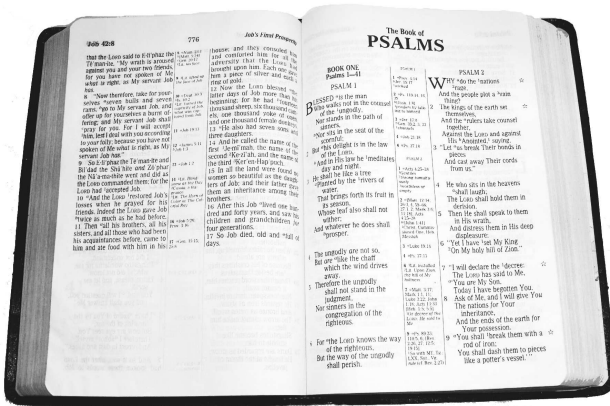


PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God's holy Word simply explained and applied



March 2019

Bible readings from Matthew chapters 10 to 13
Amos chapters 1 to 5

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Do not fear

The Lord Jesus encouraged the disciples to preach openly the things that they heard from him (27). He warned them that they would face fierce opposition, but he reassured them three times with the words, ‘*Do not fear*’ (26,28,31). It is only natural that we should be afraid when we are confronted with hatred and persecution. Those who hate the gospel may take our lives, but they are not able to harm our souls! What is the answer to the fear of wicked men?

- We must fear God *who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell* (28). The Greek word ‘Gehenna’ which is here translated ‘hell’, refers to the place where the wicked are sent on the day of judgment (cp. Mark 9:47–48). A Christless eternity is truly dreadful! God has saved us from that! Our fear of God is not one of craven dread, but is an attitude of reverence, awe and love towards him.
- We should not fear men when our heavenly Father lovingly cares for us. He is sovereign over all people including the wicked, and he is also sovereign over all our circumstances. No sparrow can fall to the ground apart from his sovereign will and we are much more precious to God than sparrows which could be purchased with very little money (29). We were bought at tremendous cost, even the precious blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 6:20; 1 Peter 1:18–19).

The fear of man brings a snare (Proverbs 29:25) and may keep us from confessing Christ (32–33). **Dare we remain silent when the ungodly blaspheme his name? Can we be ashamed of our precious Saviour who loves us?** Do you *confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus* (Romans 10:9)?

*I'm not ashamed to own my Lord
Or to defend his cause,
Maintain the honour of his word,
The glory of his cross.*

(Isaac Watts)

He who does not take up his cross ... is not worthy of me

You may be puzzled by the statement of the Lord Jesus recorded in verse 34. How could the *Prince of Peace* (Isaiah 9:6) who blesses *peacemakers* (5:9) bring division rather than peace? It is because many people hate Christ and his gospel. A Christian may find that his own family members become his greatest enemies as long as he remains faithful to Christ (35–36; see also verse 21). When faced with such pressure, should a believer turn back from following Christ? No! Our supreme allegiance must be to our Saviour who loves us and who gave himself for us (37). Just a word of caution. Some Christians alienate their families through lack of wisdom and a neglect of duties at home. Our non-Christian loved ones may reject the message of the gospel but they must always see that we are thoughtful and kind towards them.

Jesus said, '*He who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me*' (38). Taking up the cross means making difficult choices which may lead to suffering, shame and persecution for Christ and his kingdom. It means letting go of pride so that we are not ashamed of Jesus (32–33). It means denying ourselves and submitting to the Lordship of Christ (16:24). It may appear that we are 'losing our life' with all its freedom and joys, but this is not true (39). Self-denial does not bring misery, but great liberation and joy as we follow the Lord (39). The world may despise us and any work that we do in Christ's name but the Lord never forgets what we do for him. He sees us and he will reward us for seemingly insignificant acts of love and service (40–42). **Have you taken up your cross to follow Christ?**

*Take up thy cross, the Saviour said,
If thou wouldst my disciple be;
Deny thyself, the world forsake
And humbly follow after me.*

*Take up thy cross, nor heed the shame,,
Nor let thy foolish pride rebel;
The Lord for thee the cross endured
To save thy soul from death and hell.* (Charles W. Everest)

Blessed is he who is not offended because of me

John the Baptist had condemned Herod Antipas for his adultery and was thrown into prison (Mark 6:17–18). He began to have doubts about who Jesus was and he sent two of his disciples to Jesus to ask, ‘*Are you the Coming One, or do we look for another?*’ (2–3). John had affirmed the greatness of the Lord Jesus and had heard the voice from heaven saying, ‘*This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased*’ (3:11,17). He had also heard about the wonderful works of Jesus. Why was he beset by doubt? Perhaps he was expecting Jesus to purge the nation of wickedness and hypocrisy (cp. 3:7–10)? He may have wondered why the Lord allowed him to languish in prison.

The two disciples then saw for themselves the mighty power of Christ over sickness and demons. He told them to tell John about the things that they heard and saw (4–5; cp. Luke 7:21). He said to them, ‘*Blessed is he who is not offended because of me*’ (6). The Greek verb translated ‘*offended*’ means ‘*stumbled*’ or ‘*ensnared*’. Jesus was very kind and tender in his assessment of his disheartened servant. John was greater than all the Old Testament prophets and yet *the least in the kingdom of heaven* is greater than him (7–11). They were privileged to see the fulfilment of John’s prophecies (eg. John 1:29).

Verse 14 does not mean that John was Elijah returned to earth; he had denied this (John 1:21). His ministry was in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17) fulfilling the prophecy that Elijah would come again (17:11–12; cp. Malachi 4:5–6).

Are you beset by dark doubts or despair because of some perplexing trial? Do not be offended (‘*stumbled*’) at the Lord for his dealings with you. He promises, ‘*Blessed is he who is not offended because of me*’ (6). **You may not be able to trace the ways of God, but do trust him. He is wise and kind and he will never fail you.**

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.*

(William Cowper)

A friend of tax collectors and sinners

Jesus compared his generation to children playing in the market places. One group wanted to play weddings and some, pretending to be flute players, obliged with merry music, but there was no dancing because others would not join them. The ‘flute players’ then pretended to be mourners wailing their laments, but that still did not suit the others. Jesus likened this childish behaviour to the petty attitude of those who opposed both John the Baptist and himself. They opposed John who did not attend feasts, saying that he had a demon, but they condemned Jesus because attended feasts (16–19). They falsely accused him of being a glutton and a drunkard. Jesus said, ‘*Wisdom is justified by her children*’ (or ‘works’; 19). The preaching of John the Baptist and Jesus was justified by the changed lives of those who followed them (16–19).

Jesus befriended those who were considered to be the dregs of society when they turned from their sin to follow him. He was called ‘*a friend of tax collectors and sinners*’ (19). The enemies of Jesus were implying that Jesus was condoning sin, but that was not true. He offers forgiveness to the worst of sinners if they will repent and trust in him (cp. 1 Timothy 1:15).

