Abstract: Israel always believed that they were exempted from God’s judgment because of their status as God’s Chosen People. So they did many things that were wicked in the eyes of God. But God clearly states through Amos that, when Israel sins, God will punish her just as he did to the pagans. However, despite the warnings, God is showing them a glimpse of hope: if they repent and turn back to God, they can avoid the coming judgment.

This is Dr. Gary Yates, and his lecture series on the Minor Prophets. This is Session Number 9: The Judgment of Israel and Call to Repentance, Amos Chapters three through six.

**God judges Israel as He judged the pagans**

We are continuing to work our way through the book of Amos. We saw in the last lesson that the first section of the book of Amos, chapters one to two, deals with God’s judgment of the nations, and [with] the nations of Syria, Palestine, that surround Israel. They are targeted at the beginning of this section. But the punch line of the message, and the punch line of Amos’s preaching, is that the Lord wouldn’t just roar as a lion and thunder as a storm against the pagan people around Israel, but God ultimately would judge the Southern Kingdom of Judah, and then finally the eighth message is on the kingdom of Israel. And while there was one or two specific sins that were highlighted with each one of the nations, there is a long list of the catalogue of the sins of Israel.

**Israel’s sin**

Again, they felt that they were superior to the people around them. God reminds them that as his chosen people, they were more accountable than the nations because they had violated the specific covenant and commandments of the Mosaic Law. So we go to
this passage at the end of chapter two, the eighth message against Israel. And the list of sins here remind us again that the primary issue that the prophets deal with in terms of the people’s behavior and lifestyle is their greed, their materialism, their oppression of the poor and the needy. And this oppression of the poor and the needy grew out of the fact that when you make wealth, and possessions, and something other than God as the ultimate focus of your life, you become obsessed and desperate to gain.

You’ll do whatever it takes because you’re no longer trusting in God; you’re no longer content in him to meet your needs. You’re looking for something that ultimately can’t satisfy you, and gradually become more and more desperate. So that’s why, as Amos focuses on the sins of the people, they have become so violent, so oppressive, so desperate in the way that they covet their neighbor’s possessions, so Amos says, “They sell the righteous for silver, the needy for a pair of sandals, those who trample on the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and turn aside the way of the afflicted. A man and his father go into the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned, to lay themselves down beside every altar”.

So they are taking advantage of the poor in the courtroom, they are seizing their properties. A father and a son are sleeping with their slave girl. And a father and a son having a sexual relationship with the same woman is something that Leviticus is going to say is an abomination to God. And there are lists of things that are given there. These moral perversions, whether it’s homosexuality, or bestiality, or incest, or a father and a son sleeping with the same woman, are abominations before God. They are not simply ritual taboos; they are things that are morally evil in God’s eyes. So that’s going on as well.

Verse eight, “They lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge, and in the house of their God they drink the wine of those that have been fined.” They see nothing incompatible with mistreating their neighbors and worshipping God. And although the Mosaic Law said that if you take the pledge of your poor neighbor, if you take the cloak of your poor neighbor as a pledge that he will pay back his loan, you should return that every night, [and] here reflecting the fact that they are not doing that.
They actually bring these cloaks the sanctuary, they make a pallet out of that, they sit there, and they offer their prayer and make their sacrifices, and they see nothing inconsistent with violating the law, mistreating their neighbor, and attempting to worship God. In the house of their God, in their celebrations or as they offer drink offerings, they drink the wine of those who have been fined. They’ve taken this from their neighbor and they use that to celebrate and worship before the Lord.

**God’s response to Israel’s sin**

God reminds them, “Look, I have been faithful to you throughout your history; I have protected you; I’ve watched over you; I’ve blessed you. And yet you have returned my goodness with these types of sin and this type of dishonesty”. The Lord says “It was I who destroyed the Amorite before them, whose height was like the height of the cedars, and who was strong as the oaks. It was I who brought you out of the land of Egypt and led you forty years in the wilderness to possess the land of the Amorite. I did all of these things for you. I bought you out of slavery. I defeated the Canaanite nations, and yet this is how you have repaid me and this is the way you have responded to this.

