

Seek *the* LORD *and* Live! (Amos)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Amos 5:1–15, Heb. 5:14, Isa. 5:20, Amos 7:10–17, 9:11–15, Acts 15:13–18.*

Memory Text: “Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and thus may the LORD God of hosts be with you, just as you have said!” (*Amos 5:14, NASB*).

Key Thought: Amos reminds us that only in seeking the Lord is there life.

Had Israel been true to God, He could have accomplished His purpose through the nation's honor and exaltation. If Israel had walked in the ways of obedience, He would have made them ‘high above all nations which He hath made, in praise, and in name, and in honor.’ ‘All people of the earth,’ said Moses, ‘shall see that thou art called by the name of the Lord; and they shall be afraid of thee.’ ‘The nations which shall hear all these statutes’ shall say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ Deut. 26:19; 28:10; 4:6. But because of their unfaithfulness, God's purpose could be wrought out only through continued adversity and humiliation.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 28.

This week, as we continue to study the book of Amos, we will see even more of the ways in which the Lord pled with His people to put away their sins and return unto Him, the only true Source of life. In the end, we all have only one of two choices: life or death. There is no middle ground. Amos shows us a little more about the stark differences between these choices.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 4.*

Hate Evil, Love Good

Things had become very bad in Israel; the corruption, the oppression, the sin. Israel finally reached the point in which the very survival of the nation was at stake. For this reason, Amos composed a lament to mourn the coming death of Israel (*Amos 5:1–15*). Often in the prophetic books, no distinction is made between the word of the prophet and the word of the Lord. Thus, Amos’ lament is also God’s lament over Israel.

The purpose of the funeral song in Amos 5:1–15 was to shock the people into facing reality. If they persisted in their sins, they surely would die. If, on the other hand, they rejected evil and returned to God, they would live. The Lord’s character is such that He expects conformity to the divine will.

Read Amos 5:14, 15. How does one learn to “hate the evil and love the good”? See also *Heb. 5:14, Rom. 12:9, Prov. 8:36*.

Amos invites the people not just to stop seeking evil but also to hate evil and love good. The commands in this section are progressive. The verbs *to love* (Heb. *’ahav*) and *to hate* (*’sane*) in the Bible often refer to decisions and actions, not simply to feelings and attitudes. In other words, a change in the people’s attitudes will lead to change in their actions.

In this context, what warning is found in Isaiah 5:20?

“All who in that evil day would fearlessly serve God according to the dictates of conscience, will need courage, firmness, and a knowledge of God and His word; for those who are true to God will be persecuted, their motives will be impugned, their best efforts misinterpreted, and their names cast out as evil. Satan will work with all his deceptive power to influence the heart and becloud the understanding, to make evil appear good, and good evil.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 431.

How can we learn to love the good and hate the evil if we can be deceived into calling evil good and good evil? What is our only protection against this deception?

Religion as Usual

Read Amos 5:23, 24; Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:13; and Psalm 51:17. What are these texts saying? More important, how can the principle here be applied directly to our own spiritual lives today, as Seventh-day Adventists? That is, in what ways might we be guilty of doing exactly what is warned about here? (Remember, too, that it is very easy to be self-deceived in this area.)

More than most other books of the Bible, the book of Amos focuses on injustice, cruelty, and inhumanity. It also offers the divine perspective on such practices. Amos preached that God despised the empty rituals of the people's dead formalism, and He called upon them to reform. The Lord was not pleased by outward and empty forms of worship offered to Him by those who, at the same time, were oppressing others for the sake of personal gain. Their lives revealed that they missed the whole point of what it means to be followers of Yahweh; they also totally misunderstood the deeper meaning of His law.

Indeed, God rejected their religious rituals because they did not flow from lives of faith. The climactic words in Amos 5:14, 15 are the command to seek the Lord and live. Seeking the Lord is contrasted with making pilgrimages to the famous religious centers in Bethel, Gilgal, and Beersheba (*Amos 5:5*), three cities with sanctuaries that were destined for destruction.

