

THROUGH THE BIBLE STUDY

AMOS 4-6

Ehrich Weiss was one of the greatest escape artists of all time. His stage name was Harry Houdini.

One of Houdini's most spectacular feats occurred in New York harbor. Tied with a rope, locked in a packing case, bound with tape, he was tossed into the water.

He reappeared, unshackled, in just 59 seconds.

Houdini's assistants would say his motto was simple. They quoted him, **"I only get into situations that I can control and from which I can escape."** *And I would imagine we have a few escape artists with us tonight...*

Perhaps you live by Houdini's motto, **"I only get into situations that I can control and from which I can escape."** This is why many people run from God...

For God can't be controlled and from His scrutiny no one escapes! Try as you might, but it's impossible to free yourself from the shackles of divine accountability.

God has a way of cornering us. He orchestrates circumstances that often put us between a rock and a hard place - situations that force us to reconsider the direction of our lives. God can turn a person around.

In a myriad of ways it's been proven over and over *life cannot be controlled, and God cannot be escaped.*

And this is what Israel discovered. Famine, drought, pestilence, and plague - even the threat of war - were trying

to arrest the people's attention and turn them back to God. Despite what they thought *they were not in control!* Despite what they said *they couldn't escape!*

Amos came warning Israel to repent and turn to God.

Tonight's chapters are summarized, 4:5, "*Thus says the LORD to the house of Israel: seek Me and live.*"

Chapter 4 starts with a word to the women of Samaria, "*Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, 'Bring wine, let us drink!'*" On one of our trips to Israel, while we were in Bashan, in northern Israel - I spotted several cows grazing on the hills - *cows of Bashan* - and I read this verse from Amos 4 on our tour bus.

Afterward, the gals on the tour bought me a souvenir, a cuddly cow. *They weren't too fond of this metaphor.*

Amos called the women of Israel "*fattened cows.*"

In a Sunday School class one little girl was asked if she knew the story of Adam and Eve. She replied, "*First, God made the man, and then looked at him and said, 'I think I can do better,' so He created the woman.*" Obviously, her version came from her mom.

But I believe there's some truth to that version.

It may be that women were the *first to be conned* by Satan, but women are often the *last to be corrupted.*

Traditionally, women have a stronger moral fiber and deeper spiritual leanings than men. That's why when a society's women become immoral you know the culture is depraved,

and well on its way to a demise. When women are corrupt the culture is headed for a collapse.

And such was the case in Samaria. The women of Samaria, the wives of the officials and nobles, had become cruel, greedy. The commoners were dying of thirst while they were in their penthouses getting drunk.

These women had gone from *nice* to *vice*. Rather than use their status to benefit the needy and work for the poor they were the oppressors. These "*cows of Bashan*" were spoiled and fat - and ready for slaughter.

I'm sure you've heard the phrase "*Jewish Princess*."

It describes a young, secular Jewess who lives a pampered, luxurious, extravagant life funded by a rich dad. Here, Amos is targeting the "*Jewish Princesses*" of his day - and he refers to them as "*cows of Bashan*."

Bashan is the fertile, lush pasture-land northeast of the Sea of Galilee. Amos being a cattle breeder knew that the sleekest, fattest livestock came from Bashan.

Their cows were plump and spoiled, and so were the women of Samaria. Amos pulls no punches! There was only one thing worse than riling the mayor of Samaria, and that was upsetting his wife. *Amos had courage...*

Verse 2, "*The Lord God has sworn by His holiness: "Behold, the days shall come upon you when He will take you away with fishhooks, and your posterity with fishhooks."* One of the practices of the Assyrian army was to place fishhooks in the

nose of their conquered subjects. Then, like a fish, drag them on a string.

It could also refer to grappling hooks that were used to move hay bales. Either way the calves, or children of the cows of Bashan were headed for serious judgment.

“You will go out through broken walls, each one straight ahead of her, and you will be cast into Harmon,” says the Lord.” There are some people who think “*Harmon*” was a dumping place for dead bodies.

All these distressing metaphors of an Assyrian invasion surely didn’t bode well for God’s people.

