

“Seek Me That You May Live”

“For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel, Seek Me that you may live.”

—Amos 5:4, New American Standard Bible

FROM THE OPENING VERSE

of his book, we understand that Amos was a herdsman in Tekoa, a small town about six miles south of Bethlehem. There the terrain was rugged, and one might barely make a living in such circumstances. Amos described himself, saying, “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, ... and the LORD said to me, Go, prophesy to my people Israel.” (Amos 7:14,15, *Revised Standard Version*) From these words, we see that Amos was very humble.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HUMILITY

Humility has always been an important characteristic of those seeking to please God. For example, many years before the time of Amos, Solomon was king over all twelve tribes of Israel. At first, King Solomon was humble, greatly desiring to serve and please God. Therefore, “God gave Solomon wisdom

and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart.” (I Kings 3:5-14; 4:1,29) However, when Solomon became old, he “did evil in the sight of the LORD, ... because his heart was turned from the LORD,” and he had not kept the covenant and statutes which God had commanded him to follow. —I Kings 11:1-13

During his reign, Solomon had put in charge of the house of Joseph a young “mighty man of valour,” named Jeroboam. (vs. 28) One day, as Jeroboam was going out from Jerusalem wearing a “new garment,” the Prophet Ahijah took hold of his garment and cut it into twelve pieces, and said to Jeroboam, “Take thee ten pieces: for thus saith the LORD, the God of Israel, Behold, I will rend the kingdom out of the hand of Solomon, and will give ten tribes to thee.” The prophet explained that this would take place because Israel, under Solomon’s rule, had forsaken God and no longer walked in his ways, nor did they do what was right in God’s eyes. (vss. 29-33) The division of Israel into two kingdoms, one made up of ten tribes and the other consisting of two tribes—often referred to as the kingdom of Judah—continued until both kingdoms were later taken captive by Gentile nations.

The Prophet Ahijah then gave this message from God to Jeroboam: “If thou wilt hearken unto all that I command thee, and wilt walk in my ways, and do that is right in my sight, to keep my statutes and commandments, ... I will be with thee.” (vss. 37,38) These accounts of both Solomon and Jeroboam teach us an important lesson concerning one of God’s principles. We must remain humble and faithful to God throughout our entire life in all

that we say, do, and think, or we will be rejected. The Apostle Peter wrote: “Be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time.” (I Pet. 5:5,6) Indeed, the promise given to those who have answered the heavenly call is, “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.”—Rev. 2:10

SERIOUS TRANSGRESSIONS

The words of God, spoken by the Prophet Amos to the Israelites, were critical of three other serious transgressions: wealth derived through deceit, idol worship, and immoral behavior. “Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes—they that trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and turn aside the way of the afflicted.”—Amos 2:6,7, *RSV*

The expression “for three transgressions” seems to refer to completeness or fullness. The words “and for four,” added to the three transgressions, suggests that the ultimate effects of sin had been reached and would no longer be tolerated by God. Therefore, God would “not revoke the punishment.”

WEALTH DERIVED THROUGH DECEIT

In the days of the prophet Amos, many merchants in Israel measured out grain with containers that shortchanged the poor. They adjusted their scales so that, unknown to the buyer, the required payment was greater than it should have been for the amount of grain measured out. God had seen this sin, and

in one of Amos' prophecies he said, "Hear this, O ye that swallow up the needy, even to make the poor of the land to fail, ... making the ephah small, and the shekel great, and falsifying the balances by deceit." (Amos 8:4,5) Consequently, it was a time when the rich got richer, and the poor became poorer.

A similar condition existed with the nation as a whole. Israel had enjoyed a period of rest from their surrounding enemies. This led to ease and luxury, and the deceitful results of such outwardly pleasant circumstances upon fallen human hearts and minds. Many thought the nation's enjoyable state would continue indefinitely, but it lasted only until Israel was conquered and taken captive by Babylon.

