

# “The Day of the Lord”

## Sermons on the Minor Prophets: The Book of Amos (4)

*Texts: Amos 5:1-6:14 (read 5:18-27); 2 Peter 3:10-13*

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Friedrich Nietzsche, the nineteenth century German philosopher, is perhaps best known for his assertion that “God is dead.” A very formidable critic of Christianity, Nietzsche spoke of Christianity as a religion possessing what he called a “slave mentality,” one symptom of which was the putting off of a final judgment until the end of time. This encouraged people to avoid acting authentically in the present. People should not wait for an imaginary God to act, they must decisively act now, freed from religious superstitions. Nietzsche thought Christians foolish (and to be pitied) because advances in science and European culture had rendered the Judeo-Christian God an unworthy explanation of the universe—“God is dead,” a view which many of our contemporaries accept, if only in a practical way. But a Hebrew Prophet named Amos once proclaimed the very doctrine Nietzsche railed against, the true and living God (transcendent and altogether righteous) enters human history at times to bring about his sovereign judgments upon his disobedient people and neighboring Gentile nations—that which the prophets describe as “the Day of the Lord.” We come face to face with the God of the Bible who is very much alive, whether Nietzsche and his followers like him or not.

The “Day of the Lord” is an important theological concept central to the Christian doctrine of a final judgment. Amos, writing about 760 B.C., is the first of the Minor Prophets to call attention to the “Day of the Lord,” but this is a concept found throughout the Minor Prophets, with the exception of the prophet Jonah. When used by Old Testament writers, the term “Day of the Lord” refers those times (often in both the immediate and at the same time distant future) when God decisively intervenes in human history to bring about his righteous judgment upon his people Israel, and then upon Judah, because of their prolonged disobedience and indifference to YHWH’s covenant, their religious hypocrisy and their idolatry. The phrase is also used in connection with God’s judgment upon the Gentile nations which have persecuted God’s people (at times as agents of God’s judgment upon Israel) and who reject God’s own anointed king who comes from the biological line of David—the coming Messiah (Jesus). In these instances, the Day of the Lord points ahead to that future time when God will save a believing remnant of his people Israel, through the same Messiah who, ironically, Israel will reject. The Day of the Lord then can be seen as YHWH meting out covenant curses, and dispensing covenant blessings.

As used throughout the New Testament, the Day of the Lord refers to that final day of human history (judgment day), when Jesus Christ returns to raise the dead, judge the world, and make all things new. It will be a time of cosmic distress when all of creation convulses, and when all men and women will be judged according to what they have done (good or ill). On that day, the Lord will purge away every hint and trace of human sin, creating a new heaven and earth (as we read in 2 Peter 3:10-13—our New Testament lesson), which will be the home of everlasting righteousness, all traces of human sin now removed.

These repeated acts of God in judgment upon his disobedient people and the Gentile nations spoken of throughout the prophets, function as dress rehearsals for that day when Jesus returns at the end of the age. As used throughout the prophets, the Day of the Lord both foreshadows and forewarns God’s people of his righteous judgments upon human sin, the consequences of disobedience to his commandments, and the eternal danger of rejecting his saving mercy both in this life and in the next. At

the same time, the Day of the Lord provides an illustration of God's covenant promise to preserve his people and deliver them from sin and death. Those who know Jesus as their Savior long for his coming—the return of our great God and Savior to usher in our promised inheritance—the resurrection of our bodies and entrance into eternal life. But to those who do not know Christ through faith John describes the Lord's return in judgment in frightening terms (Revelation 6:12–17),

When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”

The repeated intrusions of YHWH into human history culminate in a final judgment, as just described.

As we have seen in previous weeks, the prophet Amos proclaims the words of YHWH, warning the people of Israel that their own self-righteousness has blinded them to the inevitability that judgment begins in the house of the Lord—Israel will be judged first. The depths of the idolatry and apostasy of the people has been obscured by the nation's current peace, prosperity, and self-righteous religious observances. In the prior oracles (chapter 3 and 4), YHWH has warned Israel of the judgment sure to come. Now in chapters 5 and 6, two more oracles come forth through Amos, the first (an oracle of lament) declaring YHWH's entreaty to Israel to change their current course, calling the people to repentance (5:1-17), while in vv. 5:18-6:14, in a second oracle (an oracle of woe), YHWH declares that judgment will fall upon Israel in 722 B.C., when the Assyrians invade, conquering the nation and driving the people from the land. Woe to those in Israel who are looking forward to the “Day of the Lord,” foolishly thinking YHWH does not see the depths of their sin and unbelief and this will be a day of reward for that which they think have earned.