What God really wanted was justice and righteousness in the land. The command to "seek the Lord" parallels the one to "seek good." The Lord called on the remnant to distance themselves from evil practices and religious formalism and, instead, to let justice flow like a river and righteousness flow like a never-failing stream. While justice concerns the establishment of what is right before God, righteousness is the quality of life in relationship to God and others in the community. The picture presented here is that of a religious people whose religion had degraded into nothing but forms and rites without the change of heart that must accompany true faith. (*See Deut. 10:16.*)

How careful we must be.

Called to Be a Prophet

Amos' home was Tekoa, in Judah, but God sent him to prophesy in Israel. He had gone to the Northern Kingdom and preached with such power that the land was not "able to bear all his words" (*Amos 7:10, NKJV*). Certainly many Israelites looked at Amos with suspicion and rejected him as God's messenger. In spite of that rejection, he faithfully performed his prophetic ministry.

Read Amos 7:10–17. What familiar pattern is seen here? What other examples can you find in the Bible of the same thing happening? What should we learn from all these examples?

Among those who did not like Amos' preaching was Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, who accused Amos of conspiracy against Israel's king. Bethel was one of the two royal sanctuaries, the very centers of apostate worship. Amos had predicted in public that if Israel did not repent, its king would die by the sword and the people would be led away captive. Amaziah ordered Amos to go back to the land of Judah, where his messages against Israel would be more popular.

In his response to the priest, Amos affirmed that his prophetic call came from God. He claimed that he was not a professional prophet who could be hired for services. Amos distanced himself from professional prophets who prophesied for gain.

However, speaking the truth by no means guarantees acceptance, because the truth can at times be uncomfortable and—if it disturbs those in power—it can produce serious opposition. God's call compelled Amos to preach so openly and so boldly against the sins of the king and the nobility from the Northern Kingdom that he was accused of treason.

What is our attitude when we are told that our actions and/or lifestyles are sinful and will bring punishment upon us? What does our answer tell us about ourselves and about, perhaps, our need for a change of heart and attitude?

The Worst Type of Famine

“ ‘The days are coming,’ declares the Sovereign LORD, ‘when I will send a famine through the land—not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD. Men will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the LORD, but they will not find it’ ” (Amos 8:11, 12, NIV). How are we to understand the meaning of these verses?

In Amos 8, the prophet describes the devastating effects of God’s judgment on unrepentant Israel. God will punish the people for their sins by sending famine upon the land. But in verses 11 and 12, the prophet speaks of hunger and thirst for God’s Word. The tragedy that will stand out above all others is a famine of God’s Word because God will be silent. No other famine could be worse.

Often when the people of Israel experienced great distress, they would turn to the Lord for a prophetic word in hope of guidance. This time God’s answer will consist of silence. A part of God’s judgment on His people will be the Lord’s withdrawal of His Word through His prophets.

If God’s people continue to be disobedient, the prophet says, the time would come when they will be eager to hear the message, but it will be too late to turn to God’s Word in hope of escaping the judgment. This is the result of Israel’s persistent refusal to hear God’s message through Amos. Like Saul before his last battle (*1 Sam. 28:6*), the people will one day come to realize how much they need God’s Word.

An entire population will frantically search for God’s Word, the same word that they chose to ignore in the prophet’s time. Those especially affected will be the young. While the former generations heard God’s Word and rejected it, the young people never will have the opportunity to hear the prophetic proclamation.

What do the following passages teach about the dire effects of the silence of God? *1 Sam. 14:37, Ps. 74:9, Prov. 1:28, Lam. 2:9, Hos. 5:6, Mic. 3:5–7.*

In what ways is it possible to silence the voice of God in our lives? However scary that thought is, dwell on the implications. How can we make sure this never happens to us?

Judah's Ruins Restored

The prophet turns from the dark picture of the people's sinfulness and the resulting judgments to the glorious promises of the future restoration (*Amos 9:11–15*). The day of the Lord, previously described as the day of punishment (*Amos 5:18*), is now a day of salvation because salvation, not punishment, is God's last word to His people. However, salvation will come after punishment, not instead of it.

Amid all the gloom and doom, Amos does close his book with a message of hope. Facing the prospect of immediate exile, David's dynasty has fallen so low that it can no longer be called a house but a hut. But David's kingdom will be renewed and united under one ruler. Beyond Israel's borders, other nations will call on God's name and enjoy His blessings along with Israel. The book concludes on this happy and hopeful note.

