

# God and Coronavirus

Amos 4:1 – 5:15

*Halifax: 15 March 2020*

## **Introduction**

Today, I am breaking from our regular sermon series in Mark to address the subject of Coronavirus.

- The whole world is full of discussion and advice about what to do to protect ourselves.
- There are many predictions about how widespread and how fatal it will be.
  - There is frankly much that is unknown.

While I am thankful for a lot of good work that is being done by our leaders, there is one grand omission in this whole matter that stands out.

- Although there are some leaders (though not very many) who have mentioned God and who have called for prayer,
  - there are very few who have called for repentance before God.
- The typical way of looking at these things is that they just happen at random.
  - The religious look at God as one we can turn to for comfort and help, but they almost never look at Him as a God who has sent this virus to punish our society for our sins. Such a view is seen as backward and barbaric.
  - And even the very few who recognise that God does punish sin in such ways will always be very quick to point out that, as in the case of Job or the man born blind, our afflictions are not always God's response to our sin.
    - It is true enough that they are not in the case of individuals, but when it comes to God afflicting nations or the whole world, it is hard to find any example or support from scripture for any time when they are not for punishment.
    - What's more, if we who are afflicted are in rebellion against God, as our world certainly is today, we have no reason to think that our afflictions are not sent by God on account of our defiance.

Since there is so little true acknowledgement of God when it comes to Coronavirus, I, as a Christian minister, want to do my small part to fill in the gap.

- I especially want to do this for you, the community over which the Lord has made me an overseer. It is my duty to speak the truth to you from His holy Word.

I have selected Amos 4:1 – 5:15 for our Scripture reading related to this subject.

- Amos was writing to people a lot like us—a nation in which God was once served that had largely rejected Him.
  - This is true of much of the world today—from North America to North Africa, from Russia to the UK.
  - The Coronavirus, of course, is affecting the whole world, regardless of whether we are a nation like ours that is departing from the Lord or one like China that is slowly coming to the Lord, though it is full of wickedness.
  - This is how God's judgment was against Israel with Assyria—it was directed against His people, but it was also directed against all their unbelieving neighbours.

- Indeed, as I often remind you, the whole world has not only sinned in Adam, but also turned against God’s grace, for we all go back to Noah—we all come from lines that through the years have departed from God’s saving mercies.

Listen now as I read to you from God’s holy Word (Amos 4:1 – 5:15):

**Amos 4:1 – 5:15:** Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who *are* on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, “Bring *wine*, let us drink!” <sup>2</sup> The Lord God has sworn by His holiness: “Behold, the days shall come upon you when He will take you away with fishhooks, and your posterity with fishhooks. <sup>3</sup> You will go out *through* broken *walls*, each one straight ahead of her, and you will be cast into Harmon,” says the LORD. <sup>4</sup> “Come to Bethel and transgress, at Gilgal multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days. <sup>5</sup> Offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving with leaven, proclaim *and* announce the freewill offerings; for this you love, *you* children of Israel!” says the Lord God. <sup>6</sup> “Also I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places; yet you have not returned to Me,” says the LORD. <sup>7</sup> “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. <sup>8</sup> So two *or* three cities wandered to another city to drink water, but they were not satisfied; yet you have not returned to Me,” says the LORD. <sup>9</sup> “I blasted you with blight and mildew. When your gardens increased, your vineyards, your fig trees, and your olive trees, the locust devoured *them*; yet you have not returned to Me,” says the LORD. <sup>10</sup> “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; yet you have not returned to Me,” says the LORD. <sup>11</sup> “I overthrew *some* of you, as God

overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and you were like a firebrand plucked from the burning; yet you have not returned to Me,” says the LORD. <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. <sup>5:1</sup> Hear this word which I take up against you, a lamentation, O house of Israel: <sup>2</sup> the virgin of Israel has fallen; she will rise no more. She lies forsaken on her land; *there is* no one to raise her up. <sup>3</sup> For thus says the Lord God: “The city that goes out by a thousand shall have a hundred left, and that which goes out by a hundred shall have ten left to the house of Israel.” <sup>4</sup> For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel: “Seek Me and live; <sup>5</sup> but do not seek Bethel, nor enter Gilgal, nor pass over to Beersheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into captivity, and Bethel shall come to nothing. <sup>6</sup> Seek the LORD and live, lest He break out like fire *in* the house of Joseph, and devour *it*, with no one to quench *it* in Bethel— <sup>7</sup> you who turn justice to wormwood, and lay righteousness to rest in the earth!” <sup>8</sup> He made the Pleiades and Orion; He turns the shadow of death into morning and makes the day dark as night; He calls for the waters of the sea and pours them out on the face of the earth; the LORD *is* His name. <sup>9</sup> He rains ruin upon the strong, so that fury comes upon the fortress. <sup>10</sup> They hate the one who rebukes in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks uprightly. <sup>11</sup> Therefore, because you tread down the poor and take grain taxes from him, though you have built houses of hewn stone, yet you shall not dwell in them; you

