

Prepare to Meet Your God

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- [0 : 0 0] Tonight's reading is from Amos chapter 4, which you can find on page 919. 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.
- 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 fish hooks. You will each go straight out through the breaches in the wall and you will be cast out towards Harman, declares the Lord.
- Go to Bethel and sin, go to Gilgal and sin yet more. Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three years. Burn leavened bread as a thank you offering and brag about your free will offerings.
- Boast about them, you Israelites, for this is what you love to do, declares the sovereign Lord. 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.
- 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.
- [1 : 1 5] 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. Many times I struck your gardens and vineyards, destroying them with blight and mildew.
- Locusts devoured your fig and olive trees, yet you have not returned to me, declares the Lord. 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. I overthrew some of you as I overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah.
- You are like a burning stick snatched from the fire, yet you have not returned to me, declares the Lord. Therefore, this is what I will do to you, Israel. Because I will do this to you, Israel, prepare to meet your God.
- He who forms the mountains, who creates the wind, who reveals his thoughts to mankind, who turns dawn to darkness and treads on the heights of the earth, the Lord Almighty is his name.
- [2 : 1 8] Well, good evening. Let me add my welcome to Ali's.
- My name is Simon, and I'm the trainee minister here. In the year 410 AD, after 800 years of prosperity, the city of Rome fell.
- The heart of the Roman Empire was the center of art and culture. It was a city of excess and revelry, the envy of the whole world. And then all of a sudden, it was sieged, invaded, and fell.
- One historian of the time recorded this. He would have believed that the mighty Rome, with its careless security of wealth, would be reduced to such extremities as to need shelter and food and clothing.

Another historian said, This dismal calamity is but just over, and you're a witness of how Rome, that commanded the world, was astonished when barbarous and victorious nations stormed her walls and made their way through the breach.

[3 : 24] Where then were the privileges of birth and the distinctions of quality, where not all ranks and degrees leveled at the same time, every house the scene of misery, equally filled with grief and confusion.

Rome didn't heed the warnings until the end came. People were partying on the edge of disaster. And in the end, for all their wealth and status, and for how impressive the empire was, when the invaders came, it didn't save those people from death.

And in that, there's something that sometimes when the warnings come, people do not heed them, no matter how often they're told. As we've looked at the book of Amos, as we've been going through it in our evening services, we see Israel looking, on the surface at least, like things are going really well.

They're prosperous, they're rich, their buildings are stunning. Some of their houses are so wealthy and impressive that they would be kind of like on Scotland's great show home, essentially.

High society Israel were living the high life of luxury, comfortable and content, but peel back that layer. And underneath it, you find this is all built on the back of injustice and oppression.

[4 : 38] The rich living in luxury at the expense of the poor. Israel, a nation that are meant to declare the goodness of God to the world, have grown an elite ruling class, carelessly oppressing the masses, too busy parting with their wealth to realize how bad things have become.

And so God sends a shepherd, and I mean a literal shepherd. Amos was a shepherd, tending sheep, sent to be a prophet to Israel.

He is not a high society person. He is called to bring the rebellious sheep of Israel back to God. But the more he warns them, the more stubborn Israel has become.

And over the last few weeks, we've seen God addressing Israel as a roaring lion, ready to pounce in judgment on his people, fallen Israel.

But even then, this warning has been designed to bring people back, to bring them to repentance, to say sorry to God, and come back to him in love. God is calling them to meet him in mercy, but having rejected that time and time again.

[5 : 48] In today's passage, we hear some words that might put a bit of ice into our veins. Prepare to meet your God. They're the words that people say in films before someone gets killed, aren't they?

Prepare to meet your maker. That is not a comfortable set of words to hear. So Israel, having rejected God's mercy, will now meet him in judgment. The vital thing for us, or anyone then who reads this book, is are we listening to God?

Because Israel had their ears firmly shut, and it was leading to their impending disaster. If you're here this evening, and you're listening to God, if you're a believer in Jesus, then you have chosen to listen to God already.

You need not fear that you will meet him in judgment, but that doesn't mean that you can switch off this evening. Because this passage will ask every one of us the same question, which is, are you prepared to meet your God?