IDOL WORSHIP AND IMMORALITY

After Jeroboam was made king of the northern ten tribes, he became afraid that when the people would go down to do sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem, they might be tempted to revolt and join forces with Rehoboam, king of Judah, the two-tribe kingdom. Jeroboam made two calves of gold, placing one in Bethel and the other in Dan. He told the people that it was too difficult for them to go to Jerusalem to worship, and falsely claimed that the golden calves he had made were the same as the gods which had brought their forefathers out of the land of Egypt.—I Kings 12:25-33

Jeroboam had set up an alternative place for the people to worship and offer sacrifice. However, God was greatly angered by this and spoke strong words against the Israelites through the prophet Amos. "Come to Bethel, and transgress; ... multiply

transgressions; bring your sacrifices every morning, ... offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving of that which is leavened, and proclaim freewill offerings, publish them; for so you love to do, O people of Israel!"—Amos 4:4,5, *RSV*

Immorality also became a problem in both the ten-tribe and two-tribe kingdoms. Israel was surrounded by heathen nations which practiced immoral and godless behavior. Many in Israel began to do similar things. "Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by my servants the prophets. But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the LORD their God. They despised his statutes, and his covenant that he made with their fathers, and the warnings which he gave them. They ... used divination and sorcery, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD." "A man and his father go in to the same maiden, ... they lay themselves down beside every altar upon garments taken in pledge; and in the house of God they drink the wine of those who have been fined."—II Kings 17:13-17; Amos 2:7,8, *RSV*

Despite these terrible sins, many in Israel evidently thought that God was still pleased with them, since they were observing some aspects of the Law, such as feast days, solemn assemblies, and various offerings. However, God gave this message to Israel, through the Prophet Amos: "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your

solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen.”—Amos 5:21-23, *RSV*

JUDGMENT OF SINS

Amos was then given four visions from God describing Israel’s shameful condition, and why action should be taken against them. In the first vision, Amos describes what he sees with these words: “The Lord GOD showed me: behold, he was forming locusts in the beginning of the shooting up of the latter growth. ... When they had finished eating the grass of the land, I said, O Lord GOD, forgive, I beseech thee! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!” (Amos 7:1,2, *RSV*) In his own eyes, Jacob—Israel as a nation—saw himself as self-sufficient and proud. However, Amos saw Israel as it really was, and pleaded for God’s mercy. Because of this, God promised that he would withhold the punishment he was going to send.—vs. 3

In the second vision, Amos sees God calling for “a judgment by fire, and it devoured the great deep and was eating up the land.” Once more, Amos pleads for mercy upon Israel, and God again holds back the punishment and ends the plague.—vss. 4-6

The third vision concerns a plumb line. The prophet writes: “Behold, the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the LORD said to me, Amos, what do you see? And I said, A plumb line. Then the Lord said, Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of

my people Israel; I will never again pass by them; the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”—vss. 7-9

God had directed the people of Israel in the way they should go by his commandments contained in the Law, and by the many warnings given by his prophets. These constituted the “plumb line,” or requirements of righteousness, which Israel was to follow. God’s standards were clear and precise. However, the measurement of the wall showed how “out of plumb” Israel had become from what was righteous. Even the “high places” and “sanctuaries” were being used for unrighteous purposes.

In the fourth vision, it was harvest time. “The Lord GOD showed me: behold, a basket of summer fruit. And he said, Amos, what do you see? And I said, A basket of summer fruit. Then the LORD said to me, The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass by them.” (Amos 8:1,2, *RSV*) Here is the final scene. The fruit of Israel’s waywardness is fully ripe, and it is now time for judgment and punishment. One can almost visualize a basket of ripe fruit turning to rot in the harvest-time sun, illustrating how the nation of Israel had decayed and spoiled in God’s sight.

God repeats his judgment against Israel, saying “I will spare them no longer.” (vs. 2, *New American Standard Bible*) Amos recognizes the justice of God’s pronouncement and does not seek to overturn his verdict, as he had done with the earlier visions. God’s word was sure, and the sentence would be carried out.

It seems that the people of Israel believed along the lines of the oft-repeated phrase: “once in grace, always in grace.” God had highly favored them as his chosen people. Therefore, they falsely reasoned that he was obligated to feed them, give them water, and protect them forever, no matter what they did. However, God was under no such obligation, neither before, during, nor subsequent to the time of the Prophet Amos.

