

# Interpreting the Signs

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Our Heavenly Father, as we come under your word tonight, we pray that it may teach us, correct us, rebuke us, and train us in righteousness, and equip us for every good work, for the glory of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Amen.

For example, avoiding sexism, Cinderella has a fairy god person. You wouldn't want to call it a fairy godmother, a fairy god person. And again, avoiding the sort of caricatures of women and fashion, Cinderella, in fact, doesn't like the high heels and the beautiful clothes that this fairy god person gives her.

She prefers the more comfortable peasant clothes that she was used to wearing. Again, with Snow White, she spends her time in the company of seven vertically challenged men for political correctness.

And Little Red Riding Hood, who in the story that you may remember, is rescued by the gallant woodsman. Well, she doesn't need a man to rescue her.

[ 1 : 3 4 ] She rejects him when he comes to save her. Sends him out again. Well, I find politically correct language is a bit of a minefield. One that I've tripped over many times over the years and have been in trouble with as a sort of sexist man, not knowing the politically correct terms to use.

So that's partly perhaps why I like Amos, because he's not politically correct in any way. For example, he calls women fat cows. So we men, you see, we've got biblical precedent and biblical authority.

Well, Bashan, where fat cows were from, was renowned as a fertile place and prosperous for its agriculture.

And in fact, as Amos calls these women at the beginning of chapter four, fat cows, hear this word, you fat cows, literally of Bashan on Mount Samaria. Well, he's not referring to literal cows because Bashan is not on Mount Samaria.

He's referring to the wealthy women of the capital city of the northern kingdom of Israel in the eighth century BC. I've been to Bashan. There are fat cows. It was quite fun with a few friends in a group once winding down the windows and shouting out the windows.

[ 2 : 5 6 ] Hear this word of God, you fat cows of Bashan. Their response was moo. So Amos is addressing wealthy women, the leading ladies of the nation.

I can never work out whether you're supposed to say women or ladies, it seems to me. So I'll use both and get into trouble both ways. Later on, let me assure you, Amos does address men later in this book.

So he's not totally sexist in those he addresses. Why does he address them? What's he rebuking them for? In the second part of verse one, he says, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, bring us some drinks.

You see, these women are pampered pets. They are lolling about in indulgent idleness. They're called, they're snap their fingers for their husbands, bring us some more, you know, gin and tonic or an equivalent ancient version, something to drink.

And they are satisfying their own desires at the expense of the poor and needy in ancient Israel, in the people of God themselves. Rather than the Old Testament laws, which are so egalitarian between rich and poor, here are the rich lording it over the poor, becoming richer at their expense, exploiting the poor and dominating their husbands.

[ 4 : 25 ] But these lowing animals will be brought low by God, if you understand the pun. That is, these cows, cattle, which normally low in the Christmas carols, God will bring low.

So the verse two is God's announcement of judgment on these women. The sovereign Lord has sworn by his holiness. The time will surely come when you will be taken away with hooks.

The last of you with fish hooks. Now that might sound a strange sort of picture. You know, a little hook on the end of a fishing line, taking away this big cow.

But actually, there's astonishing truth in this warning. Amos is preaching around about 740 BC. That sort of period, 750 maybe BC.

The people of God is divided into two for 200 years, and he's addressing the northerners. Israel, it's called. The south is Judah. The northern kingdom of Israel fell in 721, 20 or 30 years at the most later than these words.

[ 5 : 37 ] It fell to the then world power of Assyria. Nothing to do with Syria, though it sounds similar. The Assyrians conquered northern kingdom in 721.

And when they did that, according to the archaeological finds of reliefs, that is, a picture scratched into stone, what you see are the Israelites being led away captive with hooks into their face or mouth, chains around their necks.

It's as if Amos' poetic language is strikingly fulfilled when the northern kingdom fell so soon after these words of warning.

Why is he? Why is this warning here? What's going on? Ancient Israel in those days was wealthy. King Jeroboam II had not long died, and he'd reigned a long time, and it was a fairly wealthy place.

Nothing like Solomon's kingdom 200 years before, but still wealthy and relatively secure. Though after Jeroboam II died, it fell fairly quickly, and the Assyrians were rising fairly quickly.

[ 6 : 54 ] In that wealthy life and existence, there was great spiritual complacency. After all, isn't wealth a blessing from God?