**God reminds Israelites of their special relationship with Him**

In verse eleven, “I raised up some of your sons for prophets.” The Lord gave them messengers to let them know how exactly they were supposed to live. Moses had said, “God will raise up a prophet for you, like me, and for every successive generation.” They had the word of God. They did not listen to them, the Lord also raised up some of their young men for Nazarites; and the Nazarites by their vow, by their special lifestyle, they did not cut their hair, they did not come in contact with a dead body, they did not drink or use alcohol in any form: It was simply a symbolic way of reminding the people of their separation to God. But verse twelve says, “You made the Nazarites drink wine, commanded the prophets saying, ‘You shall not prophesy.’” So even the special people that God had given to Israel to remind them of their special relationship with him, the special status they had, they did not honor those people.

**Prosperity leads to injustice**
Now, as we look at this sin of injustice and—we’ve already talked about this a little bit—I want to help us understand a little bit better why in the eight century B.C. this particularly became an important issue. Part of this was a result of the prosperity that had happened during the reign of Jeroboam II in the Northern Kingdom and Uzziah in the Southern Kingdom. The growth of the monarchy, and the bureaucracy, and all of the things that were necessary to support that: the military, the administration that went along with that, meant that more and more lands were being swallowed up by the kings and the bureaucracy that was associated with the throne. Samuel had warned the people of Israel, “Look, if you make a king, what’s he going to do? He’s going to raise your taxes, [and] he’s going to take your sons and daughters and put them either in his corves or his military.” And part of that also involved ultimately swallowing up their lands, and so God had designed for each family, for each clan in Israel, to have their own land, [and] that land was never to be permanently sold out of the family so that that family, that clan, would be able to provide for themselves. But what was happening now was that the monarchy was swallowing up that land.

A second thing that was going on was that there were specific economic policies that were related to Israel’s prosperity. Jeroboam II had made Israel more prosperous; he had expanded their borders; as a result of that, Israel becomes more internationally significant. It becomes important for them to sustain that prosperity, to engage in trade with other peoples. And what that means now is the land is going to be used in Israel to grow specific crops that were needed for trade rather than the land being used to farm and provide for the needs of the individual families and clans.

John Walton, in the *IVP Bible Background Commentary*, gives us an explanation of this, and I want to read this. This is a lengthy quote, but I think it helps us to understand the period.

“Jeroboam’s long and effective reign made it easier to establish a comprehensive economic policy that concentrated on the mass production of export items such as grain, olive oil, and wine. Large areas of the Shephelah and low lands had
already been given over to wheat production. (II Chronicles 26: 10) Now in the eighth century, the elite were able to impose this economic policy on the small hill-country farms and villages. As a result, previous agricultural policies that attempted to distribute potential risk between herding and farming were over-turned, and the land was given over to specific cash crops. The smaller holdings of the peasant farmers, overburdened with debts, were enclosed into larger estates. This very efficient use of the land, however, eliminated the mixed crops that had formerly been grown in the village culture and more quickly exhausted the soil, leaving fields fallow, and grazing animals on harvested fields would have been eliminated or rigidly controlled. Under this new policy an attempt was made to increase the exports to the extent that there was a real hunger problem for the peasant class, while the nobility and merchant class were able to indulge in the luxury goods supplied by their Phoenician trading partners. Thus, in addition to facing rising prices at home on basic goods such as wheat and barley, the impoverished peasant farmers now found themselves in debt, servitude, or day laborers.”

So this had originally been set where families, clans, and villages can take care of one another and grow the crops and raise the livestock that they needed. Now the land was being used for these cash crops, and the rich benefited from this, but the poor suffered. And we do not have in Israel the middle class like we have today. We either had those that were wealthy that owned the land, that were part of the bureaucracy, that were associated with the monarch, and those who were poor and lived a very subsistent living, those were the people who were being taken advantage of, and those were the people who were suffering from these specific policies.
I think the third thing that was going on, and this was part of the legal process, there was a misuse of the biblical provision regarding debts, slavery, and the sale of land as a way of paying off debt. Leviticus talks about: Leviticus 25 talks about if a person was in debt, they could be a debt-slave for six years and then to be released in the seventh year, and they could temporarily sell a piece of land in order to pay off that debt, but that land was ultimately to come back to that family because that was their inheritance from God. What was happening, again, is that wealthy landowners of these large estates, maybe those who had the backing of the king and who were responsible for growing these cash crops, they were able to use the debt of their neighbors as a pretext for taking their land. A subsistent farmer lived on the margins in Ancient Israel so that any one harvest could particularly devastate them; and the role of Israel as a society, God had designed them to where there were not to be poor among them; and if there were people that were poor, they were to open their hand gladly.

