

October 16, 2005

“Lessons from a Funeral”
Amos 5:1-17

FCF: The need to be shaken out of our complacency

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Because the LORD is our life,
(magnet) we must heed His call to seek Him.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

We have some interesting projects underway at the Schwartz house – especially now that I built a new workbench in the garage. One in particular is a model requiring some paint. Fortunately, before one of our craftsman got to work, I remembered to stir it a bit so it wouldn’t streak. You have to do that if you want the project to turn out right.

And, frankly, there are times when we need to be stirred up ourselves. Like old paint, we can get a bit too settled, a bit too complacent. Case in point – we are too often too quick to assume and presume upon the favor and kindness of the Lord to us. “What could be wrong? What could be amiss? What could be askew?” we ask. We could.

SCRIPTURE READING: Amos 5:1-17

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Funerals – nearly all of us have attended one. I myself have officiated at quite a few. The nature of the experience can be as wide-ranging as the circumstances of the passing. Shock, anguish, confusion, anger, relief, joy – any or all could be present. Sometimes we knew the person well. Sometimes we wish we’d known them better. And often, the words at the service can really be of help in understanding all that’s transpired.

Amos, in a way, is presiding over a funeral for the nation of Israel. And the message he gives is funeral message. The form of this passage is one his hearers and readers would have recognized – both in its style and its tone. A death, a loss has taken place. What do we learn about the deceased? How did this happen? And what can we take away for ourselves? Now as the service proceeds, it’s clear Amos is not delivering a pleasant eulogy as a tribute. True to what we’ve seen thus far in our study, Amos is unapologetic and relentless. His concern is not the feelings of his audience. It is their hearts. Let me take you on a quick survey of what we see. Verses 1 through 3 begin with a lament, a dirge. Verses 4 to 6 – the LORD requires that His people forsake their idols and turn to Him that they might live. Verses 7 to 9 – Israel prefers to go her own way, showing no fear of the LORD and His threatened chastening. Verses 10 to 12 – Such a stance cannot stand. He must respond. And verses 13 to 17 – Further pleas are useless. But even then the admonition is repeated. Deep mourning will then soon follow.

Such is the summary. But what I want to focus on is the plea, the command, the urging we see in verses 5, 6, and 14. “*Seek the LORD and live.*” What in that do we ourselves need to hear today? In what ways might it be hard for us to hear today? What does it entail? What does it ensure? What does it mean to “seek Him and live”?

I. SOBERING THINGS WE LEARN OF OURSELVES

The first thing it involves is learning some sobering things about ourselves. Remember who Amos is speaking to – Israel, God’s people. That they would have to be told to “seek Him,” that they were clearly seeking something else – is sobering to hear.

A) The Danger of Sacred Substitutes

This speaks to the danger of “sacred substitutes” – the danger of anything given by God to His people taken and twisted by His people in such a way that, instead of bringing us closer to Him, actually pushes us away creating greater distance.

1. What they were

(**READ Amos 5:4-6**) These were significant places. At Bethel, Jacob had the vision of the ladder, returning years later he was given a new name. He had said of it, “*The LORD is in this place.*” Gilgal was the site of Israel’s first encampment in the Promised Land, the place of the memorial stones, Joshua’s headquarters. It harkened to the promise of the inheritance and possession of the land. Beersheba – there Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had each received assurances of the companionship of God with them, “*I am with you.*”

2. Why they were attractive

There was an attraction to these sites. Pilgrimages were made because they represented something precious and vital. The problem was that, for all they represented, there was no reality, no transformation. Note the play on “turning” (**READ Amos 5:7-9**). Now you might think, “*No change? Well why stick with it?*” What if change isn’t what you want?

Illustration:

A friend gave me a Dilbert cartoon. Dogbert approaches Dilbert with an idea. (**READ cartoon**) “*I decided to start a discount religion. The tithing would be 5% and I’d let people sin as much as they wanted.*” An interesting idea. “*The only problem is that I don’t want to spend time with anyone who would join that sort of religion.*”

B) *The Effect of Sacred Substitutes*

Such things are attractive to us because they ask so little of us. They have so little effect. But that has consequences. The LORD said, “*Don’t bother with Bethel, Gilgal, and Beersheba.*” To Israel’s horror and dismay, the LORD was then casting aside those places and all they represented. Why? Look what obsession with them had led to.