Jesus reproached the cities which had been privileged to witness most of his mighty works. Chorazin and Bethsaida were close to Capernaum (see map, February notes, page 18). They would face greater punishment on the day of judgment than the wicked cities of Tyre, Sidon and Sodom (20–24). Amos had denounced Tyre for its treachery in selling Jewish captives into slavery (Amos 1:9–10; cp. Isaiah chapter 23 and Ezekiel chapters 26 to 28). The sin of Capernaum and her neighbours was far greater than that of Tyre, Sidon and Sodom, for they had seen the miracles of Christ and heard his teaching but they rejected him.

It is fearful and foolish to reject the Lord Jesus. The consequences of rejecting him are too dreadful to contemplate.

You will find rest for your souls

After he denounced Capernaum and its neighbouring cities, the Lord Jesus gave thanks to God the Father for his sovereignty. He addressed the Father as the '*Lord of heaven and earth*' (25). God is absolutely sovereign over the universe. He cannot be toppled from his throne! Jesus thanked the Father for his sovereignty in revealing the gospel to sinners. He hides gospel truth from those like the Pharisees who considered themselves to be wise and prudent and reveals it to '*babes*' (those who have a childlike trust in him). The Father has given his Son all authority and Jesus is sovereign in revealing him. He is the only mediator between the Father and men (27; 1 Timothy 2:5).

Though Jesus is sovereign in bringing salvation, he invites sinners to come to him. He says, '*Come to me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest*' (28). The word '*labour*' means to toil and be exhausted in that toil. There are many who have laboured to find happiness, satisfaction and meaning to their lives, but have not been able to obtain these things. If we are to have rest:

- We must *come* to Jesus (28). He alone is able to take the burden of sin from us. There is no other person who is able to save us.
- We must take his '*yoke*' (29). A yoke speaks of submission and service under the lordship of Christ (oxen were yoked together for work). The religion of the scribes and Pharisees with its man-made regulations was a heavy and burdensome yoke (23:4). The yoke of Jesus is *easy* (Greek = 'kindly') and his burden is *light* (30).
- We must *learn* from Jesus by following his example (29). He is gentle and humble. Have you been learning from him? Does it show in your life?

There is a wonderful promise here for all who respond to the invitation of Jesus: '*You will find rest for your souls*' (29). We live in a troubled and restless world but the Lord Jesus gives rest of soul which we can never obtain from this world. This rest comes as a result of forgiveness of sin and flows from the enjoyment of peace with God and his love in our lives. **Are you enjoying it?**

The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath

The scribes and Pharisees made Sabbath-keeping a great burden and misery with all their petty rules for observing the Sabbath which were not given in God's Word. They saw the disciples plucking ears of corn on the Sabbath in order to satisfy their hunger and were quick to criticise them (1–2). Jesus showed their blindness to the teaching of the Scriptures when he asked them twice, *'Have you not read?'* (3,5). He reminded them that David had done an unlawful thing by eating the shewbread (3–4; cp. 1 Samuel 21:1–6). Jesus then pointed out that the Jewish priests were obliged to desecrate the Sabbath because of their necessary duties (5; cp. Numbers 28:9–10). Sabbath laws must be overruled when there is a need to be met!

Jesus taught that human need must be met on the Sabbath just as it is on any other day. He said, *'The Sabbath was made for man'* (Mark 2:27), not to be a burden but a blessing. Mercy is far more important than outward religious observance and Jesus reminded them, *'The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath'* (7–8).

Jesus then went into the synagogue where there was a man with a withered hand. The Pharisees saw another opportunity to accuse Jesus of breaking the Sabbath. They asked him, *'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?'* (9–10). He pointed out that if they had a sheep which was trapped in a pit on the Sabbath, they would certainly rescue it. A man is more important than a sheep! Jesus said, *'Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath'* and he healed the man (11–13). The churlish Pharisees had no compassion for the handicapped man and were annoyed to see him healed on the Sabbath. They were so rigid in their interpretation of the law and yet they plotted to murder the Lord Jesus on the Sabbath (14).

Is Jesus the Lord of your Sabbaths? If he is, the Lord's Day should be the highlight of your week. You are able to worship God with his people, to do good and to show compassion to those in need.

A bruised reed he will not break

The Lord Jesus was aware of the murderous intention of his enemies and he departed from that place. Great crowds continued to follow him and he healed them all (14–15). Matthew here quotes from the first of the ‘Servant’ prophecies from Isaiah which refer to Jesus (Isaiah 42:1–4; the others are Isaiah 49:1–9; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12). These verses teach us that:

- God the Father sent the Lord Jesus into the world as a servant. *‘Behold, my Servant whom I have chosen’* (18). Why did the Lord Jesus humble himself and come to earth as a servant? When we give our minds to seriously ponder this question, we are confronted with the amazing love of God. Man is a rebel and our disobedience to God calls for a Saviour who is perfectly obedient to God. He delighted to do the will of God the Father (Psalm 40:8; cp. Hebrews 10:7; John 4:34). Jesus came as a servant to do the Father’s will in order to save us from our sins (cp. Romans 5:19; Philippians 2:6–8).
- God chose him as the One who alone is able to save us (18)
- God the Father delights in him (18; cp. 3:17; 17:5).
- The Holy Spirit is upon him (18; Luke 4:17–22; Acts 10:38).
- He has come to save Gentiles as well as Jews (18,21).
- He does not quarrel or rave. His enemies did this when they stirred up the mob to cry out for his crucifixion (19; cp. Mark 15:11–14).
- He is gentle in his dealings with us. *A bruised reed he will not break, and smoking flax he will not quench* (20). Bruised reeds are useless and smouldering wicks which do not give light are of no worth. Though the world may despise us, our gracious Saviour does not cast us off. He patiently and tenderly works in our lives, healing and restoring.

The scribes and Pharisees were callous and indifferent to human need. They asked, *‘Is it lawful?’* (10) but never, *‘Is it kind?’* **When religion makes men callous, something is terribly wrong. Do we have a heart of compassion that comes from knowing the love of Christ in our lives?**

The blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men

After Jesus healed a man who was demon-possessed, blind and mute, the amazed crowds wondered whether he could be the promised Messiah (*'the Son of David'*). The Pharisees reacted to this by saying that Jesus cast out demons by the power of Satan (22–24; cp 10:25). He responded by showing that such an accusation was foolish. Satan cannot cast out Satan! A kingdom or a house divided against itself cannot stand, and Satan would be powerless if he were divided against himself. The Lord Jesus is stronger than the devil and has bound him and plundered his house to bring deliverance to those in his grip, such as the man who had been possessed by demons. (25–29).

Jesus gave a very stern warning – If we are not with him, we are against him (30). We may feel satisfied that we are not as bad as many other people but the crucial issue is the way we respond to the claims of the Lord Jesus. We cannot be neutral!