What was going on instead is that any type of debt was being used as a pretext now for seizing those lands. And I think these people would have said, “We are following the prescripts of the law: the debt-slavery and the sale of property.” However, they were not following the intent of the law and the spirit of the law where God had designed that anyone could enjoy from the benefits from the land. I think another thing that was going on was as the Assyrians began to encroach on the territory of Israel and Judah, they [the Assyrians] placed the demand that tribute would be paid to them, and the burden for that tribute often came from the poor and the needy in the land that the kings of Israel, and the rich bureaucrats, looked to as the ones who would provide the crops, that would provide the services, that were part of that tribute. So because of all of those things in the eighth century, we have a justice issue and a justice problem, and in Amos chapter two, as he catalogs Israel’s sins, he is particularly going to focus on this and, again, there is this ethos throughout the Minor Prophets—throughout the prophetic literature in general—that forces us to think about the fact “how is my love for God being reflected in the way that I treat others?” There is this dual aspect of God’s covenant and God’s love and God’s commitment for Israel where he says, “You love me with all your heart, but you’re also
to take care of your neighbor and love him as yourself.” And Israel was not doing that, and this becomes the basis for Israel’s judgment.

**How, why and when God’s judgment takes place**

In chapter three to six, as we move to the next section of the book of Amos, we have an elaboration on God’s judgment and how, and why, and when this is going to take place; and there’s also a structure that I think we see in this section as well. The second section of the book, chapters three to six, [is] an elaboration of judgment; and in chapter three, verse one, we see this statement, “Hear this word.” Chapter four, verse one: “Hear this word.” Chapter five, third time, same thing: “Hear this word that I take up over you in lamentation oh house of Israel.”

So we have here an elaboration on the judgment of Israel; that is, we have a call to hear the word of God in chapter three, chapter four, [and] chapter five. Those are the three main messages in this section, and “hear the word” is a reminder that they need to listen and respond to the prophetic word [that] God is about to send judgment. But remember that the judgment is not fixed in stone; there is always a possibility that if people will listen, if they respond to God, and if they will do the things God has commanded them to do, if they change their ways, if there is real repentance, the judgment can be avoided.

The final sections of chapter three to six, however, though, reflect the fact that Israel ultimately is not going to listen to this word because in chapter five, verse seventeen, the word that we see there introduced (or chapter 5, verse 18) “Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord,” and the word “woe,” the Hebrew word `oy, was something that was often a part of a funeral lament. We have woe lyricals throughout the prophets where basically the prophet is saying that the target of this message is as good as dead because they are not listening to the message. So “Woe to the people of Israel who are longing for the day of the Lord,” who think that God is going to roar like a lion, or thunder like a storm, to deliver them, ultimately God is going to roar like a lion to defeat them and to judge them.
Chapter six, verse one, [has the] same thing: “Woe to them who are at ease in Zion and to those who feel secure on the mountains of Samaria.” So Amos does not just preach judgment against Israel, the Northern Kingdom his neighbors, Amos also preaches judgment against his own people, the people of Judah, and ultimately that judgment will follow them as well. One of the things that Amos has to do in this section chapter three to six is he is elaborating on the judgment of Israel. One of the things he has to do is that he has to get the people to challenge and to understand that their status as God’s chosen people does not exempt them from judgment; it does not give them a “get out of jail free” card. And so in chapter three, verse one, here is what Amos says: “Hear this word that the Lord has brought up against you all people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt.” You are accountable because God has done this great work for you. God’s brought you out of slavery, God’s redeemed you out of Egypt, and the Lord says in verse two, “You only have I known of all the families of the earth, therefore I will punish you for all of your iniquities.” And that “therefore” would have been something I think the people of Israel and Judah would have stumbled over because when the prophet said, “You only have I known of all the families on the earth,” there’s their special status. There’s their honored position as the Chosen People of God but the conclusion that is drawn from that is “therefore I will protect you and deliver you from all your enemies,” that is not what it says the prophet says.” (He says) “Therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities,” and one of the things that runs through the book of Amos is this idea that Israel needs to give up on the notion that they think they are exempt from judgment in a way that is not true of the other nations.

Amos has already done that in chapters one and two: the judgment that falls on the nations ultimately also falls on Judah and Israel. He is going to make this point a number of other places where Israel can’t rely on simply being the Chosen People of God, [and] to think that they are going to be exempt from this.