The Israelites also thought that in order to please God it was sufficient to merely follow rituals and traditions. The ten-tribe kingdom went to Bethel to sacrifice and bring tithes. Their empty rituals meant nothing to the Lord, though, because he was looking for the proper fruits of whole-hearted obedience to him. This he did not find. Like a basket of summer fruit rotting in the sun, the nation of Israel had corrupted. God informed Israel that he was about to take action specifically directed against them. “You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.”—Amos 3:2

NATURAL ISRAEL TYPICAL

Although the Israelites were God’s chosen people and were given many promises from him, they were not willing to reform their hearts. Consequently, they were taken captive by Babylon. In the New Testament, we are warned that the experiences of Israel are an example to us. The Apostle Paul wrote: “These things occurred to them typically, and were written for our admonition, on whom the ends of the ages have come. Wherefore, let him who is thinking that he has stood, take care

lest he fall.”—I Cor. 10:11,12, *Wilson’s Emphatic Diaglott*

In the Bible it is stated that “Zion” is the “city of David.” (II Sam. 5:7; I Kings 8:1) Literal Zion was a high plateau, referred to as a mountain, located in the city of Jerusalem. In the Scriptures, mountains are frequently referred to symbolically as representing kingdoms. In the book of Amos God said, “Woe to them that are at ease in Zion.” (Amos 6:1) In other words, woe to those in Israel at that time who felt at ease with God’s blessings, as embodied in the beautiful temple at Jerusalem which they so revered. Woe also to us, spiritual Israelites, if ease turns us away from God.

Moreover, in the New Testament “mount Sion” is used with reference to the spiritual or heavenly phase of the kingdom of God. (Heb. 12:22; I Pet. 2:6; Rev. 14:1) Can it be said that spiritual Zion, those now running for the mark of the prize of the heavenly call, are “at ease?” Could we be guilty of the same sins as was natural Israel, earthly Zion, in Amos’ day?

Towards the end of his sermon on the mount, Jesus said, “Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them. Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.” (Matt. 7:20,21) The “fruits” which God desires in his people are termed by the Apostle Paul as the “fruit of the Spirit.” This fruitage consists of “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance,” and is to be exercised toward others as a reflection of God’s character in us.—Gal. 5:22-25

THE TRIAL OF PROSPERITY

The Apostle Peter wrote: "The trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ." (I Pet. 1:7) In this verse the word "trial" means "test." In the early years of the Gospel Age, a difficult trial or test for the followers of Christ was frequently that of physical persecution. However, at the present time, this is rare for most of the Lord's people.

In a significant portion of the world today, prosperity is more or less abundant, compared to living standards of the 19th century and earlier. Prosperity, though, can be a hindrance to pleasing the Lord, as we are told in the book of Job: "So, full of ease, their life passes and they go down at last without a struggle to the grave. And these are the men who bade God keep his distance from them, refused to learn his will; what right had he, the Omnipotent, to their obedience, what advantage would they gain by offering prayer to him?"—Job 21:13-15, *The Knox Bible*

Prosperity was a severe trial for the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Materially, things had probably never been better for them. They worshipped when and where they pleased, and many believed what they wished. This tainted sense of "rightness" they perceived as warranted, and the prosperity they enjoyed was, in their eyes, evidence of God's approval.

However, there might be no greater trial than in the moment of exceeding great fortune. When reading about the summer and winter "houses" and

the “houses of ivory” in Israel at the time of Amos, the arrogance of Uzziah, and the failure of Solomon once he was rich, it is evident that prosperity can indeed be a trial for the Lord’s followers.—Amos 3:15; II Chron. 26:16-21; I Kings 11:4-10

Another kind of prosperity could be that of having abundantly available to us at the present time the message of truth. We may claim to have been “in the truth” for many years, reading and studying the Word of God and the additional Bible helps available. However, we must inquire: Is “the truth” genuinely in us? Is it continuing to have a sanctifying effect on us, and helping us in the work of transforming our heart and mind?—John 17:17; Rom. 12:2; I Thess. 4:1-4