Because that isn't a choice. For Israel, or for any of us, the question is not if we will meet God, merely when. And when you meet him, how will you meet him?

[7 : 00] Israel ran from his mercy, so met him in wrath. Those who trust Jesus will meet God as a loving father, not a roaring lion, but will still have to give account for how they lived in this world.

And so with that in our minds, and in light of those questions, let me pray as we dig further into this passage this evening. Father God, we pray that as we listen to your word this evening, that you would open our ears, our hearts, and our minds to respond to you.

Have mercy on us, and speak to us through your word. Impact our hearts, and help us to see you. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Now for each point this evening, the passage kind of breaks down into four bits.

We're going to go for each one of them. For each one, we're going to think, actually, how do we prepare to meet God? And as Amos builds his case, we will see a little bit of how Israel failed to prepare to meet God, and how we might do differently.

So first, prepare to meet your God by showing compassion. Now in 2006, one of the most popular reality TV shows that is astonishingly still going, was The Real Housewives of Orange County.

[8 : 19] This series documents the luxurious lives of the rich wives of Californian businessmen. It's astonishingly popular. It's spawned 11 series since 2006.

There are 21 spin-off series around the world. At the time of the first series, the average house price of people on that show was \$1.6 million, and that has only gone up since then.

And the whole show is just a glorification of money and wealth. It is a catalogue of the competitively rich, and the wealth on display is huge. But were you to scratch beneath the surface, what would you find?

Well, if you go and look on the government websites for Orange County, California, you'd find there's a huge gap between the richest and poorest. 13.5% of the people in Orange County live in poverty.

The Real Housewives got paid an average of \$400,000 per season, and the average four-person family in Orange County earn \$24,000 a year.

[9 : 24] While some live in luxury, others live in poverty that they struggle to escape from. And that just gives us maybe a bit of a way to think through what we read in the first few verses of this.

Because in our passage this evening, Amos introduces us to, in some ways, the real housewives of Samaria. From one side, it looks stunningly glamorous, but from below, it looks horribly oppressive.

Amos 3 told us that there are people in Israel living in mansions adorned with ivory. Jonathan last week told us that even the temple had bits of ivory in it, but it wasn't covered in it.

There's such wealth and such excess to such a pointless degree. And through the whole book of Amos, you get this increasing picture of wealth and enjoyment that never stop.

Every day's a holiday, every night's a party, but look beneath the glitz and the glamour and the celebrity, and you find that it's built on the back of slaves toiling endlessly in poverty, going hungry in the fields.

[10 : 24] And it's so often true in this world that luxury and oppression are just two sides of the same coin. And so our first point then to focus in on this, we must prepare to meet our God by showing compassion.

Amos' word to the women of Samaria is, it's hardly flattering, is it, in verse 1. Here he's word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria. Bashan being one of the most fertile areas of land, producing excellent crops and well-fed animals.

You get the point. He's calling these women fat cows. And that should make us flinch, shouldn't it? Is that what you expect to read in your Bible?

But that's the right place to flinch because it shows you some of how wrong Israel has become. Israel are now oppressing people underneath them and if you did go back in the Bible's history, you'd find that Israel started in oppression themselves as slaves under the Pharaoh of Egypt.

But now they look much more like the slave masters bringing other people into slavery. But as one of their historical enemies oppressed them, so they are now oppressing their own people, members of their own country.

[11 : 41] And Amos picks out the excess and evil of these women as just one example. Do not fear if you're a female reading this. The men get it sold to the neck in chapter 6 as well. This is very much the whole of Israel.

But this is an example that should make us think. God has called his people to display the character of himself to the world as a generous God of compassion who cares for the weak and the needy.

But in Israel's day, in Israel's time in Amos' day, those people are crushing the poor and the needy. They're totally rejected in the God of compassion. And so God declares an oath.

So verse 2, look down, the sovereign Lord has sworn by his holiness. What does that mean? Well, God's holiness is set apart as his unchanging nature, i.e. what God says at this point is not going to change.

What's he going to do? Well, he's going to judge these people. He's going to utterly crush these people. Just read through verses 2 and 3 that you'll be taken away with hooks, the last of you have fish hooks and go straight out through the breaches in the wall.

