

# The Limits of Religion

Amos 5:18–24 | Psalm 70 | 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 | Matthew 25:1-13

## AMOS 5:18–24

<sup>18</sup> *Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD! Why do you want the day of the LORD? It is darkness, not light;* <sup>19</sup> *as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake.* <sup>20</sup> *Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?* <sup>21</sup> *I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.* <sup>22</sup> *Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.* <sup>23</sup> *Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.* <sup>24</sup> *But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

## INTRODUCTION

New Orleans is a city in the southern United States, located on the Gulf of Mexico, the ninth largest body of water in the world. And it is a city that sees a lot of hurricanes. Because of this, giant levees—large embankment walls to keep the water contained—are a common thing to see around the city. This levee system is one of the largest and most extensive in the world. And in 1965, they were put to the test when a hurricane almost flooded New Orleans, Hurricane Betsy. After it destroyed parts of the surrounding areas, New Orleans built its embankments higher, more than three times the normal height: 7 meters. And so, in early August 2005, the roughly 1 million residents of New Orleans went about their lives, confident the walls would protect them. They felt safe. The walls had been protecting them for decades. And even though experts warned them, they nevertheless felt secure. Yet, it turned out to be a false sense of security. They were unprepared for Hurricane Katrina, a hurricane that submerged 80 percent of the city under water, caused \$125B USD in damage, and killed more than 1,800 people.

It can be dangerous to look for salvation, for security, in the wrong places. And in fact, this is what I think the prophet Amos, in that first reading, is showing us. Israel's reliance on their religious practices had produced a kind of arrogance that was to be their undoing. Like the people of New Orleans, they were relying on good things, good things that provided a false sense of security. They needed to learn an important lesson: *Be careful where you place your hope.* Misplaced hope leads to disaster. *And so, be careful where you place your hope.* Let's take a brief look.

## 1. THE SURPRISE OF JUDGMENT

The passage begins with a shocking statement: *“Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD!”*<sup>1</sup> This is a bit of a weak translation. Literally, it is: *“Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD!”* Why? Because they were expecting the day of the Lord, a term for the final judgment of God, the final accounting, the reckoning at the end of time when God sets things right—they were expecting this day to be a good thing for them. It is immediately followed by three metaphors which communicate the surprise of this assertion. ‘It is not a day of light, as you might expect, but a day of darkness, a day that will not end well for you. Just as tragic as it would be, having escaped a lion, only to be met by a bear, so it will be for you. You may think you are comfortable now,

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<sup>1</sup> Amos 5:18.

as though you could leisurely walk into a house and rest your hand on the wall, but you are about to be bitten by a snake.’ And then it returns to the light and dark. These metaphors communicate uncertainty and instability, compelling the reader to pay attention. Something is terribly wrong, and the coming reckoning is not what they think.

But, why? Why will the day of the Lord be so shockingly terrible for them? Or more to the point, why do they think it is a good thing when, apparently, it is not? What has caused them to be comfortable, confident even, in their safety and security before the Lord? The next few verses explain. They were relying on their religious practices to protect them. They were gathering in both feasts and solemn assemblies (verse 21), offering all the sacrifices (verse 22), and even engaging in lively worship (verse 23). They were such proficient and extensive worshippers, such active churchgoers, that they had convinced themselves that they were going to do well on the great day of the Lord, that religion and ritual was enough to spare them God’s judgment.

Now, these things are not intrinsically evil. Religious rites and rituals are not inherently contrary to the Lord’s desires. Indeed, he instituted festivals and offerings in the Law.<sup>2</sup> Rather, these religious practices alone, void of one key thing, renders them abhorrent to the Lord. And that one thing is found in the last verse: *“But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”*<sup>3</sup> This is a theme that Amos has been building.<sup>4</sup> But even more so, it is a major theme in the whole of the Scriptures.

It’s part of the wisdom literature, specifically in Proverbs: *“To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice.”*<sup>5</sup> It’s part of the Psalter, where the Psalmist acknowledges: *“For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased.”*<sup>6</sup> The priest, Samuel, said to the very first king of Israel: *“Has the LORD as great delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices, as in obedience to the voice of the LORD?”*<sup>7</sup> In short, the Lord has never wanted an empty faith. He’s never wanted ceremony and ritual for the sake of ceremony and ritual. Those things are not inherently wrong—and I’m not just saying that because today is Remembrance Sunday. Rather, it’s just that religious devotion was always to be accompanied with righteousness, with obedience, with a deep, meaningful, relationship with God in which his Word and his desires for his people are met. Piety without righteousness, is empty. And more importantly, it is not going to appease a God who demands perfect submission and true holiness.

Let’s learn from Israel’s presumption here. Where do you place your hope? Is it in the rituals of your worship, the piety of your lifestyle? It’s very easy to get into a mindset of putting on a show for the sake of others, to be seen by others.<sup>8</sup> We forget that God sees in secret, he sees the heart, that he is not fooled by our religious devotion when it is divorced from true righteousness—the very point Jesus makes in the Sermon on the Mount. Likewise, we may slip into bargaining. The Lord likes our religious works, our good deeds, our obedience to his Word,

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<sup>2</sup> See Exodus 12-15 and 34. See also Lev 1:1-7:10 and Leviticus 24.

<sup>3</sup> Amos 5:24.

<sup>4</sup> See Amos 3:10, 4:4-5, 5:5-7, 5:12.

<sup>5</sup> Prov 21:3.

<sup>6</sup> Ps 51:16.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Sam 15:22.

<sup>8</sup> Jesus addresses this very tendency directly in Matt 6:1-18.

the beauty and emotional depth of our worship, and so we imagine that those things will make up for our sinful, evil, rebellious selves. We imagine, in some kind of transactional system, that the cosmic balance is in our favour. But both things ultimately fail and reveal our hypocrisy. Even if I give myself to righteousness and obedience, it ultimately undermines. For I am totally unable to be righteous on my own. I shall strive for it, so as to not be a hypocrite, but true justice and righteousness are still beyond me, beyond all of us.

So, examine your life. Examine where you place your hope. If it is placed in your religious practices, repent before the Lord comes. If it is pinned to your piety, your devotion, or even your good works, recognize you are without sure hope. For only one man is worthy of our hope, the one man who puts an end to the need for religion, who fulfils all righteousness, who gives us hope because he died and rose again on our behalf: Christ Jesus. Paul put it like this in his second letter to the Corinthian church: *“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”*<sup>9</sup> Our only shot at true righteousness is in Christ.

*Be careful where you place your hope.* For if we are to have a confident hope, a hope that moves beyond empty religiosity to true religion in pursuit of justice and righteousness, then, it must be placed in Jesus.

## CONCLUSION

Brothers and sisters, *be careful where you place your hope.* For if we are to have a confident hope, a hope that moves beyond empty religiosity to true religion in pursuit of justice and righteousness, then, it must be placed in Jesus. The hymn-writer, Edward Mote’s words remind us of that foundation. I commend them to you:

My hope is built on nothing less  
than Jesus’ blood and righteousness;  
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,  
but wholly lean on Jesus’ name.

On Christ, the solid rock, I stand;  
all other ground is sinking sand,  
all other ground is sinking sand.<sup>10</sup>

Let me pray. *Heavenly Father, thank you for giving us hope in your Son. May we grow in our desire to know you, to love what you love, so worship in Spirit and truth with each coming day. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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<sup>9</sup> 2 Cor 5:21.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Mote, “My Hope is Built on Nothing Less,” 1834.