

The Secret of Life  
Amos 5:6-7, 10-15  
October 11, 2015

*Seek the Lord and live, lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and it devour, with none to quench it for Bethel, O you who turn justice to wormwood and cast down righteousness to the earth! They hate him who reproves in the gate, and they abhor him who speaks the truth. Therefore because you trample on the poor and you exact taxes of grain from him, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not dwell in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions and how great are your sins – you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate. Therefore he who is prudent will keep silent in such a time, for it is an evil time. Seek good, 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, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.*

The prophet Amos ministered to the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II in the eighth century B.C. This was the most prosperous period the Northern Kingdom ever enjoyed. But prosperity isn't always a sign that all is well between you and the Lord. Israel was practicing every kind of sin imaginable, including idolatry. While they were sinning, they were telling themselves they were good, God-fearing people.

A story is told about a corrupt judge, who opened court one morning with these words, "I have two checks in my hand. One check is from the defendant for \$15,000. The other is from the plaintiff for \$10,000. It is my intention to return \$5,000 to the defendant and then judge this case strictly on its merits." You can't mix sin and integrity.

Amos calls on the people to: *Seek the Lord and live* (Am 5:6 ESV). We seek God through repentance over our corruption and sin. God forgives us and gives us life; a new life, by which we are able to renounce unrighteousness and oppression. A new life which enables us to hate evil and promote justice. Because, you can't hate evil and promote justice without the help of God.

Psalm 1 begins: *Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers* (Ps 1:1 ESV). Why is this man blessed (or happy)? Because God is a righteous judge. God will never turn a blind eye to sin. All sin must be punished.

The Northern Kingdom of Israel had forgotten that. They assumed that since the economy was good, God must be on their side. They must have thought that God would never punish their sin. Maybe they thought that God couldn't punish them. They were so mistaken.

When the Northern Kingdom was overrun by the Assyrians in 720 B.C., it was never heard from again. The God that the Northern Kingdom snubbed, is the God that Amos

described like this: *He who made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into the morning and darkens the day into night, who calls for the waters of the sea and pours them out on the surface of the earth, the Lord is his name; who makes destruction flash forth against the strong, so that destruction comes upon the fortress* (Am 5:8-9 ESV).

By engaging in idolatry, the Northern Kingdom lost her spiritual virginity, her purity, and her faithfulness to God. Her sin, and her lack of repentance, sealed her fate. Amos writes: *Fallen, no more to rise, is the virgin Israel; forsaken on her land, with none to raise her up* (Am 5:2 ESV).

This chapter of Amos is a funeral dirge, an elegy. This is a poem mourning the death of the Northern Kingdom, even though everything appeared to be “sunshine and roses.” The Northern Kingdom had forgotten God, and the people must have been standing around slack jawed listening as Amos delivered their obituary.

How easy it is to forget God when everything is going our way. Little by little we begin to drift away from God as we are lulled into thinking that our source of life is in the things of this world, or within ourselves.

Our nation has been drifting for a long time. Little by little this country is pulling away from the spiritual moorings it was anchored upon. You may find something Thomas Jefferson said both shocking and true. Jefferson said, “*God, who gave us life, gave us liberty. Can the liberty of a nation be secure when we remove a conviction that these liberties are the gift of God? Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that his justice cannot sleep forever.*”

God is righteous. God is just. He still punishes sin, just as he did with the Northern Kingdom.

Yet God is also merciful. He holds out the promise of forgiveness when we repent of our sinful ways. God sent Jesus to pay the price of our sinfulness. Through faith in Jesus, we are forgiven. Saint John writes: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness* (1 Jn 1:9 ESV).

God makes us new creations in Christ. Paul told the Corinthian church: *If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come* (2 Co 5:17 ESV). This is what Martin Luther called the “Glorious Exchange” – Christ takes our sin and gives us his righteousness. Scripture tells us: *In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ* (Ga 3:26-27 ESV).

Early one morning, fire broke out in a house. As the fire engines arrived, flames were leaping high into the air. Suddenly a young man appeared at an upper window in his pajamas. Firemen quickly placed a ladder against the burning building, but the man refused to climb down, shouting that he had to get dressed first. The firemen pleaded, “Come as you are,” but to no avail. They tried to ascend the ladder, but were turned back as the wind fanned the flames into a fury. Suddenly the roof caved in. The man

had waited too long.

Amos called on the people to seek God and live. He called on them to flee from the wrath to come. He begged them to return to God. But the people refused. They died and their kingdom was forever lost because they wanted to dress themselves in the clothing of self-righteousness and self-serving religion.

We, as individuals and as a nation, have a choice. We can go the way of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, or we can do our best to live out the righteousness of God.

There was flagrant and open injustice in Israel. Speaking through Amos, God warns Israel and America: *You hate the one who reproves in court and despise him who tells the truth. 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. For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts* (Am 5:10-12 NIV).

The sins of the Northern Kingdom are with us today. Truth is ignored, the poor are trampled under the feet of the rich, and justice is sold to the highest bidder. However, the greatest travesty of our day is that those who witness to the truth of Jesus Christ are often ignored or silenced in the public arena.

This is the current direction of our nation, but we don't have to follow that course. We can make the choice to live justly. If you don't know how to live a just and righteous life, the way is simple. There are printed instructions for living out the justice of God.

A huge painting by Paul Robert hangs in the Supreme Court Building in Switzerland. Its title is "Justice Instructing the Judges." In the foreground are the litigants: wife against husband, architect against builder, and so on. Above them stand the Swiss judges, with their little white dickeys. How will they decide? Justice is usually portrayed as a blindfolded lady, holding a sword vertically. But in this painting her eyes are open, and her sword points downward to a book on which is written, "The Word of God."

We work for justice today, in our own conduct as we care for others, and in society as we witness to our faith. We refuse to be bribed into the ways of the world. We refuse to keep silent when injustice is all around. We speak out when the government passes laws that encourage people to live sinful lifestyles. We speak out when the unborn are mercilessly killed with the permission of those we elect to office. We speak out when the elderly are forgotten and neglected.

Through the prophet Amos, God is calling us to seek him and live. We need to repent daily of our sinful ways. We need to daily ask God to forgive our wayward nation. We need to ask God to give us the power to turn from evil and seek good, so that the world will see the love of Jesus shining out through us.