Those who persist in opposing Christ or in rejecting him, refusing to repent of their sin are in danger of blaspheming the Spirit. What is blasphemy? The word comes from the Greek noun *'blasphēmia'* meaning slander and evil speaking of someone or something that is good. There comes a time when the Holy Spirit will no longer strive with those who blaspheme him (cp. Genesis 6:3). God gives them up to their own sin and their heart becomes hardened, so that they will never repent (cp. Exodus 3:19; 4:21; Romans 1:24,26,28). Jesus said, *'The blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men'* (31).

Some sensitive Christians endure much misery and torment wondering whether or not they have blasphemed the Holy Spirit (and Satan is ever ready to accuse them). The person who has blasphemed the Spirit is not troubled in such a way. **When someone is worried or anxious about committing the unpardonable sin, it is extremely unlikely that they are guilty of such a thing.** If you are troubled about this question, come to the Lord Jesus and commit your cause to him. He is kind and understanding; he will give you rest for your soul.

Every idle word

The Lord Jesus knew the thoughts of the Pharisees (25) and he warned them concerning their wicked words. Matthew Henry points out that our words reveal the state of our hearts:

- The heart is the root, the language is the fruit (33). Just as a tree is known by its fruit, our spiritual state is revealed by the words that come from our lips.
- The heart is the fountain, the words are the streams (34). Evil words are the natural product of an evil heart!
- The heart is a treasure store, the words are the things brought out of that treasury (35). The evil man brings forth evil things from his evil heart. Let us be sure that we are like the good man who brings out good things from his heart.

Jesus called the scribes and Pharisees a *‘brood of vipers’* (35). John the Baptist had used the same words to describe them (3:7).

Jesus also warned against careless talk: *‘for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment’* (36). Moses *spoke rashly with his lips* and forfeited his right to enter Canaan (Numbers 20:10–12; Psalm 106:33). The Lord knows every word that we utter (Psalm 139:4) and all will be recalled on the day of judgment. Let us take great care and think before we speak. **Before speaking about others, we should ask ourselves, ‘Is it true?’ — ‘Is it kind?’ — ‘Is it necessary?’** Coarse joking and filthy talk should be unthinkable for any Christian (Ephesians 5:4). We must keep ourselves from foolish or idle talk. If we do not bridle out tongues (see James 1:26; 3:1–12), we will face shame on the day of judgment.

*If you your lips
Would keep from slips,
Of five things please beware —
Of whom you speak,
To whom you speak,
And when, and why, and where!*

(Matthew Mercer)

An evil and adulterous nation seeks after a sign

The scribes and Pharisees were so blinded by their tradition and so hardened in their unbelief that they refused to accept the claims of Christ. They came to him appearing to be so polite, but their request for a sign was perverse and wicked (38). They had seen many miracles, but when they were unable to gainsay the evidence, they accused Jesus of being in league with the devil (22–24). It appears that they were seeking a more spectacular sign than those they had seen (*‘a sign from heaven’*; 16:1).

Jesus responded to their request by saying that *‘An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign’* (39). Why does he use these terms to describe them? Their religion was a sham and a cloak for wickedness. In calling them *‘adulterous’*, he was indicating that they were unfaithful to God whom they professed to serve. Many professing Christians are addicted to seeking after signs and wonders. This is not an evidence of faith, but of weakness and immaturity.

Jesus did promise a sign – that of the prophet Jonah (unlike unbelieving scholars, he accepted Jonah’s three day experience in the stomach of the great fish as historical fact). Jesus was here prophesying of his own resurrection from the dead (40) but even that failed to convince his enemies (see chapters 27:62–64; 28:11–15). The heathen of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah who performed no miracles. The Queen of Sheba had travelled a great distance to hear the wisdom of Solomon. On the day of judgment, they would be called to witness against the evil generation who rejected Jesus, because a greater than Jonah or Solomon had been among them (41–42).

Many unbelievers claim to have intellectual difficulties in believing in the gospel, but the problem is not one of intellect, but of a sinful heart. *This is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil* (John 3:19). **There are none so blind and stubborn as those who refuse to see!**

Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother

Jesus likened *'this wicked generation'* (45) to a man who had been delivered from an unclean spirit. He had a new beginning and the *'house'* of his life was in order. The spirit found seven other spirits more wicked than himself and they returned to enter the man making his last state worse than ever. Many thousands had been privileged to hear John the Baptist and Jesus but a religious interest was not good enough. We can have a form Christianity that is knows nothing of Christ as our Saviour and Lord. If we refuse the challenge to repent of our sin and to trust in Christ to save us, we will become hardened in our sin and this will leave us in a worse condition than we were in before.

Mary and brothers of Jesus came to the house where Jesus was teaching (cp.13:1) but could not reach him speak to him. Some people reverence Mary as a perpetual virgin but they are ignorant of Scripture. The names of some of the children of Joseph and herself are recorded in the next chapter (13:55–56).

Why did they wish to speak to Jesus? It may be that they were concerned for him and wanted to protect him from those who said, *'He is out of his mind'* (Mark 3:21,31). It seems that someone in the doorway of the house told the Lord Jesus that they were outside. Jesus asked that person a question, *'Who is my mother and who are my brothers?'* (48), He then pointed to his disciples and said, *'Here are mother and brothers'* (49). He was not despising Mary, but teaching that a spiritual relationship to him is far more important than natural relationships.

Those who do the will of God are those who belong to him. Jesus said, *'For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother'* (50). **Do you seek to please God?** Be encouraged that however weak your faith, you are precious to Christ and he will lead you and bless you throughout your life and he will reward you in heaven (cp. 7:21; 25:20–23).

He who hears the Word and understands it

This chapter contains seven parables about the kingdom of God. In the parable of the sower, the crucial factor is not the seed, but the ground into which it is sown. **The state of the ground determines the fate of the seed.** In this parable the seed is the Word of God (19; cp. Mark 4:14). The preaching and teaching of God's Word must take first place in the work of the kingdom. If we neglect our private reading and meditation of the Bible we will be weak and unstable in our Christian life. We should also join a church where the Bible is faithfully taught and preached.

As the Word of God is preached, taught or read, it falls on different types of ground; this ground is the human heart (19). When the Word of God comes to the heart of the 'wayside' hearer, he does not understand it. Satan comes immediately and snatches it away from his heart (4,19). Such a person has no real desire to understand God's Word and any apparent interest very soon dries up.

The 'stony places' hearer has a shallow heart. Though there is an appearance of life, there is no depth and his profession of faith soon evaporates when trouble comes (5–6, 20–21). Such a hearer desires to have the peace and blessing of following Christ, but is shocked when trials come and he protests, 'I never thought it would be like this.' The thorny ground hearer has a worldly heart that chokes the Word of God so that it becomes unfruitful (7,22). Such a person lives for his possessions and pleasures rather than our wonderful Saviour. The 'good ground' hearer is *he who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit* (8,23).