have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink wine from them. <sup>12</sup> For I know your manifold transgressions and your mighty sins: afflicting the just *and* taking bribes; diverting the poor *from justice* at the gate. <sup>13</sup> Therefore the prudent keep silent at that time, for it *is* an evil time.

<sup>14</sup> Seek good and not evil, that you may live; so the LORD God of hosts will be with you, as you have spoken. <sup>15</sup> Hate evil, love good; establish justice in the gate. It may be that the LORD God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

- May the Lord add His blessing the reading of His holy Word.

This passage makes me think of Romans 11:22 where the LORD speaks about cutting some of His people off because of their unbelief.

- Paul, reflecting on this, says: **“Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in *His* goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off.”**
- *Cut off*—that is the final consequence of their unbelief.
  - We need to, as Romans 11:22 says, consider the goodness and the severity of the Lord as we consider God and the Coronavirus.
- So we will proceed in this way...
  - First we will consider the severity of the LORD.
  - Then we will consider the goodness of the LORD.
  - And then we will look at how we should respond to the Coronavirus before the LORD.

## **I. Consider the severity of the LORD when we see coronavirus.**

A. We are told in Amos 4 that God sent one calamity after another to His people.

1. Look at the catalogue of troubles that God sent to them...
  - a. In 4:6-8, He sent “cleanness of teeth—” not dental hygiene, but a famine.
  - b. In 4:7-8, He withheld the rain causing many of His people to thirst.
  - c. In 4:9, He says, “I blasted you with blight and mildew” and goes on to speak of locusts as well.
  - d. In 4:10, He says, “I sent among you a plague after the manner of Egypt; your young men I killed with the sword.”
    - These were not light afflictions... people died.
  - e. In 4:11, He even says “I overthrew some of you, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah.”
2. Note well that these afflictions are not described as things that just happened as random turns of events.
  - The LORD testifies plainly that **He** sent these troubles.
  - This is something that many Christians today do not acknowledge—
    - They want to say that trouble just happens or that Satan is the ultimate cause of these things, but as here, the Bible constantly testifies that God is the one who afflicts us.
    - Back in Amos 3:6, the principle is clearly laid down: **If there is calamity in a city, will not the LORD have done it?**

- In 5:9, it says of the one whose name is the LORD that: **He rains ruin upon the strong, so that fury comes upon the fortress.**
  - That God is the One who sent our afflictions is the consistent teaching of His word from Genesis (think of the great flood) to Revelation (think of the fall of Jerusalem and Babylon).
3. Know that this is just as true today as it ever was.
- Do we have Coronavirus? Then God is the One who sent it.
  - Other agents may have been involved—wicked men, careless men, Satan, and so forth, but ultimately it came into the world because God sent it into the world...
  - To use God’s way of speaking in Amos, He would say, “I sent coronavirus so that many of you fell sick and died, but you did not return to Me.”
    - This is true of famines and floods as well.
- Hearing that God afflicts us naturally raises the question—why?
- B. We are told that the LORD afflicts us because of His wrath against our sin.
1. You can see this throughout the passage we read in Amos.
- a. Chapter 4 opens with God’s condemnation of the oppression and drunkenness of the women in Israel.
- **Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, “Bring wine, let us drink!”**
  - When women, who are by nature nurturers and more compassionate and gentle than men, are doing these things, you know that things have gotten very bad in a society.
    - Do I need to point out that this is certainly the case in our society?
    - We find drug and alcohol abuse, child abuse, and even murder.
      - If the women are doing these things, you can be sure that the men are even worse.
  - In verse 2, the LORD swears that He will punish them for this: **The Lord God has sworn by His holiness: “Behold, the days shall come upon you when He will take you away with fishhooks, and your posterity with fishhooks.”**
- b. And in 4:4-5, He speaks of disgust about their religion!
- Many of them were bringing their sacrifices and their tithes—but it was obvious that they were not coming to God in sincerity.
  - Their worship was just an empty show—more for their entertainment or to manipulate God than truly to come that they might live as His people.
- c. He blasts them even more for their sins in 5:11-13, accusing them of treading down the poor and afflicting the just and taking bribes.
- He says that He knows their manifold transgressions and describes it as an evil time.
  - Truly His wrath and fury are upon them for their sins.