**Israel’s wickedness compared to other nations**
Chapter three, verses nine and ten, say this: “Proclaim to the strongholds in Ashdod...” See, we are talking about the Philistines. “And to the strongholds in the land of Egypt...” Okay, we are going to being the foreigners in here—the Philistines, the Egyptians—and the prophet says, “Assemble yourselves on the mountain of Samaria and see the great tumults within her, and the oppressed in her midst. ‘They do not know how to do right,’ declares the Lord: those who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds.” So what the prophet does is that he invites the people of Philistia and Egypt and says, “You want to see a real example of wickedness? You want to watch an R-rated movie and see violence and the oppression that is going to surprise you? And I want you to sit down and watch what is going on in the city of Samaria.” The Philistines and the Egyptians could learn from the wickedness of the people of Israel that challenges their status.

Chapter six [is] the same, verses one to three: “Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure on the mountains of Samaria. “

Okay now. The prophet is going to say in verse two, “Pass over to Calna and see, and go from there to Hamath the Great. Then go down to Gath of the Philistines. Are you any better than these kingdoms? Or is their territory greater than your territory? Oh you who put away the day of disaster and bring near the seat of violence. Do you think that there is any way that even though you are living in wealth and prosperity, do you think that your wealth is somehow going to protect you against the invasion and the incursion of the Assyrians in the way that it has affected these other people? You’re no different than they are. The same trouble, the same adversity, the same devastation that has come down on these people is ultimately going to affect you and the wealth and the prosperity that you have. It’s not going to save you; it’s not going to get you out of this problem.”

Chapter 9:7-10: the Lord says this to the Israelites, and again this is a shocking message. I want you to just think about how an Israelite who’s listening to Amos and who believes in the traditions of how God has chosen Israel, and saved them, and made them his people; listen to what the prophet says: “‘Are you not like the Cushites to me, Oh people of Israel,’ declares the Lord.” You’re no different than the people of Cush.
“Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt?” The answer would have been yes, and that was our great moment of salvation. We looked to that as how God formed us and shaped us as a people.

But look at what Amos does with that tradition. He says, “But did I not also bring the Philistines from Caphtor and the Assyrians from Kir?” Look, you’d think this was some special thing. Your immigration from Egypt to the land [of Canaan] is no different than my bringing the Philistines to the land from Caphtor or the Assyrians from Kir. It’s just immigration! Okay, that’s not denying what the Exodus was all about, but it’s simply pointing out to the Israelites that they’re in the same boat as all of these other people; and so the Lord says, “Behold, the eyes of the Lord God are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the surface of the ground, except I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob,” declares the Lord.”

**Israel no different from other nations**

So you think that the Exodus—and it is a great moment: it was Israel’s shining example of redemption and how God loved them and had delivered them; but in a sense, Amos places it in the same category as the immigration of these other peoples to simply say the Lord is going to judge them [i.e., Israel] in the way the Lord judges the nations.

Okay, as a result of that, if the people will understand, and they will get this idea that God’s judgment is going to fall on them just like the pagan peoples, they’re no better, no different. Ultimately, that will change the way that they listen to the prophet’s message. They will recognize the seriousness of the warnings that Amos is trying to give them. So we go back to this: the Lord says through Amos, “You’re the only family I’ve known, I have a special relationship with you; therefore, and I will punish you.”

We have a series of rhetorical questions again, another cycle of seven here in the book of Amos where every one of these rhetorical questions has a no answer. Again, a rhetorical question is when you ask a question, [but] you are not looking for an answer; you’re trying to make the person think, and each one of these rhetorical questions is asking Israel to reflect on the seriousness of the warnings that Amos is giving them.
Cause and effect

Look, if a prophet is here warning you about something that is to come, there’s a reason why he’s here, and maybe you should take that seriously. And so with each one of these rhetorical questions, there’s a cause and an effect relationship. There’s an effect that happens, but there’s a cause that’s a result of that, and what Amos is trying to help them to see is this: The reason for the cause for this effect, [namely], where a man is standing in front of them warning them of the judgment of God, the cause of that [effect] is God’s anger and the approaching judgment that is about to fall on them.