The first of these two oracles opens with the prophet's call for the people of Israel (the Northern Kingdom) to direct their attention to what follows—YHWH's oracle delivered by Amos. “*Hear this word that I take up over you in lamentation, O house of Israel.*” The word translated as “lamentation” is a Hebrew word often used to describe a funeral dirge. The funeral song is sung of the nation—“the house of Israel.” The meaning is painfully obvious—what is about to come is a funeral song for a dead nation.<sup>1</sup> The words of that funeral song come in verses 2-3. “*Fallen, no more to rise, is the virgin Israel; forsaken on her land, with none to raise her up.*’ For thus says the Lord GOD: ‘*The city that went out a thousand shall have a hundred left, and that which went out a hundred shall have ten left to the house of Israel.*’” The virgin imagery reflects Israel's self-identity as a new kingdom pure and undefiled before the Lord. The reality is completely different from Israel's self-deception. The judgment to come within a generation (the Assyrian invasion) will decimate the nation leaving a small remnant of perhaps 10%.

But even though judgment is certain to come, in verses 4-6, YHWH mercifully calls the faithful in Israel to repentance. “*For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel: ‘Seek me and live; but do not seek Bethel,*

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<sup>1</sup> Smith and Page, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, on Amos 5:1.

*and do not enter into Gilgal or cross over to Beersheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into exile, and Bethel shall come to nothing. 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.*” Bethel and Gilgal were places where Israel had rebelled against YHWH and where false worship and sacrifices were offered to the golden calves which supposedly represented YHWH. Bethel was Israel’s substitute for Jerusalem (as established by Jeroboam I). Beersheba was actually located in the southern part of Judah, but was visited by religious pilgrims from Judah and Israel because Abraham once lived there. YHWH is warning the faithful who remain in Israel to avoid these places, all three of them will come under judgment, with Bethel (in the region of the House of Joseph) singled out for destruction by fire—a covenant curse.<sup>2</sup> YHWH’s call is for those who hear his word (in the sense of believing Amos’ preaching) to seek him in order to live. YHWH is the author of life. The false gods (indeed the false notion of YHWH throughout Israel) can only become objects of God’s holy wrath. The Canaanite gods have no life. Serving dead gods will, ironically, bring eternal death to all who worship their lifeless form.

In verse 7, YHWH laments “*O you who turn justice to wormwood and cast down righteousness to the earth!*” Wormwood is a bitter and poisonous plant. The image here is that justice has been corrupted, that evil is triumphing over good. Righteousness—conformity to God’s eternal standards—has given way to the mere whims of men. But God is sovereign despite Israel’s unbelief and rebellion. Citing portions of several ancient hymns, Amos reminds the people in vv 8-9, “*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.*” You may think YHWH to be dead. You may ignore him. You may worship him as you, not he, sees fit. But he is and remains the God with whom the people of the earth have to do. He rules the constellations. He can destroy the earth.

YHWH will not condone the injustice widely present throughout Israel. His oracle declares (vv. 10-13), “*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.*” The rich (the royal house and the merchants) who have prospered during a time of prosperity which YHWH brought to the land cannot escape. YHWH sees their transgressions—their greed and abuse of the poor. YHWH sees through the hypocrisy of those faking righteousness. It is an evil age. The truth has been hushed up. But YHWH sees. YHWH knows.

Still, in spite of all of this, in verses 14-15, YHWH again calls his disobedient people to repentance. “*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 only acceptable response from YHWH’s people is to renounce their evil ways and return to the Lord—to hate the evil they have done and seek to live consistently within the covenant YHWH has established with them. YHWH is holy. But he is also gracious and will always receive his repentant people.

The oracle ends (vv. 16-17) with Amos taking Israel back to the funeral song with which the oracle was

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<sup>2</sup> Stuart, Hosea-Jonah, 346.

introduced. “*Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of hosts, the Lord: ‘In all the squares there shall be wailing, and in all the streets they shall say, ‘Alas! Alas!’ They shall call the farmers to mourning and to wailing those who are skilled in lamentation, and in all vineyards there shall be wailing, for I will pass through your midst, ’ says the LORD.*” When YHWH’s wrath finally comes—as it will within a generation of Amos’s prophetic ministry—there will be nothing left to do but mourn. YHWH himself will pass through the nation—not to bring blessing, but to mete out covenant curses. YHWH’s heavenly host will not destroy the Assyrian invaders when they come, nor will they defend the sinful, disobedient, self-righteous people as Israel mistakenly expects. Instead, the nation of Israel (the northern kingdom) will be dead. Its people will be killed, exiled, or scattered among the nations. The survivors will wail and mourn. YHWH will walk among them in judgment, executing covenant curses.

