

## ***VIII. Prepare to Meet Your God!***

23-Jan-05            Amos 4:1-13            Keddie Chapters 5-6

*Theme:* Self-centered living, empty religious formalism, and ignoring God's calls to return to Him will not prepare you to meet your God.

*Key Verses:* Amos 4:12-13 <sup>12</sup>“Therefore thus will I do to you, O Israel; Because I will do this to you, Prepare to meet your God, O Israel!” <sup>13</sup>For behold, He who forms mountains, And creates the wind, Who declares to man what his thought is, And makes the morning darkness, Who treads the high places of the earth—The LORD God of hosts is His name.

### Review

Last week we looked at Amos chapter 3. **Amos starts out by reminding us of all of Israel's privileges: they were chosen, redeemed, and unique. As such, they were about to feel the chastisement of God's love.** God the Lion is roaring in judgment of His people. However, a series of rhetorical questions show us that God has momentarily paused before judgment is to fall. Perhaps this is an opportunity for the people of God to repent and be restored to fellowship. Unfortunately, Israel pays no attention to this opportunity, and so the Lord has no choice but to devour His wayward people in judgment.

**The nations are called in to witness the guilt and sin of Israel. To her shame, she is seen as even worse than the pagan nations around her. “For they do not know how to do right.” They have lost the light of the Scriptures and are now no better off than a heathen nation. Their unconverted stated is made evident by their works of robbery, violence, and oppression.** A once great Church has been rendered powerless because they have abandoned the Word of God. “They do not know how to do right.”

**The rest of the chapter describes the way in which the Lion of Zion will devour His people. Their false altars will be destroyed and their pleasure palaces will be consumed. Like the remains of a sheep eaten by a lion, so shall Samaria and the rest of Israel be. The house of Jacob, the false house of God at Bethel, the pleasure houses and palaces of Samaria, all of these are houses for destruction.**

How do we avoid the charge of not knowing how to do right? “We must work out our salvation with fear and trembling.” The pagans around you are watching. What do they see?

### Introduction

We come today to **Amos chapter 4, the third main section in Amos' prophecy.** Amos will continue his relentless examination and exposure of the sins of 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC Israel. Today he will do that by **focusing in on the women and their sin.** But ladies, don't fret too much and think that your husbands are getting off the hook this morning. The parallel passage to this, our fifth section of Amos, will hammer the sins of Israelite men. Amos is an equal opportunity prophet!

### Exposition

#### **A. Holy Cows and Holy Shrines – Not! (4:1-5)**

Amos continues to expose both the corrupt society and the corrupt worship of Israel. In this first part of chapter 4, Amos focuses on society wives and society religion. While both of them may

look pretty on the outside, all gilded up with makeup and fine living, inside they are dead and decaying.

1. *The Cows of Bashan (4:1-3)*

**The cows of Bashan. That is what Amos calls the society wives of Samaria.** Now, I am sure that today if a lady were called a “fat cow” she would not take that as a compliment! Au contraire! Even in Amos’ day, this epithet would surely be ironic and insulting, although not perhaps as much as it would today.

Bashan was located across the Jordan River in the most fertile part of Gilead. It was a rich and prosperous farmland area. **The pastureland supported rich herds of well-fed, well-kept cattle. A cow of Bashan was a pretty good thing.**

Today in India, cows are considered “sacred.” They wander around aimlessly. Although they are sacred, they are not cared for. When I was in India, I saw lots of scrawny cows (like the thin cows in Pharaoh’s dream), eating garbage and scavenging for a morsel of green grass. One look at the cows of India is enough to convince you not to eat beef there! On the other hand, in Japan, Kobe beef is prized for its taste and texture, because the Kobe cows live in the lap of luxury. They are among the most pampered farm animals on the planet. In modern parlance, those ancient Samaritan socialites might have been considered as Kobe beef.