2. The Bible teaches us that God’s wrath is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.
    - We are told that He is angry with the wicked every day.
    - So you see that He has very good reason for being angry with us.
      - It is because He is good and holy and has no use for wickedness and evil.
    - It has never been a part of His glorious character and it never will be.
      - He will never allow it to go unpunished, without retribution—because He is holy and just and good.
      - We say that if He was good, He would not be against us for our wickedness, but that is a very foolish thing for us to say.
      - In the Bible, we are taught that His glory is seen in punishing sinners just as they deserve... something that He will do at the end of the world.
- And that brings us to the third way that His severity is shown in our text.
- C. His severity is shown all the more in that the punishments He initially afflicts us with are shown to be only a foretaste of judgment that will come on us in the end if we don’t repent.
1. The list of punishments we saw in Amos 4 is overshadowed by a much greater punishment in chapter 5.
    - a. In chapter 5, verse 2, He speaks of them as fallen with no one to raise them up... it is a punishment from which they will not recover.
    - b. And in 5:3, He says that only a tenth of them will survive.
      - **Amos 5:3: For thus says the Lord God: “The city that goes out by a thousand shall have a hundred left, and that which goes out by a hundred shall have ten left to the house of Israel.”**
      - Think of this—a situation not where one percent or even ten percent of us perish, but where ninety percent do!
        - That is very literally what happened after the Assyrians came through.
        - Ninety percent of them were wiped out.
  2. This judgment in Amos 5:2-3 was a literal judgment that fell on Israel, but it is a picture of the eternal judgment that will come on the world at the last day.
    - It is to be fallen, as verse 2 says, never to rise again.
      - As Jesus said in Matthew 25:46, **And these will go away into everlasting punishment.** There will be no remedy.
      - Everlasting punishment is just as it sounds, punishment that will never end.
    - Whatever punishments and sufferings we have in this world are only a small taste of the judgment that is to come.
    - When we experience something like the coronavirus, we need to recognise that the judgment to come will be far worse.
      - It is clear in our text that the much lighter punishments and afflictions we have in this world should awaken us to see the severity of God,

- and to come to the realisation that if we do not repent, we will be utterly and entirely cut off from His comfortable presence to suffer what we deserve for our sins.

TRANS> In these ways, the severity of God is revealed to us in our text.

- It is He that sends the troubles we have in this world.
- He does it because of our sin.
- And these troubles are but a foretaste of the judgment to come.

Having seen this, we are now ready to turn to a happier subject.

## II. Consider the goodness of the LORD.

A. See that the afflictions we experience now are meant to turn us back to our gracious God.

1. There is a refrain that is repeated after each of the five afflictions in Amos 4:6-11 that makes this purpose clear.
  - With each one, the LORD says,
    - “I did this, but you have not returned to Me.”
    - **I gave you cleanness of teeth (v. 6)... but you have not returned to Me.**
    - **I withheld rain from you (v. 8)... but you have not returned to Me.**
    - **I blasted you with blight & mildew (v.9)... but you have not returned to Me.**
    - **I sent a plague... and killed your young men with sword (v. 10)... but you have not returned to Me.**
    - **I overthrew some of you, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah (v. 11)... but you have not returned to Me.**
2. Afflictions like Coronavirus or hurricanes or famines or devastating wars are sent by God to get our attention.
  - They show us His wrath against sin to wake us up so that we will return to Him.
  - They alert us to the fact that He is the LORD and the judge of all the earth and that His judgment is coming—that we might prepare for it.
    - Amos 4:12 says, **“Prepare to meet your God, O Israel!”**
3. I tell you, if there were no afflictions such as we experience in this world, we would be much worse than we are.
  - Not one of us would have ever come to see that we are sinners before a holy God and that we have greatly offended Him.
    - We could have gone on in our ignorant bliss and would have become more and more offensive to Him.
  - We know this because this is the situation before the flood.
    - God did not punish sin very much at all—they had smooth conditions and lived to be nearly a thousand years old.
    - God let their wickedness grow up until the whole earth was filled with it and nobody but Noah was with God.

- And then He sent the flood from which there was no repentance—it was a picture of the final judgment.
- We should be very glad for the fact that since the flood, the LORD restrains us with many afflictions which ought cause us to return to Him...
  - but even when they don't, they still restrain sin and keep this world from being as bad as it would otherwise be.
  - In this way, things like the coronavirus are a mercy from God, a true expression of His goodness.