A second oracle—this time of woe—is found in Amos 5:18-6:14. We’ll cover the material in chapter 5 since the oracle in chapter 6, repeats much of what we have already covered. The second oracle opens by making reference to the Day of the LORD (or the day of YHWH). It was a common legend in Canaan (and the ancient near-east), that a true sovereign could defeat his greatest enemy in a single day, or in a single battle. The people of Israel mistakenly assume this the Day of the Lord is that appointed time when YHWH will intervene to destroy all Israel’s enemies—those listed in the oracle of chapter 1 and 2, where all of Israel’s enemies were cataloged. This is likely the prevailing notion among the people and its leaders, which Amos now challenges in verse 18. “*Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD! Why would you have the day of the LORD?*” The people of Israel have fallen so far they cannot see the obvious—both they and their enemies are the object of God’s coming in judgment.<sup>3</sup> This is not a day for which they should be longing. It is a day Israel should be dreading.

Expecting covenant blessing—Israel will instead receive covenant curses. The Day of the Lord, “*is darkness, and not light, 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. Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?*” The images were widely known in the ancient world. Calamity is fleeing from a lion, only to be caught by a bear. Calamity is entering your house to find safety, but are bitten by a snake waiting for you there. When this day comes, there will be no light only darkness—a metaphor in Amos’s day, but a reality at the time of the end when the heavenly bodies cease to give light when Jesus returns.

Amos is describing events a generation ahead, when Assyrian armies sweep through the land in 722. Yet, the imagery of a foreign invader bringing devastation and death pales in comparison to the day of God’s wrath yet to come. Every instance of such judgments in the Old Testament serve as an object lesson to us, the new covenant people of God. Just as the prophets (like Amos) warned Israel that such a day of judgment was coming upon Israel, so too, Jesus, Peter, Paul, and John, all speak of a day of judgment coming upon the whole world, when all wrongs will be made right, and all people will be judged according to what they have done. The heavens and earth will be dissolved—with a new heaven and earth taking the former’s place. No wonder Nietzsche railed against such an idea. Amos’ notion of a coming Day of the Lord moves justice from the realm of human whim and mere opinion about what is right and wrong (where Nietzsche and others located morality) to an objective world where an eternal judge, judges all people against the standard of his holy commandments—a transcendent and absolute standard of human conduct, given by the creator himself and revealed in nature (natural law) and in God’s word—his covenant with Israel.

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<sup>3</sup> Stuart, Hosea-Jonah, 353.

But what would prompt YHWH to bring such a horrific judgment upon Israel? We have seen that YHWH has heard the cries of the poor exploited by the royals and the wealthy. YHWH will deliver them. Amos has spoken of the absence of justice throughout the land. YHWH will rectify that. Now, YHWH addresses the religious hypocrisy upon which the break-away nation was founded in the day of Jeroboam 1, nearly two hundred years before. YHWH's patience with religious hypocrisy has come to an end. Amos proclaims his words in vv. 21-24. "*I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. 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. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen.*" YHWH hates and despises the religious feasts of Israel. These are strong words but reveal the level of divine contempt of worship which is not a matter of the heart but is instead only a public display of religious hypocrisy. The religious assemblies of Israel (based upon false ideas and hypocrisy) do not please God—they offend him.

The burnt offerings are offered by priests appointed by the king. They are not Levites as YHWH commanded. The offerings of grain—the fruit of the nation's temporary prosperity—are not offered with thankful hearts, but as a sign of how much wealth the people have accumulated, while the poor go hungry. The animal sacrifices are offered in vain since the people are not concerned about the guilt of their sin, nor with how their current religious practices are willful violations of God's word and covenant—often times combined with elements of the worship of Baal (the Canaanite-weather/fertility god). The people and priests may sing the right songs (i.e., the Psalms and other biblical texts from Israel's past), but given the attitude of their hearts (far from God and disinterested in him), these are not songs of praise, but loud and noisy sounds which offend YHWH (like turning the volume up to 11).

Fair to say, it would be better for the people to stay home than dare approach the true and living God with worship they designed to suit their own sinful desires, and at the same time worshiping Baal, just to make sure all their religious bases were covered. The great irony is the more they worship, the more they reveal their hypocrisy. And the more wrath they store up against themselves.

YHWH's response (v. 24) is for Israel to return to the covenant and its promised blessings. "*But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*" These are perhaps the most familiar words from the Book of Amos because of the frequency they are cited by political orators calling for social justice. Instead this is YHWH calling Israel to abandon their sham religious performances, and to act justly toward their neighbor. It would not be improper to paraphrase these words as "keep my covenant."<sup>4</sup> Should Israel do that, YHWH will relent. But they don't and he doesn't.