So why does Amos call these wealthy women “cows of Bashan”? **Amos outlines three sins of these women.** They are women “who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, ‘Bring wine, let us drink!’” (4:1). **They are portrayed as callous, self-absorbed, idle, rich socialites who are more interested in manipulating their husbands for their own pleasure than in the impact their lifestyle has on those around them.** Keddie describes them this way: “The ladies are sleek and well-fed! They are utterly materialistic! They never stop ‘chewing the cud’ of luxury! They must have more and more ... and more ... and they are quite prepared to oppress the poor and crush the needy to satisfy their desires. They share the goals of their husbands, namely, to have a life of ease and financial security. Like them, they are morally and spiritually bankrupt; they will trample on the ‘little man’ to gain their ends. They love luxury, hence the appellation ‘cows of Bashan’.”

**How did these society wives oppress the poor and crush the needy?** It seems unlikely that in their culture they did so directly. **Most likely, they did so through the manipulation of their husbands.** We see that in the third line – “who say to their husbands, ‘Bring wine, let us drink!’.” **Their desire for a luxurious lifestyle was the fuel that drove the engine of their husbands’ crimes against society.** We’ve already seen Amos condemn Samaritan society for oppression of the poor (2:6, 3:9), for robbery and violence (3:10), and for their opulent living (3:15). Now **Amos is exposing that these crimes against their neighbor are being done to support the luxurious lifestyles of the cows of Bashan.** Plastic surgery, botox, personal trainers, designer clothes, society parties – these things are expensive. Maintaining this standard of living calls for drastic measures – and who cares if the little people get trampled in the process? **The cows of Bashan were all about status, comfort, and security.** They were definitely not “holy cows.” Welcome to *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* – Samaria style!

Amos is telling us that **the cows of Bashan are held as responsible for the injustices done to support their lifestyle as if they had done the deeds themselves. And since they are responsible, they will suffer the consequences.** God tells us that He is about to reverse the

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lives of the cows of Bashan. And He does so by swearing an oath by His own holiness. Motyer points out: “The point, of course, of swearing ‘by’ something is to add the note of assurance to the oath. It must be something of great intrinsic weight and urgency to suggest that the very nature of God Himself must be invoked to support it.” This oath of God, therefore, lets us know that the behavior of the cows of Bashan was abhorrent to Him.

“Behold, the days shall come upon you...” God promises to intervene to set accounts straight. Within the lifetime of some of his hearers, Amos’ words would come to pass. The destruction of Samaria and the Assyrian captivity was only 50 years or so away. **The metaphor changes here – the cows of Bashan are morphed into fish, being led away captive on fishhooks. The status, comfort, and security of the cows of Bashan are reversed – their status as the socialites of Samaria has been replaced by slavery; their luxury and comfort has been replaced by chains and fishhooks; and their security has been destroyed like the broken city walls they are led away through.** Although the reference to *Harmon* is unclear, the intent of the passage is obvious – the fattened cows of Bashan would be led away to the slaughter for their sin.

### 2. *The Shrines of Bethel and Gilgal (4:4-5)*

Having just disposed of the cows of Bashan, let us return to their culture to see another aspect of their society that is missing the mark. Amos now turns his attention to the shrines of Bethel and Gilgal. **Just as the cows of Bashan were not “holy cows,” Bethel and Gilgal are not “holy shrines.”**

**Bethel, of course, is one of the two locations that the first king of Israel, Jeroboam I, established as an alternate worship site to Jerusalem, complete with golden calf. Bethel is the main worship center in Israel.** In fact, we’ve already met Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, from Amos chapter 7.

**Gilgal is the place where Israel first crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land under Joshua (Jos. 5:1-12). As such, it symbolized possession of the land. However, Amos goes on to say in chapter 5 that “Gilgal shall surely go into captivity.”** In other words, trusting in the shrine of Gilgal will not guarantee anything. Boice comments: “The God of Gilgal was the guarantee of the promises. But Gilgal without God, religion without the reality, meant nothing.”