Biblical prophets did not teach that God's punishment is for punishment's sake itself. Behind almost all the warnings is the call of redemption. Though the threat of exile was imminent, the Lord encouraged the remnant with the promise of restoration to the land. The remnant would enjoy the renewal of the covenant. Those who experience the judgment would see God acting to save and restore.

What is the ultimate fulfillment of Amos' promises about the restoration of God's people? See *Luke 1:32, 33; Acts 15:13–18*.

Many Jewish teachers regarded Amos 9:11 as a messianic promise given to Abram, reaffirmed to David, and expressed throughout the Old Testament. The new king from David's line will reign over many nations in fulfillment of God's promise to Abram (*Gen. 12:1–3*). The Messiah will reign even over enemies such as Edom. The restored ruins of God's people never again will be destroyed.

Through the coming of Jesus Christ, David's greater Son, God upheld His gracious promise. James quoted this passage from Amos to show that the door of salvation is open to Gentiles to enjoy a full share of covenant privileges entrusted to the church. God would offer His redemptive blessings to Jews and Gentiles in the promised Messiah, the offspring of both Abram and David.

The ultimate fulfillment of these promises to everyone who accepts them, Jew or Gentile, will be seen only at the Second Coming. How can we keep that hope and promise alive and not let it fade amid the stresses of life?

Further Study: “Our standing before God depends, not upon the amount of light we have received, but upon the use we make of what we have. Thus even the heathen who choose the right as far as they can distinguish it are in a more favorable condition than are those who have had great light, and profess to serve God, but who disregard the light, and by their daily life contradict their profession.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 239.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ As a class, go over your answers to Sunday’s question about learning to hate evil and love the good, as well as the danger of calling evil good and good evil. Why is this danger especially prevalent when culture and society start to change their values in ways that accept certain behaviors, lifestyles, and attitudes that clearly are condemned in the Bible? As individuals, and even as a church as a whole, we are not immune to the cultural and societal trends in which we are immersed, are we? Dwell on the changes that have happened in your own culture and society over the years. For example, what things that were once considered shameful and taboo now openly are expressed and practiced, even deemed good or, at least, not wrong? How have these changes impacted the church’s attitudes toward these acts? What can we do in order to protect ourselves and our church from falling into the dangerous trap of calling evil good? At the same time, what cultural changes for the good have impacted the church in a good way, a way that more closely reflects the principles of love and acceptance revealed by Jesus’ life?
- ❷ Dwell more on this idea of “a famine” for the Word of God. What is the likely way that could come about? Does the Lord purposely hide truth from people, or is it that people’s attitudes make them totally unreceptive to the Word of the Lord? Or could it be both? Or something else entirely? Discuss.
- ❸ As Seventh-day Adventists who live with so much light and have so many reasons to believe in the truths that we have been given, are we not in danger of thinking that our knowledge of these wonderful truths alone is all that we need? How should the truths with which we have been blessed impact the way in which we live and interact with others, not only in the church but in our community? In other words, how can we live out the truths with which we have been entrusted? Why is it so important that we do?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Amos 5:14*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand that God wants our good, and that seeking the Lord and His true values is finding life.

Feel: Sense that evil brings disasters and destroys what is meaningful and beautiful. Doing good not only feels good but brings positive results.

Do: Seek to restore life through an earnest and honest search for God.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Seeking the Lord

- A** How do you seek the Lord?
- B** Why does God tell His people that He will be with them when He is already with them—talking to them and calling them to repentance?
- C** What does it mean that God is with His church?

II. Feel: Seeking Good; Hating Evil

- A** What should be your attitude toward sin and sinners?
- B** How does love refuse things that are harmful? How can true love hurt and heal at the same time?

III. Do: Restoration of Relationship

- A** How do you seek God in your daily life?
- B** How do you make religious songs, rituals, and habits meaningful?
- C** How can you be safe from self-deception, a cheap relationship with God, and a sense of false security?