Therefore, aren't we blessed? Isn't our lifestyle endorsed by God? Let's keep doing what we're doing. And that's what Amos is trying to shock them with in a book that is full of, indeed, shocking language.

So you will go straight out, verse 3 says, through breaches in the wall, and you will be cast out towards Haman, declares the Lord. Haman's unknown by modern writers, presumably an Assyrian town somewhere where they're taken away into exile.

The breaches in the wall show the fall of the capital city. Samaria was thought to be close to impregnable. That is, it was a hill that was not connected to any other hill, so it stood isolated.

Therefore, the wall around the top was secure in every direction. It was the capital city built only 100 or more years earlier by King Omri.

[ 8 : 05 ] Very wealthy city. The archaeological remains show great wealth from Omri's day onwards until its fall. But it wasn't impregnable.

It fell. The Assyrians conquered it. And these ladies, lying back on their lounges, calling for another gin and tonic from their poor, suffering husbands, are not aware of the danger that is imminent.

They are living up the luxury as if God was applauding them. But not so. This is a serious and solemn warning from Amos the prophet.

They do not understand their situation. They do not understand the times in which they live. They do not understand God's law and how they're breaking it.

And they do not understand what God is about to do. So the first section of this chapter are warnings to women. To wealthy women.

[ 9 : 12 ] In verses 1 to 3. Not an idle warning. A warning, of course, that is fulfilled within 20 to 30 years of Amos speaking these words.

Let us also take heed. When we live in wealth and opulence, in a society that encourages indulgence and idleness.

Let us take heed. Amos turns his attention in verse 4 from women to issues of worship. And here he is no less sarcastic.

I quite like sarcasm. Especially when the people who listen to me don't get it. And Amos is a great master of sarcasm.

Hear what he says in verse 4 at the beginning of this new section. Go, or literally come, to Bethel. Come to Gilgal.

[ 10 : 17 ] Bethel and Gilgal were major places of worship in ancient Israel. Bethel was one of the two major shrines of the northern kingdom. It's where the first king of the north, Jeroboam I, had built a place of worship of golden calf at Bethel and further north in Dan.

Gilgal was also a sacred place for the whole of Israel. It was where stones were set up after crossing the Jordan River. And it was a place that marked the arrival into the promised land from ancient times in the time of Joshua.

It seems that Gilgal remained even for the northern kingdom a significant place of worship, a shrine of sacrifice and so on.

And as Amos says these words, come to Bethel, come to Gilgal. He's mimicking the priests. A bit like a church bell that you might hear in the morning that tells the village, come to church.

The priest might stand up, come, come to Bethel, come to Gilgal. But Bethel is illegitimate worship. Golden calf worship, idolatry.

[ 11 : 24 ] And Gilgal's worship, we're not sure exactly the details of Amos' day. But it seems that its worship also has become idolatrous or illegitimate in God's eyes.

Well, normally a pilgrim might have heard these words with joy. Come to Bethel, come to Gilgal. But what does Amos say? Come to Bethel and sin.

Come to Gilgal and sin yet more. Well, that's the sarcasm. That's the irony, the twist in the tale. That's not what a priest would say.

You imagine tonight as you arrived at Holy Trinity and out the front there just before the main entrance door. Andrew or Matt or Nathan or somebody is there saying, come, come to Holy Trinity.

Come and sin. You'd be shocked, wouldn't you? You ought to be. I haven't heard them say that. I hope they don't. Well, Amos' words are shocking.

[ 12 : 28 ] Come to the equivalent of church and sin. I mean, this is the place of holiness, isn't it? This is the place of meeting with God. Sin is the opposite of what you might expect. Amos here is shocking Israel deliberately.

And again, that's one of the things I like about this book. His use of language that is so shocking, surprising, confronting. Because I think what happens is that when we are entrenched in our sinful patterns and behaviors, we don't realize it.

We're blind to it. We're blind to it. We're deaf to it. We don't recognize that our path is heading the wrong direction from God. Sin is blinding.

It dulls us. And so what we see in a book like Amos, where the people were fairly wealthy, complacent in their sin, is he can't simply say, oh, did you know you're sinning here?

Oh, no, we're not. So what he does is pull out all the guns, the big artillery, to jolt them awake. Come to Bethel and sin.