We mustn’t think that the **cows of Bashan** were not religious. They **were religious**. They went to church every Sunday. They tithed. **They observed all the outward forms of their religion. And yet God says their worship was empty and vain, just like their lives.** Keddie comments: “We must not think of the ‘cows of Bashan’ as out-and-out, openly, grossly wicked people. They were normal people, albeit people with wealth and position in society. They were the kind of people that most people want to be, if only they could have the opportunity! And they go to church! They were pillars of the church. They were quite keen on the observance of the regular forms of religious worship. They brought sacrifices and gave free-will offerings. And like so many of us, their religion had very little to do with their daily lives. Let us notice how they behaved and apply the lessons to ourselves and to our churches. **Israel’s religious problems included church attendance, ritualism, and showy do-goodism.**”

Let’s take a look at these three problems. **First there is church attendance:** “Come to Bethel and transgress, at Gilgal multiply transgressions” (4:4a). **The problem is not necessarily their attendance. It’s just where they attend! Going to Bethel and Gilgal does not alleviate the**

**problem of sin – in fact it is the exact opposite. Sin is not forgiven at Bethel and Gilgal; sin is committed there.** Keddie comments: “They worshipped God in their terms, rather than in His. The Bethels and Gilgals of our time abound in the shells of Christian churches gone to seed in the Bible-unbelieving, doctrineless and Christless theologies of the twentieth century. ‘Go to Bethel and sin!’ stands as the Lord’s rebuke to the empty religion of our day!”

**Next we have the problem of ritualism (4:4b-5a). This is worship for worship’s sake, rather than for God’s sake.** “Bring your sacrifices every morning.” That sounds good, doesn’t it? But Keddie points out that the sacrifices were required only yearly, citing the family of Samuel as an example (1 Sam. 1:3, 7. 21). Doing extra religious acts does not make up for the sinful attitude in which they are done. Likewise for their giving: “Bring ... your tithes every three days.” Keddie suggests that tithing in ancient Israel was done yearly, not every three days (cp. Lev. 27:30). In any event, tithing every three days may sound very religious, but they are doing it for the wrong reasons as we will see shortly. The last example of ritualism is this: “offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving with leaven.” Again, it sounds good until you realize that it was breaking God’s law that required only unleavened bread to be offered with the burnt offering of thanksgiving:

Leviticus 2:11 <sup>11</sup>No grain offering which you bring to the LORD shall be made with leaven, for you shall burn no leaven nor any honey in any offering to the LORD made by fire.

Leviticus 7:12 <sup>12</sup>If he offers it for a thanksgiving, then he shall offer, with the sacrifice of thanksgiving, unleavened cakes mixed with oil, unleavened wafers anointed with oil, or cakes of blended flour mixed with oil.

Keddie asks: “But what would they care about what God’s Word says? They would point out that they were doing *more* than even God had asked, would they not? So why should God complain? And **the prophet’s point is that though they were to follow such a rigorous course of ritual observances, it would avail them nothing. If they thought the frequency of their worship, or the value of their tithes, was impressive to God, then let them reflect on what God actually required of them.**”

**Finally, consider the root cause of the problem, their *showy do-goodism*.** “Proclaim and announce the freewill offering, for this you love, you children of Israel!” **The whole point of the exercise was for other people to notice how religious they were. The cows of Bashan desired the praise of men more than the approval of God.** Keddie concludes: “Grace in the heart is what was missing in the ladies of Samaria. All that they did that was outwardly good was to serve the spirit of self-righteousness.”

Perhaps we should take a minute to reflect on our own religiosity. Why are we here? What do we seek to accomplish? **Is our church attendance and participation in the “rituals” of worship – Sunday school, prayer, singing, listening, even tithing – is it for the glory of God, or is for the glory of self?**

#### **B. Missed Opportunities (4:6-13)**

The cows of Bashan were religious, but they went to church for all the wrong reasons. God now gives them a series of five reasons why they should turn to Him. Unfortunately, these were a series of five missed opportunities.