► **Summary:** Empty rituals and harmful behavior masked under the name of the Lord cannot satisfy and lead to meaningful relationships with God or others. Truly seeking the Lord and following His will brings true life.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1**—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Amos 5:14, 15, 18, 21*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: At the core of Amos’ message—a prophet who is seen often as the voice of doom—is the threefold appeal to “seek the LORD,” “love good,” “and live” (*Amos 5:4, 6, 15*). Only by a wholehearted return to the Lord can one find a plentiful and satisfying life.

Just for Teachers: This week’s lesson warns against cheap religion and false expectations regarding the day of the Lord. The day of judgment was understood in Amos’ day as a day of revenge against enemies. Israel’s enemies would perish, but believers would inherit God’s kingdom. However, Amos cautioned the community of faith that the day of the Lord would also be a day of severe judgment for His people because they had abandoned authentic spiritual life. Their religion was only outward, full of performance and rituals, and did not consist of an inner transformation and true relationships. Read the strong words describing how God hated their worship: there was no heart in their worship nor was there justice (*Amos 5:21–27*). Amos’ message was the last ultimatum of God in an attempt to stop Israel from doing evil. If nothing changed, the whole Northern Kingdom would disappear. This unfortunately happened in 722 B.C. with the Assyrian conquest—all because Israel refused to listen to the Lord, His messenger, and His Word.

Opening Discussion: What would happen if you started your Sabbath School class, or your pastor started his sermon, by saying: “Woe to you who expect the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ!” (*paraphrase of Amos 5:18*). “Woe to you who are comfortable in the church and feel secure, but in your daily life you forget the Lord and His will!” (*paraphrase of Amos 6:1*). What reaction could you expect? How shocking would it be?

► **STEP 2**—Explore

Just for Teachers: The literary structure of the book of Amos is written in a chiastic way (mirror structure), which was one of many literary structures used in antiquity:

- A. God’s judgments upon nations, including Judah and Israel (*Amos 1, 2*)
- B. God’s judgments upon Israel (*Amos 3, 4*)
- C. God’s appeal to His people: seek the Lord and live (*Amos 5*)

B. God’s judgments upon Israel (*Amos 6, 7*)

A. God’s sure judgments and promise of final restoration (*Amos 8, 9*)
This literary structure demonstrates that at the heart of Amos’ prophecy is not a message of doom but of hope.

Bible Commentary

I. “Seek the LORD and Live” (*Review Amos 5:6 with your class.*)

The sign of a genuine prophet is that he calls for repentance (*see Joel 2:12–17, Ezek. 14:6, 18:30–32, 33:11; even John the Baptist, Jesus, and the apostles engaged in this work—Matt. 3:2, Mark 1:15, Acts 2:38, 3:19, 2 Cor. 5:20*). Amos is doing the same. As the servant of God, he reminds the people of the covenant that they made with the Lord. This covenant contains covenant blessings and curses (*Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 27–30*); Amos enumerates the curses that Israel is in danger of falling under. The only solution to their spiritual crisis is a return to the Lord. He appeals to them: “Seek the LORD and live” (*Amos 5:6, NIV*); otherwise, divine judgment will sweep over them like a fire. Nothing will be left. All centers of false religion will be destroyed, and corrupt worshipers will go into exile (*Amos 5:27, 7:17*).

Consider This: How can you help your brother or sister in Christ to see the negative consequences of his or her wrong decisions and choices? How, in a redemptive way, can you help him or her to seek the Lord? Remember that the only power that brings people to repentance is God’s goodness (*Rom. 2:4*).

II. Genuine Worship and a False Priesthood (*Review Amos 5:21, 22 with your class.*)

Amos underscored the need for true worship. Turning from empty formalities and rituals to the real God would save the whole country from suffering through many tragedies. God strongly condemned cold, manipulative, and unfulfilling worship: “ ‘I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them’ ” (*Amos 5:21, 22, NIV*). The attitude of a worshiper is the crucial issue. Worship is about cultivating a genuine relationship with the living God and not about performance, manipulative techniques, presumptuous grace, and/or mechanistic rituals (*Isa. 1:11–14; Mic. 6:6, 7*). God continues: “ ‘Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps’ ” (*Amos 5:23, NIV*). True worship comes from a heart willing to follow God’s will and obey His commandments. Love, truth, and justice must be combined in the lives of those who praise Him (*Amos 5:24; compare with Gen. 4:7; Deut. 6:5; 10:12, 13; Isa. 1:15–20; Mic. 6:8; John 4:23*).

