

**Seek the Lord and Live**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
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**Amos 5:6-7;10-15**

Many years ago, in the sweltering, unforgiving heat of the delta, the children of Israel spent their days slaving away to build Pharaoh's mighty cities, and to harvest Pharaoh's precious grain. And then one day, the Lord was gracious to Israel – God heard Israel's cry. And God offered deliverance.

On that first Passover evening, they gathered what they could carry, and they fled under the cover of darkness into the wilderness. And it was a tenuous freedom. For forty years, they wandered, all the while wondering what it might mean to be people of God.

And finally, one day, God told them. God said:

Because you lived as slaves in Egypt, you remember what it was like to be subdued. And to be overworked. And to be a stranger. And to be aimless. And to simply subsist. And to be hungry, or cold, or naked, or scared, or scarred, or angry, or helpless, or deflated, or to be made to feel as less than.

And because you know me, you also know what it means to be loved. And to be cared for. And to be provided for. And to have purpose. And to have dignity. And to have an identity. And to be a community.

So Moses, with God's help, gave Israel the law. And for several more generations, folks kept cranking out statutes, and commandments, and helpful tips on how to be God's people.

And the long and the short of it all was this. God said:

You know what it felt like when you were slaves in Egypt. That's NOT how to treat people. You also know what it felt like when you found my love and my provisions in the wilderness. That IS how to treat people. Now go and replicate these feelings in all you say AND do. Treat people well, because you know how it feels when people don't.

Also many years ago, (just not as many as the Exodus!), there lived a prophet named Amos. Amos was a proclaimer. And yes, we call him a prophet (he's even got his own book), but he wasn't from a class of prophets. He didn't live in the royal court, nor did he spend his life training for a priesthood. He was a successful herder and landowner. But God gave him a voice. And he used it. And that voice was bent on cleaning up the abuses and hypocrisy of those who claimed to be covenant people – those who could preach covenant, but not live it.

Amos lived in the middle of the eighth century BCE. And while he was a Judean, he spent most his time in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, proclaiming in the streets of Bethel. That name is important. Bethel is a religious shrine. You'll remember that after Jacob swindled his brother Esau out of his birthright, he fled his homeland to take refuge with his Uncle Laban in Haran. Bethel was the first place Jacob stopped to rest along the way. And that night, he had a dream, in which he climbed a ladder. And God made a covenant with Jacob, promising him that his offspring would inhabit the land of Canaan for generations

to come. God said, “I’m with you, wherever you may go.” Many years later, in the same place, Jacob changed his name to Israel, and formalized this promise.

So one would imagine that Bethel, of all places, should have been a town that knew a thing or two about living into God’s covenant. But rarely do prosperity and covenant go hand in hand. And during Amos’ ministry, Israel, under the forty-year reign of King Jeroboam, experienced unprecedented levels of prosperity.

Amos noticed a discrepancy. The rich got richer, and the poor got poorer. Lands were swallowed up. Grain was hoarded. Marble and precious metals adorned fancy homes, in addition to the palace and regional shrine. And great, opulent sacrifices occupied the national liturgy. And yet there were masses of people who were hungry, or homeless, or unemployed.

And the priests and prophets of the kingdom, with a straight face, would read the statutes of Exodus and Deuteronomy – the ones that said God’s people should be just, and kind, and generous, and forgiving, and devout. And then, they’d buy more fine linens and fine wines for the evening banquet, ignoring their impoverished neighbors in the marketplace, or they’d levy sacrificial taxes against people who couldn’t afford to buy dinner, let alone tithe. Bribes, lies, corruption, an utter disregard for God’s commandments, were all standard.

And Amos says, “enough.” If you keep living this way, if you keep talking about covenant, but living in disagreement, your destruction is at hand. The house is on fire, and there’s nobody that’s gonna put it out. Amos didn’t believe in a God who was vengeful out of spite, or out of whim. But he did believe in a God of consequence. To disobey God’s commands, to break God’s covenant, to live intentionally and consistently in a way counter to God’s desires, was a recipe for Israel’s, and indeed all of humanity’s collective demise. Other nations, and especially Israel and Judah, are not immune.

There’s another thing about Amos. His wasn’t a happy prophecy. Most prophets remind their hearers of all the bad things they’ve done, and of the consequences of their actions. And after having properly reduced the egos of their audience, they build them back up with an ounce of hope. “You have sinned. And you have disobeyed God. And when we get home from the grocery store, you had better look out, because it’s not gonna be pretty! But God is merciful. And you’ve got a little time straighten up. Just don’t tarry, because God’s serious this time, y’all.”

We don’t get that from Amos. Amos is reporting that the kind of lifestyle choices Israel has made are ultimately going to result in its people being a remnant of its former self.

And several decades later, Amos’ words prove eerily true. Israel, the Northern Kingdom, is sacked by Assyria, and it literally ceases to exist.

Now lots of folks, including those who lived in the Southern Kingdom in the years following Israel’s demise, and later in the years after their own demise, and I imagine even folks who live in 2018, take Amos’ words very literally, because of the Assyrian victory. See, Amos told you. And it happened.

Well, I take his words literally. And I take them seriously, too. But I don’t think Amos was prophesying about fallen kingdoms. I think that certainly there were some writers and editors who followed him, who crafted this book to make it look that way. But I think Amos was speaking words that transcend

space and time. And I think he was talking to you and me, just as much as he was talking to the people of eighth-century Bethel.

“Seek the Lord, and live,” he says. “Seek good and not evil,” he says. “Establish justice at the gate,” he says, “And you shall live.”

I haven't seen the red sea parted. I haven't wrestled God in a dream. I haven't walked the streets of Bethel. I haven't heard Jesus proclaim along the shores of Galilee. But I know, just like the people of old, that we cannot live, if we cannot see God In the faces of our neighbors.

If one in four school children are hungry, we cannot live.

If one billion people walk four miles each day for clean water, we cannot live.

If our neighbors work three jobs, Sabbath included, just to make ends meet, we cannot live.

If we proclaim that all are welcome at our table, and yet we still require a dinner jacket to be seated, we cannot live.

If we proclaim a God of unlimited possibilities, and yet we demand that such a God conform to our own limited and prejudiced standards, we cannot live.

If after having wandered in the wilderness, we can only empathize with those who have found civilization, we cannot live.

If the song in our heart does not translate to the work of our hands, and the sweat of our brow, we cannot live.

If things matter more than people, if winning matters more than cooperation, if being right matters more than being just, we cannot live.

If love of God, and love of neighbor, and love of self are not evident in all that we do, we cannot live.

Amos' words are solemn. But they don't have to be scary. They don't have to be scary, because each of us is equipped to be God's people. We have hearts that can be filled with God's love. We have minds that can express God's love. We have hands that can grasp God's love. We have feet that can carry us to the places God's love call us to be. And we have ears, and eyes, and mouths to hear, and see, and speak God's love in our time.

Seek the Lord and live, Sardis Baptist Church. There's no time better than right now.

May it be so. And may soon. Amen.