[ 13 : 39 ] Come to Gilgal and sin yet more, he says. And then in a very sarcastic way, he goes on in the rest of verse 4 into 5 saying, bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every...

Well, this is where I don't like the NIV. Sorry. They've changed the Bibles here since I was here last year. Every three days. I mean, it doesn't make sense to bring your tithes every three days, which is probably why the NIV has changed it.

But actually, Amos, I'm sure, said that because normally a tithe would come every year, not every three years. And Amos, I think, is parodying their high religious piety.

Here are people who are very religious, who are very devout, who love to bring their sacrifices every morning. Their tithes even every three days. That's how religious we are.

Aren't we good? All the time covering up their idolatry and their immorality. See verse 5. Burn leavened bread as a thank offering and brag about your freewill offerings.

[ 14 : 47 ] Well, freewill offerings were not to be bragged about. They're an act of piety between you and God. Here are people boasting in their spirituality. Look how religious we are.

Look how good and devoted and devout we are. Boast about them, you Israelites, for this is what you love to do, declares the sovereign Lord. You see, in their immoral lifestyles, they are not less religious, but they are more religious.

They think that their religiosity has guaranteed them a place of confidence with God, but not so. So, as Amos later in the next chapter will go on to say, God hates their feasts and their religious practices.

They're all the religious devotion in the world counts for nothing. Indeed, it's negative value if it's associated with immoral and idolatrous lives. These are shocking words.

Words to the very religious core of ancient Israel. These are the sorts of words that Amos is addressing to the equivalent of committed members of a church.

[ 15 : 55 ] The ones who come to Bible study three times a week. Who are on seven church committees. Who give double their tithes. Et cetera, et cetera. What a shock.

Are you listening? Are you listening to these very shocking words? You see, God is actually absent from their worship.

It's become an empty ritual that has no moral association. No love of God. No real concern for the glory and holiness of God.

This is worship that has got wrong motives. It is self-pleasing, not God-pleasing. In fact, verse 4 says, bring your sacrifices. Because normally you might expect it to say, bring God's sacrifices.

But not here. God's disowned them. They are boasting in their piety. Not humble. And they're burning leavened bread.

[ 16 : 57 ] Which seems to break Moses' law as well. They're playing games of ritual, basically. There's a smug self-satisfaction here that is oozing from their praying hands.

And from praying on the Sabbath, they just turn to pray on their neighbors and to pray on the poor, as we saw about the wealthy women. And their piety adds to their sin.

It doesn't balance it out in the eternal ledger. It makes them even more sinful. I guess we need to be careful.

We need to be careful that we don't have merely the outward form of piety or godliness that perhaps covers up, in our own minds at least, some inner immorality.

We need to be careful that we don't love church more than we love God. That we don't love the music more than the majesty of God. Or we don't love the ritual somehow more than the righteousness that God demands.

[ 17 : 59 ] That our motivation is not our own indulgence and pleasure. But our motivation is God's glory and honor and holiness. And this warning applies even most to the super committed.

Many of you. Let us take heed. From women, Amos has addressed something about worship. And now, perhaps unusually in my sermons, those who've heard me preach often will know.

Warnings. Women worship warnings. It's not often I have alliteration. One of the great dilemmas we face in the world, people in general face, and Christians especially, I think, face, is why has this event happened?

What does it mean? When Melbourne was engulfed in bushfire in February 2009, what is God doing and saying?

Was it right, as some Christians claimed, that this was the judgment of God against the loose abortion laws in Victoria? I found that offensive.

[ 19 : 15 ] One of my godly Christian friends died in the bushfires. When an earthquake destroyed Christchurch, the same thing. Christian churches got up and said, this is God's judgment against the loose morality of New Zealand.

What about the Japanese tsunami a few years ago in 2011? Or the earthquake there? What about the tsunami around the Indian Ocean in 2004? Or Cyclone Nargis in Burma in 2008?

And on and on and on and on it could go. What is God doing? And sometimes Christians make these great statements, even in September 11, 2001, New York. This is God's judgment against the abortion laws of the United States of America, for example.

I find all that sort of thing fairly offensive, to be honest. Not that God doesn't bring judgment. But how do we interpret signs? How do we interpret our world and what's going on?