“Come to Bethel and transgress (remember Bethel was the site of the official idol of the northern kingdom of Israel), at Gilgal multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days.

Offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving with leaven, proclaim and announce the freewill offerings; for this you love, you children of Israel!” says the Lord God.”

Verses 4-5 are a parody and to help us understand it we need to get the picture. Imagine, being at Bethel.

The word “*Bethel*” means “house of God,” and this city had a rich history of encounters with God. It was at Bethel that Abraham built an altar to God and it was here that Jacob saw the ladder ascending into heaven.

But sadly it was also at Bethel that Jeroboam had set up one of his idolatrous altars. It was at Bethel that the people entered into false worship. They were bowing to a graven image in the name of the God of Israel.

Now imagine we're at Bethel on the day of a sacred feast. Streamers are blowing in the wind. Banners are unfurled. The streets are lined with decoration. Everyone is dressed to the hilt, in a festive mood.

We're waiting for the priest to open the ceremony with a traditional call to worship, Psalm 95:6-7, "Come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD our maker. For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand."

The priest is about to open his mouth when suddenly we hear the voice of Amos thunder the words... "*Come to Bethel and transgress... multiply transgression...*"

The Hebrew term "*transgress*" means "to break off." It's meaning is close to our word "mutiny."

Colliers Encyclopedia has an interesting definition for the word "mutiny" - it reads, "Simple disobedience or refusal to obey an order is mutinous; but no such single act of insubordination could be said to have flowered into full mutiny. A mutiny involves the intention to kill, displace, or continuously defy the officer."

And lest we become overburdened with guilt, realize a single act of disobedience is a sin certainly, but it stops short of idolatry. Sin is a violation of a **command**.

Whereas idolatry is an organized, premeditated attempt to usurp the authority of the **Commander**.

The nation Israel was guilty of disobeying the commands of God - but far worse, they had organized a system of religion that usurped the authority of God.

A single sin might be to glance at an ad or a billboard featuring a sexy girl and think a lustful thought. You should repent and try to avoid any future temptation.

But idolatry is to be tempted, sin - but then willfully ignore God's authority in that area of my life. *When the repetition of a sin is more my motive than repentance from that sin - then the sin becomes an idol in my life.*

Idolatry is the deliberate arranging and organizing of my life in such a way where I can pursue a sin and put myself in close proximity to its temptation.

Verse 6, *“Also I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places; yet you have not returned to Me,” says the Lord.* *“Cleanness of teeth”* was a proverbial expression for *“famine.”*

No food meant they didn't need to brush their teeth.

God sent Israel warnings! He orchestrated situations, one of which was a famine, to get their attention and cause them to realize they can't escape His judgment.

“I also withheld rain from you, when there were still three months to the harvest. I made it rain on one city, I withheld rain from another city. One part was rained upon, and where it did not rain the part withered. So two or three cities wandered to another city to drink water, but they were not satisfied; yet you have not returned to Me,” says the Lord.

“I blasted you with blight and mildew. When your gardens increased, your vineyards, your fig trees, and your olive trees,

the locust devoured them; yet you have not returned to Me,” says the Lord.

“I sent among you a plague after the manner of Egypt; your young men I killed with a sword, along with your captive horses; I made the stench of your camps come up into your nostrils; yet you have not returned to Me,” says the Lord.”

Last week we mentioned God’s blessing sometimes surprises us, but His judgments are always marked out by sufficient warnings. To be judged by God you need to have run a few stop signs.

Here in these verses, Amos describes the wake up calls God sent to Israel to try and get their attention.

I read recently where an FBI agent in Iowa ignored a “Do Not Enter” sign and barricades, and tried to save some time by cutting through a construction area.

He ended up driving his car into six inches of freshly poured cement, and was ultimately fined \$1000.

I don't care who you are, if you drive past God’s *warning signs* you are headed for *heavy fines!* You can stay out of wet cement by staying obedient to God.