What kind of ground does your heart provide for the Word of God as you read it each day and hear it taught week by week? Do you seek to understand it? If you want to bear precious spiritual fruit in your life, you must approach God's Word with a prayerful and submissive heart. – *He who has ears to hear, let him hear!* (9).

It has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom

Parables have been described as ‘earthly stories with a heavenly meaning’, but they also have a heavenly purpose, which is to divide those who hear them. After telling the parable of the sower, the Lord Jesus gave the disciples his reason for speaking in parables. We may think that Jesus used parables to make his message more clear to his hearers. This was not the case. It was to conceal the meaning of his message from them as a judgment from God (10–15). Jesus quoted Isaiah 6:9–10 which is also quoted in John 12:40 and Acts 28:26–27. He explained the meaning of the parables to his disciples, not to the crowds (11,18,36).

Jesus used parables to reveal truth (*‘the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven’*) to those who accepted it and to conceal truth from those who hardened themselves against it (10–12). Some understand the stories told by the parables but fail to ‘see’ the truths that they teach. Others not only understand the stories, they also ‘see’ the spiritual truths revealed in the parables. We should thank God continually for the spiritual enlightenment that he has given to us (cp. Ephesians 4:17–18). Jesus said to his disciples *‘Blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear’* (16). Are you troubled when some who profess to follow Christ and appear to be enthusiastic Christians fall away? The parable of the sower which we considered yesterday explains the reason for spurious conversions.

We often teach children and young people the parables. They are interesting stories (eg. the story of the wise man – Matthew 7:24–27), **but we must explain and emphasise the spiritual truths conveyed by the parables.** We should pray that the Holy Spirit will open their hearts so that they may understand and receive these truths. John Blanchard rightly points out that ‘those who treat parables as no more than interesting stories will end up with nothing but interesting stories!’ (LOOK THROUGH LUKE, page 44 published by Henry E. Walter).

Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun

The parable of the tares among the wheat (24–30), like that of the sower, concerns a field, some seed and a harvest. In the parable of the sower, the seed was all good but here there is an evil sower who sows tares among the wheat. The ‘*tares*’ are bearded darnel plants whose seeds are poisonous both to man and animals.

The servants see their master’s seed germinate and grow, but they also notice the tares. They are puzzled and alarmed because they know that their master had sown good seed and they tell him what they have found; he informs them that an enemy is responsible for this. They ask if they should gather up the tares, but he says that they must be left alone (29–30). The roots of the wheat and the tares would have started to intertwine under the ground and the wheat would be harmed if they tried to uproot and remove the tares. They were to allow them to grow together until the harvest. He will then tell his reapers to gather up the tares, bundle them up, and burn them. They would then harvest the wheat and store it in his barn.

After Jesus sent the multitudes away, the disciples asked him to explain the meaning of the parable (36). He said that the field is the world and that he is the One who sows the good seed which represents those belonging to his kingdom. The enemy who sows the tares is the devil (37–39). We may wonder why God does not remove those who are not genuine Christians from his people but there are many still in the world and in our churches who are not yet believers, but who will come to faith in Christ.

When the Lord Jesus comes again at *the end of the age*, he will purge his kingdom of *all things that offend, and those who practise lawlessness* and cast them into hell (39–42). **That will be a terrible day for those who are lost, but a glorious day for every true Christian.** *Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father* (43). **Are you a citizen of the kingdom of God?**

When it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree

The Lord Jesus explained the meaning of the parables of the sower and of the wheat and the tares to his disciples, but he did not explain the meaning of the other parables found in Matthew chapter 13. His use of parables fulfils the prophecy of Psalm 78:2 which is quoted (34–35).

J.C. Ryle observes that the parable of the mustard seed (30–32) illustrates ‘the progress of the kingdom of heaven in the world’ (EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON MATTHEW). The mustard seed is very small but it grows into a tree where birds nest in its branches: *But when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree*. We may be disheartened that many of our churches are small and that God’s kingdom sees very little increase around us. Many churches are closing down and the message of the gospel is despised. Can it be that the kingdom of heaven is really growing like the mustard seed? The answer is that the church is rapidly growing in many parts of the world, even if it appears to be in decline in the western world. **Let us remain faithful to God’s Word and never compromise his truth in order to attain apparent growth.** There are setbacks and difficulties in gospel work but we must persevere. *We shall reap if we do not lose heart* (Galatians 6:9).

The parable of the leaven (33) shows ‘the progress of the gospel in the heart of a believer’ (Ryle). A woman has three measures of flour (possibly 25 kgs or 56 lbs). She puts a little leaven (yeast) in with the flour and this causes all the dough to rise. Eventually, all the dough has risen. When a work of grace begins in the human heart, it is never static. Little by little, it influences all aspects of the believer’s life as he grows in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ and sin is forsaken. The Holy Spirit whom God gives us at conversion, brings precious fruit that grows like the yeast in the dough. – *Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*. (Galatians 5:22–23). This is godliness which results in a radiant life for the Lord Jesus. **Is this apparent in your life?**

He goes and sells all that he has

The Lord Jesus spoke the first four parables recorded in this chapter to the multitudes (2–3). After he sent the crowds away, he explained the meaning of the parable of the tares among wheat to his disciples and told them three more parables (36). In the next two parables Jesus likened the kingdom of heaven to treasure hidden in a field and to a very precious pearl (44–45). Both parables are similar in that both men find something of immense value that they must have, whatever the cost. Spurgeon takes the view that the man seeking beautiful pearls represents Christ and that the pearl of great price is the church, the Lord Jesus giving all to purchase us. I take the view that the man is the seeker and Christ is the pearl of great price (this is the view held by the Puritan John Trapp, Matthew Henry, J.C. Ryle and William Hendriksen).

A man was digging in a field when he unexpectedly found treasure in the ground. He hides it and gladly *he sells all that he has* so that he could purchase the field and claim ownership of the treasure (44). The next parable tells of a merchant who was a seeker after beautiful pearls; at last he found an outstanding pearl and he was so determined to have it that he also sold all that he had and bought it (45–46).

The message of both parables is that the blessings of belonging to Christ and his kingdom are priceless and bring great peace and satisfaction. Christ our King is wonderful and precious in his person and no price is too great to pay to gain him (cp. Philippians 3:8–9). Think about some of the blessings that we have as Christians: we know forgiveness of sin through the Lord Jesus Christ and peace with God; we have the help of the Holy Spirit day by day and we enjoy fellowship with God; we have the privilege of prayer; we have eternal life and wonderful blessings in the world to come.

We should value our salvation more than anything else in all the world; We cannot purchase it, but there is a price to pay for discipleship. We have to deny ourselves and take up our cross daily to follow Christ (Luke 9:23–25). **Is the Lord Jesus precious to you?**

Have you understood all these things?

