

## **SCRIPTURE READINGS**

**Amos 5:6-13** (from Tanakh—The Holy Scriptures, the Jewish Publication Society’s translation)

5:6 Seek the LORD, and ye shall live; lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and devour it, and there be none to quench it in Bethel.

5:7 Ye who turn judgment to wormwood, and leave off righteousness in the earth, 5:8 Seek him that maketh the seven stars and Orion, and turneth the shadow of death into the morning, and maketh the day dark with night: that calleth for the waters of the sea, and poureth them out upon the face of the earth: The LORD is his name: 5:9 That strengtheneth the spoiled against the strong, so that the spoiled shall come against the fortress.

5:10 They hate him that rebuketh in the gate, and they abhor him that speaketh uprightly.

5:11 Forasmuch therefore as your treading is upon the poor, and ye take from him burdens of wheat: ye have built houses of hewn stone, but ye shall not dwell in them; ye have planted pleasant vineyards, but ye shall not drink wine of them.

5:12 For I know your manifold transgressions and your mighty sins: they afflict the just, they take a bribe, and they turn aside the poor in the gate from their right.

5:13 Therefore the prudent shall keep silence in that time; for it is an evil time.

5:14 Seek good, and not evil, that ye may live: and so the LORD, the God of hosts, shall be with you, as ye have spoken.

5:15 Hate the evil, and love the good, and establish judgment in the gate: it may be that the LORD God of hosts will be gracious unto the remnant of Joseph.

## **Mark 10:17-22**

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” [The man] said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing: go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

The book of the prophet Amos is one of my favorite books in the Bible. In fact, one of my resources says that this book consists of the written words of the first actual biblical prophet to have his words recorded, and it may have been the first biblical book to be completed in what is substantially the form we find it in today. That's saying a lot. Most of the other biblical books were finalized if not actually written hundreds of years later. I invite you to dig out your study Bible and give it not just a reading but a little bit of study. There's a lot of cultural material dating from the 700s BCE or BC, and Amos was one of those prophets who is remembered because he told it like it was.

Amos identified himself as a shepherd and a dresser of sycamore trees, rather than a professional prophet. We'll hear more about the professional ones next week. He felt a call from God to travel from Judah north to the monarchy of Israel—that's when the original nation of Israel founded by David had been split into two countries for some time—and deliver the word of God. The book is in the form of poetry, and as such is the beginning of a distinct literary genre, as the poetry gave the various oracles the cachet of authenticity to the hearers. Prophecy is best done in poetic form.

Amos came to the northern monarchy, Israel, in a time of safety and prosperity. They hadn't been invaded by Assyria for some years, and Israel had expanded its own borders as far as they would ever get. The royal court and the people were pretty proud of themselves, and things were going great, at least on the surface.

And along comes Amos, who brings into the light of day the venality and corruption of those who exercised power over the people.

The thing about those biblical prophets, is that they weren't necessarily appreciated in their own lifetimes. Nobody likes it when someone who has a degree of freedom to speak by virtue of their status starts telling them they're wrong—that they'll incur God's wrath if they don't change their ways. More than one of the famous prophets was imprisoned at least once in their own lifetimes. The reason they got published in the Bible and still garner respect even today, is because people looked back after the fact and said they were right.

Hear the words of Amos: "Forasmuch therefore as your treading is upon the poor, and ye take from him burdens of wheat: ye have built houses of hewn stone, but ye shall not dwell in them; ye have planted pleasant vineyards, but ye shall not drink wine of them."

That isn't good news. That means their wealth and their pride and their accomplishments will become meaningless before much longer. This is a pronouncement of God's judgment as filtered through the mouth of a prophet. That's a fairly mild example. Those prophets proclaimed God's judgment on Israel and Judah, as well as on their national enemies. They called out those who used their clout in the legal system to take advantage of the poor and

powerless. They called out the national leaders for behaving stupidly in international relations, playing one neighboring country against another and setting themselves up for disaster. They railed against immoral behavior, and especially against those who turned away from the God of their ancestors, the God of Israel, to worship other gods or to ignore the teachings that God had given them. Over the course of Israel's history, any number of rulers and other people took to offering sacrifices to Baal or other gods, and there may even have been child sacrifice on occasion. That's probably why the story of Abraham trying to sacrifice his son Isaac is in the book of Genesis. The writers of Genesis were saying, "Don't DO that! Just because other people do it doesn't mean God wants us to sacrifice our children." The prophets were not "predicters" of the future, as people sometimes think of them. They spoke what they understood to be the Word of God to people in power; they spoke to issues of their time and place. They comforted the afflicted and afflicted the comfortable.