He roars in verse 11, “I overthrew some of you, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and you were like a firebrand plucked from the burning; yet you have not returned to Me,” says the Lord.” Here’s a modern colloquialism we get from the Bible - “a brand plucked from the burning.” Like a red hot poker pulled from the fire, here’s a person rescued from fiery circumstances.

And this was Samaria, the capitol of Israel.

At the time, some of the surrounding Israeli cities had already fallen to the Assyrian army. Samaria had been spared. God kept rescuing the capitol from the fire, but *how much longer would His mercies last? How many times would God plucked them from the fire?*

And how many times has God spared you the results of some very foolish actions? How many times has He spared your very life? *When will you get the message?* Heed the warning, and return to God before its too late!

“Therefore thus will I do to you, O Israel; because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel!”

Remember Harry Houdini? Houdini thought that he could outsmart the grim reaper and escape death’s clutches. He once told his wife he’d try to appear to her after he died. It was the one stunt at which he failed!

Houdini could free himself from many a dangerous circumstance, but not from the shackles of death, *and neither can you.* In the end, death tracks us all down.

The grim reaper ushers us all into heaven’s courtroom to stand before a holy God. Tonight, before you leave, you’re wise to ***“prepare to meet your God.”***

Verse 13, **“For behold, He who forms mountains, and creates the wind, Who declares to man what his thought is, and makes the morning darkness, Who treads the high places of the earth - the Lord God of hosts is His name.”** Amos reminds God’s people who they're dealing with! Don’t refer in some trivial way. Like calling Him *“the man upstairs,”* or *“the Big Guy”*...

God makes mountains rise, and whips up the wind, and reads thoughts, and causes darkness, He even strolls on the highest mountain peaks. His name is *“the Lord of hosts,”* or in essence, *“God the ultimate boss!”*

In 1715 the King of France, Louis XIV, died. He called himself *“Louis the Great.”* He was the monarch who arrogantly spoke the famous line, *“I am the State!”*

Well, his funeral was spectacular. Thousands of people attended. His body laid in-state in gold coffin.

To dramatize his greatness he had given orders that the cathedral where the funeral was to be held should be dimly lit, with one special candle sitting above the coffin. But when the Bishop arose to give the funeral address he reached over, and snuffed out the candle, reminding the French people that *“Only God is great!”*

This is the truth Amos is teaching Israel.

Chapter 5, *“Hear this word which I take up against you, a lamentation, O house of Israel...”* Again, we're at a festival, perhaps an annual harvest feast.

People have gathered to Bethel from all over the northern kingdom to worship the idols of Jeroboam, and praise them for the autumn harvest. It's a joyous, happy time for everyone but *Amos... and God!*

In the midst of the levity and laughter Amos announces that he has a funeral message to preach.

Talk about throwing a wet blanket on the party! Amos is about to crash the party with a eulogy, a lamentation. The

people have gathered to drink and make merry. Amos has come to mourn. God grieves over their sin.

It reminds me of the new pastor who took over a dead church. One Sunday morning the people walked in, and noticed a black coffin in front of the sanctuary.

The pastor rose and asked the people to file by and pay their last respects to the deceased. He had placed a mirror in the empty coffin, at just the right angle so when they looked in the coffin they saw themselves.

Here at Calvary Chapel we're thankful God has blessed us with an alive and growing church, but if we neglect the message of Amos and the warning to repent we can get spiritually sick and eventually die.

Amos is trying to *wake us up without a wake!*

Verse 2, “The virgin of Israel has fallen; she will rise no more. She lies forsaken on her land; there is no one to raise her up. For thus says the Lord God: “The city that goes out by a thousand shall have a hundred left, and that which goes out by a hundred shall have ten left to the house of Israel.” He’s describing the coming destruction. Only 10% of the population will survive!

And Amos’ words were fulfilled just 36 years later, when in 722 BC Samaria fell to the Assyrian army.

“For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel: “Seek Me and live; but do not seek Bethel, nor enter Gilgal, nor pass over to Beersheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into captivity, and Bethel shall come to nothing.”

In the OT the true God was to be found not in Bethel or Gilgal, but in the Temple in Jerusalem. This was the one place where God had promised to meet with man.