So we begin sort of innocuously with the first [vision], it’s a sort of a benign example—verse three: “Do not two walk together unless they have agreed to meet?” Two people are not going to just walk together; if they’re walking together, they have prearranged that meeting, kind of an innocuous thing. But listen to how this turns with the next rhetorical question: “Does a lion roar in the forest when he has no prey? Does a young lion cry out from his den if he has taken none?” The answer to both of those is no, and the roaring of the lion indicates the capture of prey, okay. The roaring of God from Jerusalem, as the prophet is announcing that, indicates that something disastrous is about to happen.

We get another ominous series of questions in verse 5: “Does a bird fall in a snare on the earth when there is no trap for it? Does a snare spring up from the ground when it has taken nothing?” So again animals being taken as prey and hunting, there’s something disastrous about to happen. Does that just happen accidently; does a trap just happen to be there? No, there's cause and effect.

And now we get to what exactly and precisely is going to happen to Israel. Verse 6 says, “Is a trumpet blown in the city and the people are not afraid?” The answer is no. A trumpet indicated; that was the emergency broadcast system. It indicated an enemy’s coming; there’s some disaster; there’s something approaching on the horizon; we need to get ready for this; we need to prepare for war; we need to prepare to defend ourselves. The prophet’s message is the trumpet blowing in the city warning them about what’s going to happen. And then it says, “Does disaster come to a city unless the Lord has done
it?” Now this is the Lord [who] is about to bring calamity and the things that are happening to Israel; they’re not random accidents; it’s not that they’ve had a series of national setbacks or misfortunes. God has specifically brought this judgment against them.

Now, I want to look at the statement, “Does a disaster come to a city unless the Lord has done it?” We need to be careful not to build too much into that statement. It does not mean that God is the direct cause of every disaster that ever happens. In an ultimate sense that is true, but this is talking about a specific situation and a specific scenario. When a prophet is warning about tragedy and disaster that’s about to happen, this is from the hand of God.

Verse seven: “For the Lord does nothing without revealing his secrets to his servants the prophets. The lion has roared, who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken, who can but prophesy.” Amos is saying, “My message to you, it’s not just the words of a man: this is not just my opinion I didn’t just come up from the Southern Kingdom of Judah because I felt like sharing this with you. God has brought me here. There is a cause and effect in all of this, and you should hear the roaring of the lion that is about to take place because that lion is about to consume you”. And so throughout this section what we’re going to have is the roaring of the lion.

**False prophets and God’s warning**

And you have a group of people who think God is going to protect them; God is going to bless them no matter what. In the Southern Kingdom of Judah, the people are going to respond to the preaching of Micah and say, “You shouldn’t preach these things. Disaster is not going to overtake us. Is not the Lord in our midst?” And the problem for Amos and Micah, and many other true prophets of the Lord, is that there were always plenty of other prophets who were going to tell the people exactly what they wanted to hear, for they had a false understanding of the covenant. They thought the covenant meant God blesses us, God provides for us; God takes care of us no matter what. A biblical understanding of the covenant always involves promise and obligation. And if
they wanted to experience the blessings of the covenant then, they had to realize that it also carried with it certain responsibilities.

So what is going to happen in this section is we are going to see a number of warnings of the kind of judgment that God is preparing to bring upon the people of Israel. And Amos’s job as a prophet is to convey, in human language, the roaring of God as a lion, and to make this judgment as awful and as terrible as he possibly can make it sound.

We have the extreme white water of God’s wrath; we talked about that before, that if it’s bad enough, maybe these people will listen. If I know that we are about to be completely wiped out, maybe instead of just brushing this prophet’s message off, maybe instead of saying we’ve heard it all before—we’ve heard about these warnings, prophets have been saying this to us for generations—maybe they’ll listen. I want us to hear the terror that should be in the hearts of the people as they hear the message that is about to fall upon them.

Jeremiah preaching to the people of Judah later would say death is climbing through the window, and I think that’s a fairly effective way of summarizing what Amos says as well. In verse 12 of chapter 3: “Thus says the Lord, ‘As the Shepard rescues from the mouth of the lion two legs or a piece of an ear, so shall the people of Israel who dwell in Samaria be rescued with the corner of a couch and the part of a bed.’” Whatever remnant is left over, there’s not going to be much there.

Chapter 3, verse 15: “I will strike the winter house along with the summer house, and the houses of the ivory shall perish, and the great houses shall come to an end,’ declares the Lord.” They had ripped off their neighbor to build these great estates. They’re not going to live there because God is going to destroy them.