Well, for ancient Israel, they're in a different situation from a modern country. Ancient Israel is the chosen people of God. No other country since Jesus fulfills that role in any respect, really.

[ 20 : 24 ] But what about for them first? Well, God had brought various things against them. In verse 6 we read, I gave you empty stomachs and lack of bread in every town.

Actually, again, the language has changed a bit because literally it says, I gave you clean teeth. But that's not because God was a Colgate salesman.

I gave you clean teeth because there was no food to eat. It was a famine. God had brought a famine against Israel. No food.

An empty stomach, therefore. But it's taken away, you see, the poetic language, sadly, in this translation, I think. In verse 7, rain was withheld and the harvest was three months away.

That is, the harvest didn't come. It needed that early rain. It didn't come. There was a drought. No rain, no spring rain in May or June, probably, for that harvest. And then in verse 9, gardens and vineyards struck with blight or mildew.

[ 21 : 34 ] And in addition, fruit trees, olive trees struck with locusts. The fruit gone by blight or mildew or locusts. What's going on in these events that have happened, presumably, relatively recently in Israel's history?

The blight would come from an east wind that dries and scorches the grain. The mildew would be some form of worm, apparently, that turns the tips of the plants pale, and therefore they don't bear the fruit.

All the main crops are mentioned here, gone in some sort of pestilence or whatever, disease sort of thing.

In verse 10, plagues among you, like in Egypt, and young men killed by the sword, maybe an enemy attack that's defeated some people, maybe taken part of the land.

What's going on in those sorts of events that, presumably, again, are fairly recent in their history? And then in verse 11, some of you overthrown, like at Sodom and Gomorrah.

[ 22 : 41 ] Well, Sodom and Gomorrah are notoriously evil, wicked cities from the book of Genesis, that God utterly destroyed, bringing out Abraham's nephew Lot and his family at the last minute.

Known for their general wickedness, thoroughly evil. God brought judgment. And here, the striking thing is that those sort of pagan cities that become like models of judgment because of their wickedness, well, that's being applied to God's people here.

I overthrew some of you, you Israelites, like at Sodom and Gomorrah. How is Israel to understand those events as they happen?

We take it that Amos is being accurate here, and that in recent years, Israel has experienced all of these things at some point or other. That there has been a famine and a drought and some plague and mildew and locust attack, and some form of enemy attack and destruction or devastation of a city or more.

What does it mean? Or does it mean anything? Is it just the vagaries of nature that we fluctuate from El Nino to whatever the other one is?

[ 23 : 59 ] I can never remember that one. The dry, the wet. Is it that nature is random? The wind blows and it blows in a different direction, goes round and round, like Ecclesiastes tells us.

Is there a sort of randomness to this world? A lack of meaning? Vanity, vanity, all is vanity. Meaninglessness. How do we interpret those sorts of events?

How is ancient Israel to interpret those sorts of events? Well, at the end of each of these five, there's five parallel paragraphs here. The end of each of them comes the same refrain.

At the end of verse six, yet you have not returned to me, declares the Lord. At the end of verse eight, yet you have not returned to me, declares the Lord.

At the end of verse nine, yet you have not returned to me, says the Lord. At the end of verse 10, yet you have not returned to me, declares the Lord. And the same at the end of verse 11. Yet you have not returned to me, declares the Lord.