[12 : 51] I.e. the city will have fallen, the walls will be down, the army is invaded, and the stunning golden jewelry is turned into hooks that are now dragging these women away. It is horrible imagery, isn't it?

One day, that beautiful jewel will be exchanged for hooks. One day, the cocktail parties will be turned into captivity, champagne for shackles. And throughout this book, Amos is just stressing how much God cares about justice that is inseparable from his character.

He hates oppression and will not tolerate the stubborn luxury of Israel forever. It's just fundamentally wrong to our God that someone live in poverty whilst others bask in luxury.

And he will judge that. And that should make us ask some serious questions of ourselves. And yes, we know if you're here this evening and you're a believer in Jesus, then you are safe from the judgment of God.

But how we treat wealth really matters. It must. Because God has not changed. As people called to display God's goodness to the world, can we really live a life of endless luxury?

[14 : 00] There are people in the world this day who are Christians for whom that question would never come up because there's no chance that they will ever have any luxury. But for us here in the rich modern West, we should really think about this.

Do we live in a way that shows the goodness and kindness and generous compassion of our God to the world around us? Or do we just tolerate that luxury that just creeps in on us?

Do we treat all of our wealth and worldly possessions as if they are gifts from God, part of his goodness, and therefore be able to live separately to them and give them away? Or do we claim them as our own and hold them tight?

What are we going to say when we meet our maker? So that is our first point. Prepare to meet our maker by being people of compassion. Now secondly, prepare to meet your maker by truly worshipping.

I'm going to move on to verses 4 and 5 for which I'm going to invite Ali Burrows, one of our trainees who's been leading the service. Just back up for a second. Verses 4 and 5 are structured as a cult of worship for Israel, but it's sitting there to show them just how far they've fallen.

[15 : 11] It can maybe be hard for us to connect with verses 4 and 5, so I've asked Ali to give us what might be maybe more of an Amos 4 style version of her welcome to church this evening. To stress this, this is a negative example before Ali does this.

This is what it might feel like. Good evening, and welcome to St Silas Church. We come here this evening to sin and disgrace the Lord. We are here to worship ourselves, so I hope you're all rich.

We hope that all we do this evening really impresses each other. So make sure you flash your cash when the offering bag comes around. And afterwards, make sure you brag over coffee and on social media about how amazing you are, because we love that here.

Thank you. Haunting, isn't it? That God can say to his people, that is how you worship.

If you were to start a service of worship, you'd be people who just worshiped yourselves, because that's all you do. When you bring offerings to me, they are to make yourselves look good, and then you go and brag about them. It's a really painful thing to see Israel getting mocked in this way for their totally false ceremonial religion in this kind of satirical cult of worship.

[16 : 33] Notice that Amos mentions two places, Bethel and Gilgal, in verse 4. And it says, go to Bethel and sin, go to Gilgal and sin yet more. Bethel was the place where God met with Jacob, one of Israel's founding fathers.

Gilgal's the place with 12 memorial stones reminding Israel how God had been with them to take the land that he had promised to them. These should be places that inspire worship in these people, and they're being told to go there and sin.

And notice the imperatives all the way through. Go to Bethel and sin, go to Gilgal and sin yet more. Bring your sacrifices every morning. Burned leavened bread.

Interesting, leavened bread is actually what the law said not to bring. So even the sacrifices are wrong. And brag about your freewill offerings. Boast about them, you Israelites.

This comes with the force of command from Amos. And again, it just makes us flinch a bit. Especially the conclusion for this is what you love to do, declares the sovereign Lord.

[17 : 42] God knows that these people love to sin in this way. To an outside observer, Israel might look very keenly religious, but to their God they are starkly idolatrous, worshipping themselves whilst pretending to worship him.

One day these Israelites will meet their God and have to explain who they were worshipping and what their ceremonies were for because they were not for him. This is so wrong for the people of God to use their worship as a cover-up for yet more evil.

Because God's people are called to live lives of true worship that honors him. The whole human problem of sin is being turned in on ourselves and worship calls us to turn back out to God.

The way we worship God in our lives in general, yes, but also the way that we worship him in our services and the way that we pray and the way that we speak. We're meant to come together in humility and holiness.