Were the prophets always correct? Well, there are times when it's clear that one of them is just on a rant over his favorite sore spots. But they believed that God is a God who acts in history, in the lives of those who are yet living. They didn't believe in any afterlife, at least not in the same way as many of us do. They believed for the most part that God would punish evildoers in their own lifetimes, and reward doers of good.

The Bible is full of judgment. And the issue of what's right and what's wrong was decided within the society. The community took action, sometimes, based on whether someone was violating one of the Ten Commandments or some other important faith-based "rule". So it wasn't always God who was meting out judgment—it was the community. They thought they were acting for God, of course. Sometimes evildoers didn't seem to come to judgment, unless it was the people doing it on behalf of God and for the safety and purity of the community. And if the nation as a whole was doing evil—whatever that meant—then it was the armies of another country who were seen to be meting out God's judgment.

By Jesus' day, people were beginning to think more about what an afterlife based on reward or punishment might be like. Maybe that was because, as it is today sometimes, evil people seemed to be getting away with their evil deeds.

As we heard in the lesson from Mark's gospel this morning, it was entirely possible and even normal to be considered "righteous" if one lived by following the Ten Commandments and other instruction from Torah. By the standards of the community, that young man who spoke with Jesus was a good and upright man. He was righteous. And we have no reason to think otherwise. And Mark tells us that Jesus perceived this man and loved him. The fact that Jesus challenged him to give away his wealth and follow him wasn't necessarily a sign that Jesus was judging him harshly—he loved this guy and thought he would make a good disciple.

Yes, the Bible is full of judgment. And there's a place for judgment. There is evil in the world. There is selfishness, and greed, and hate.

But the Bible is also full of love. And, especially since the way we think about an afterlife of either heaven or hell was maybe a new way of thinking about judgment in Jesus' time, I want to put forward another idea that's also found in scripture.

In the 6th chapter of the gospel according to Matthew, Jesus is teaching. In talking about hypocrisy, Jesus does talk about a reward in heaven. But he says, "So whenever you give alms, do not sound the trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward... And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward."

So Jesus wasn't talking about murderers and thieves here—he was talking about reasonably good people who were just getting puffed up and thinking too highly of themselves. But he doesn't say anything about punishment. He says, "they have received their reward." Whatever it is we get when we let people know how good we are, how wise we are, how noble we are—that's our only reward.

Expanding this idea a bit, what if "God's judgment" consists of reaping the results of our behavior? When we don't try to live what we might as well call "godly lives," when we behave badly, even if we don't go to jail we do end up taking responsibility for our actions—by becoming more alienated from those who care about us, by drifting further and further away from our relationship with God and with others, and by becoming spiritually smaller and smaller. That's our reward, and it's not anything that is good. By allowing ourselves to "shrink," as it were, we're losing out on what we might have if we were growing in spirit instead.

On the other hand, when we live in love, when we care for others, when we seek to grow spiritually, we receive our reward, too. We have richer relationships, the communities in which we live benefit from our goodwill, and we draw closer to God instead of farther away. We have less heartache, less anger, less fear, less hate in our lives, and more blessing. And we have received our reward.

In the days of Amos and Jeremiah and Isaiah, the prophets preached that the whole nation would suffer from the evil behavior of those in positions of power, and the whole nation would benefit from the good behavior, the righteous behavior of the rich and powerful, too.

What if? What if our rewards and punishments really are made manifest as direct results of our behavior? How do we measure up now? I'll take heaven if it exists and I get to go there—but...

Something to think about. Amen.