[ 25 : 01 ] Five times. all these disasters are from god i sent the plague i sent the famine i god first person singular is the subject of all of the key verbs here it's god who's done it not nature not coincidence it's not random events god has done it indeed to his own people why well the end of each verse gives us the clue yet you did not return to me that is god has done each of these acts of some punishment or judgment to try and bring his people to return to him him personally him in a relationship but they haven't done it but why should they why should a drought or an enemy attack lead people to turn back to god what's the connection what's the logical or the theological connection here all these disasters you see are acts of some judgment by god punishment punishment for their sins punishment for their wickedness their evil doing punishment for their idolatry punishment for their immorality but could the people of israel interpret it that way they are also punishment tinged with grace a real punishment yet the opportunity the prompt to return to god but they didn't you see israel should have understood each of these events because each one of these five events most clearly come from the same earlier chapter of the bible from the end of leviticus or the end of deuteronomy there comes a comes a section that is often called the covenant curses if you do not obey god then this is what will happen a drought a famine blight mildew locust enemy attack devastation they're all there if israel knew their bibles well then when each of those events occurred they should know they should remember they should recognize why has this happened because our bible tells us the law of moses tells us in leviticus or deuteronomy that these are god's punishments for our sin but notice here the grace of god that each one of these punishments is the prompt to return to repent of sin real punishment but real opportunity to come back to god it's not a final punishment it's not a sort of blip you're gone no chance of repentance but the opportunity to turn back to god and israel should have known israel should have recognized from the bible from their old testament or from their bibles from the books of leviticus and deuteronomy but not one of these disasters has led them to turn back to god not one and that was their point so here is a people who are experiencing a famine of god's word who do not know god's word they're ignorant of it their lives are full of outward piety but they haven't applied god's word to their inner hearts at all and so all these punishments these droughts and famines and so on have not in fact led to the repentance to the return of god's people blinded by sin they are blind to the warning signs they are just complacent contented and god's warnings have gone unheeded and now amos says god's patience has expired time's up god's given you a chance he's given you

plenty of chances he's given you at least five chances and you've ignored them and therefore this is what i will do to you israel says god in verse 12 and because i will do this to you israel prepare to meet your god not meet your god because you return to god but meet your god as judge he who forms the mountains who creates the wind who reveals his thoughts to mankind who turns dawn to darkness and treads on the heights of the earth the lord almighty is his name that's the god the creator god the god of all things that's the god you need to be prepared to meet not some cozy comfortable santa claus type god but the god who's lord of all maybe amos at the end of that chapter in verse 13 is quoting some hymn which may be used as a statement of praise about the glory of the creator god but if indeed this is the god of such glorious creator power he's also the god of such power to judge a ferocious god a god who can create the world a god who can bring real judgment as well take god seriously is what amos is saying and to meet this god is surely then to fear god will not be forever indifferent or patient with the sins of his people the time is coming amos says when god will bring final judgment for ancient israel that was the end of the nation 20 years later gone exile again not to be unexpected because again in leuiticus and deuteronomy the same sections droughts famines blight mildew locusts enemy attack devastation and what's the end of the sequence in deuteronomy and leuiticus exile gone as a nation away from the land and that's what amos is going right on to in the next chapter to say you will surely go into exile but what about us how do we respond to things like this because we're not ancient israel australia is not a nation of god's people no nation since christ is like that how does this then apply you see god's people is a church scattered throughout the world how do we understand droughts and famines and so on is it right to stand up and say this is god's judgment against the sins of the state of victoria or something like that i don't think we can have that confidence for individual events i don't think we can have that arrogance of interpretation either but i think we can understand because god has given us enough to understand we may not understand why god allows 180 something people to die in a bushfire around melbourne we may not understand why god allows the same rough number to be killed in a christ church earthquake or thousands to be killed in japan or even hundreds of thousands in the indian ocean and in burma in recent years but we can understand what our response is meant to be just as for ancient israel yet you did not turn to me the same response still applies jesus told his followers in answer to a question how to interpret the disasters of our age whether man-made evils or a natural sort of disaster the collapse of a building the question why is perhaps the wrong question how should i respond is the right one and jesus words echoed amos's really return to god

repent of your sin in a drought in a famine blight or mildew some natural catastrophe or even some man-made evil that you might be part of or read about return to god be ready to meet your god that's what god is saying to us we live in a world in which we assume that we will meet god one day eventually but it may not be far away it may be sudden it may be soon the events of our world then and now are gracious warnings to us to make sure we live our lives in readiness that we live our lives from the inside out in godly righteousness that we don't deceive ourselves and think that our piety can cover over the wickedness of our hearts as it did in amos's day this chapter is warning us now is the time don't put off till tomorrow now is the time to make sure you've turned turned back to god in repentance away from sins of immorality and idolatry to a humble faith under god and his word let us then take heed let us pray almighty god you've made very clear in scripture that you are sovereign over all things this whole world is under your power that you control the wind and the waves that you are the judge of the living and the dead and you've given us plentiful warnings throughout history that you alone are god may we live each day ready to meet you the lord of all creation the judge of the living and the dead not trusting in our own piety or boasting in it but boasting in christ in christ alone amen you