

Amos 5:1-17

'Seek me and live!'

Finding life

I was 18 years old.

I had been brought up in a Christian family.

I knew who God was.

I knew what God had done in Jesus Christ.

But I had drifted away.

And six months earlier I had been involved in a serious car accident.

I had been seriously at fault and the end result of the accident was that I had put two people into hospital and wrote off my mother's near new car.

Since then I had stopped drinking.

Although I hadn't been drinking at the time of the accident, I knew that alcohol would have made it worse.

I had stopped driving because of the fear and guilt I was feeling.

And I had begun to hang around the edges of a church again.

And so it was that one day there was a church picnic.

I went along because a girl I was interested in was going to be there.

But as the day wore on, I stopped watching her and began to watch other people.

There was a depth in their relationships that I didn't see anywhere else.

There was a vitality to their life that I hadn't found anywhere else.

And I knew where it came from.

I knew that it came from God.

And from my upbringing I knew how to access this God and what to do.

And so that night at home I brought all my guilt and shame and sin before God.

I told him that I believed in Jesus.

I told him that I wanted the forgiveness he offered in Jesus.

And I declared that I wanted to live life for Jesus from now on.

I awoke the next day to a changed existence.

I knew I was forgiven and accepted.

And the impact was profound.

Some characteristic sinful practices that I had struggled with for years disappeared.

And when I found other sins that I was not aware of, I wanted to put them aside.

On the psychological side, things were equally profound.

The fear of driving disappeared and I began driving again.

I decided to lose the weight I'd been carrying for most of my teenage life and lost about 18 kilograms in the next three months.

Relationally, I stopped arguing with my sister to her immense frustration.

You see, in my own mind, I had found God.

And with God, I had found a life worth living.

I knew that he had created me for this and I found joy in it.

Friends, the story of the Bible starts and finishes with human beings in a garden with unfettered access to God.

And it does this because God wants us to know that his greatest desire for us is that we have untainted friendship with him.
This untainted friendship with him is what the Bible calls 'life.'
It is what you and I were created for.
It is where God wants us all to be – truly experiencing life by truly relating to him.
I raise this issue of life and Gods' purposes today because this is where the focus of today's passage lies.
As we listen to Amos today he will talk to us about God and about life.
And he will tell us that we should seek life.
And he will tell us what life is about and how to find life.
So, let's turn with anticipation to the book of Amos.
Let's see what he has to say.

Amos 5

Context

Today we are going to look at Amos 5:1-17.
First, let me remind you of the context of Amos 5.
God's first word to the nation of Israel in Amos 2 was that they were living lives of rebellion against him.
Their worship was tainted.
And their ethical practices were corrupt.
He had been extremely generous and kind to them, but they had treated each other with no kindness and no generosity.
In chapter 4 we were told that God had been longsuffering.
He had given them many opportunities to repent but they had not taken them up.
And so we are told in Amos 3:2 that he is coming to punish them.
He is going to defeat their army (2:13-16).
He is going to destroy their symbols of wealth – their luxurious houses.
And he is going to destroy the places of sacrifice and sanctuary – their temples (3:11-15).
He is going to come meet his people face to face (4:12).
And when he does, he is going to send them off into exile (4:2-3).
Amos is clear; God's elect people have rebelled against him.
And because they are his people he is coming in judgment.
And that judgment will be devastating in scope.

Structure

This is the context for Amos 5.
Now, what happens in Amos 5 is that Amos announces a lament.
He imagines that he is in the future and that God's judgment has already happened.
In my mind's eye, I can imagine him performing this lament.
He would probably have chosen some prominent religious or other site.
I suspect that he would have done all the normal practices of lamentation.
He would have shaved his head.
He would be wearing sackcloth.
Perhaps he would be throwing dust and ash around.
And he would be wailing at the top of his voice.
People would be gathering 'round to hear and see what is happening.
Listen to the first words of his lamentation:

'Fallen is Virgin Israel,

*Never to rise again,
Deserted in her own land,
With no one to lift her up!'*

So, this is the genre of chapter 5.

It is a lamentation.

Now let me show you how it is structured.

You see, the structure of the passage is very detailed.

I've put it there for you in your outlines.¹

A	1-3	Lament the death of the nation
B	4-6	Call to seek God and live
C	7	Accusations of no justice
D	8-9	Hymn to Yahweh
C'	10-13	Accusations of no justice
B'	14-15	Call to seek God and live
A'	16-17	Lament the death of the nation

Critical elements

This structure helps us see what Amos is doing.

You can see that there are some critical elements in what he is saying.

First, he is saying that God is the one who matters.

Look at verses 8-9.

Amos is telling us that God is the one at the centre of everything he is saying.

God is the one who creates.

He is sovereign over everything in the created order.

And he is even sovereign over the fate of nations.

Just as he creates the stars and changes light into darkness or vice versa, so he can bring cities to ruin.

Second, Amos makes clear that Israel is guilty.

He makes this clear in verse 7 and also in verses 10-13.

They have turned justice into bitterness.

They have cast righteousness to the ground.

They hate the places of justice and they despise those who tell the truth.

They live in wealth.

And they trample on the poor.

Third, Amos tells people that justice is a certainty.

He makes this clear in verses 1-3 and 16-17.

Verse 3 tells us of a decimation of the armies of Israel.

