

Amos 5:18-24 (NIV)

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ Will not the day of the LORD be darkness, not light— pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness?

²¹ "I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. ²² 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. ²³ Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. ²⁴ But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!

After the death of King Solomon, the kingdom of Israel divided into two separate kingdoms. The northern kingdom kept the name Israel and was ruled by a king named Jeroboam. Judah, in the south, was ruled by Solomon's son Rehoboam. Jeroboam didn't want his subjects going to Jerusalem, which was in Judah, in order to worship. So, he set up a golden calf statue in the shrine at Bethel, and another in the shrine at Gilgal. Then he told his people to worship God at these shrines, rather than going all the way south to Jerusalem. He sent priests to Bethel and it became the center of their modified religious devotion. In addition, Jeroboam instituted new feast days, new offerings, and changed the requirements for certain offerings. (For example, he declared that the bread offering should change from unleavened bread to leavened bread.)

For a while, this new smaller Israel lost territory. Then the Assyrians made their lives even harder when they started charging them "protection money" – as long as they paid the money, they were protected from being conquered by the Assyrians!

About 150 years after the kingdom had divided, Jeroboam II, a descendent of the first Jeroboam, became king. The Assyrians had started to have some internal problems so they backed off of Israel - for a while. Jeroboam II was able to expand the territory and influence of Israel considerably, even into pagan areas such as Moab, Philistia, parts of Syria, and other areas.

They imported wealth, customs, people, and pagan gods from these areas. Among those pagan gods were several fertility gods with their various immoral rituals, one god that demanded adult human sacrifice, another that demanded child sacrifice, a war god, a war goddess, a god of death and the underworld, and several nature gods. Israel was a model of religious and cultural diversity. And they were doing great in their own minds. The worshippers of Yahweh were very proud of the extent of their expanded nation and expanded religious devotion. They sacrificed and worshipped frequently at Bethel and Gilgal. They were proud of their wealth and their success. They took this as a sign that God was blessing them. In fact, they saw this as a sign that Yom Yahweh (the day of the Lord) was not very far off. On Yom Yahweh, God would punish all their enemies for all the things they had done wrong in the past, and make Israel the rulers of the whole world!

Then Amos showed up. Amos was from Judah, the southern kingdom. He was not a trained or professional preacher/ prophet. He was a sheep rancher and an orchardist. He was a very intelligent man, and clearly devoted to Yahweh. It was unheard of for prophets from Judah to go to Israel, but Amos obeyed when God called him to do so. At first, his message seemed right on track to the people gathered at the shrine in Bethel. Amos preached about how God was going to punish the groups Israel had fought with for so many years (and currently controlled) such as the Moabites, the Philistines, the Syrian, and others, for their cruelty in war, their enslavement of others, their violations of treaties with other nations, and their many other evils. Amos even prophesied God's punishment of Judah. But then, Amos shocked them. He prophesied against **them**.

See, the truth was that not everyone in Israel was wealthy. In fact, some people were very bad off and things were getting worse for them. The enthusiastic worship, was really just an attempt to manipulate Yahweh, just like the pagans in their midst believed they could manipulate their gods. Certain well-placed officials and wealthy landowners had managed to become *extremely* wealthy by manipulating credit and debt. With a bit of clout at the gates (where legal issues were settled, like in our courts) and some bribe

money, they could separate their debtors from their long-term ancestral farms. In fact, they perverted the legal system to the point that they could even force their debtors into slavery for owing as little as the price of a new pair of sandals. The wealthy had mansions built with ivory inlays to use as their summer homes and winter homes. Rich women would urge their husbands to grab more and more wealth from those with no recourse so that they could buy more luxuries. Amos called them pampered cows. I wonder if there are rich pampered amoral women in our society today? How about greedy, dishonest, unethical, unscrupulous business people? Because of recent events, we might tend to think of investment bankers, and politicians, but we might also think about members of drug cartels, local drug dealers and drug manufacturers, organized crime, gangs, and others who prey on their neighbors. How much prostitution, immorality, violence and child sacrifice occurs today as part of the worship of the demon-god called meth? Who get rich off drugs? Who suffers?

Rather than helping the needy among them, the people of Israel took from them and made their lives worse. Through their abuse of the legal system, they stole from the poor and the widows and the orphans, sometimes finally selling them into slavery when there was nothing left to steal. Israel teemed with gross immorality, injustice, and violence.

Their rituals had become a substitute for morality, ethics, decency, and kindness to others. The rituals let the wealthy of Israel see themselves as good, as people who pleased God. But they were fooling themselves.

What if there were people today who considered themselves Christian, went to church regularly, but were really a lot like the people in Israel? Picture a large, wealthy congregation, full of the movers and shakers of our country, politicians, lobbyists, heads of government agencies, etc. – the type of place Senators, CEOs, and Presidents would feel comfortable in. Who, despite their own wealth have “reached out” to the D.C. community and bus some of them in each Sunday. Picture a huge paid staff who develop and provide an almost endless array of programs for all the various age and interest groups in the congregation.

What might Amos say to them? Perhaps -----

“Woe to you, I mourn for 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 if you ran from a lion only to meet a bear, as if you ran into your house for safety, only to get bitten by a rattlesnake.

Don't you know that the day of the LORD going to be darkness? No light-- pitch-darkness, without a ray of brightness?

You don't really want the LORD to come anytime soon. God is NOT happy with you.

The LORD's message to you is this:

{with barely constrained fury}

I hate, I despise your so-called Christian feasts; they are orgies of consumerism. I can't stand your celebrations. You set up trees and greens and banners and candles, and spend massive amounts of money giving gifts to others who have too much. Why?