There's just no space for competitive showing off or boasting as if the Lord needs something from us that we've impressed him with when we bring something. No, instead, we're called to come humbly because worship is about our need of relationship to him and his goodness, not what we offer to him.

[19 : 00] And we look forward to a future that is full of eternal worship. And if that is a future that God has for us where worship will be good and we will live in it forever in a way that is absolutely joyful, then why wouldn't we be people marked by that now?

Because we can participate in right and good worship and truth. So we've acknowledged that when we meet him that will be us. We prepare to meet our maker by truly worshiping him.

Now, as we go through this, we're just getting more and more of a bleak picture of Israel. But it might help us to understand a little bit of why this prophecy then feels so intense because we know every week as we come to this and read it, it just feels very heavy initially.

But that is right when we consider more and more of what's happening to God in all of this. Because if we're not careful, we might just think, well, God's just taking out his frustration on Israel.

But the point of the prophets is to call people back to the Lord in repentance, not to just send them away forever. And Amos warns readers of this prophecy to turn from making the same mistakes as Israel did in their history, not to become these people again, to turn back to God now and meet him in mercy before running into him stubbornly in judgment.

[20 : 25] And so we move on to our third point. The third way God calls out Israel is to prepare to meet your God by learning from history. So verses 6 to 11 contain a five-part lament in some ways from God.

each section of one or two verses ends with the words, yet you have not returned to me, declares the Lord. And I think given the five-part repeat here, just hear the pain in those words.

You have not returned to me, says the Lord. My beloved people, you did not come back. No matter what I brought, you just kept rejecting. And in each one of these things, heavy as they are, every one of them is a mercy from the Lord to call his people back, if increasingly severe.

Because no matter what the disaster is, it's far better than meeting God in judgment. If you were to go back to Leviticus 26 or Deuteronomy 28, parts of the law that talk about the curses that God will bring if his people reject him, you would see that all the stuff we read from verses 6 to 11 here are just things that God said would happen if the people rejected him.

And look at their rejection. It started with hunger in verse 6. God brought them hunger to come back to him. And then blight and famine in verse 7.

[21 : 50] Sorry, then drought in verse 7, blight and famine in verse 9. And every time God is removing a blessing from them so these people might turn and go, where is the God that gave us these things? What are we doing?

Maybe we should turn back to him. And yet, they refuse to turn back to him every time. So God sent plagues and armies against his people according to verse 10, treating them as if they were not his people.

Almost as if they were their old enemy, the oppressors, Egypt. And notice, that's the second time that Israel have been compared to their historical slave drivers. Think about who you're becoming, Israel.

But narratively, they're just getting further and further away from God. So finally, verse 11, serious destruction came like the days of Sodom back in Genesis, a place that God destroyed by fire because of its evil.

And even though Israel had been pulled out, that situation singed at the edges, they haven't for a second thought to return to their God, even for help or repentance. No matter how much they're called home, no matter how much God's arms are open wide, no matter how much his mercy is on display, they just keep rejecting and refusing.

[23 : 03] So imagine how God feels to be spurned by the people that he loves and is blessed. Why? Why? Why would you do this? Why won't you turn back to me, Israel?

But they won't. There's still religion in Israel, but there's not relationship. Israel refused to learn from their history, so instead of meeting God with open arms, they're about to meet the lion that will tear them apart.

And so after all of that, what is the conclusion going to be for this people? If God's going to send, is God going to send another plague? Is he going to send another army? Well, look down at verse 12.

Therefore, this is what I will do to you, Israel. And because I will do this to you, Israel, prepare to meet your God. As we've said every time, these people are going to meet their God regardless of what they think.

The threat to Israel isn't that God would send them away or send someone else against them, but that they would meet him in wrath instead of mercy. But what God are they going to meet?

[24 : 14] Well, look down at verse 13. This reminds us of who this God is. He who forms the mountain, who creates the wind. The end of that verse. Who treads on the heights of the earth.

The Lord Almighty is his name. This is the powerful creator God, the God of their history. The one who spoke creation into being, who rescued them in the exodus, who brought them through the wilderness and gave them their land and they rejected.

God's been revealing his thoughts to his people through the prophets and now, well, now a day of darkness is coming. Right in the middle of that verse.