Amos cried, *“Seek the LORD and live,”* but realize in order to seek Him you’ve got to know where to look.

And the same is true for us. There’s only one place in the world today where God has promised to meet with man, and that’s in His Son, Jesus. Thus, if you want to seek God and live; you have to come to Jesus!

Verse 6, *“Seek the Lord and live, lest He break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and devour it, with no one to quench it in Bethel - You who turn justice to wormwood, and lay righteousness to rest in the earth!*

He made the Pleiades and Orion; He turns the shadow of death into morning and makes the day dark as night; He calls for the waters of the sea and pours them out on the face of the earth; the Lord is His name.” Pleiades and Orion are constellations. Thus, God created the stars. As well as, the sea and the rain.

He even makes the morning, and paints the night.

“He rains ruin upon the strong, so that fury comes upon the fortress. They hate the one who rebukes in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks uprightly.” In 2 Timothy 4:3 Paul tells Timothy the same will be said, in the last days, of folks within the church.

“The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers;

and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.”

Verse 11, “Therefore, because you tread down the poor and take grain taxes from him, though you have built houses of hewn stone, yet you shall not dwell in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink wine from them. For I know your manifold transgressions and your mighty sins: afflicting the just and taking bribes; diverting the poor from justice at the gate.” God had multiple beefs with Israel.

Their sins were *manifold* and *mighty*. Oppressing the poor. Over-taxing their citizens - even taking bribes.

Which reminds me the pastor who was asked to do the funeral of the meanest, most wicked man in town.

The dead man's brother approached the pastor and asked if he'd tell the congregation his brother was a saint. The pastor declined saying he was honest and would never deliberately distort the truth. There was no way he could ever lie and say this crook was a saint.

That's when the brother reached into his pocket. He pulled out a wad of money, and handed it to the pastor. The pastor thought for a minute, then took the money, and said to the brother, “Let me see what I can do.”

At the funeral the pastor walked to the podium and began to preach, “Let me just say a few words about the deceased. This man was mean, wicked, nasty, rotten, low-down - he was just a sorry excuse for a human being - and our community is better off without him - BUT compared to his brother he was a saint!”

Samaria was full of scoundrels - folks who care little about the poor and think about no one but themselves.

But what about us? Are we so busy trying to thrive, we've forgotten the people who are trying to survive?

The people of Samaria had forgotten about God, and as a result they were only concerned for themselves.

Where do the poor and needy rank on your priority list? Spiritual fervor and social justice go hand in hand. You can't truly *love God* without *loving your brother!*

Verse 13, “Therefore the prudent keep silent at that time, for it is an evil time. Seek good and not evil, that you may live; so the Lord God of hosts will be with you, as you have spoken. Hate evil, love good; establish justice in the gate. It may be that the Lord God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

Therefore the Lord God of hosts, the Lord, says this: “There shall be wailing in all streets, and they shall say in all the highways, ‘Alas! Alas!’ They shall call the farmer to mourning, and skillful lamenters to wailing.

In all vineyards there shall be wailing, for I will pass through you,” says the Lord. Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! For what good is the day of the Lord to you? It will be darkness, and not light.”

The Day of the Lord is when God brings an end to the current age, and ushers in His glorious kingdom.

Remember, the Hebrew day begins and ends at sundown, therefore the nightfall precedes the daylight.

Well, the same will be true on a global scale.

The Day of the Lord will begin with the night (or judgment), but it ends with the day (of blessing).

The Jews thought it was all about the blessing. They anticipated the day of the LORD's goodness, but failed to acknowledge its preceding night of destruction.

Verse 19, "It will be as though a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him! Or as though he went into the house, leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him! Is not the day of the Lord darkness, and not light? Is it not very dark, with no brightness in it?"

In other words, there'll be nowhere to hide when God decides to judge the Earth. Flee the lion and the bear will get you. Flee the bear and the serpent will bite you.

No man can outrun God!