False worship, on the other hand, is motivated by the opposites of love, truth, and justice. For idol-worshipping Israel, Bethel in the south of the Northern Kingdom was the center of false worship. That was where a royal sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom were located (*Amos 7:13*). This cultic place, together with Dan in the north of Israel, was established by Jeroboam when he turned away from allegiance to Rehoboam, king of Judah, and Jerusalem's temple. He made two golden calves and put each of them in designated places to be worshiped (*for details see 1 Kings 12:26–33*). In both places, he built altars, appointed priests, and instituted festivals. All of this was counterfeit worship. God tried to stop Jeroboam from this perverted service by dramatic actions through the unnamed man of God, but in vain (*see 1 Kings 13*).

In his ministry, Amos faced strong opposition from Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, but the Lord's judgment fell upon the false priest and his family and not on God's prophet (*Amos 7:10–17*).

Consider This: Note Amos' word *perhaps* ("it may be" [NKJV]) in Amos 5:15, NIV. Even though you seek the Lord, repent, and do what is good and right, you cannot earn God's mercy and salvation. God cannot be manipulated, forced, or pushed to do something. But you can be assured that God in His mercy always responds to the cry of a humble and contrite heart (*Isa. 57:15, Matt. 8:3, 1 John 1:9*). This is not Amos' unique emphasis; other prophets underlined the same thought too (*see Joel 2:14, Jon. 3:9, Zeph. 2:3*).

Questions for Discussion:

- 1 Why does God care so much that our religion is not merely a formality, a cultural expression, but rather the wholehearted pursuit of our lives every day?
- 2 How can our worship be so significant that our prayers, songs, music, study of God's Word, and sermons bring meaning and real answers to the problems of our perplexed existence?

III. God Ultimately Restores (*Review Amos 9:12–15 with your class.*)

Amos predicted that David's fallen tent/house would be restored (*Amos 9:11–14*). Verse 12 proclaims that all the nations who bear the Lord's name (i.e., who accepted Him as their own God) will be part of the restored Davidic rulership. They belong to the Messiah and His kingdom. Jesus Christ unites all who seek Him and trust in Him. The Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) places stress on the faithful remnant, including believing Gentiles who bear the Lord's name and thus belong to Him and rejoice in Him. His followers are the Lord's special possession. Verses 13–15 promise the return of God's people from exile and the restoration of prosperity to those who went

through great hardship. God graciously reverses their dramatic situation. He will bring blessing after judgment. And He always keeps His promises.

Discussion: Amos' prophecy in chapter 9:11–14 predicts the future restoration of David's fallen house. How does the apostle Peter, in Acts 15:15–17, apply this prophecy to the worldwide mission of the Christian church to preach the gospel to all nations?

► **STEP 3**—Apply

Just for Teachers: God miraculously intervened in the past in favor of Israel. However, we often forget that He works for the salvation of all people. We do not have much information in the Bible regarding the ways in which God works in history for all people, but Amos 9:7 is one illuminating example of such work by God on behalf of the nations. God powerfully stated: “Are not you Israelites the same to me as the Cushites? . . . Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?” (NIV). Emphasize God's impartiality—how He wants to save and bless everyone, the whole world, because this is His will (*Isa. 45:22; compare with Gen. 12:3*).

Life Application: God values all people. He wants everyone to seek salvation. How can we as Christians show every person his or her true value and give an assurance of God's abiding love? Ask each class member to turn to the person seated next to him or her in order to speak about God's care. Help members to express their thoughts about God's care in such a way that the other person not only knows that God cares about him or her but *feels* the truth of it in his or her heart.

► **STEP 4**—Create

Activities:

- 1 Sing songs (from the *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*, if available) that express how we should come to the Lord in humbleness, with a grateful heart, and with the proper attitude to praise Him. Sing the selections together in class.
- 2 Discuss with your class how to make your worship a God-centered, not a human-centered, experience.