He who reveals his thoughts to mankind, who turns dawn to darkness. God has been showing these people through the prophets for their history and through Amos now what his thoughts about them are and what he wants them to be and having not listened, dawn is turning to darkness, lights are fading.

And judgment is coming. And so the end is coming. These people are not prepared to meet their God. They've had so many chances of mercy, but because of their continuous rejection, they will now meet God in judgment.

[25 : 32] And so finally, our last point really is that instead of that, we prepare to meet our God by bowing before him. So are you prepared to meet your God?

If you're here tonight and you're not yet a Christian, this might all feel incredibly intense and I get that. But to some extent it should because this is not a comfortable passage, but it's far more comfortable than meeting God in judgment.

We're called to listen to God because he warns us that we can be on the wrong side of him and until we come to him in repentance for our sin, we are. But he does so in hope of mercy and with an invitation to draw us home.

The choice is open to all of us and as I said before, this isn't a choice of whether to meet God or not, this is just the choice of how we meet him when we meet him because it's not an if question.

We meet him in love and mercy as he calls us or will we meet him in judgment as we reject him? What is absolutely certain is that we will. If you're here and you are a believer in the Lord Jesus and you have returned to God and you have repented of your sin, that just doesn't mean you can turn away and do as you wish.

[26 : 52] We're not invited in so that we might live as we want. No, we're invited in to be the people of the Lord so that we might live as he wants in relationship with him and enjoy him. And so all of this should act as a warning, not of impending judgment because that's been taken by the Lord Jesus, but as a warning to live well as the people of God because we stand to represent him in this world.

And if people see people living in luxury, refusing to worship, not listening to God, then what God are they going to see in us? But if we live with compassion, worshiping truly and listening to our Lord, then people will see the true and living God in our lives.

But just to kind of round this off and pull this together, I want to turn our thoughts to the Lord Jesus.

And I want to turn our thoughts to someone he interacted with who is also female and from Samaria and don't flinch, he's not about to call her a cow, don't worry. But turn to John chapter 4, which is on page 1066 of the church Bibles.

And here Jesus meets a woman of Samaria. In verse 21, Jesus says this, Woman, Jesus replied, Believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father, neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.

[28 : 15] You Samaritans worship what you do not know, we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews, yet a time is coming and has now come when true worshipers but worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.

For his Spirit and his worshipers must worship in Spirit and truth. Now just think for this woman in Samaria, she is meeting her God face to face.

But look how loving this is, he's inviting her to worship and saying that actually the faith that she has in her God actually is being met in him. Earlier in the story, Jesus offers her eternal life by saying that he is living water that she needs and she asks if he is the Messiah and he says that he is.

And as soon as she figures out who Jesus is, she runs back to her town. So verse 28 and 29 says, Then leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, Come and see the man who told me everything I ever did.

Could this be the Messiah? So when Jesus calls, this woman listens and then runs to get others so they may listen and worship truly too. And what's the impact?

[29 : 29] Well, down in verse 39, Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of this woman's testimony. He told me everything I ever did. So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them and he stayed for two days and because of his words, many more became believers.

And he said to this woman, We no longer believe just because of what you said. Now we've heard for ourselves and we know this man really is the Savior of the world. Through Jesus, God is calling the whole world to meet him in salvation.

So if you want to prepare to meet our maker, to receive free mercy and grace, then we come to Christ. We come to the Lord Jesus, listen to him and respond. So if you don't yet know him, come to him in mercy.

And if you do know Jesus, live a life where you make every effort to go and tell others to worship in spirit and truth. And so we'll finish with the final question, which is the same as the start.

Are you prepared to meet your God? Let's pray. Father, we come before you again this evening, having heard from your word.

[30 : 40] Father, thank you that you warn us to flee from the coming wrath, but in Jesus, you invite us to know you personally and fully. You invite us with free mercy and grace to join you in salvation.

Father, thank you for your word to us. We pray that you'd open our hearts and minds that we might live by it. And Lord, as your people, help us to live lives that honor and glorify you, worshiping you in all things. With joy and gladness in our hearts, that you have welcomed us home.

Amen. Amen.