Chapter 4, Verse 1, “Hear this word you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountains of Samaria.” Remember those are the wealthy women who care only about themselves, and they’re crushing and oppressing the poor. Here’s what God is going to do to them. “The Lord God has sworn by his holiness that, behold, the days are coming upon you when they will take you away with hooks, and even the last of you with fish hooks.” The Assyrians actually had a practice where they would put hooks through the mouths of
their captors and lead them away. So imagine the fat cows of Bashan lounging in their luxury, living in the lap of luxury, oppressing the poor, concerned only about themselves. Ultimately, they’re going to be degraded and taken away as exiles, and I can’t think of anything that’s more degrading than having a hook put through your mouth and being led away as a captive by this king.

Alright, that should make the people want to repent. Chapter 5, verses 16 and 17, are very similar to Jeremiah’s later warnings about death climbing through the window; death is going to be part of the reality of the lives of the people of Israel. They’ve lived during this time of great prosperity under Jeroboam, but all of that’s about to change. Chapter 5, verse 16: “Thus says the Lord God the God of hosts, ‘In all of the squares there shall be wailing, and in all of the streets they shall say: Alas and alas. They shall call the farmers to mourning and to wailing those who are skilled in lamentation, and in all the vineyards there shall be wailing, for I will pass through your midst,’ says the Lord.”

You know, in the Exodus God had passed through the midst of the people of Egypt to judge them and to save Israel; now the Lord is going to pass through Israel and is going to bring judgment upon his own people.

Chapter 6, verses 9 and 10, here’s the after-effect. When the Assyrian army comes through, and the Assyrians aren’t specifically mentioned here, but ultimately they’re the enemy that’s going to bring this about. In chapter 6, verses 9 and 10, death again is part of this picture, and it’s pretty vivid. Verse 10 says, “If ten remain in one house, they shall die.” So imagine a group of ten people that somehow have survived the onslaught, [yet]m they are going to die, “And when one’s relative, the one who anoints him for burial, shall take him up to bring the bones out of the house and shall say to him who is in the innermost part of the house…” Imagine being given the responsibility as a survivor to have to go in and clear the bodies out of that house. It almost would be better to be one of those victims inside of that house. “And if someone says if there’s still any one with you he will say, ‘No, no one’s left.’ And then this person will also say, ‘Silence; we must not mention the name of the Lord.’” They will come to a place after they have taken God for
granted and thought that God was going to protect them no matter what, that they will say, “Don’t even mention the name of the Lord, let’s keep it a secret that we were here because God may sweep us away in this judgment as well.”

That’s how awful and terrible this final judgment is going to be. Chapter 6, verse 14: “For behold, I will raise up against you a national house of Israel,’ declares the Lord, the God of Hosts,” and again, “The God of armies”; God is a warrior behind all of this. “And they shall oppress you from Lebo-hamath to the Brook of the Arabah.” So that is the kind of judgment that is going to fall upon Israel, and the prophet makes it sound as bad as it possibly can be and as awful and as horrible as it really will be; so that if they will listen, then possibly the judgment can be avoided.

There are a couple of other things just in terms of the theology of judgment in Amos [chapters] three to six. We’ve looked at this passage before, but Amos chapter 4, verses 6 to 11, reminds us that what is going on here specifically is God’s bringing upon the people of Israel the covenant curses that Moses had warned them about. “God has given them cleanness of teeth and lack of bread”; they’ve had a lack of food. “God has withheld the rain from you so that you’ve not had the rain you’ve needed for good harvest. God has struck your crops with blight and mildew; your gardens and your vineyards, your fig trees and your olive trees—they have been devoured by the locusts.” So all things that God has specifically warned them about [have happened], “I sit among you with pestilence after the manner of Egypt. I killed your young men with the sword and carried away your horses. I made a stench of your camp.”

“Yet you did not return to me”

They’ve already experienced various types of military defeat, and we see that often in the conflict in the Old Testament between the Arameans and the Israelites in the time leading up to this. The Assyrians had been a thorn in Israel’s side back in the ninth century and Jehu who had been forced to submit to them in 841 B.C. So that is going to become worse; that is going to become more intense. “I overthrew you as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah.” If a people had already experienced that, you’d think they would realize that God was getting their attention. You’d think that they would
realize in light of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 that God is displeased with our disobedience; we need to get this right. But what it says in Amos and repeatedly in chapter 4, verse 6, verse 8, verse 9, verse 10, verse 11; “Yet you did not return to me. I’ve sent you every possible wakeup call that I could possibly send, and you have not returned to me; therefore, the ultimate covenant curse is going to come.” I’d like you to notice what it says in chapter 4, verse 12, is kind of the culmination of this: “I’ve done all these things, and you have not returned to me.”