In the book of Revelation there is a description of some among the professed Gospel Age followers of Christ who, in their own eyes, feel they are rich and prosperous, but whom God judges to be something else. “Unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; ... thou art lukewarm, ... Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.” (Rev. 3:14-17) The message to the church of Laodicea is the seventh and final one noted in John the Revelator’s vision, and which we believe refers to the present Harvest period at the end of the Gospel Age.—Matt. 13:39, *Diaglott*

IDOLATRY AND IMMORALITY TODAY

At the present time there are probably not as many literal idols, made of wood or stone, which

are bowed down to and worshipped, as in the days of Amos. Modern day idols are generally much more subtle and might include such things as: popularity, wealth, fame, prestige, and self. In today's society, to be proud of our own accomplishments and success, and to tell others what we have done or achieved, and the recognition we have received from others, is well regarded. This could lead us to start spending more and more time informing others of the interesting things happening in our personal life, as well as reading about what everyone else has been doing. All of this, however, is at the expense of using our time to meditate and study upon the Word of God, and to reflect on how we can apply the lessons contained therein. If we are not careful, these general attitudes, so prevalent in today's society, could gradually lead us astray and take us away from the paths of the Lord.

Likewise, as in Amos' time, immorality is rampant today. In the media, many immoral and ungodly practices are repeatedly shown as acceptable conduct. In addition, governments throughout the world have passed laws in recent years legalizing certain of these kinds of behavior. We are sorry to witness these things, realizing that they are additional results of man's fall, and which many will need to overcome and rid themselves of during Christ's earthly kingdom. (Isa. 35:8; Rev. 21:27) For the followers of Christ at the present time, proper and improper moral behaviors are clearly laid out for us in the Scriptures.—Rom. 1:21-28; I Cor. 6:9,10,19,20; Eph. 5:1-9, *New International Version*

THE ANTIDOTE: SEEKING THE LORD

God said to the house of Israel, “Seek ye me, and ye shall live.” (Amos 5:4) Through the prophet, the Lord further explained that seeking him was not a question of journeying to Bethel, or even to Jerusalem. Rather, it was to “seek good, and not evil,” and to “hate the evil, and love the good.”—vss. 14,15

The Prophet Micah wondered how he should approach unto the Lord. He asked, “Shall I come before him with burnt offerings? ... Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil?” Micah then records the answer God gave to him: “What doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.” (Mic. 6:6-8) Similarly, Moses wrote: “What doth the LORD thy God require of thee, but to fear [reverence] the LORD thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the LORD thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul.”—Deut. 10:12

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Amos saw through the pomp and prosperity present in his day. Let us also be aware of the spectacle, idol worship, and immorality present today. We realize that the iniquity in this present evil world is reaching its fullness and is ripe for God’s judgment. (Rev. 14:14-19) However, let us also recognize our own personal responsibility with regard to God’s requirements for spiritual Israel.

Jesus warned that during the harvest of the Gospel Age, “because iniquity shall be multiplied, the love of the many shall wax cold.” (Matt. 24:12,

Revised Version) Let us not allow the iniquity around us in the world to cause our hearts to grow cold or lukewarm. Let us likewise not be led away from God by seeking after prosperity, love of ease, or popularity among others. We cannot claim the promises related to the high calling which are set before us, while at the same time doing as the world does. Rather, our desire should be to seek God, striving more and more to “do justly,” to “love mercy,” and to “walk humbly.”

The principles of God do not change. In Amos’ day, God judged the nation of Israel as unworthy of his continued favor at that time. We believe these prophecies also have an application to the present Gospel Age. The Apostle Peter wrote, “The time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God.” (I Pet. 4:17) Let us give close attention to God’s Word, that we may become more and more like our Father in Heaven, the one whom we are to please. Let us love the things which are true, right, noble and godly, regardless of what others around us may say or do. Thus, soon we shall hear his sweet, “Well done, good and faithful servant; ... enter thou into the joy of thy lord.”—Matt. 25:23 ■