1. Estrangement one from another

Estrangement one from another – tears and rifts. How we worship reflects who we believe God to be. How we worship also shapes what we become. We become what we worship. Israel believed God to be distant and uninvolved and that’s what they became – careless about His law and callous towards one another (**READ Amos 5:10-11**).

2. Estrangement from God

This is what is referred to as a “futility curse.” And who is behind it? It is the LORD’s chastening of Israel (**READ Amos 5:12-13**). Estranged from one another and the LORD as well. And they couldn’t see it. Listen to the next verses (**READ Amos 5:14-15**).

This is where all this had brought them. And so Amos is in essence playing Dr. Phil, asking, “*So how’s that working for you?*” What had happened with Israel at a societal level was inevitable once they’d gotten off kilter with the LORD. And Amos presses them, in essence forcing the question, “*So how’s that working for you?*”

Application:

Bethel, Gilgal, and Beersheba – the “sacred substitutes” had been rejected. And I wonder – what would they be for us? What are our “sacred substitutes”? Where might we be focusing on the externals, the trappings, the things instead of the One to whom the things were meant to lead us? Is our Bible reading and knowledge fostering pride? Prayer and meditation borne out of a desire to escape? The pursuit of fellowship an excuse not to engage in tougher relationships? Service a payback or worse a bribe? And “*how’s that working for you?*” Where is your joy, your peace? Where is the patience, the tenderness, the kindness towards others that such things should be fostering? The LORD is our life. The LORD is our life. And we must then heed His call to seek Him.

II. STRIKING THINGS WE LEARN OF THE LORD

This call forces us to recognize sobering things about ourselves. But it also allows us to see some striking things about the LORD as well. Think with me.

A) The Object of Our Seeking

To whom is He calling us? To the object of all our seeking – Himself.

1. The possibility of living

“*Seek me and live.*” It’s a double imperative. The sense in the Hebrew being “*If you seek me then you will most surely live.*” You will live – not simply not die or get by but live.

2. The necessity of seeking

But the condition of the living is a seeking – seeking Him. And the clear inference from this passage is that the seeking is to be done on His terms, not ours. And the lives of His people are to be governed by His ways not our impulses. This is to seek Him.

Illustration:

It’s something akin to the idea of “Love Languages”. We are wired such that we appreciate, we hear certain expressions of love more clearly than others. It’s something like that here. The LORD is saying, “*If you’re really seeking me, if you really love me, then this is what that sort of pursuit should look like. This is how I’ll ‘hear’ you.*”

B) The Call for Our Seeking

That’s what it is to pursue the object of our seeking. But consider the call as well.

1. Who it is from

Consider who it’s from – the Designer and Maker of all things, the One who holds it in place at every moment, the One before whom creation shakes and the angels bow down and cry “Holy, holy, holy!” Now what sort of creature would warrant His attention?

2. Who it is to

He says – whatever else we might say – He says that we do. Now that’s astonishing. And all the more that Israel, His rebellious people did. Astonishing that they would have to be called to seek Him. Astonishing that He would then call again. But He did.

Application:

And He does. “*Seek me and live.*” He is the object of all our seeking. Behind all our pursuits of career, name, status, relationships, money, and pleasure, He is the object of our seeking. He is what and who our hearts are crying for. He is the security, fulfillment, peace, understanding, wisdom, forgiveness, freedom, hope we are seeking. And, as if that weren’t astonishing enough, He – He, the object of it all – is seeking us. Those who think themselves to be seeking, those who think themselves to have found Him – wonder of wonders, He is seeking – calling us again and again to seek Him.

CONCLUSION:

Let me try and bring all this together. Think back to the Scripture Reading earlier in the service (**READ Matthew 13:44-46**). We need to hear these words again and again. They speak to what is involved in becoming a Christian – knowing how very poor we are, seeing the riches, the beauty, the healing we need in Christ alone. This is so basic to entering the kingdom. But it is basic to life lived before the King as well. For this selling and buying is not just “once for all.” It is continual. We do not save the receipt. We are to – in the words of Amos – continually “seek” the LORD that we might “live”. We are to be continually reveling in the treasure we’ve found, continually recognizing how susceptible we are to being duped into trading it all in for some lesser god, and continually praising and seeking the God who continually seeks us out that we might live.

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