Here’s the outcome, here’s the consequence. “Therefore,” verse 12, chapter 4, “Thus I will do to you, Oh Israel, because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, Oh Israel.” Okay; now for me personally, I can’t read that verse without remembering a sign that I used to drive by almost every week in our hometown where a church, to announce the location of its church and church services, they had a sign that said, “Prepare to meet your God, come to the First Baptist Church.” Okay, this is “prepare to meet your God.” However, that you don’t want to experience because remember God is the roaring lion, God is the thundering storm; they have not obeyed the covenant commands; therefore, prepare to meet your God.

And to develop this further, the idea of preparing and meeting with God, the verb kwn, to prepare, and the verb hikwn (the verb kwn with the prefix hi there) is used in Exodus chapter 19 when God first met with the people when he appeared to them at Mount Sinai. And as God was going to come down in the fire and the smoke and the thunder, they were to prepare to meet their God. They were not to pass the boundaries or the borders that Moses had set up, or else they would be consumed by God. As God met with them, they were to purify themselves; they were to sanctify themselves; they were to get ready for what God was going to do because that was going to be the time when God would establish the covenant. And now, in light of this covenant, they are to prepare to meet their God because they are going to experience the ultimate covenant curse that God has brought against them. So as we see these judgments that are going to come against them, the military defeat that God is going to bring, we understand that this is going to be God’s working out his covenant curses.
God turned against Israel

The other passage that I want to call to your attention that helps us to understand what the judgment will be for Israel in the eighth century B.C. is that Amos describes this: In Amos chapter 5, verses 18 to 20, as the coming day of the Lord. And Amos in chapter 5, verse 18, again is going to turn upside down Israel’s expectations and Israel’s understanding of what the day of the Lord would be like, and what the day of the Lord was supposed to be. “Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord,” he says. “Why would you have the day of the Lord? It is darkness and not light.” Again, because they were God’s covenant people, they believed that the day of the Lord would be the time when God would come down and destroy their enemies. Ultimately, we’re going to be free. God will rescue us. God will save us from the Assyrians. God is not going to let us down.

Amos says: “Watch out! Your expectations about the day of the Lord are all wrong. It is not going to be a day of salvation. It is not the time that you should be looking forward to, like it were Christmas, because God is going to ultimately judge his enemies, and what Israel doesn’t understand is they have become the enemy of God.

Throughout the Old Testament we have these holy war traditions where God would fight on behalf of the armies of Israel. And in the Exodus, God fought against the armies of Pharaoh and drowned them in the sea when Israel had no strength of their own. When Israel came into the land, God fought their battles for them. He brought down the walls of Jericho and all the people of Israel did was walk around the walls, blow a horn, and believe and trust in God’s deliverance.

There were times when David went out to fight against his enemies, and they would hear the sound of God marching in the trees. During the times of Jehoshaphat, one of my favorite stories in the book of Chronicles, is that God says, “You’re not going to go onto this battle and wage war. What you’re going to do is you’re going to go into this battle, and the priest and the singers and the Levites are going to lead you, and you are going to sing the enemy to death. And all of these things reflect the idea God fought Israel’s battles for them. What the prophets do is that they take Israel’s holy war traditions, they take Israel’s day of the Lord traditions when God will come down and
destroy his enemies in a single day, [and] they turned those traditions upside down and say, “God is now going to target Israel as his enemy.”

It reminds me as a baseball fan that sometimes your favorite player would play, and all of the sudden he will become a free agent; and the next time he plays your team, he is wearing an entirely different uniform; and suddenly the affection that you once had for that player has turned into animosity.

God has become a free agent, and God is now wearing a different uniform. God is not wearing the uniform of the Israelites. God is wearing the uniform of the Assyrians, and he doesn’t do this capriciously, he doesn’t do this because he wants to simply vent his anger. God is doing this as a way of bringing judgment against his people. What the Israelites had forgotten about was that throughout their history, there were times where God had inflicted the judgment of military defeat on his people as a way of correcting them and trying to get their attention during times of apostasy. In the days of Samuel, when they were fighting against the Philistines, they were defeated, and they thought that the solution was simply to take the Ark of the Lord in the battle, and that God would show up and defeat his enemies. Surprisingly, that day in battle, the Philistines won the battle; they captured the Ark of God, and the people of Israel were defeated. Of course, ultimately later, God defeated the gods of the Philistines to prove that he was superior to them, but it was a reminder to Israel that God could break out against them as a roaring lion even though they were his chosen people.