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### 1. Five Calamities (4:6-11)

Back in Amos 3:6, God taught Israel that all calamity comes from him: “If a trumpet is blown in a city, will not the people be afraid? If there is calamity in a city, will not the LORD have done it?” **God now describes to Israel a series of five increasingly serious calamities that He has brought upon them.** However, they haven’t learned the lesson of Amos 3:6. They were unaware that God was trying to wake them up from their empty religion and vain lifestyle in order to return to Him.

The five calamities in order are famine (4:6), drought (4:7-8), crop disease and locusts (4:9), disease and war (4:10), and earthquake (4:11). All five calamities end with the same refrain, “‘Yet you have not returned to Me’, says the LORD” (4:6, 8, 9, 10, 11). All five of these calamities were opportunities for the people of God to repent of their sin and return to God. That is always the great call of the prophets of God – to repent of sin and return to God. Here we see God sending more and more serious wake-up calls to Israel. Finally He will have no choice but to wipe them out, because they are simply not paying attention.

**First, there is famine:** “Also I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities. And lack of bread in all your places” (4:6a). Isn’t that an interesting phrase – “cleanness of teeth.” I guess that’s the upside for not having enough food – no need to brush your teeth! **In times of famine, the people would have been tempted to worship the fertility gods of the land such as Baal, who were thought to control the harvest. And yet the futility of that vain religion is exposed here.** God is the one who is the Lord of the harvest, not Baal. While the Israelites were busy trying to convince Baal to bring the harvest back, God is standing there waiting – “‘Yet you have not returned to Me,’ says the LORD” (4:6b).

**Next, there is drought:** “I also withheld rain from you, when there were still three months to the harvest, I made it rain on one city, I withheld rain from another city. One part was rained upon, and where it did not rain the part withered. So two or three cities wandered to another city to drink water, but they were not satisfied” (4:7-8a). Same song, second verse. **God is the one response for the rain which brings in the harvest. Notice again the Lord’s sovereignty here.** He causes it to rain here and not there. Then he causes it the rain there and not here. **Every rain drop in every location is subject to the will of God.** And He withheld the rain for His people’s good, so that they might return to Him. What do they do instead? They turn to neighboring cities for help. Good as far as it goes, but it doesn’t go far enough. **Mere physical water can never satisfy the thirsty souls of men – they need to turn to the living water of Jesus Christ:**

**John 4:13-14** <sup>13</sup>Jesus answered and said to her, “Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, <sup>14</sup>but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.”

They turned to their fellow man, instead of turning back to God. “‘Yet you have not returned to Me,’ says the LORD” (4:8b).

**Third, there is crop disease and locusts:** “I blasted you with blight and mildew. When your gardens increased, your vineyards, your fig trees, and your olive trees, the locust devoured them” (4:9a). Hubbard explains: “*Blight* is the work of the east wind that dries and scorches the grain prematurely so that it turns brown. *Mildew* is the product of parasitic worms which turn pale the

tips of green grain. The emphasis in this verse is again on the thoroughness of the destruction.” **What the blight didn’t destroy, the mildew got. What the mildew missed, the locusts ate.**

Israel was an agrarian society. **These first three calamities all are focused on the same area – their economic livelihood.** Famine, drought, and crop failure all attack their economic base and their lifestyle. **You would think that these three disasters would be enough to get the attention of the Israelites. But it didn’t.** God repeats the refrain again: “‘Yet you have not returned to Me,’ says the LORD” (4:9b).

**So, God ups the ante in the fourth calamity – disease and war:** “I sent among you a plague after the manner of Egypt; your young men I killed with a sword, along with your captive horses; I made the stench of your camps come up into your nostrils” (4:10a). Amos deliberately brings up the memory of Egypt to make a contrast: **the Exodus is reversed – the plagues and disasters God once had brought upon Egypt He is now bringing upon Israel.** Hadn’t the Israelites learned anything? **Pharaoh had hardened his heart against God; were the Israelites any different? No, not really:** “‘Yet you have not returned to Me,’ says the LORD” (4:10b).