In the parable of the dragnet (47–50), the Lord Jesus describes a scene which would have been very familiar to his disciples, especially to those who were fishermen. Galilean fishermen trawled a large net through the water, gathering up all kinds of fish. When the catch was landed, the men and perhaps other members of their families would sit down on the beach. There, they would sort through the catch, separating the edible from what could not be eaten or sold. The rejected creatures were discarded. Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like this.

The parable of the dragnet (47–50) is similar in meaning to that of the tares sown among the wheat. Both parables contain a solemn warning concerning the end of those who do not obey the gospel. At the end of the age, the angels will separate the wicked from the righteous and cast them into hell. Jesus said, *‘There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth’* (49–50; cp. verses 40–42). Many people admire the Lord Jesus as a great Teacher, but they do not believe or obey him. He often spoke of the peril of being outside of his kingdom and of judgment and hell. The Gospel of Matthew contains some of these warnings (eg., 5:29–30; 7:21–23; 16:26; 18:8–9; 25:41–46)

Jesus asked his disciples, *‘Have you understood all these things?’* (51). He wanted them to be sure that they had understood his warning and that they had taken it to heart; it would affect the way they served him and preached. We need to understand that not everyone will go to heaven and that many will go to hell. We are in great peril if we are complacent about our own spiritual state. Jesus urges us to be prepared for the day of separation when he comes again, *‘You also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not expect him’* (24:44). **Are you ready?**

They were offended at him

The people of Nazareth were astonished at the wisdom of Jesus when he taught in their synagogue. They had heard of his mighty works (probably his miracles at Capernaum, some twenty miles away, cp. Luke 4:23) but they despised him. They asked, ‘*Is not this the carpenter’s son?*’ They did not understand how someone from a humble family could have such wisdom and power (53–55). He had led a sinless and perfect life among them for thirty years, but they still rejected him. Jesus reminded them that a prophet is not accepted in his own country or by his own relatives (57); at this time his brothers did not believe in him (John 7:5). Jeremiah the prophet had also known rejection from his own family and by the people of Anathoth (Jeremiah 11:21; 12:6; 20:10).

The same mistake is made by many today who see Jesus as just a man. They refuse to accept the teaching of the Word of God that he was not Joseph’s son in a literal sense but was conceived through the Holy Spirit (1:20–23). They do not believe that he is the almighty Son of God, co-equal with the Father and the Holy Spirit (cp. Philippians 2:5–7) and that *in him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily* (Colossians 2:9).

They were offended at him (57); this could be translated ‘they were caused to stumble because of him.’ Jesus did some mighty works at Nazareth, but not many, because of their unbelief (54, 58). Satan blinds sinful men to the greatness of the Lord Jesus (2 Corinthians 4:3–4). People are still offended by our message that Jesus humbled himself and died on the cross to save sinners. The preaching of ‘*Christ crucified*’ is a ‘*stumbling-block*’ (1 Corinthians 1:23 – same Greek word translated ‘offence’). Paul also wrote concerning ‘*the offence of the cross*’ (Galatians 5:11). We too were blind in our minds, but Christ has enlightened us (Ephesians 1:18; 4:17–18; 5:8). **We should be eternally grateful for all that he has done for us!**

AMOS

Amos prophesied during the reigns of King Uzziah of Judah and King Jeroboam II of Israel (about 760 BC). He was a herdsman and a farmer of sycamore figs (1:1; 7:14). This fig tree (cp. Luke 19:4) must not be confused with the European sycamore tree. Amos prophesied to the northern kingdom (Israel), though he was from Tekoa (about 12 miles south of Jerusalem) in Judah. Both countries were enjoying an economic boom, but things were far from well. The rich grew richer, many of them owning several houses, but the poor grew poorer (3:15) and they were oppressed by the rich (2:6–7; 4:1). Justice was perverted by bribery (5:10–12). There was plenty of religion with great feast days, but it was corrupt (4:4–5; 5:21–23; 7:10–13).

Amos thundered out warnings of judgment against the people on account of their wickedness. His prophecy ends with a ray of hope, the restoring of the kingdom of David, the coming of Messiah to reign over his people (9:11–15).

You may wonder what relevance such a prophecy has for us almost 2800 years later? It has every relevance! The similarities between society in Amos' day and our day are quite striking and his prophecy contains vital lessons and warnings for us.

Outline of Amos

1. Prophecies against the neighbours of Israel and Judah – 1:1 to 2:3
2. Prophecies against Judah and Israel – 2:4–16
3. Three sermons against Israel – 3:1 to 6:14
4. Five visions of doom – 7:1 to 9:10
5. Restoration of David's kingdom – 9:11–15

For further reading: I have found *THE ROARING OF THE LION* by Ray Beeley (Banner of Truth) and *THE DAY OF THE LION* by J.A. Motyer (IVP) to be helpful.

The LORD roars from Zion

Historians are unable to fit a precise date for the earthquake mentioned in verse 1. The prophecy of Amos begins with dire warnings of judgment against six nations which were neighbours to Israel and Judah (1:3 to 2:3). We are often asked if God cares about the oppression, violence and cruelty in the world. He does indeed care! God is not a weak onlooker. *The LORD roars from Zion* (2; cp. 3:8). God used Amos to thunder out his message, roaring from Zion. Many who speak for the church today do not present such a God to the world. Most people imagine God to be a benign, disinterested onlooker of all that happens in this world. We must tell them that he is almighty, sovereign, merciful and just, and that he will surely punish sinners. We must tell a needy generation of the Lion of the tribe of Judah who came to our world to die as the Lamb of God to save sinners (Revelation 5:5–6).

The expression, ‘*For three transgressions ... and for four ...*’ which introduces God’s case against each of the nations is a way of saying, ‘For crime upon crime’. **Time does not erase men’s wickedness from God’s memory.** The Lord first recalls the military campaigns of the Syrian king, Hazael, which had taken place some fifty years earlier (3–6). Elisha had wept as he warned Hazael that he would be guilty of dreadful atrocities against Israel (2 Kings 8:12). Hazael’s slaughter of the Israelites in Gilead is likened to the threshing of corn where horses or mules would drag heavy wooden blocks, studded with iron teeth over heaps of corn. The straw was chopped into small pieces releasing the grain; the Syrians would perish for their wickedness

The Lord would also punish the Philistines who raided towns and villages, taking everyone captive to supply their thriving slave trade (6–8). Gaza, the principle city of the Philistines here represents the whole nation. There is such a thing as ‘a just war’ but warfare may bring out the worst in some people. Those guilty of vile atrocities in wartime may manage to escape human justice, but God’s day of reckoning will come: *The LORD roars.*

Map to show the nations and places in the prophecy of Amos



I will send fire

The Phoenicians (Tyre) shared the guilt of the Philistines for taking captives to sell as slaves to Edom. Their sin was the greater because they broke the covenant they had with Israel (9–10; probably the treaty between Hiram and Solomon – 1 Kings 5:10). Such behaviour was treacherous. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conducted a long siege against Tyre some two hundred years after this prophecy (approximately 587–574 BC). Alexander the Great captured the city in 332 BC and sold 30,000 of its people into slavery.