B. Look at how He pleads with us to come to Him in the time of our affliction.

1. Look at Amos 5:4: **For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel: “Seek Me and live.”**

- What a beautiful call and what a beautiful promise!
  - These who have done so much to provoke Him to anger and who have been so stubborn under all the corrections He has sent...He calls to seek Him and live.
  - Those who just like our world—suffering coronavirus and many other things and refusing to return to God—hardening ourselves and acting as if there is no God...
    - Still He says to us, “Seek Me and live!”

2. But notice the warning with this in Amos 5:5—**But do not seek Bethel.**

- That was the place where God was falsely worshipped.
  - There is plenty of false and hypocritical worship that goes on today—worship that is not according to God's commandments.
  - Worship that is full of rituals but not of seeking the living God as our Saviour from sin that we might walk with Him through His saving work.
    - God has no use for empty religion.
    - Such religion only seeks God that the coronavirus might end—but what is needed is that we seek Him that we might henceforth live in communion with Him.
- Verse 6 repeats the gracious call again, “Seek Me and live.”
  - That is what coronavirus should lead us to do... to find life with God.

C. Look at how the LORD promises to be gracious to us if only we will come to Him.

1. Everything comes to a climax in the wonderful promise in 5:14-15 that the LORD Himself will save us if we will come to Him.

- Yes indeed—we cannot save ourselves, but He does the saving.
- Look at these beautiful words from our intensely gracious God: Amos 5:14-15: **Seek good and not evil, that you may live; so the LORD God of hosts will be with you, as you have spoken. <sup>15</sup> Hate evil, love good; establish justice in the gate. It may be that the LORD God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.**

2. Be done with evil—leave it to come to the LORD so that He will be with you—and it may be that He will be gracious to you!
  - That is not meant to be taken as an “He might or He might not be gracious” kind of statement.
    - It is almost sarcasm... for He is known to always be gracious to those who turn to Him in humility for His grace.
    - How freely and how fully He embraces them and unleashes His divine energy to bless them in their walk with Him.
      - How freely His mercy flows to provide for their sin that they might be forgiven—and to supply them with His Spirit that they might be transformed to walk in His ways.
3. Now that Jesus has come into the world, this grace has been shown in all its beautiful fullness.
  - We have now seen how the severity of God demanded that our sin be punished and how the goodness of God laid that punishment upon Jesus Christ, the Son of God who become flesh.
    - It may be that the LORD will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph, to those who return to Him... it may be indeed!
    - We have seen just how gracious with Christ on the cross and the Holy Spirit poured out on us to restore us to God.
      - Consider the goodness of God, our gracious welcoming Saviour.

### **III. How, then, should we respond to coronavirus?**

- A. First, in the face of coronavirus, let us see both the severity and the goodness of God.
  1. Coronavirus is a reminder to us that God is opposed to the way we have been living.
    - It is a reminder to us that we need to return to the LORD lest something much worse come upon us.
  2. Coronavirus is a reminder of the goodness of God.
    - That though He might have punished us with the final punishment from which we will never escape, He has not done so yet...
    - His call is still extended to all to seek Him and live—He has sent this virus in His goodness that we might come to Him and live...
      - Not just survive the virus—but that we might come to Him that we might stand through Christ our redeemer on the Day of Judgment...
      - As those who have come to Him.
- B. Second, in the face of coronavirus, let us confess our sins to God, repent, and be restored to our gracious welcoming God who will save us.
  1. That is what we should do as individuals who know ourselves to be sinners, and that is what all the nations of this world should do...
    - We should confess that these troubles are here because of our sin.
    - Such things would not be here if we were not all sinners.



