

**“Prepare To Meet Your God
Amos 4:1-13**

January 31, 2016

SCRIPTURE INTRO:

This winter we’re studying the little book of Amos.
Amos is not a book of the Bible that we read very much.
I suspect that’s because it has a message
that many American Christians never hear.

Amos is about God’s judgment.
It’s a message that’s not intended to comfort us at first—but to frighten us.

But if you open yourself to Amos’ message,
and accept it as God’s inspired word,
and if you let it have its way with you,
then there is profound safety and comfort to be found.

INTRO: I want you to think about all big disasters in the news in recent years. Natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina or the 2010 Haiti Earthquake or the 2004 Christmas Tsunami that killed 250,000, or the 2011 Japanese Tsunami, Disease outbreaks like Ebola or this new terrible virus Zika, forest fires and droughts and floods and tornadoes. Also, manmade disasters like the September 11th Attacks, bombings and terrorism in Paris or San Bernardino, school shootings like Littleton or Virginia Tech or Sandy Hook.

What are some of the common ways these disasters are covered and talked about ? There is a big visual component. Television news especially looks for the most graphic, compelling images and video—those images boost ratings. There is often a human interest angle in news coverage. A family is interviewed who has just lost all their possessions in a flood or who is grieving the sudden death of loved ones in a tornado. Often times with that comes an appeal to give to this or that relief organization.

Then there comes the analysis and with that a lot of finger-pointing. What the government didn't do to prevent, or not enough done in the aftermath. Political parties make hay, wouldn't have happened on their watch, their policies. There is social analysis and psychological analysis. Experts weigh in on what motivated the shooter to kill 20 children—it was bullying, poor mental health policy, video games, lax gun control. Disasters are examined from the perspective of racism and environmentalism. If this had stuck a white neighborhood, would government response different? Was this hurricane caused by global warming and what should be done about it?

Then the news cycle is over and the most recent disaster is no longer a compelling story. We're back to Kim and Kanye until the next bombing or mass shooting or hurricane or tsunami, and it starts over again.

But in all of this very predictable news coverage there is one enormously important fact that is never mentioned—that all these catastrophes were the hand of God and foretastes of greater judgments to come.

After all the videos, after all the human interest stories and appeals for aid,
after all the political and sociological and environment analysis—

You never hear the news anchor say:

“But let us not forget, this disaster was ultimately the hand of God. He did it.

It is a foretaste and a merciful warning he will one day judge the world for sin.

We are no different from the people who were swept away in the tsunami.

Unless we repent and turn to God, we too will perish.

That’s the news for January 31st. Goodnight, everyone.”

Never. In fact, to suggest such a thing would bring howls of protest.

The very idea that God could have done such things offends people—

they find it strange, alien, offensive, and disgusting.

Not just secular people, religious people too, even many people in the church

utterly reject the idea that disasters are foreshadowings of God’s judgment.

As we will see later in the book of Amos—

the church of his day despised him for saying such a thing.

How dare you! God doesn’t cause disasters. That’s not our God.

If you want to be a biblical Christian,

if you want to be a thoughtful, wise follower of Christ—

then you must develop a thoroughly biblical understanding of disasters.

You must wrestle with God’s Word, and so deeply incorporate it into your thinking,

that when you hear the news of disasters and catastrophes—

you think and even feel differently about them than the world does.

I’m not at all saying that human analysis of disasters is not valuable. It is.

We should examine political, sociological, medical, environmental factors.

It’s right for Christians to try to understand the secondary causes of disasters and to

try to prevent them or to mitigate the damages and alleviate human suffering.

It’s important to be able to speak about suffering in a thoroughly biblical manner—

to explain the fall and human wickedness on the one hand, and the reality of

innocent suffering on the other, and especially the redemptive sufferings of Jesus.

Disasters and suffering is a multi-faceted subject in Scripture.

Developing biblical minds and affections means we look at every facet.

Amos is one facet. Amos says: You see disasters and catastrophes? God did it.

God did it for a merciful purpose, to warn survivors of his coming judgment.

So you better listen and repent.

Let's look at this passage under two headings:

1. How your sensitivity to God's judgment is dulled
2. How your sensitivity to God's judgment is sharpened

MP#1 According to Amos,

your sensitivity to God's judgment is dulled by three things.

First, it's dulled by luxurious, self-absorbed living.

Amos goes to the Women's League of Samaria.

Here are the wealthy women, the socially-connected women, the women who start the day with a workout and massage, who enjoy a two-hour champagne brunch with their friends, who then go to the beauty salon and after that on their daily shopping excursion, then back with girlfriends to fire the sunset gun with numerous rounds of martinis.

Amos, the bi-vocational farmer-preacher,

looks at these pampered, beautiful, demanding, intimidating women and says: "Hear this, you cows of Bashan."

Bashan cows were a famous breed, like our Herefords or Black Angus.

The were sleek and well-fed, they had not a care in the world.

But this is not gutter language. And this is not class envy.