The Edomites were descended from Jacob's twin brother, Esau. The Edomites had a history of hatred towards Israel though both nations were descended from Abraham and Isaac. Esau's anger against Jacob (Genesis 27:41) was embedded in the psyche of his descendants (11–12). Edom had not only *cast off all pity* for his brother (Israel) but was also implicated in the crimes of the Philistines and Phoenicians through purchasing their slaves.

The Ammonites had ripped open the pregnant women of Gilead in order to enlarge their territory. They would not escape divine punishment (13–15).

The Moabites' crime was against the Edomites (probably after the rare occasion when Edom was on Israel's side in battle – 2 Kings chapter 3). In a spiteful act of revenge, the Moabites desecrated the grave of the king of Edom and burned his corpse (2:1). This kind of desecration is wicked in the sight of God.

How did God punish those nations? He warned each of them, *'I will not turn away its punishment ... I will send fire.'* Their main cities would be destroyed (3–4; 6–7; 9–10; 11–12; 13–14; 2 :1–2). Fire here speaks of war. They must reap what they had sown and would be destroyed by foreign armies. *Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap* (Galatians 6:7). **This is an encouragement to every child of God who suffers persecution. The Lord will surely punish their oppressors (Romans 12:19).**

Because they have despised the law of the LORD

Judah and Israel may have enjoyed hearing the prophecies against their neighbours, but the prophet now turns his attention to them (4–10). Judah was not condemned for crimes against humanity but ‘*because they have despised the law of the LORD and have not kept his commandments*’ (4). The nation or individual who despises God’s Word, will not keep God’s commandments. We have seen a dreadful decline in the western world because of this sin. The spiritual vacuum is being filled by the occult such as new-age practices, spiritism, astrology and witchcraft. The phrase, ‘*Their lies*’ (4) refers to the idolatry and occult practices which took root in Judah when God’s Word was despised. False religion is a lie! However, those who delight in the Word of God and obey it are truly blessed.

The northern kingdom (Israel) was not only condemned for its idolatry, but also for oppressing the poor. The righteous and the poor were being sold into slavery and were being trampled into the dust by their oppressors (6–7). They had turned to a religion which practised ritual prostitution and sexual immorality in the house of their false god (8). God reminded the people of his mercy to their forefathers 9–10), but what had they done? Young men who had dedicated their lives to God as Nazirites (cp. Numbers 6:1–21) were being encouraged to take strong drink so breaking their vows of abstinence and the prophets of God were silenced (11–12; cp. 7:12–17). God was weighed down by the burden of his people’s sin (13; some translations, eg. English Standard Version, render the verse to read that it is Jehovah who is pressing down upon his people). The Lord warned that he would destroy Judah and Israel by invading armies (5,13–16).

When men refuse to hear God’s Word they have no excuse when judgment comes to them. We must not allow the attitudes of the world to fashion our thoughts. Let the message of Amos be a warning to us! **We are in danger of divine judgment if we despise God’s Word. Let us search our own hearts and repent if any such rebellion be found in us.**

You only have I known of all the families of the earth

Chapters 3 to 6 of Amos contain three discourses in which the prophet sets out in greater detail the message that God had given him for Israel. Each discourse begins with the words, ‘*Hear this word*’ (3:1; 4:1; 5:1).

The Lord reminded Israel of their special relationship to him as his covenant people: ‘*You only have I known*’ (‘*chosen*’ – ESV) *of all the families of the earth*’ (2). He had not chosen them because they deserved to be chosen (Deuteronomy 7:6–7). He had made them his own ‘*special treasure*’ and had delivered them from oppression in Egypt to bring them into Canaan. ‘*You only ...*’ — Such amazing grace should have excited wonder, love, praise and obedience to the Lord. Great privilege brings great responsibility (Deuteronomy 7:11).

Israel’s sin was all the more serious because they had despised and spurned God. They had been unfaithful to God and had disobeyed his commandments. The Lord said, ‘*Therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities*’ (2). Ray Beeley points out that ‘there is nothing soft about the divine love; it is a holy love which demands wholehearted obedience’ (THE ROARING OF THE LION, page 46). **The Lord has chosen every Christian to be holy (1 Peter 1:2,15; 2:9)**. If we belong to the Lord, we will love him and obey his commandments (1 John 1:7; 5:3). If we are not leading a godly life, we must question our Christian profession.

Ray Beeley helpfully summarizes verses 2 and 3 (THE ROARING OF THE LION, page 18):

1. The privilege of undeserved love – ‘*You only have I known.*’
2. The pattern of united living – ‘*Can two walk together, except they be agreed?*’
3. The punishment of uncontrolled licence – ‘*Therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.*’

The Lord GOD has spoken! Who can but prophesy?

The Lord had spoken against Israel for its sins (1–2) and he goes on to challenge the people with a series of questions:

- ‘*Can two walk together, unless they be agreed?*’ (3). If they are walking together, we can safely assume that it is by some prior agreement. The people of Israel were in covenant with God, binding them to him in love, faithfulness and obedience. They were guilty of breaking that agreement.
- ‘*Will a lion roar in the forest, when he has no prey?*’ (4). If a lion was heard roaring in the forest, it meant that he had sprung upon his victim, because he is silent when stalking his prey. The warning of the prophet is like the roar of a lion indicating that there is danger ahead.
- ‘*Will a bird fall into a snare on the earth, where there is no trap for it? Will a snare spring up from the earth, if it has caught nothing at all?*’ (5).
- ‘*If a trumpet is blown in a city, will not the people be afraid? If there is a calamity in a city, will not the LORD have done it?*’ (6). A trumpet blast sounded an alarm of impending invasion which filled the people with fear. The words of the prophet were not only like the roar of a lion (4), but also as the sounding of a trumpet which should have filled the people with fear because of coming judgment (6). God was warning the people that he would certainly punish them if they did not repent of their sin.

J.A. Motyer reminds us that ‘the task of the Old Testament prophet was to address the present in the light of the future’ (THE DAY OF THE LION, page 72). *A lion has roared! Who will not fear?* (8). The Lord had roared like a lion because he had something to say to wayward Israel. They should fear and pay attention to the prophet (8). The Lord *reveals his secret to his servants the prophets* (7). Amos had to speak! The Word of God was burning like a fire within him. *The Lord GOD has spoken! Who can but prophesy?* (8). **Let us pray that God will raise up men today who will listen to what he has to say, and who will fearlessly declare his Word to our needy generation.**

They do not know to do right

The Lord called on Ashdod (a Philistine city) and on Egypt to witness the wickedness and disorder in Samaria (the northern kingdom was often called Samaria after its capital city). We are presented with a scene of appalling evil in a very divided society. Many made themselves rich by oppressing the poor, using violence and robbery (9–10). Some had several houses – *‘the winter house ... the summer house; the houses of ivory’* (15). The self-indulgent oppressors were incapable of doing what was right and God said, *‘they do not know to do right’* (10).

