

## **The Soft Side of God**

### **Amos 5:1-27**

**Part One: Amos 5:1-17** is laid out in a ‘chiasm’, an X (*chi*) pattern, having seven paragraphs, with the first and last in parallel, the second and sixth, the third and the fifth, with the fourth as the middle. Sometimes chiasm emphasizes the middle element; other times, it is little more than an artistic device for aesthetic and mnemonic purposes. Due to the chiasm, I collate parallel verses below.

#### **Day One: Amos 5:1-3,16-17 A funeral dirge**

*Fallen is Virgin Israel, never to rise again, deserted in her own land, with no one to lift her up... The city that marches out a thousand strong for Israel will have only a hundred left; the town that marches out a hundred strong will have only ten left... There will be wailing in all the streets and cries of anguish in every public square."*

After so many chapters focused on the anger of God, it is welcome relief to consider his softer side, his grief for those who suffer, even if it is the result of their own sin and his judgment.

Yet while the tone is softer, the reality is just as hard. In the conquest and deportation by enemy armies, Israel will suffer casualty rates of 90%, higher than the worst battles in the most brutal war of American history (casualty rates in the worst battles of the American civil war ran around 50% of combatants).

God grieves for Israel. Nonetheless, because of their sin, he does not rescue them. This underscores the fate awaiting us, if we turn away from God and toward sin. Ask God for his mercy, to keep you for your entire life, that you might not deny him either by renouncing your faith or by embracing sin.

#### **Day Two: Amos 5:16-17 When God passes through**

*"There will be wailing in all the streets and cries of anguish in every public square. The farmers will be summoned to weep and the mourners to wail. There will be wailing in all the vineyards, for I will pass through your midst," says the LORD.*

Within forty years, this prophecy came true, with the invasion and conquest of Israel, the destruction of its cities, the death of a great many warriors and civilians, the deportation of its leading citizens, and the end of the nation. Worse than the coming destruction at the hands of the enemy Assyrians, though, is that this destruction comes at the hands of their enemy God. Destruction comes when God ‘passes through’ their midst (5:17). This is the same language used of God ‘passing through’ Egypt, striking the first-born sons dead, while ‘passing over’ the Israelites.

Chosen and loved by God, Israel has, by its sin, become God’s enemy. We also are chosen and loved by God. Pray for his hand to be on your life, that you not become his enemy: “Abba Father, let me be, yours and yours alone. May my will forever be ever more your own. Never let my heart grow cold, never let me go.”

#### **Day Three: Amos 5:4-6,14-16 Seek God and seek good**

*This is what the LORD says to the house of Israel: "Seek me and live... Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is... Perhaps the LORD God will have mercy on the remnant.*

God never threatens judgment without pointing to a way out: seek God and seek good. Seek God: instead of submitting to God on his terms, we often try to shape him into what we want him to be (for example, how often do you hear something like, ‘I prefer to think of God as ...’). Seek good: we cannot have God while harming others. Are you doing harm to a family member or seeking revenge on someone who has harmed you? Seek God, and seek good.

#### **Day Four: Amos 5:7,10-13 Legal Justice and Financial Modesty**

*You who turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground... You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine... You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts.*

Amos again returns to two sins: (a) oppression of the poor through the courts, and (b) spending on luxury homes and luxury goods. Regarding (a), in a 2001 book, law professor Alan Dershowitz describes corruption in the legal system and advises, “[be] suspicious of all legal and judicial institutions. Trust no one in power, including – especially – judges.” At the very least, the high cost of legal fees disadvantages the poor today. Occasional stories give evidence of more sinister corruption, such as the recent case of two judges in PA receiving millions in kickbacks for sentencing teens to privately-run youth detention centers. Regarding (b), Amos does not specify whether luxury is always a sin, or only when linked with exploitation of the poor. At the very least, with Amos 3:15, this text encourages modesty in our homes and our lifestyles. In marketing, ‘luxury’ is an inducement; in Amos, it is a warning.

### **Part Two: Amos 5:18-27**

In the next three paragraphs, Amos takes aim at three false hopes in succession. The Israelites hope falsely in the coming ‘day of the Lord’, in the frequency and passion of their worship, and in other gods alongside Jehovah.

#### ***Day Five: Amos 5:18-20 False Hope***

*Woe to you who long for the day of the LORD! Why do you long for the day of the LORD? That day will be darkness, not light. It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear, as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him. Will not the day of the LORD be darkness, not light – pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness?*

The Israelites longed for the ‘day of the Lord’, the day when God would intervene in history, to elevate Israel to world preeminence, and to bring all nations to Jerusalem to pay homage both to God and to his people. They anticipated a time of unparalleled national power, reputation, and wealth. Amos warns, to the contrary, that it will be a time of unparalleled judgment, destruction, and sorrow.

Many Christians look similarly to grace to cover all sin at the final judgment, and expect Christ’s return to supply unqualified blessing,

regardless of lifestyle. Such hopes are as false in our time, as they were in Amos’ day: for those who live in sin, Christ’s return brings judgment, not salvation.

#### ***Day Six: Amos 5:21-24 False Worship***

*I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!*

As we saw in Amos 4, God has no use for worship that is not accompanied by just treatment of others. Only this time, he raises the volume: *I hate, I despise, I cannot stand, I will not accept, I will have no regard, I will not listen.* Justice and mercy are his expectation not only on us individually, but on our society. Meditate on this today: that God demands us to treat others justly and mercifully, and will not accept our worship otherwise. Pray for our society, that it will become more just and equitable where it is still marked by discrimination or poverty.

#### ***Day Seven: Amos 5:25-27 False Gods***

*"Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the desert, O house of Israel? You have lifted up the shrine of your king, the pedestal of your idols, the star of your god – which you made for yourselves. Therefore I will send you into exile beyond Damascus," says the LORD, whose name is God Almighty.*

God faults Israel for inconsistency: he looked after them in the wilderness, even though they did make regular offerings. Now that they are in the land, and prosperous, they make offerings to other gods. While we may not worship other gods, we may neglect worship of our own God. How different is Israel’s sin, from our tendency to appeal to God to help us out of crisis, while ignoring him in routine or easy times?