Amos is rough as a cob, but he's speaking the truth.

Amos doesn't attack them for being rich. It's what they've done with their wealth.

He condemns how it has shaped their character and behavior.

They've become so self-absorbed and so preoccupied with their lifestyle

that they're indifferent to the poor and needy. Don't even see poor who serve.

And even more profoundly, they've completely tuned God out,

and his moral claims on their lives and the very possibility of judgment.

Let me show you how Amos expresses that. It's so incisive.

They say to their husbands: Bring us some drinks! You can picture it, can't you.

How demanding they are, what a big role alcohol plays in their lives.

The literal translation is: They say to their lords . . . bring us some drinks.

Most English Bibles translate it husbands because that's what it means.

In that culture, wives called their husband, lord.

But do you see the irony? They are ordering their lords around.

It's not just that they wear the pants. This is a window into their souls.

Look again at very next verse. “The Lord Yahweh has sworn.” Same word.

The point is that in their self-absorbed luxury, think they even order God around. So how do you think someone like that responds to news of a disaster?

With deep self-reflection? With questioning about the direction of their lives?

With sober thought of their own death and facing God and giving an account?

Are you kidding? Bring us some more drinks.

I don't have time to work this out. You'll have to do it yourself.

Be aware that wealth, luxury, ease, self-absorbed leisure, mindless entertainment cause you to tune out the warnings of judgment in the disasters God sends upon the earth.

Second, your sensitivity to God's judgment is dulled by perverted Christianity.

After addressing the women of Samaria,

Amos goes to the religious centers of Israel, Bethel and Gilgal.

They are packed with worshippers.

And he very sarcastically says: Go ahead, do your religious thing and sin.

Give your tithes and offerings and sacrifices and sin some more. Same thing.

What's going on here? Why was their worship sin?

When the Lord brought the Israelites out of Egypt and into the Promised Land he made Jerusalem his city and the Temple the place of his presence.

He told Israel that this was where they were to sacrifice—in Jeru temple alone.

This was where the priesthood served. This was the place of biblical worship.

The Temple alone pointed forward to Christ alone—salvation through Jesus alone.

The necessity of his atoning sacrifice.

But the Israelites set up these rival centers of worship in Bethel and Gilgal.

It's ok, they said: We're worshipping the same God.

And the loved their worship, Amos says so. They bragged about it.

It made them feel good.

But even though it had some of the trappings and language of biblical religion, it wasn't. It was a perversion. It was a religion of their own making.

And their version of biblical religion was to steer clear of any talk at all of God's judgment.

The idea that disasters could be warnings and foreshadowings of his final judgment and a calls to repent of sin—they totally reject that.

This is true of almost every perversion of Christianity today.

I mentioned before sitting on an airplane with a woman who was Unitarian.

I asked her what she believed and the very first thing she said was:

We don't believe in hell or judgment. We don't believe God judges anybody.

There was a Methodist bishop who died in 1963, Bishop Bromley Oxnam.

He said the God of the Old Testament, Amos's God, was a dirty bully.

In other words, any talk of God judging people, that's despicable.

Of course, all Methodists don't believe that. That was his liberal theology,

And those are two extreme examples—Unitarianism and Theological liberalism.

But we could probably find examples in the evangelical Christian world of churches where all talk of God's judgment is carefully avoided.

When that happens to the teaching of the church,

the sensitivity of the people to God's judgment is dulled.

And particularly in this matter of disasters, they lose the biblical lenses for viewing.

Third thing that dulls sensitivity to God's judgment is naturalistic reasoning.

You look at the disasters and catastrophes that happen,

and they seem to be so haphazard and so arbitrary.

Why did a devastating earthquake hit Haiti of all places?

The poorest country in the Western hemisphere, place where there is already enough misery in terms of poverty and disease and corruption.

Why didn't it hit some center of self-centered wealth and arrogance and power?

Well, sometimes it does. Sept 11 was a judgment on the world center like that.

Even so, this seemingly arbitrary quality of disasters is hard to deny.

And if you reason naturalistically, only looking at the empirical data,

you might conclude that God had nothing to do with it—

or if he does, he's certainly not sending a message. It just happened.

I mean, if God really caused these things, then why didn't he make that more clear?

But did you notice that the Lord himself admits this seemingly arbitrary character to his judgments. Look again at verse 7.

I sent rain on one town, but withheld it from another.

One field had rain; another had none and dried up.

It's not that one group of farmers were godly and got rain,

but the others weren't so they didn't.

All disasters are foreshadowings of God's final judgment.

Of course they seem arbitrary to us. Of course they come out of the blue,

so to speak and strike when not expected.

Of course they shatter our sense of what's fair and who's good or bad or deserving.

Because they demonstrate that all the world is under God's judgment and that a day is coming when every single soul will be summoned to give an account.

Work this out for yourself. Some of you susceptible to naturalistic thinking.

Some more inclined to say, What's God got to do with this? I am.

But when you do, you miss the message God has for you.