2. Most people in our world, even professing Christians, do not want to see any association between coronavirus and our sin.
    - I do not mean to say that those who get it are worse sinners than those who don't—in some cases, they may have gotten it because of they have turned from God, but God sends these things to those who follow Him too to test them and strengthen them through sufferings.
    - But when things like coronavirus come upon this world or the nations of this world, especially when we are living in defiance of Him as we are today,
      - It is absolutely and unquestionably because of our sin.
  3. So let us turn from our sin and come to our gracious Saviour that we might live.
    - And then we shall live.
    - And let us confess the sin of our nation as much as we are able, and plead with God to have mercy on us, and plead with Him to grant repentance to our nation so that our leaders and all our people will turn to the Lord.
    - Yes, we can plead for relief, but much more importantly, let us plead for mercy that will lead us to repentance and repentance that will bring forgiveness.
- C. Third, in the face of coronavirus let us urge those around us to repent—our family and our friends and even our nation as we have opportunity.
1. People are afraid, but their fear is in the wrong place.
    - They should not so much fear coronavirus as the LORD who sent it to us in His wrath.
  2. The virus will be gone soon enough, but the LORD who sent it will remain forever.
    - We need to help people see that it is the LORD who has sent it to show us His wrath against our sin so that might learn to fear Him,
      - all that we might turn to Him to restore us to Himself by His saving work.
  3. Do as Amos did and use coronavirus and such troubles to point them to our gracious God for salvation—our gracious LORD to whom we ought to return.
- D. Fourth, in the face of coronavirus, let us be prudent, but not anxious or bitter.
1. When God sends such judgments upon us, we should not tempt God by carelessly exposing ourselves to the virus.
    - We should take reasonable measures to protect ourselves and to practice good hygiene so that we do not contract it.
  2. But at the same time, we should recognise fully that if the LORD wants us to be sick, or to be very sick, or even to die from it, that is His decision.
    - We are here for Him, not for ourselves, so if He wants us to serve Him with a virus or if this is how He wants us to die, we need not be afraid (unless we are not reconciled with Him).
    - If we have put ourselves in His hands for salvation through His Son, death only means that we go to be with Christ in glory, which is far better for us than to remain here.
      - If my work for God is done, it doesn't matter if I am five or fifty or ninety five, what reason would I have to stay here if He no longer has work for me to do here?

- He will look after whatever I leave behind... just as He used me to look after it, He will use others.
  - There is absolutely no place for fear if we realise that we are here only for God.
3. Yes, He commands us to cherish life and to seek to preserve our life, but equally He commands us not to be anxious about our lives or their preservation.
- If you are struggling with fear, that is something to repent of and to bring to Him that you might be delivered from it by His grace—He came to save us from our sin, and worry and fear are sins just as drunkenness and pride are sins.
  - If you are bitter about these afflictions, you need to repent of that too.
- E. Fifth, in the face of coronavirus, let us see that we do not wrongly judge one another.
1. As believers, some of us will be more oriented toward taking measures to protect ourselves and others will be more relaxed.
- Of course we should not put other people in danger by our own carelessness and we may need to correct a brother for such behaviour...
2. But just as we are not to judge each other about food and drink—where one abstains from meat and another enjoys it with thanks to God...
- so we must not judge one another about our methods of washing our doorknobs or wearing a mask or not wearing a mask.
  - We are servants of God and each of us must answer to Him.
  - We will not all see things the same way, and we are to love and forbear one another.
- F. Sixth, in the face of coronavirus, let us be merciful to others—we should look for ways to show kindness for the honour of Jesus who poured Himself out for us.
1. If people around us are sick, we ought to serve them as we find them in need.
- Are they quarantined? Then let us offer to pick things up for them that they need.
  - Perhaps you can volunteer if it is needed to deliver food or to help at the hospital.
  - It is sad that people felt they had to hoard toilet paper—that they would even fight over it—that they do not have a network of friends and neighbours who would help them if they were unable to go out...
    - But let us be that network of friends—first to each other as brothers and sisters, and then to our neighbours.
2. What if the crisis overwhelms our hospitals—what should we as Christians do then?
- We should do as Cyprian did... even to our enemies.
    - Philip Schaff tells us the beautiful story: “During the persecution under Gallus (252), when the pestilence raged in Carthage, and the heathens threw out their dead and sick upon the streets, ran away from them for fear of the contagion, and cursed the Christians as the supposed authors of the

plague, Cyprian assembled his congregation, and exhorted them to love their enemies; whereupon all went to work; the rich with their money, the poor with their hands, and rested not, till the dead were buried, the sick cared for, and the city saved from desolation.”

**Conclusion:**

What a difference it makes for us to see the hand of God in the coronavirus.

- We should see His hand in all things, and then we can fulfil our true purpose which is to live for His glory and honour.
  - Yes, we see His severity against our sin, but that only enhances our perception of His goodness which we see in His gracious saving work.
- Let God never be able to say of any of us, “I sent you coronavirus, but you did not return to Me.”
  - Coronavirus and whatever affliction comes our way can be a great blessing if it turns us to the LORD, not in a superficial way, but as those who come to Him that we might be saved by Him, that we might live in communion with Him as His servants forever.