witness for Him!

14. Verse 6: "I gave you empty stomachs in every city and lack of bread in every town, yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD.
- a) It would help if we understood this section of Amos from God's perspective. God desires a relationship with us, based on our trust in Him. That doesn't mean we're free to live as we feel like it. God gives us a set of laws to live by as that's the best way to live out life as He meant it to be lived. We're then free to live as we desire if we are using our lives to go make a difference for Him. If it's our desire to please Him based on gratitude for what He has done, then logically we'd want to please Him with our lives. The Israelites were going through "God rituals" to try to keep their consciences clean for their sins but were not living as He desired. Thus, the judgment was coming down.
 - b) All that lecturing leads me to Verse 6. Personally, I like the "King James Translation" that is more literal and said that God gave them "cleanness of teeth" that implies a lack of food as their teeth were clean.
 - c) As I like to put, God is always willing to go to more and more drastic measures in order to get our attention. It's as if God's thinking, "If I do this, will you seek Me? If that doesn't do the trick, what if I try "that" now?" Let me ask the same question another way: If God's so interested in a relationship with us, why not have a giant angel appear in front of us to tell us, "Seek God or we're in big trouble". All that would do is scare us. He wants us to have a loving relationship not based on fear, but just on trust. Therefore, He'll do what He has to do to draw our attention back to Him!
 - d) Anyway part of that "drastic measure" included food shortages to get their attention.
15. Verse 7: "I also withheld rain from you when the harvest was still three months away. I sent rain on one town, but withheld it from another. One field had rain; another had none and dried up. ⁸ People staggered from town to town for water but did not get enough to drink, yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD.
- a) Whenever I read this passage, the first thing that pops in my head is all the destruction we read about in Revelation. In the middle of that book, we read of God destroying a third of many things! We read of a third of the waters being wasted and a third of mankind dying in certain places. What I pondered is, "If God is God, can't He make or destroy something in a moment of time? Why wipe out one-third of something as opposed to just doing it all at once? By the way, that's why the debate about whether God created the world in seven literal days or seven eras of time has always bored me. I figure if God is God, He can do it in seven seconds or seven billion years. I lean toward a literal interpretation because I just figure God's less likely to condemn me for being too literal versus not literal enough!
 - b) OK enough questions, time for some answers. The reason God works that way both here in Amos and in Revelation is God doing what He can to get our attention by resorting to more and more drastic measures. Back in Amos' day, God allowed rain to occur in some places but not others. You'd think that would get people's attention, but it didn't. Let's be honest, if our town lacked food and water, yes we'd go elsewhere to get that, but wouldn't we also question God as to why that is so? Apparently people went elsewhere to get what they need to survive, but still failed to see God to ask why!
 - c) That leads to a logical question: If we're suffering in some way, is God obligated to tell us why that is? I'd argue no, as God gave us His rules to live by and He's not obligated to do just that. Years ago, I remember being told that when we get to heaven, the only word we will get out of our mouth is "Oh" as in "Oh, that's why you allowed this to happen!"
 - d) God does make the promise to all believers that all things we go through are designed to work out for His glory (Romans 8:28), but we are not entitled to know how or why until we get to heaven.
 - e) Anyway, the main point here is that God specifically allowed the Israelites living there at that time to suffer in order to try to get their attention as if to say, "You're failing to live as a witness for Me and I'm doing what I can to get your attention!"

16. Verse 9: "Many times I struck your gardens and vineyards, I struck them with blight and mildew. Locusts devoured your fig and olive trees, yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD. ¹⁰ "I sent plagues among you as I did to Egypt. I killed your young men with the sword, along with your captured horses. I filled your nostrils with the stench of your camps, yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD.
- a) Speaking of judgment, we're getting into the "hot and heavy" as we get close to finishing up Chapter 4. After reading these verses a few times, my first question is, "Why did God get so tough here? Yes the Israelites have collectively ignored God for around 2 centuries, which is roughly the length of time the Northern Kingdom of Israel existed.