Joe Lewis may've been the greatest boxer who ever lived. He was tough. During his reign as heavyweight champ he was scheduled to fight a Pittsburgh boxer named Billy Conn. Conn was a fleet footed fighter who relied more on speed and quickness than on brute strength. Conn had the nickname, "The Runner."

Just before the Conn fight, Lewis was asked if he could overcome the hit and run tactics of Billy Conn.

Lewis' reply is now a famous quote. He told the sportswriter, "He can run, but he can't hide!"

And you too can run from God, but you won't be able to hide. One day you're going to stand before Him.

Tonight, perhaps you need to surrender to Him as your Lord and Savior... Maybe you know Him as your Savior, but there's an area of life you're ashamed of, and you've been trying to hide it from His scrutiny...

Maybe God has placed a specific calling on your life, and you're afraid of the costs that might involve. Again let me say it, **"You can run, but you can't hide!"**

Verse 21, **"I hate, I despise your feast days, and I do not savor your sacred assemblies."**

The story is told of a husband and wife who were driving home after church when she asked him, **"Did you see the new hat Joann was wearing this morning?"**

The husband replied, **"No I didn't notice it."**

"Well, did you notice that dress that Susan was wearing?"
"No, I didn't notice that either." **"Well, did you notice the shoes that Betty wore?"** **"No dear, I didn't."**

In exasperation the wife shouted, **"For goodness sake, a lot of good it does for you to go to church!"**

Amos is speaking to this exasperated wife in her own words, **"A lot of good it does for you to go to church."**

There're people who go to church for the wrong reasons. They bring their bodies, but leave behind their hearts. They pray, sing, read, and study - but their heart is AWOL. There's no passion, no desire. There're going through the motions, but without the devotion.

Verse 22, **"Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them, nor will I regard your**

fattened peace offerings. Take away from Me the noise of your songs, for I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments. But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream." God hated His people's worship because it was all a sham! If you love God you're going to care about what God cares about. You can't say you love Him; then ignore the Lord's concerns and interests.

These people were good at praise and worship and pot-lucks, but they were short on charity and kindness.

They were good at *religious liturgies*, but tragically they knew nothing about *righteous living*.

Let me read some stinging words, "We humans have an immense ability to tolerate contradictions between our faith and our actions. It becomes a way of life. We live in two worlds: the faith we talk and sing about and the life we live." We need to close the gap between what we say we believe and how we actually live!

And I say start right where you're at. In your home, at your work, dare to *be pure and passionate for God*.

I heard the true story of a lady who walked into an elevator, looked over, and there was actor Robert Redford. She kept glancing at him out of the corner of her eye wondering if it was really the movie star.

Finally she asked him, "Are you the real Robert Redford?" He replied, "*Only when I'm at home?*"

The faith we sing about in church, is the faith we need to live out at home! Be an authentic Christian.

“Did you offer Me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel?” The answer was “yes!” So why did they later resort to idols?

You also carried Sikkuth your king and Chiun, your idols, the star of your gods, which you made for yourselves.” The false gods he mentions here are Assyrian idols. Ironically, Israel will eventually be conquered by the people who’s idols they worshipped.

“Therefore I will send you into captivity beyond Damascus,” says the Lord, whose name is the God of hosts.” Even though the Hebrews were religious - even though they worshiped - *that alone didn’t save them.*

As God said earlier, *“let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream.”* A faith that believes rightly, will produce a desire to do what’s right.

Now in case you thought Amos was a male chauvinist and only picked on *the cows of Bashan*, you would be wrong. For in chapter 6 he addresses their husbands, who as we’ll see, were *a bunch of bull.*

Amos addresses Samaritan officials, its leaders.

“Woe to you who are at ease in Zion, and trust in Mount Samaria, notable persons in the chief nation, to whom the house of Israel comes!” *“Woe to you who are at ease...”* let that be a warning to us as well.

Be careful we don't drop our guard. The times when we're most vulnerable spiritually, most susceptible to temptation, are when we kick back. You've been fighting a battle, and now its over... let me take it easy for awhile. That's when you're a prime target for Satan.

