

Yet You Did Not Return

- Amos 4:1-13
- One of my memories from back in the Damascus Road days of my ministry was the five of us, Cindy and I, Joel and Sonia Leath, and Paul Smith, at a maximum security prison somewhere. And these men were all in lockdown and we couldn't go into the cellblock where they were. We stood in a room that separated one cellblock from another, and sang to them. And the song I remember singing, among others, was adapted from a hit by Pacific Gas and Electric in 1970. The song had this chorus: "Are you ready to sit by His throne, are you ready, not to be alone? Someone's coming to take you home, and if you're ready then He'll carry you home."
- As we have seen in our four previous Sundays in the book of Amos, God is asking Israel the same question: "Are you ready to sit by the throne? Because this is your final notice." God was bringing judgment to a wayward nation. And as we have said all along in this study, God still brings judgment to wayward nations. And wayward people. As we continue our study of God's judgment against the northern kingdom, the nation of Israel, let's look at today's text under these three headings: Women, Worshipers, and the Works of God.
- **Women (vs. 1-3)**
- There is no dancing around this passage. God uses sarcasm, or irony, to call the wealthy women of Samaria to account. He first compares them to cows, and later to dead fish who are dragged from their place by a hook. This is not recommended, guys. It's not the way we should go men, ever, in describing women, and especially those whom we love. So why does God do it? Well the cows of Bashan were well known for their size, and for the richness of their pastures; they were fattened because they were pampered and fed as much as they wanted. They looked down their plump noses at all the other cows in the region. The wealthy women of Samaria pampered and exalted themselves, so God judges them for three sins.
- **First, they oppress the poor.** They despise all whom they consider to be 'beneath them,' and take advantage of those who cannot fight back. As we have already seen in this book, God hates that arrogance, especially in His own people.
- **Second, they crush the needy.** Not only do they exalt themselves in their hearts against the poor, they do what they can to grind the needy under their heel. They treat people as things, and use others for their own personal gain. God is angry at that sin every day.
- **Third, they command their husbands.** "Bring, that we may drink!" This is not, "Honey, can you grab the pitcher of tea and bring it out to the deck?" God is judging the women of Samaria because they are usurping the authority of their husbands. These are women who are out of order, because of the way they are misusing the position and the power God gave to them. God created women to have tremendous influence in every sphere of life. The first place and most important, is in the home. A woman submitted to her husband and rejoicing in the role she has to play as his helpmate has almost unlimited influence in that marriage for good. She will be a godly encourager and supporter of her husband, delighting in seeing him succeed with her prayers and help. When she is out of order, commanding her husband, trying to lead him, that will always bring consequences that neither of them want. The flip side is true, brothers, because God has created us to lead at home and to initiate. The man who is joyfully leading his wife and children, working hard to provide, and teaching and encouraging his family, has almost unlimited influence in the home for God's glory. But when he chooses to abdicate, there will always be consequences neither he nor his wife would want. When either spouse is out of order, pride and a "me first" attitude is at the root, and heartache and strife are the result. God takes this very seriously, to the point where he swears: "The Lord God has sworn by His holiness..." (verse 2)