Israel was ripe for judgment and it came within half a century the prophesying of Amos. He warned that their land would be surrounded and destroyed by an invading army (the Assyrians). The word *‘palaces’* (11) would be better translated ‘fortresses’ or ‘strongholds’. The few survivors of the Assyrian invasion who escaped exile would be proof that a great nation once existed, just as the remains of a sheep taken from a lion proved that there was once an animal which was no more (11–12). The northern kingdom was not restored from exile like its southern neighbour, Judah. Bethel means ‘house of God’ but its altars were dedicated to idols. God warned that he would destroy Bethel along with the luxurious houses of Israel (14–15).

The western world has despised and rejected God’s Word and the people *‘do not know to do right.’* Wicked practices are condoned which would have greatly shocked even unbelievers fifty years ago. There are many public figures who shamelessly flout their immoral and wicked lifestyle. We too are ripe for divine judgment. Political turmoil and terrorist attacks have demonstrated that treasures on earth are never safe (Matthew 6:19–21) and can be swept away in an instant. We are encouraged to spend more and more on many unnecessary luxuries while the work of God suffers for lack of finance. **Amos has a solemn warning for nation and for church. Let us take heed!**

The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness

God's holiness is emphasized throughout the Bible. The word translated '*holy*' in the Old Testament means 'separate' or 'different'. How is God different from us? To quote the words of the hymn, he is 'perfect in power, in love, and purity'. We read here, '*The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness*' (2). The Lord who is absolutely perfect demands that his people lead holy lives (1 Peter 1:15–16). We will never attain perfection until we arrive in heaven but we must never make this an excuse for sinful behaviour. The Lord chose Israel to be different from the other nations but she had fallen into the sins of those nations – idolatry, self-indulgence and the oppression of the poor.

God was making an oath in swearing '*by his holiness*'. He was affirming that as sure as he is holy, he would visit the self-indulgent women of Samaria with judgement and disaster. Their husbands were oppressing the poor and crushing the needy in order to satisfy their opulent lifestyle. Amos did not mince his words in his condemnation of these women. He called them '*cows of Bashan*' (1). Bashan on the east of the Jordan was renowned for its rich pasture land on which its fat cattle gorged themselves (see map, page 23). Amos prophesied that these women would be dragged away captive with hooks through their noses just as fish are drawn from the sea on hooks (2). This was fulfilled in 721 BC when the Assyrians led Israel away captive.

Bethel and Gilgal were two great centres of worship in Israel (Genesis 28:16–22; Joshua 5:9), but they had become debased with all kinds of idol worship. Amos mocked the song of the pilgrims as they went to worship their idols, '*Come to Bethel and transgress*' (4). These people loved their religious ceremony and sacrifices, but it was all so empty and vain (4–5). They had a religion without holiness, which left them comfortable with their wickedness. There is all the difference in the world between true religion and 'religiosity'. Religiosity blinds the eyes to real spiritual need and leads millions to hell. **How real and sincere are you in your profession of Christ?**

Yet you have not returned to me

The striking message of these verses is that the holy God is absolutely sovereign and that he sends disasters to the earth (cp. 3:6). We cannot always discern God's reasons for such actions, but often it is his judgment for sin or a warning that we should consider our ways and repent. Our generation rarely considers that God may be saying something to us through natural disasters or tragic events. Those who preach that God punishes sinners are regarded by most people as fanatics. A God who is small enough to fit inside our logic, weak enough to condone our sinful ways, and nice enough to allow us to do as we please is no God at all!

God sent Israel famine (6), drought (7), blight and locusts (9), plagues and war (10) and an earthquake (11) but they were deaf to his voice and rebellious. Look at the times that God says, *'Yet you have not returned to me'* (6,8,9,10,11).

Israel had been *'like a firebrand plucked from the burning'* – charred and ugly, useless and hopeless, but there was an opportunity to repent and return to the Lord (11). **They wanted a religion which made them feel good, but which in reality, did them no good because it failed to deal with the problem of sin.** Such a religion allowed them to live for themselves and to seek personal gain, whatever the consequences to others. Many still want that kind of religion today, but God will have none of it and we must not compromise the message of the Bible.

See comments of Dale Ralph Davis on next page.

Dale Ralph Davis refers to this chapter from Amos when commenting on trouble in Judah during the reign of King Amaziah. He writes, ‘King Amaziah’s capture, the city’s walls wasted, the rifled treasures, the helpless captives (2 Kings 14:13–14) – all this is a prelude to more of the same.

One can find a good example of this foreshadowing pattern in Amos 4:6–12. There the prophet mentions certain covenant curses Yahweh inflicted on Israel in order to drive them to repentance. Yet after each blow Yahweh’s refrain is the same: ‘*Yet you have not returned to me*’ ... Israel was dense; they didn’t get the point. They ignored the foreshadowings. All that remained was for them to meet God in terrible judgment (12).

Judean kings ... and the Israelite nation are not the only one’s who ignore “foreshadowings”. Don’t contemporary nations do the same? ... We have had, off and on, a rash of scandals in the highest levels of government. We have been attacked by terrorists ... Are these God’s foreshadowings to awaken a nation that has no knowledge of God, that by its courts and legislation has guaranteed a culture of death for thirty years, that revels in rampant immorality, and cuddles and caters to those who glory in their sexual perversions? Is God shouting at us and we are not hearing? Is he giving us glimpses to which we are blind?

(2 KINGS: THE POWER AND THE FURY – pages 209–210).

Prepare to meet your God

The Lord again warned the people that judgment was coming: *‘Therefore thus will I do to you, O Israel; and because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel!’* (12). Motyer (THE DAY OF THE LION, page 100) points out that the idea of meeting God in the Bible is connected with grace. — Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with God (Exodus 19:17). The Lord graciously descended to meet with his redeemed people. God is not like the useless idols worshipped by the heathen. He is awesome and we must not only cling to the promises of his Word but also listen to the warnings in that holy Word. Israel had refused to meet with God in grace, therefore they would meet with him in judgment!

Verse 13 teaches some very important truths about God:

- He is the Creator: *He forms the mountains and creates the wind.*
- He is omniscient. He knows everything even our thoughts. *He declares to man what his thought is.*
- He is omnipotent (all-powerful). He can do the impossible; *he makes the morning darkness* (cp. Genesis 18:14).
- He is awesome in his sovereign majesty; *he treads the high places of the earth.*
- He is *the LORD God of hosts* commanding the many thousands of mighty angels.

Ray Beeley comments, ‘Yet for all these attributes he is the God of this small people, the God that can be met through grace. (THE ROARING OF THE LION, page 59).

How is your life before God? If you are not right with God, do turn to him. If you are not prepared in this day of grace to meet God in repentance, be prepared to meet him in judgment! — ‘Prepare to meet your God!’