**Finally, the fifth calamity is destruction through earthquake:** “I overthrew some of you, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and you were like a firebrand plucked from the burning” (4:11a). The picture here is likely that of an earthquake which destroyed some of the Israelite towns and villages, in much the same way that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. The mere mention of **Sodom and Gomorrah** raises up a most unflattering comparison. Those two cities were the most wicked and vile cities in the land of Canaan. **For God to destroy Israelite towns in a similar fashion does not speak well of their society.**

And yet, there is a significant difference between Sodom and Gomorrah and the Israel of Amos’ day: “you were like a firebrand plucked from the burning.” Only Lot and his family escaped that earlier destruction. The rest were buried under the fire and brimstone of God’s wrath. **God’s grace was manifest to Lot, and it was apparently manifest to the Israelites as well.** The language of Amos 4:11 is reminiscent of a later verse in the book of Zechariah, where the high priest Joshua is on trial and the Lord saves him as well:

**Zechariah 3:1-2** <sup>1</sup> Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to oppose him. <sup>2</sup> And the LORD said to Satan, “The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! *Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?*”

**The Israelites of Amos’ day were saved from this most severe of judgments. What were they saved for? To return to the Lord, of course! But did they?** Hear again the refrain: “‘Yet you have not returned to Me,’ says the LORD” (4:11b).

Motyer draws an excellent comparison between the Lord and His people. **“To be sure the people had been busy, busy making money, putting by in store for the future, being exceedingly religious. God, on His side, had been busy too,** with the odd busy-ness of sending famine (6) and drought (7), blight and locust plague (9), epidemic (10a), war (10b) and earthquake (11). The troubles of life are spread before us here by Amos, falling into one category or the other. But over them all is the first person singular of divine decision and action. Everything on earth comes from a God who rules and reigns in heaven (cp. Is. 45:7; Mt. 10:20; Rom. 11:36). This is the biblical view of the sovereignty of God over the history and

experiences of man. **‘I have been busy too’: that is the divine word of verse 6. You have been busy being religious (4-5); I have been busy seeking to bring you to repentance (6, 8, 9, 10, 11).’**

2. Prepare to Meet Your God! (4:12)

“Therefore.” Whenever you see a *therefore*, you need to see what it is there for. What comes after the *therefore* is in response to what comes before it. What has come before it? The five-fold refrain of missed opportunities – five chances for the people of God to repent and return to their God.

“Therefore thus will I do to you, O Israel: because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel!” ***Prepare to meet your God.*** That’s the line used in the old western movies just before the final shootout. In the movies, it means it is time to die. But what exactly does it mean here? **The only other place in the Scripture where it talks about meeting God is in Exodus 19 at Mt. Sinai:**

**Exodus 19:10-20** <sup>10</sup>Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their clothes. <sup>11</sup>And let them be ready for the third day. For on the third day the LORD will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. <sup>12</sup>You shall set bounds for the people all around, saying, ‘Take heed to yourselves that you do not go up to the mountain or touch its base. Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. <sup>13</sup>Not a hand shall touch him, but he shall surely be stoned or shot with an arrow; whether man or beast, he shall not live.’ When the trumpet sounds long, they shall come near the mountain.” <sup>14</sup>So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and sanctified the people, and they washed their clothes. <sup>15</sup>And he said to the people, “Be ready for the third day; do not come near your wives.”