YHWH examines Israel's motives, in verses 25-27. "*Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?*" Yes, the people did, but then just as now, their hearts were far from YHWH. Israel's spiritual condition now is much like it was their former days of wandering in the wilderness. As a consequence of such unfaithfulness and indifference to YHWH's covenant, he chides them "*you shall take up Sikkuth your king, and Kiyyun your star-god—your images that you made for yourselves, and I will send you into exile beyond Damascus,*' says the LORD, whose name is the God of hosts." The mention of Assyrian star-gods Sikkuth and Kiyyum is likely a sarcastic reference to Israel's own idolatry. The names of the Assyrian deities (Kiyyum is the planet Saturn, visible in the night sky) are intentionally misspelled using Hebrew vowels from the Hebrew word

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<sup>4</sup> Stuart, Hosea-Jonah, 355.

“abomination.”<sup>5</sup> As Israel engaged in idolatry during their time in the wilderness, they will do so again. YHWH is mocking the Assyrian gods (an abomination to him) as a way of predicting the people’s fate—exile beyond Damascus (Syria) under the foot of those who worship gods regarded as an abomination by YHWH. YHWH made the stars and planets which the Assyrians foolishly worship. The Israelites will do so as well. If they will not worship YHWH according to his word, well then, they will be forced to worship Assyrian gods which are no gods. “You want idolatry? I’ll give you idolatry.”

What do we take with us by way of application? The first thing of which we ought be mindful is that the reason why Israel should dread the Day of the Lord, is the same reason why Israel erred in thinking that God’s judgment upon the nations would vindicate their cause (as we saw in chapters 1-2). Judgment begins in the house of the Lord. When God’s people are disobedient and openly reject his ways, they inevitably bring down upon themselves the covenant curses about which they had been warned before entering the promised land, and warned about repeatedly through the ministry of Israel’s prophets. Amos was a divine process server, proclaiming to the people of Israel (the Northern Kingdom) the verdict of the heavenly court—time is up, judgment (in the form of covenant curse) is about to be dispensed. YHWH’s oracles to Israel announce as much. YHWH’s words never fail. He keeps his promises, and he brings about his judgments. That judgment begins in his own house.

Second, we are greatly mistaken if we think YHWH has a short fuse and is acting in a fit of temper. For 600 years he has remained long-suffering and patient with this stubborn and disobedient people. But Israel had become more pagan than Hebrew. The kings and priests flaunt their rejection of YHWH’s covenant. In the face of such a sad situation, Amos is just one of the prophets sent by YHWH to Israel to warn them of judgment, and call them to repentance. Yes, judgment will come upon Israel with the Assyrian invasion, but that is not the end of the story. As we will see next time (in our final sermon on Amos, before we take up the Book of Jonah), after the warning about the judgment sure to come upon Israel, we find the promise that one day off in the distant future, YHWH will restore his disobedient people—a promise of a messianic age (and the coming of Jesus Christ). The Day of the Lord is both a day of judgment, and a day of redemption. It is the day of judgment because it is the day of Christ’s return. But this is a day not to be feared by those trusting in Jesus to save you from your sins. For believers, this is a day identified in Scripture as the blessed hope. As Paul tells Titus (2:13), we are “*waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.*” It is not a day to fear, but our great desire—that the Lord might return and we never taste death.

Third, the Day of the Lord as found through the writings of Israel’s prophets, function as dress rehearsals for a day of final judgment. Nietzsche may have convinced many of his and our contemporaries that a final judgment is nothing but an inexcusable cop-out, because, supposedly, this allows Christians to avoid taking decisive action in the here and now, because we are content to let a pretend God be judge at a time off in the distant future. Yet we know there will be a coming Day of the Lord, because we have the historical record of God’s decisive actions in the history of his people—the prophets bear witness to it. God is the righteousness judge of all things. He alone is without sin and human passion. Because he will come in judgment, he commands that we leave final judgment to him. He will settle all accounts. He will end human suffering and pain. He will vindicate his cause and that of his people. Nietzsche tells us to “seize the day” (*carpe deim*). But instead, YHWH seizes us. Our days are his, not ours, including the final day of human history, the Day of the Lord.

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<sup>5</sup> Smith and Page, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, on Amos 5:25-27.

What we do now matters—Nietzsche was right about that. It matters not because “god is dead” and if we don’t act decisively now, we are pitiful cowards. Rather what we do matters because God is very much alive, and Nietzsche is very much dead. Whether people believe it or not, there is coming a day when Jesus returns to raise the dead, judge the world, and usher in a new heaven and earth. It is a day that will make an Assyrian invasion look like child’s play. YHWH and his hosts will come and make all things new. He will redeem his people and bring a holy vengeance upon those who are not. Until that day comes, let us do as Peter tells us to do in 2 Peter 3:10-14.

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.