Verses 16-17 tell us of God coming in judgment and what it will mean both in the cities and the countryside.

[Read verses 16-17]

The fourth critical element is found in verses 4-6 and 14-15.

These verses are a call to repentance.

God calls upon his people to seek him.

And in verse 15 he holds out the hope that God will act with characteristic mercy.

So, there we have the four critical elements of this lament.

- God is the one who matters.
- Israel is guilty.
- Judgment is a certainty.

¹ This structure is taken from the Mentor commentary by Gary V. Smith.

- And therefore the nation should seek God.

What does it mean to seek God?

What I'd like to do now is to have a look at this fourth element.

I'd like to look at Amos in detail and see if we can find out a bit more about what it means to seek God.

Let's have a look at verse 4-6 first.

In the Old Testament one of the things you did when you wanted to seek God is that you went of to the temple.

This is where God was found and so this is where you went to seek him.

You may have offered a sacrifice.

Or you might have talked to a priest or a prophet.

The striking thing about verses 4-6 is that Amos tells us that it is not in the religious sites that people should seek God.

Now it could be that Amos is telling the northern people that their shrines are not legitimate and that Jerusalem alone is the place of worship.

However, we know that Amos is also critical of they type of worship that is conducted.

It is full of pomp and ceremony but devoid of genuine devotion.

What I think is going on here is that the people are being told to seek the God who is coming to meet them in judgment.

They should be people who are not known for religious practices but for their dependence upon him.

They should be people who love him and his ways.

They should be humble.

And they should trust him.

This is what it means to seek God.

And when they seek God like this, they will find life.

Now we who live this side of Christ, know where it is that God can be found.

We know he is not found in temples, or sacrifices, or rituals.

We know that God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ.

And those who seek God in Jesus will find him.

And they will find richness of life.

But let's return to Amos again.

Let's now have a look at the second passage in Amos 5 that talks about seeking God.

Let me read it to you.

¹⁴Seek good, not evil, that you may live.

Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is.

¹⁵Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts.

Perhaps the LORD God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph. [Amos 5:14-15, NIV]

I want you to notice a few things.

First, where verses 4 to 6 talk about seeking God, these verses talk about seeking good.

Seeking God is paralleled to seeking good.

What I think this means is that part of seeking God is seeking good.

Second, I want you to notice that seeking God is contrasted with seeking evil.

Third, I want you to notice the contrast in verse 15.

To love God is to hate evil.

Fourth, I want you to notice that the goal of seeking good is still the same – it is life.

And the meaning of life here is spelt out.

It is a situation where God is with us and where we experience his mercy rather than his judgment.

Can you see what is being said here?
Seeking God is about seeking him personally.
But seeking God is also reflected in seeking his ways.
It is reflected in hating evil as he does.
And it is reflected in loving good as he does.
To seek God is to seek good.
To seek God is to hate evil.
And this is true whether we are God's Old Testament people or his New Testament people.
So, Amos 5:15 is almost directly quoted in Romans 12:9 in the New Testament.
Take a look at Romans 12.
Let me read it to you:

⁹Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹²Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. ¹⁸If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. [Romans 12:9-21, NIV]

Paul has just finished telling his readers about God's great act in Christ.
He has told them about God's mercy toward them.
And now he is telling them how they ought to respond to each other.
They ought to respond to God's love toward them by loving each other.
They are to be people who hate evil.
They are to be people who cling to what is good.
Their focus is to be on living rightly.
So, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, seeking God means the same thing.
It means loving God.
And it means loving your neighbour.
That is why Jesus said that the two greatest commandments are that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind, and love our neighbour as ourselves.

Amos 5 and us

Finding life

So, with this in mind, let's return to where we started.
What has Amos told us about life?
He has told us that life is found in relating to God.
It is found in the service of God.
This is what I found when I became a Christian.
And this is what I have found every day since.
I was created for this.
And you were created for this.
We were made for God and we will find no rest until we find rest in him.

We were made for life and we will find no life until we find life in him.

The opposite of life

Amos has also made clear to us that there is an alternative to life.

The alternative to life is death.

It is the opposite of life.

It is a place of no mercy, no protection, no peace, and only God's judgment.

But, worst of all, it is the place where God is absent.

Death is to be separated from God and all the good he has to give.

Separation from life

With this in mind, I want to ask what it is that will separate us from life.

Again, this passage has made it clear, hasn't it?

The opposite of seeking God is not so much running away from God as refusing to seek him and refusing to practice the good.

In other words, the thing that will separate us from God is our own rebellion and disobedience.

The nature of repentance

Let me close today's talk by drawing all of this together in talking about repentance.

You see, we have talked about the fact that God created us for life.

We have talked about the fact that we often think and act in a manner that is displeasing to God.

We have talked about the fact that this creates a separation from God and from the life he intends for us.

So, what needs to happen for me to return to God and to life?

The first thing to do is to seek God in Jesus.

For it is in Jesus that true life is found.

But God also wants us to change our direction and our actions.

God doesn't want us doing what the ancient Israelites did.

He doesn't want us to treat God and forgiveness as a talisman or a means of manipulating God.

God wants changed lives.

He wants us to seek God and to hate evil.

He wants our repentance to issue in positive seeking of good and positive hatred of evil.

You see, life is not just found in forgiveness.

Life is found in living God's way.

It is found in obedience.

So, let's seek God together.

And together, let's embrace the life he offers.