You bring special Christmas offerings, and special gifts for the poor, and shoeboxes of toys, but I won't accept them from you. Where are these things the rest of the year? What are you doing the rest of your time?

I know the answer. The rest of your time you are making deals that cheat others. You are selling drugs to kids. You are looking at pornography and going to prostitutes on the sly right before your very public meetings on preventing human trafficking. You are scamming the welfare system, and several charitable agencies so you can use the cash you make under the table to buy a giant high def TV and the latest iPhone for yourself for Christmas. You are cheating on your husband, neglecting your children, maxing out your credit cards to buy stuff to impress

others, and numbing yourself with pills. I don't care a thing about your Christmas Fellowship dinners. Get your hymns and your praise music away from me! I'm tired of your catchy slogans and your latest programs, and your fund-raising special offers. What does that have to do with me, your God? How can these things impress me when your hearts are so far away from me?

Do you even care what I want? What I want is justice that rolls on like a river and righteousness that is like a stream that never fails!

Stop for a moment and really imagine what Amos' hearers might be thinking.

The Jordan River was very important to the people of Israel because there were times of the year when there was very little rainfall. They also knew about streams that failed, the "wadis", deep gullies down the hillsides that are empty during the dry season, but become raging torrents of water during the rainy season. God doesn't want dry wadis or even occasional torrents of goodness. God wants righteousness and justice that is as deep and wide and flowing as a river and as powerful as a raging wadi that never goes dry.

Amos's call for justice and righteousness was a reminder of the ancient covenant laws. Yahweh is morally perfect, perfectly just, perfect in judgment, and perfectly righteous. Justice and righteousness are not just required of individuals, but of nations. God requires moral and ethical behavior of ALL people, but especially of those who are His own.

So, what IS justice? What IS righteousness. What do they look like in a people? How does an individual who is just and righteous person act? According to the epistle written by Jesus' brother James, the just person doesn't show partiality. It means that we treat the rich and the poor the same. We treat the powerful and the powerless equally. We speak with the same level of respect to the homeless person, the street drunk, the drug addict, and the male prostitute as we would show to the mayor, or the President. Being just means that you don't see your own sins as small and other people's sins as big. The just person cares for widows and orphans in distress. The just person behaves in a righteous manner. In both Hebrew and Greek, there are words for justice and righteousness that are almost identical. The ideas go together. You are not righteous if you are unjust. You are unjust if you do not do what is right.

Job, of Old Testament Book of Job fame was declared by God to be a righteous man. God called him "blameless," "upright," and a man who "shunned evil." We know from the text that Job was faithful to his wife in thought and action. He never neglected the needs of the poor. He took care of widows. He raised orphans as his own. He was honest. He didn't envy others. He treated his employees fairly, and if one had a grievance with him, he listened and corrected things if he was in the wrong. He never let travelers sleep on the city streets, but kept his doors open for them to come in. He provided garments made from the wool of his sheep for any who lacked clothes. He never put his trust in gold. He never worshipped nature or the stars. He never gloated over an enemy's misfortune or cursed an enemy. His employees could always get meat from him. He took time at the gate (in court) to fully understand case issues so that his decisions would be fair. He never used his influence for personal gain. He taught others, helped the feeble, strengthened the weak, and was very aware that his own righteousness was nothing compared to the righteousness of God.

Job was basically the opposite of what the people of Israel had become. Job was the real thing, not a poser like the worshippers at Bethel. (Aside, Bethel means *Beth*-House of, *El* – God. House of God. Hosea, whose ministry was a short time after Amos' called the same shrine "*Beth Aven*" or House of evil, trouble, nothingness.) The activity at Bethel had strayed so far that it was no longer worship of Yahweh.

God doesn't want us to "do church" or "go to church," we are to BE the church, to be Christ's hands and feet and eyes and ears on this earth. This is not a part-time weekend job. This is our existence and life as

Christians who seek God with all of our hearts, listening to God's Holy Spirit who dwells within each believer, moving in the direction that the Holy Spirit moves us.

And if the Holy Spirit isn't moving you, changing you, challenging you – you're not listening. I don't think it is simply an interesting coincidence that the Hebrew word for "spirit" *rauch*, also means "breath" and "wind" AND the Greek word for "spirit" *pneuma*, also means "breath" and "wind" the same symbolism in two very distinct languages.

Breath and wind both cause movement. Neither can be seen, but both can be felt. Movement is change. A man in a church where I worked once came to me angry and red-faced and yelled, "Don't change ANYTHING! I don't want ANYTHING to change!" Life is change. Cells die, new ones take their place. Reality is change. Things move. Subatomic particles appear and disappear. Everything is moving: quarks, muons, electrons, atoms, molecules, cells, organs, animals, plants, ocean waves, water current and air currents, underground rivers, plates and magma, the earth is rotating, and revolving around the sun, the solar system is revolving around the center of the galaxy, the galaxy is hurtling away from all the other galaxies in the universe, and there may be more movement beyond all this. God designed reality to change, and in our small part of reality, God gives us a choice: change that brings life and growth, or change that brings death and destruction. The Holy Spirit leads us to life.

We aren't called to "do church" or to go to church. We've been called to follow Jesus Christ and to be His body here on earth. Our call is to

"let justice roll on
like a river,
and let righteousness flow
like a never failing
stream."

Let's spend a few moments in silence and ask the Holy Spirit to fill us, to change us, and to guide us.