In the days of Solomon, after his apostasy, God warned that he would punish the house of David for the sin that they’d committed; and ultimately because of Solomon’s idolatry and the foolishness of his son, the house of David lost the majority of their kingdom. That was always a reality. The people of Jerusalem later are going to depend upon the fact of “The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.” This is God’s house. God will protect us. God will watch over us. God will take care of us no matter what.

Jeremiah reminds them, “Why don’t you look back to your past history and let’s go back to the time of Samuel again when the city of Shiloh, when the town of Shiloh
that had been the place of the sanctuary, it had been the place where God’s tabernacle dwelled, and the city of Shiloh had been destroyed. God had not protected that city no matter what simply because it was the location of his sanctuary, and the same thing potentially could happen to Israel.”

So, there is this warning of military defeat in Amos chapters 3 to 6. There is this reality that God is about to break out in judgment against his people, and theologically, these are the covenant curses. This is a time in Israel’s history when Israel needs to prepare to meet their God, and this is a time when Israel is about to see the day of the Lord break out against them.

**There is still hope**

But in the midst of these terrible warnings of judgment, there is also the prophet’s calling the people to repentance and to a change of behavior because these judgments can be avoided. Okay. The prophet’s word is not set in stone. Just like the ghost of Christmas future in the [story] *A Christmas Carol*, warning Scrooge of the shadows of the things that are to come, there is a possibility that if he reforms and changes his way, different things can happen. And so we are seeing the shadows of Israel’s future. This is what is going to happen to Israel if they do not change their ways; but in chapter 5 there are these urgent appeals, and remember this is a major part of the book of the 12.

We saw at the beginning in Hosea, in Amos, in Joel, and carries all the way through where God is calling his people to repentance, and so in chapter 5, at the heart of this, “Seek me and live, but do not seek Bethel, do not enter in Gilgal or cross over to Beersheva, for Gilgal should surely go to exile and Bethel should come to nothing.” Your sanctuaries are not going to save you, but if you would turn back to God, and if you would revise your lifestyle, it will.

“Seek the Lord and live, unless he break out like fire in the house of Joseph and devour with none to quench it for Bethel. Seek good,” chapter 5:14, “and not evil that you may live, and so the Lord, the God of Hosts, will be with you, as you have said. Hate evil and love good and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of Hosts, may be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.” Chapter 5, verses 23 and 24, “Take
away from me the noise of your songs and the melodies of your harps; I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.”

So what you should see in chapters 3 to 6 is that along with these horrible warnings of judgment there is an urgent plea to repent and turn back to God. I believe that a lot of people, and I think as people look at this from a modern and contemporary perspective, a lot of people would look at the horrible things that we’ve read in Amos 3 to 6 and say, “This is why I don’t really want to know. This is why I’m not drawn to the God of the Old Testament. He is an angry, wrathful, judgmental God.” But what I see here as well is the other side of God’s character, and I see the reality of Exodus 34, verses 6 and 7. He is a God of *hesed*, covenant faithfulness. He is a God of compassion. He is a God who is slow to anger, and even at this point in Israel’s history, where they have angered him for hundreds of years and their covenant violations have become too severe for him to ignore, there is still, even at the end of the story, the possibility of repentance.

In that passage in Exodus 34, the Lord says, “I showed my *hesed* in my covenant faithfulness to a thousand generations. I visit the iniquity to the fathers down to the third and the fourth generation.” The Lord may judge for three to four generations, but his covenant faithfulness, and his love and his compassion, and his quality of being—slow to anger—those are the characteristics that are most prominent in the Old Testament. And here we see his will: There is judgment coming, but the reason that God has raised up this prophet is that the lion is roaring, warning his people of the judgment that is coming and giving them the opportunity to repent. We see a God in the Old Testament who is holy, who does hate sin, who ultimately must hold people accountable; but we also see a God who is not willing that any should perish, and a God who does not take delight in the death of the wicked. We see that here: in the calls to repentance, in the warnings of the prophets that are being given to us in Amos chapter 3 through chapter 6.