<sup>16</sup>Then it came to pass on the third day, in the morning, that there were thunderings and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain; and the sound of the trumpet was very loud, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. <sup>17</sup>And *Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with God*, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. <sup>18</sup>Now Mount Sinai was completely in smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire. Its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly. <sup>19</sup>And when the blast of the trumpet sounded long and became louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him by voice. <sup>20</sup>Then the LORD came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain. And the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

**Meeting God was a terrifying thing.** “All the people who were in the camp trembled.” Do you think they wanted to go out there? Fortunately for them, they couldn’t go very far. God had set boundaries around the mountain. If they crossed the boundaries, they would be killed. Only Moses was allowed to cross the boundaries and come up on top of the mountain to speak with God. In this case, God was relatively pleased with His people – they hadn’t really rebelled too much yet! **If meeting God was so terrifying for the Exodus generation, consider what it would be like for the rebellious and sinful generation of Amos’ day.**

Motyer believes that there is an element of grace in this command: “Prepare to meet your God!” At least, he points out, God is still “your God.” The only other time Amos use the expression

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*your God* (9:15), it is a word of comfort and assurance. So maybe there is some comfort in this command. Keddie notes that the “this” of “I will do *this* to you” is unspecified. There might be some judgment implied in “this,” but it is open-ended. **Perhaps there is room for grace in the “this.”** But **what is certain, is that Israel must meet God, just as all men must meet God and make an account before Him.**

**2 Corinthians 5:10** <sup>10</sup>For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

**Romans 14:10-11** <sup>10</sup>But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. <sup>11</sup>For it is written: “As I live, says the LORD, Every knee shall bow to Me, And every tongue shall confess to God.”

Keddie writes: “There are few more solemn words than ‘Prepare to meet your God.’ Israel must meet him. All men must meet him. Israel had time to prepare and we know how well that time was used. You have time to prepare, but how will it be with you?”

### 3. Sovereignty Hymn – First Stanza (4:13)

**Amos ends his latest sermon with a fragment of an old Israelite hymn describing the sovereignty of God in 4:13. This is the first of three such hymn-like stanzas in the book of Amos. The other two are in Amos 5:8-9 and Amos 9:5-6. All three of the hymn stanzas describe the sovereignty of God and His name – “the LORD God of hosts is His name.” This hymn describes the God that Israel is to meet – He is the creator and sovereign Lord of the world!**

Hubbard points out the irony in Amos quoting this hymn: “**Amos takes Israel’s familiar hymnody in which the people would have found great joy and comfort (5:23) and turns it back on them as evidence of God’s right and power to judge them.** In 4:1 the women are indicted as oppressing, crushing and begging; in 4:13 God is lauded as creating, declaring, making and treading. Amos has emphasized the ultimate and tragic difference between God’s ways and those of His people.”

### Conclusion

I’ve looked at the three sections of the hymn in Amos, and have pulled them together into one place [Pass out handout]. As you look at the verses from Amos, you can see that the theme of God’s sovereignty and His name are contained in each section.

Furthermore, I’ve attempted to adapt this ancient Israelite hymn of God’s sovereignty into a metrical hymn that we all can sing together. I now have a greater appreciation for all of the hard work done to make metrical versions of the 150 Psalms – this is not easy work!

I would like to close today by singing Amos’ hymn *The LORD God Is His Name*. It is arranged to the tune of “Behold a Branch is Growing” (#153 in the Trinity Psalter).

Behold who forms the mountains,  
Who makes the wind to blow;  
Declares His thoughts to mankind,  
And darkens morning’s glow;  
Who treads upon the land,

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High places He commands—  
The LORD God is His name.

He made the constellations –  
Pleiades, Orion.

He brightens death's dark shadow,  
And blackens morn's clear sun,  
Seawater He calls forth,  
And pours o'er all the earth—  
The LORD God is His name.

Rains ruin on the mighty,  
And fury on their fort.  
He is the LORD Almighty,  
The God who does this work.  
Who touches, melt the earth,  
And all who dwell there mourn—  
The LORD God is His name.

Who floods the River's bound'ries,  
Subsides the Nile's flow.  
Who builds stairs in the heavens,  
And founds them here below.  
Seawater He calls forth,  
And pours o'er all the earth—  
The LORD God is His name.

Next week: Lesson 9 – Seek the LORD and Live – Amos 5:1-17 – Keddie Chapter 7

Close in Prayer.