

A CALL TO ACCOUNTABILITY

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 97

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Amos 5

AMOS 5:18-24

18 Woe unto you that desire the day of the LORD! to what end is it for you? the day of the LORD is darkness, and not light.

19 As if a man did flee from a lion, and a bear met him; or went into the house, and leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him.

20 Shall not the day of the LORD be darkness, and not light? even very dark, and no brightness in it?

21 I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies.

22 Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts.

23 Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols.

24 But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.



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I. Dismal Day

5:18a. Prophets like Amos point out that God's unique relationship with Israel provides them with special blessings and privileges, but it also comes with a responsibility for faithful obedience to Him. The people in Amos's day expect the privileges, but they have abandoned the responsibility.

Woe introduces messages of warning and judgment. Amos's audience desires the day of the Lord for twisted, selfish reasons. They have forgotten that covenant blessings are contingent on covenant faithfulness, and faithlessness will be met by judgment.

The *day of the Lord* is a common theme in the Old Testament. Israel believes that the Lord will arise on behalf of His people and defeat their enemies in a mighty display of His power on that day. God's people consider themselves exempt from judgment on that day because of their status as His chosen, covenant people.

18b. The people will find themselves surprised that *the day of the LORD* will be *darkness* for them *and not light*. The darkness and judgment that the other nations will experience will also fall on Israel.

19. Amos illustrates the plight of the people. In both images, *a man* believes himself to be safe right before he meets his doom. He discovers that *a bear* is as deadly as *a lion* and not even the man's *house* can keep him safe from *a serpent* that has slithered inside.

Two lessons should be drawn from these scenarios. First, it is impossible to hide from judgment on the day of the Lord. In Amos's illustration, even one's own home will provide no refuge from what the day of the Lord will bring.

KEY VERSE

Let judgment run down as waters,
and righteousness as a mighty
stream. —Amos 5:24

Second, the day of the Lord and its accompanying judgment arrive without warning. A person believes him- or herself to be safe from harm when unanticipated danger strikes.

20. Amos reiterates his earlier point that the *day of the LORD* will be a time of *darkness, and not light*. The Hebrew word translated *very dark* comes from the same root word that describes the "thick darkness" that fell upon the land of Egypt for three days during the ninth of the 10 plagues (Exodus 10:22). The judgment delivered shortly after that day resulted in the Israelites' being delivered from their enemy, from slavery to freedom. The day of the Lord, however, promises to be a reversal of both what Israel had experienced and what they expect to happen once more.

II. Disappointed God

21. Though Amos has been speaking for God up until now, the Lord himself steps in to express His extreme displeasure with Israel's *feast days*. Though the Lord had ordained these feasts for His people, He now refers to them as *your* feast days. The Lord does not want to be associated with them in any way. God rejects mere observance of days.

The Lord voices His disdain especially for the people's *solemn assemblies*. The Lord hates how the people have twisted religion to their own ends. Israel scorns anyone who tries to correct the people's wicked behavior and promote what is upright and good.

The language of being offended by the *smell* reflects the Old Testament sacrificial system. The Lord had stated that He took pleasure in the aroma of offerings presented to Him. In Amos's day the pleasing aroma has become a stench in the Lord's nostrils. This is the first of three sensory reactions the Lord has to the worship of the unholy, faithless people.

22. The three offerings noted here are required by the Lord as part of the Old Testament sacrificial system. *Burnt offerings* are foundational. These are completely consumed by the sacrificial fire, except for the skin (Leviticus 1:6-9; 7:8). A burnt offering is to be offered every morning and evening for all Israel (Exodus 29:38-42).

Meat offerings are offerings of flour and oil. The word *meat* in this case signifies that the best part of the grain is to be given to the Lord through this offering. It celebrates that the Lord is the provider of what the land produces.

Peace offerings are shared by the priest, the one who brought the sacrifice, and others. Thus the offering becomes part of a communal meal. The term *fat beasts* refers to the best of the herd or flock that was used for the peace offering.

For God to refuse to *accept* these offerings that He has commanded indicates that something is amiss with the people who are bringing them. The Hebrew suggests that God refuses to even see these offerings.

23. The Lord's strong disapproval also applies to the music presented by the people at their worship assemblies. The *melody* makes God want to cover His ears.

What is the reason for such harsh words? The people of God are merely going through the motions and words of worship, divorcing that worship from any real impact on their daily conduct. The words of Isaiah could be spoken by Amos to his audience: they are people who "draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me" (Isaiah 29:13).

24. Amos specifically highlights the issues of *judgment* and *righteousness*. Judgment

concerns the fair, lawful practices of a society that honors the Lord. Practicing judgment requires a person to be actively concerned about not only knowing what is just but also choosing to do it. An individual who really cares about justice becomes passionate about making sure that it is carried out in his or her life and in the lives of others.

That the northern kingdom does not uphold justice is clear from the indictments that Amos brings against the people. Such conduct makes their so-called acts of worship nothing but a sham. No wonder the northern kingdom is ripe for divine judgment! This is why the day of the Lord that the people so fervently desire will be a time of darkness rather than light.

To live righteously is to make certain that God's standards of what is right guide one's decisions. When justice and righteousness are pursued habitually day after day, they flow like *waters* in a *mighty stream*. But how can this happen when the people have clogged the flow through their stubborn and rebellious hearts and their contempt for God's righteous standards?

The call to exercise justice and righteousness has echoed through the centuries to God's people. The laws set forth by Moses laid out what those qualities should look like in the promised land. Joshua affirmed these laws. Isaiah will be bold in decrying empty worship. Jeremiah will describe those who make the Lord's temple in Jerusalem a "den of robbers" (Jeremiah 7:8-11), mouthing the words "the temple of the LORD" like a mantra that can save them (7:4), while treating the people in need around them with the utmost scorn. God's desire for justice and righteousness is not a fad; His people do well to take Him seriously.

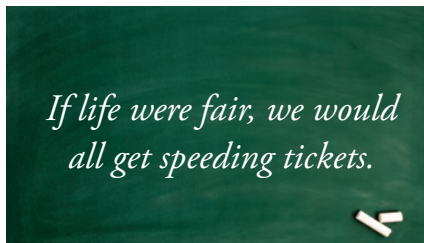
THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

We worship God through the offerings
of our daily lives.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

A CALL TO ACCOUNTABILITY

Into the Lesson



Explain this saying and how it does or does not challenge typical ideas of fairness.

1—What frequently causes people to complain about being treated unfairly?

2—Why is self-interest the worst criterion by which to evaluate fairness?

3—What better criteria exist?

People want fairness and expect justice—it's human nature. But is justice a matter of personal, subjective expectation? Let's see what God had to say about this through the prophet Amos.

Into the Word

Imagine a letter from God in response to one of the following letters. God's response should be derived from the cited portion of the text.

Day of the Lord (Amos 5:18-20)—Dear God, life is good for me. But I guess it will be even better when You bring judgment during Your promised day of the Lord. Tell me what good things I can expect!

Good Religion (Amos 5:21-24)—Dear God, I know You expect Your people to worship You. I think we have done a pretty good job of that, but we would like to hear You tell us so.

Into Life

"Righteousness and peace have kissed each other" (Psalm 85:10).

Can justice occur where peace and righteousness do not "kiss"?

What is the value of having an accountability partner to encourage practicing the imperative of the key verse, Amos 5:24?