- The judgment on the women of Samaria is severe. Their bodies will be taken away with hooks, even dragged through the streets with fishhooks. Then they will be thrown out through the breaches, verse 3.
- **Worshippers (vs. 4-5)**
- Not only does God bring judgment for disorderly women, He brings judgment for wayward worship. Where the worship could better be characterized as hypocrisy, where the people might as well be wearing costumes and makeup and acting out their parts on a stage. What if you got an email from me on Saturday evening inviting you to church the next morning that said, “Come to Antioch and SIN in the morning. Come to the sanctuary and SIN BIG, at 10:00!!” God, again with sarcasm or irony, whichever description you are comfortable with, calls out the hypocrites in Israel for their fake worship. What are they doing that tells us it was fake worship?
- **First, they were worshipping in the wrong place.** Though Bethel and Gilgal both played important parts in worship for the nation of Israel, Jerusalem was the center of worship for the Jews. Moses told the people that in so many words in Deuteronomy 12, that God would tell them where that place would be and they were to tear down the other places where the ‘nations’ served their gods.
- **Second, they increased their rebellion by worshipping in the wrong way.** They increased their rituals and decreased their love for God and each other. They ignored the laws of sacrifices. For example, leavened bread was to be offered as a peace offering, not a thanksgiving offering, and was not to be burned. The freewill offerings were just that: freewill. They were not required, and they were NOT to be trumpeted! “Hey, check this out. I am putting a BEN FRANKLIN in the freewill offering plate. That’s right. THIS guy. Making a mockery of worship has never been a laughing matter to God. Now, He reminds them of what He has been doing to call them to repentance, and what He will do next to bring judgment.
- **Works of God (vs. 6-11)**
- Abraham Kuyper said, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!” Here we see that sovereignty at work in Israel, as God tells them five things He has already done to bring them back to Him, and then what He will do next. You will notice that God has literally everything at His disposal in dealing with His wayward child. I didn’t. I could just spank, use timeout, take away the car keys or some other privilege when one of my kids were disobedient. I couldn’t bring famine. Worst I could do was make them eat for breakfast that broccoli they refused for supper the night before. I couldn’t use drought. It never occurred to me to use blight or mildew. That’s what was growing in their showers. I never considered sending pestilence. That’s what was running around under their beds. But here’s the point. God is not limited in using whatever measure he chooses to discipline His people and to bring judgment on the disobedient. And He does that purposefully, not to bring them to shame but to bring them to repentance. Not to push them away but that His people might return to Him. But they did not. Five times He says, “Yet you did not return to me.”
- **I gave you cleanness of teeth.** I saw that verse on the wall of a dentist’s office one time. Not Mark. But that’s clever. However, God is not reminding them of dental hygiene here. He was reminding them of famine. If we show a disdain for the Word of God, which we should want more than our necessary food, God has shown that He will take away our necessary food. “Yet they did not return to Him.”
- **I withheld the rain.** The drought got so bad in some places that one city depended on another for water to drink. But it never satisfied. Jesus cried out on the last day of the feast, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” (John 7:37-38) God reminded them with thirst how much they needed the water that only a relationship with Him can give. “Yet they did not return to Him.”

- **I struck you with blight and mildew.** God brought disease and decay to the crops, again, to remind the people of God that their sustenance could only come from Him. He can bless the work of our hands, and He can make it all fall apart. Remember the promises He made to Moses in Deuteronomy 28, that those who obey the Lord will receive His blessing, and those who disobey the Lord will receive His punishment. “Yet they did not return to Him.”
- **I sent pestilence among you. I killed your young men with the sword.** God uses irony again, as He visited upon His own people the plagues He brought to Egypt. He reminds Israel that they have become a pagan nation because they have rejected the Word of the Lord and have gone their own way. It was true then. It is true today. “Yet they did not return to Him.”
- **I overthrew some of you.** God had overthrown Sodom and Gomorrah because of their wickedness. This was the most extreme destruction known to ancient Israelites, where two whole cities were reduced to smoldering ruins. Do you see how the punishments have increased in severity? So much so that at this point, Israel should see themselves as “a brand, or burning stick, plucked out of the burning.” How many of us can look back at our days of rebellion against God, maybe even after we had become a Christian, and say, “I am a brand plucked out of the burning?” I know I can! Oh, saints, no matter what life you lived before you met Christ, you were a rebel. Your heart was wicked and deceitful. You were living life on your own terms, with no regard for wanting to please a holy God. But He plucked you out of the fire. But here, God says to Israel, “Yet they did not return to Him.” What is God going to do at this point? If a person or a nation continues in its rebellion, despite warning after warning, after being punished over and over, and refusing to humble themselves before their Creator, what does God do? He tells us plainly in verse 12.
- **You haven’t seen anything yet.** God says that all the punishments He has given them before, he will give them again. But there will be no limits. And there is now only one thing they can do: “prepare to meet your God.” This is a line we can use at the bedside of someone who is about to die. It is a word of great comfort if that person knows God. But it is also a word that should strike terror into the heart of the one who does not know God. One who has willfully continued to disobey God and live life as if he were god, living as though he is the master of his fate and the captain of his soul. But for the Lord to say, “prepare to meet your God” could also mean this: you have refused to return to Me, despite my repeated calls for you to do. Well, now I am coming to you. It would have been much better if you had listened to Me and repented. But now it is too late. I am coming, and let me remind you who I am (verse 13). I am the one who formed the mountains (can you hear God saying that to Job?). I am the One who creates the wind. I am the one who can tell every person what he or she is thinking. I am the one who makes the morning darkness. Which could be a reference to the sun hiding for three hours when Jesus was on the cross. Or a reference to creation, as Amos 5:8 seems to be. I am the one who walks across the mountains. In other words, this is not one of your little man-made gods talking to you, some shadowy myth made up by weak minds and rebellious hearts to avoid having to live by truth. No, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no other. I am the Lord, the God of hosts! God loves His people and brings to bear on their lives whatever it takes for them to return to Him and find the blessings untold that will follow those who love the Lord and walk with Him. That’s the grace of God that we have access to because of the cross! God will always be faithful to His covenant.