Brings us to the second point. Let's consider . . .

MP#2 How your sensitivity to God's judgment is sharpened

How do you train yourself to view disasters and catastrophes biblically so that you see them as foreshadowings God's judgment and so that they lead you to repent and trust Jesus more completely?

First and foremost, you believe God's word on this subject, and you consciously adopt a biblical mindset.

The Lord says to Israel:

I gave you empty stomachs in every city.

I withheld rain from you.

I struck your gardens and vineyards with blight and mildew.

I sent plagues among you.

I killed your young men with the sword.

I filled your nostrils with the stench of your camps.

I overthrew some of you as I overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah.

It could not be more clear. When it comes to disasters. God did it.

But there is another refrain in those verses.

"Yet you have not returned to me." "Yet you have not returned to me."

"Yet you have not returned to me." After every disaster.

And that shows that God did it for a purpose, a merciful one—

that those who are left would return to him. In this case, they did not.

This isn't just Old Testament teaching. We read Luke 13 earlier.

Jesus said the very same thing. Everybody was talking about two disasters—a massacre by the Romans and a collapsed tower.

Jesus says of those who died:

Do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?

I tell you, No! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.

There is a very important qualification in Jesus' words.

He says it's wrong to think that those who are the victims of disasters are particularly bad people. They might be. But if you think that, you'll miss point. You'll think this disaster doesn't have a message for you.
Every human soul must answer to God.

What's the effect of these foreshadowings of judgment?

They either bring people to God, deepen repentance and trust in him.

Or they confirm people in their rebellion against him.

I remember once experiencing both in the same week.

It was years ago when we lived in Ft. Lauderdale.

I had a conversation with a man who told me that when he was in Viet Nam, he saw such terrible things, that it convinced him there could not be a god.

He was a confirmed atheist.

That very same week, I was talking to another man and he said:

I became a Christian in Viet Nam.

I saw terrible things and I knew I needed God and cried out for Jesus to save me.

For the first man, the day will come when God says:

You saw with your own eyes the terrible consequences of sin.

Why didn't you heed my warning and turn from your own sin?

For the second man, the day of the Lord will be one of vindication.

Because he heard in that disaster an offer of mercy and grabbed it.

But I think understanding and believing the Bible at this point is only the first step.

The harder thing is actually applying it to yourself.

It's easy to understand a person coming to faith in Christ through a disaster—

but how should you respond if you are already a believer?

If you know Christ, then you know he has suffered judgment for you.

The day of the Lord will be one of vindication and salvation and joy.

So then, what does this teaching have for us now?

How should you, as a serious, committed Christian, ponder disasters for your spiritual benefit? How should you respond when you see them on TV

or when you read about and reflect upon the terrible disasters of history?

What sorts of things might the Lord be telling you?

There was a movie that came out 10 years ago: *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*

True story about a German university student, Sophie Scholl,

who distributed pamphlets critical of Hitler.
She was caught, tried before a kangaroo court and executed.
Sophie's motives were not just political.
She was a Christian and her convictions compelled her to speak out.
The movie does a great job depicting her faith in Christ. Netflix.

One of the powerful scenes is her trial.
The presiding judge is a rabid Nazi who constantly belittles her.
Her court appointed attorney is such a coward that he offers no defense at all.
The entire apparatus of the Nazi machine is against her.
It's going to grind her to dust. And as the camera sweeps the courtroom,
you see the most powerful men in the world in their spotless uniforms.
Hitler said the Third Reich would last 1000 years.
You can see in their confident faces that they believe it.
And here's this little college girl who loves the Lord and loves her country.
She looks like one of our own college girls. Could be Eliza sitting there.
You can't help but to be sucked into that moment.
It stirs your emotions—it fills you with anger and grief and shame even—
when you compare her bravery and conviction to your own easy life.

But the power of that scene is that you know the rest of the story.
You can't help wondering: Would those men have executed Sophie Scholl
if they had known the disaster God would bring on Germany in barely two years?
Would they have done it if they had known Germany would be ravaged and divided
and humiliated, its young men killed by the sword, its great cities overthrown,
and the powerful men in that courtroom indicted for that ruination?
But no one expects judgment. Quite the contrary.
The sinful nature believes that our schemes and our lives and our pursuits
will lead to more power and pleasure and comfort for ourselves.

On the other hand Sophie Scholl believed in God's judgment.
She believed the words of the Prophet Amos and Jesus Christ himself.
She believed that we live in a moral world and that God is the judge.
She saw his hand in the devastation her country suffered just 30 years before
in the First World War. She didn't want her country to go through that again.
And her faith in Christ and her belief in the sovereignty of God made her brave.

Having a biblical view of disasters gives you a big view.

They are more than entertaining news stories, more than commentaries on this or that political party or government policy, even more than an opportunity to show charity to the suffering.

They are powerful demonstrations of God's sovereignty, and foreshadowings of his judgment, and ultimately reasons for you to trust Jesus more deeply, and obey him without fear.