 - b) What I'm pondering is why is the judgment so harsh that God found it necessary to kill a bunch of Israelites and allowed plagues to go through Israel. The historical details of the stories behind these plagues, don't interest me as much as the fact that God ordained all of this destruction. What I pondered is why, and would God repeat this stuff with us?
 - i) The first thing to realize is how serious God takes His relationship with us. If God is willing to kill people through wars and plagues in order to draw people close to Him, consider how important that relationship is to Him.
 - ii) Next, does that make God a "bad guy" if He's willing to allow all of this to occur? I hold the view that if there is no afterlife, this life is very unfair. Paul told us in 1st Corinthians 15:32 that "If there is no resurrection, then we might as well eat, drink and have a good time for we'll die tomorrow". That's my paraphrase, but it makes the same point. My point is if there is no resurrection, than we can fairly make the accusation that God is cruel by allowing people to suffer this way. However if we will be resurrected, then what is a lifetime compared to eternity? If it is necessary to let some people suffer horribly in order for others around them to "get a clue" of God's existence, then it's worth the trouble.
 - iii) A page back I pondered the question of why did God kill off a "third" of things in the book of Revelation as opposed to wiping out all bad people all at once? (That is based mainly on Revelation Chapter 8.) The point of that chapter as well as the point here in Amos is that God's willing to do whatever it takes, including wiping people out in order to draw as many people as possible close to Him.
 - iv) The next question is, if God's willing to work that way with the Israelites way back then, what makes us Christians think He'll be any less tough on us? The purpose of all that judgment is to draw people closer to Him. The Israelites failed to be the type of witness for Him that He desired and suffered for it. What makes Christians think we're any better off? So does that mean whatever wars existed or plagues in say the last century God ordained? No idea. All I do know for sure is that we have to take our witness for God "seriously" or like the Israelites back then, we're in big trouble to put it mildly. God took the life of two believers in Acts Chapter 5 if for no other reason than to show us that God wants us to take our being a witness for Him seriously, just like in these verses here in Amos. Speaking of which:
 - c) The key point of these verses is that God allowed all sorts of bad things to happen to the Israelites living then in order for the rest of the Israelites to "get a clue" that God desires to have a close personal relationship with us. For the newcomers, that does not mean every single moment of our life will be "sunshine and roses". It means that God wants to be with us as we go through our lives. He wants us to turn to Him for the strength to get through the tough times and someone to celebrate with during the great moments of life. What He wants is an intimate relationship with people where we learn to trust Him more and more of the fact He's in charge and He's guiding our lives the way desires ultimately to glorify Him in this world. Yes that means some Christians are called to be martyrs. The rest of us who are believers are called to live our life to glorify Him in whatever we do. If we do live that way, we have no reason to fear plagues and the like, as our eternal security is set!

17. Verse 11: "I overthrew some of you as I overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. You were like a burning stick snatched from the fire, yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD.
- a) While I was on a roll over the last page explaining why God judges us, Amos is trying to tell the Israelites just how much trouble their in! Amos uses both a biblical example and a simple example that people can relate to. Ever noticed that when a prophet describes any previous judgment by God, that prophet takes it literally? Amos doesn't say when Sodom and Gomorrah was destroyed, it was a fable to be studied. He describes it as a historically literal event. That alone tells me how seriously I should take my bible!
 - b) My point here is that Amos says a long time ago (about a millennium ago) those two cities were literally destroyed by God as an example of what will happen to a place that fails to live as God desires. Stop and consider that the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah weren't Israelites. God destroyed those cities, because they gave themselves over to sexual sins to a point where anybody did it with everyone anytime they felt like it! In the beginning His command were for people to marry (Genesis 2:24) and multiply (Genesis 1:21). What I am getting at here is if all couples are subject to His law that we are to be loyal to spouses and not just do it with whoever looks good to us, how much tougher do you think God will be on those of us He's called to be His witnesses to the world?