2 Samuel 11 is the passage that deals with the infamous adultery of David and Bathsheba. Verse 1 reads, “Now it came to pass in the spring of the year, at the time when kings go out to battle, that David sent Joab and his servants with him, and all Israel... but David remained in Jerusalem.” David stayed behind.

This was the time when kings usually went to battle, but not on this occasion. David took a break, he kicked back, he spent some time relaxing on the veranda.

He dropped his guard - ratcheted down his intensity.

And it was at that point when he saw a woman bathing in the moonlight. Satan took advantage of him when he was “*at ease,*” and it nearly destroyed him.

You've heard the old saying, “*Idleness is the Devil's workshop.*” It's true, *vacant lots and vacant minds both collect trash.* I'm not suggesting we never take time to relax, but we should be cautious when we're “*at ease.*”

Be careful on Friday nights and on weekends.

Beware when you're on vacation.

You can rest your body, but don't let down your guard spiritually. Understand, Satan never takes a break from the spiritual battle and neither should we!

Verse 2, “*Go over to Calneh and see; and from there go to Hamath the great; then go down to Gath of the Philistines. Are you better than these kingdoms?*

Or is their territory greater than your territory?”

These were cities the Assyrians had already ravaged and conquered. Now he's asking Samaria if they're more virtuous than them? The answer is "no." Thus, if God didn't deliver these cities, why deliver Samaria?

"Woe to you who put far off the day of doom, who cause the seat of violence to come near; who lie on beds of ivory, stretch out on your couches, eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall..."

Mutton to eat, a bed of ivory, a person sprawled out on the couch... these were symbols of a life of luxury.

You can hear "happy days are here again" playing in the background. The furthest thing from the mind of this Samaritan is "*the day of doom.*" Beware...

"Who sing idly to the sound of stringed instruments, and invent for yourselves musical instruments like David; who drink wine from bowls..." Here's a sign of plenty. Wine flowing... not just a cup-full, but bowl-fulls.

"And anoint yourselves with the best ointments, but are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph. Therefore they shall now go captive as the first of the captives, and those who recline at banquets shall be removed..."

What vivid imagery. Amos predicts the upper-crust of Samaria will go straight from *the banquet to bondage* - from *the party to prison* - from *chalices to shackles*.

Verse 8, "The Lord God has sworn by Himself, the Lord God of hosts says: "I abhor the pride of Jacob, and hate his palaces; therefore I will deliver up the city and all that is in it."

I heard of a pastor who stood one Sunday and announced there were 739 different sins. On Monday he was besieged with requests for the list.

The unregenerate man gravitates toward sin. His nature is sinful. His tendency is to buck God and bruise his brother. At the root of all our many sins is this one principle problem, *pride*. God can deal with all our other sins, if we first repent of the one root sin, *pride*.

“Then it shall come to pass, that if ten men remain in one house, they shall die. And when a relative of the dead, with one who will burn the bodies, picks up the bodies to take them out of the house, he will say to one inside the house, “Are there any more with you?”

Then someone will say, “None.” And he will say, “Hold your tongue! For we dare not mention the name of the Lord.” God's judgment will be so devastating and sweeping - they'll be so awed by His power and presence - that people will be scared to utter His name!

“For behold, the Lord gives a command: He will break the great house into bits, and the little house into pieces. Do horses run on rocks?” The answer is “no.”

“Does one plow there with oxen?”

Yet you have turned justice into gall, and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood...” In other words, you had a good thing going! But you've spoiled it. You've turned justice to poison - righteousness to bitterness.

What were fertile fields are now ruins and rubble.

“You who rejoice over Lo Debar, who say, “Have we not taken Karnaim for ourselves by our own strength?”

“But, behold, I will raise up a nation against you, O house of Israel,” says the Lord God of hosts; “and they will afflict you from the entrance of Hamath to the Valley of the Arabah.” The entrance of Hamath is the mountain pass from Lebanon to Israel’s north border.

The valley of Arabah is the entrance into the Kidron valley, or the southern border of the northern kingdom.

The idea is that all Israel will fall under the sword!