Seek the LORD and live

This chapter opens with a lamentation for Israel. She had forsaken the Lord and she would herself be forsaken with no one to raise her (1–2). The grim prophecy of death and devastation through war (3) was to be fulfilled within forty years when Israel was taken into Assyrian captivity in 721 BC.

What was God’s message to faithless Israel? — It was ‘*Seek the LORD and live*’ (4,6). The people were building their religion around pilgrimages to Bethel, Gilgal and Beersheba, places which were hallowed in the memory of the nation (5).

- God had revealed himself to Jacob at Bethel where the patriarch had exclaimed, ‘*Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it*’ (Genesis 28:16). Bethel was now a centre of idol worship; God was no longer in the place and Israel did not know it.
- The miraculous crossing of the Jordan was celebrated at Gilgal (Joshua 4:20–24) and from there the campaigns for the conquest of the promised land were launched (Joshua chapters 10 to 12). Gilgal would itself go into captivity (5).
- Pilgrims travelled over fifty miles into Judah to go to Beersheba. There a pagan king had said to Abraham, ‘*God is with you in all that you do*’ and there the Lord spoke to Isaac and Jacob (Genesis 21:22–23; 26:23–24; 46:1–4). God was no longer with Israel, however, because of their wickedness. Amos urged them not to go on their pilgrimages but to ‘*Seek the LORD and live*’ (6).

Why seek the Lord? He is the creator of the stars (*Pleiades and Orion*), the transformer of things around us (8). He is awesome in his power (9). The consequences of not seeking him are judgment (*‘lest he break out like fire’*, 6) and bitterness (*‘wormwood’*, 7). The message of Amos to the people was, ‘Do not organise your life around pilgrimages, but repent of your sin and centre your life upon God.’ **How are you doing? Is the Lord first in your life? — ‘Seek the LORD and live’ (6; cp. Revelation 21:6; 22:17).**

Seek good and not evil

The Lord warned that he would rain ruin upon ‘*the strong*’ who oppressed those who were poor (9). The oppressors hated those judges who rebuked them in the gate and spoke up for their victims (10). The gate of the city was a meeting-place, a centre of business activity and from it justice was dispensed by the elders (Deuteronomy 21:19).

The ‘*strong*’ trampled on the poor and imposed taxes upon them. They afflicted the righteous and used bribery to pervert justice. They had built fine houses and planted vineyards with their ill-gotten gains from crushing the poor. God warned them that these things would be taken from them. They would not be able to dwell in their houses nor enjoy the fruit of their vineyards (11–12).

Therefore the prudent keep silent at that time, for it is an evil time (13). Matthew Henry comments, ‘Men will reckon it their prudence, when they are wronged and injured, to be silent, and make no complaints to the magistrates, for it will be to no purpose, they shall not have justice done them.’

Amos urged these wicked people, ‘*Seek good and not evil*’ (14). They would then live and the Lord would be with them. An evidence of their repentance would be a hatred of evil and a love of good and of justice (14–15). They were not to presume upon God’s goodness: *It may be that the LORD God of hosts will be gracious*. Forgiveness is a privilege, not a right; it is a gracious act of God.

Are you seeking good? Do you hate evil? Are you right with God? If you are not, do not despise God’s offer of mercy. The door will not always remain open and you may not have another opportunity to repent of your sin. *Now is the day of salvation* (2 Corinthians 6:1–2).

Note: The Bible often speaks of a ‘remnant’ (eg. Isaiah 1:9; 10:21; Jeremiah 15:11; 23:3; Ezekiel 6:8; Joel 2:32; Romans 9:27; 11:5). Ephraim, the largest tribe in Israel, traced its descent from Joseph and is here called, ‘*The remnant of Joseph*’ (6,15).

For what good is the day of the LORD to you?

True religion is wonderful in the assurance that it brings to the child of God, but false religion is very dangerous because it often gives a false sense of assurance. That was the problem with Israel. The people vainly imagined that God was with them even though they were wicked. They looked forward to ‘*the day of the LORD*’ when God would punish their enemies. They did not realise that this would be a terrible day for them. God warned them, ‘*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*’ (18). There are similar words concerning ‘*the day of the LORD*’ in Joel chapter 2:1–11: ‘*The day of the LORD is great and very terrible; who can endure it?*’ (Joel 2:11).

God is called, ‘*the LORD God of hosts*’ in three verses (14,15,16). Jehovah is the almighty, sovereign God who commands hosts (armies) of mighty angels who excel in strength. When he speaks, it is foolish not to pay attention. He warned Israel that the professional mourners would wail in the towns and in the countryside. They would call upon the farmer and those in the vineyards to lament with them (16–17).

Amos asked the people, ‘*What good is the day of the LORD to you?*’ Imagine a man fleeing from a lion only to meet a bear. He then escapes into a house and stretches out his hand to prop himself against a wall, only to be bitten by a serpent (19). Just as he did not escape from harm, there would be no escape for the people of Israel when the Lord passed through them – all would be darkness (17–20).

The return of the Lord Jesus is also called ‘*the day of the LORD*’ (1 Thessalonians 5:2). He will return suddenly and there will be weeping and wailing from those who are lost. It is essential that we are ready (Matthew 13:41–42; 24:44). **Let us examine your own hearts and be sure that ‘*the day of the LORD*’ will be light for us rather than darkness.**

*Let justice run down like water, and righteousness like
a mighty stream*

The people of Israel paid lip-service to Jehovah at the time Amos prophesied. They observed religious feasts and rituals (4:4–5; 5:5–6) but they also worshipped idols. Such practices are not acceptable to God! When religion is corrupted, it leads to all kinds of problems and sinfulness. What does God think of a religion which has elaborate ceremonies and ritual, but which is corrupt and lacking in holiness? We are left in no doubt whatever! The Lord said to these Jews, *‘I hate, I despise your feast days, and I do not savour your sacred assemblies ... I will not accept them, nor will I regard ... take away from me the noise ... for I will not hear’* (21–23).

What does God expect from those who profess to belong to him? He says, *‘Let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream’* (24). J.A. Motyer points out that justice ‘is right behaviour in relation to others ... righteousness is the cultivation of correct moral principle (both for self and for society); justice is mainly outward, righteousness inward’ (THE DAY OF THE LION, page 132). Justice is the fruit of righteousness (6:12). The Lord wants to see an abundance of justice and righteousness in our lives!

God reminded the people of their ancestors who also offered sacrifices in the wilderness journey from Egypt to Canaan (25). They had not only offered the sacrifices appointed by God but they had also embraced pagan gods (Sikkut, the Assyrian god of war and Chion, the planet Saturn, possibly a reference to the worship of the stars). These foolish people had forsaken the God who made the stars to worship star gods (26; cp. verse 8) and the Lord warned that they would be sent into Assyrian captivity (*‘beyond Damascus’*; 27).

Are you concerned about leading a righteous life? Religion without holiness is repugnant to God: Pursue ... holiness, without which no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14).