 - c) The second point here is that God "rescued" Israel in the sense that God rescued a burning stick out of a fire. The rescue is that the Israelites were taken out of Egypt by miracles that are described in detail in the early chapters of Exodus. Again notice the literalness of how Amos describes Israel's history and effectively says, "God's in charge, He makes the rules, He called us to be His witnesses to the world and we're in big trouble if we ignore Him!"
 - i) There, that's the whole lesson in one thought, let alone this verse!
 - d) OK John, now that you've scared us half to death, now what? First, remember that we've been called. It doesn't mean we have to panic. It just means we live our lives as if God is always watching us (which He is anyway), we seek Him as if our eternities depend upon it (it does!) and we do our best to communicate with Him through prayer and studying of His word. Then we pray that God use us as we go through our lives making a difference for Him. If we do that, we can't lose, no matter what happens in our life! Well that would be a wonderful way to end the lesson, but we still have two more verses to discuss!
18. Verse 12: "Therefore this is what I will do to you, Israel, and because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel." ¹³ He who forms the mountains, creates the wind, and reveals his thoughts to man, he who turns dawn to darkness, and treads the high places of the earth-- the LORD God Almighty is his name.
- a) Now for the epilogue of what happened to those Israelites who Amos was speaking to in these verses. Within a few decades after Amos wrote this, the Assyrian Empire (based out of what is Iraq today for my newcomers) destroyed the Northern Kingdom. Whoever did survive that attack, were taken away captive hundreds of miles away in an embarrassing way as I described earlier in this lesson. However, that's ancient history. Here's what we need to take away from this lesson:
 - b) I can't imagine anything scarier than to be told by the God who created the universe we're living in (the main point of Verse 13), that we have to be prepared to face Him because we failed to be a witness for Him.
 - c) OK time for me to get weird for a moment (as if I haven't done so throughout this lesson). I hold the view that "time" is different in God's realm than it is for us. I don't believe that God has "lots of time on His hands", I believe He exists outside of time, as He created it in the first place. A perfect God cannot learn by definition. Therefore, a perfect God knows of all things before they occur. The reason I'm getting into all of this, is because if Amos is saying prepare to meet your God, not only was death to come soon, but I also believe His judgment is also equally as soon. Since I believe God exists outside of time, when we die, we immediately enter that "no-time" world and the judgment comes soon afterwards.

- d) Let me explain it another way. Some bible scholars argue for something that scholars do call "soul sleep". It's the idea that our souls all sleep until God's judgment comes. Since I believe God exists outside of time as we know it, I don't believe in soul sleep. Like most conservative scholars, I hold the view that whenever we die, we immediately enter God's eternal world where time has no meaning. It's the idea that our great, great grandparents enter God's world "in a sense" at the same time we do since time there doesn't matter.
 - e) I believe in heaven we can still sense time going by (John describes silence in heaven for about half an hour in Revelation 8:1), but I'd argue that time in heaven is irrelevant since we will be there forever. This also means that God interferes into the world's affairs as He enters our world at the least to communicate the bible to us and more importantly to have relationships with us. Yes, it also means He enters our world to allow bad things to occur as Amos has been describing throughout this lesson.
 - f) That's why Amos ends this particular sermon within the sermon with the tough reminder that the Israelites are about to be judged by God and yes it's the God of the Universe who is doing that judgment in the first place! Yes that should scare us, but I talked about how we should respond to that on the last page.
 - i) The bad news is there is more judgment discussion coming in the next lesson.
 - ii) The good news is that we've already been rescued from that judgment so that we can be free to use our lives as a witness for God.
 - iii) With that said, let me close in prayer with a final reminder of how God has called us to live as a witness for Him!
19. Let's pray: First, Father, we thank You that You have separated us so we don't have to face that type of judgment these particular Israelites did for ignoring Your desire for an intimate personal relationship with You. Help us to remember that You created us for a purpose, that purpose is to glorify You in all that we do. We know that we're imperfect creatures and we're forever grateful that we don't have to prove our worth to You. So out of gratitude, help us and guide us so that we do use our lives to glorify You. Make it obvious to us what it is You'd like us to do this day as we use the precious time You've given us for Your glory! We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.