

A Memphis Summer

It has been a tumultuous summer in our nation and in Memphis, Tennessee. We have seen on graphic video the police shootings of Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, and Charles Kinsey. Several weeks ago hundreds of our young people occupied the I-40 bridge protesting the apparent racial injustice in our law enforcement. This calls for study of God's word!

Amos was a mid-8th century BC prophet. Although he was from Tekoah, in Judah, God called him to speak primarily to the northern kingdom of Israel. During this particular era, Israel was feeling very secure and they were experiencing much material prosperity. They had become somewhat arrogant, self-satisfied, and indifferent to the things of God. God called Amos to speak clearly to them.

Amos 5:18-27

18 Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord!
Why would you have the day of the Lord?
It is darkness, and not light,

19 as if a man fled from a lion,
and a bear met him,
or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall,
and a serpent bit him.

20 Is not the day of the Lord darkness, and not light,
and gloom with no brightness in it?

21 "I hate, I despise your feasts,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the peace offerings of your fattened animals,
I will not look upon them.

23 Take away from me the noise of your songs;
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.

24 But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

25 "Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?

26 You shall take up Sikkuth your king, and Kiyyun your star-god—your images that you made for yourselves,
27 and I will send you into exile beyond Damascus," says the Lord, whose name is the God of hosts.

I. God pronounces a woe upon His own people (vv. 18-20)

Amos asks the Israelites why they are longing for "the day of the Lord." Israelites normally longed for the day of the Lord because it would be a day when God would vindicate them against their enemies (see Isaiah 13, Jeremiah 46, Obadiah 15). But in this case the woe is pronounced against God's own people for their disobedience.

II. God pronounces a woe upon His people because of their unethical behavior (vv. 21-27)

A. They separate their social ethics from their worship (vv. 21-23)

The Israelites thought they could treat God like a pagan idol, simply offering gifts to Him and singing songs of the liturgy but then going out into the world and living their own way. God makes it clear He will not accept their worship under those conditions. Not only will He not accept it, He hates it! These are strong words. The Israelites were being hypocrites. They were saying one thing in their liturgy but living out an entirely different theology and worldview in their daily lives.

B. They were withholding justice and righteousness (vv. 24-25).

Clearly, Amos conveys God's demand for justice and righteousness. The Israelites were oppressing the poor: "those who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and turn aside the way of the afflicted" (2:7); "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..." (5:11). The Israelites were prosperous but they were not sharing their prosperity equally with the poor and the marginalized. We see that in our own day as the gap between rich and poor has dramatically increased. In the US today, the top .1% of the population has the financial worth equal to the lower 90% of the population. In 1965 a typical CEO made 44xs the salary of his workers. Today it is 354xs! Likewise, in the area of law enforcement, we can see injustices. African Americans are stopped, searched, and shot unarmed at per capita rates significantly greater than that of Caucasians. The graphic videos of this summer have reminded us of these realities. The biblical word "justice" means to offer or to give a neighbor his due according to biblical community standards. The biblical standards include legal justice but also include social justice. The word "justice" in the Old Testament Hebrew is used 425xs in the Old Testament.

But God also says that He wants righteousness to flow as an ever-flowing stream. The justice that we perform must be in accordance with God's law.

C. They were worshipping false gods (vv. 26-27).

Whenever we fail to exercise social justice according to God's word, it is clear we have simply chosen another god. This provokes God's anger, revealed in verses 26 and 27.

So what shall we do?

As followers of Christ, we must first of all address the apparent racial inequities in our law enforcement and judicial system. We believe that "black lives matter," and we say it loudly; at the same time, there is a movement called the Black Lives Matter movement which presents multiple difficulties for followers of Christ:

1) they actively embrace sexual immorality; 2) they make no distinction between the guilty and the innocent, seeking to indict, convict, and sentence policemen before there is a fair hearing; 3) they systematically exclude Christians and Christian theology; and 4) they are not careful to avoid inciting riots and angry mobs.

What then shall a Christian do? First of all, we shall seek to organize around biblical principles. There are 250 African American and Caucasian pastors who are meeting to do that very thing this summer. Secondly, we shall address several underlying issues that contribute to the inequities in our law enforcement and judicial systems: 1) pray; 2) make friends with those of another race; 3) listen sympathetically; 4) speak up; 5) engage the underlying issues of family and early childhood, unequal educational opportunities, creation of jobs for minorities, and the planting and revitalizing of Christ's church.

One cannot study Amos 5 without noticing the end of the book. In 9:11-15 God promises to restore the booth of David that is fallen (v. 11) and to plant them back on the land where they shall never be uprooted (v. 15). This all occurs because of the incarnation, sacrifice, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He is the one who bears the burden of all the world's injustices and calls us to walk in His steps.

Discussion Questions

1. What was so startling about Amos' prophecy?
2. How does the biblical idea of "justice" differ from our normal idea of justice in the West?
3. What injustices do you see in Memphis, TN? In our country? In the world?
4. What can we do to address the injustices that we see?
5. How should Christians view the Black Lives Matter movement?

Going Deeper

1. What action steps for justice have you been prompted to take?
2. In what situations can you speak up boldly and lovingly for biblical justice?