

When it's a sin to go to church

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[0 : 00] If you're a visitor or a guest this morning, we are actually going through a series on the book of Amos. And we said at the beginning that it's going to be an uncomfortable book. And I think today will prove that that will be the case again.

So let's ask God to convict us that His Holy Spirit would help us to turn to Him again. Let's pray. Father, we ask today that you might indeed pour out your Spirit on us.

That we might be cut to the heart, turn back to you, and hang on to your every promise of forgiveness and reconciliation this day. All this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Now just this week, I read one of those financial planning articles. I'm not really one of those people who are very excited by investments and dividends and insurance premiums.

But anyway, somewhat randomly, I decided to read this article. And basically, this article mentions five signs that indicate you're not prepared to retire, even though you think you are.

[1 : 13] So let me just share a number of those signs with you. Don't worry, this isn't going to turn into a financial pep talk. Number one, you don't have a clear monthly financial plan.

Basically, if you don't have a rough idea of how much you need to spend each month to cover your necessities, as well as emergency costs. And if you haven't thought about what sort of major life changes you undergo once you retire, well, you're not prepared.

Since you have no idea how much you really need. Number two, you don't regularly check up on your savings. So this is basically just saying that you need to check whether your savings are actually in line with your savings goals, so that you're prepared.

And then number three, you haven't considered inflation costs. Again, this is simply saying that even if you have hundreds of thousands in your bank account, it might not go as far as you think it does.

Since what might cost 40,000 ringgit today might cost 70,000 ringgit in 20 years. Anyway, I'm not going to bore you further with this.

[2 : 30] There are plenty of finance professionals, I'm sure, in our congregation who can advise you better. But here's the thing. You could be totally unprepared even if you think you are.

And that's what Amos wants to say this morning. You could be totally unprepared to meet God even though you think you are. Now remember where the prophet is.

Up north in Israel, where the people have celebrated about 40 years of the reign of King Jeroboam II. And if you were present on the 40th anniversary of his reign, well you could imagine the sorts of celebration that were going on.

There's a festival to mark the king's success in making Israel great again. There's documentaries on TV showing how he has won many military victories against his enemies.

There's a large exhibition detailing his economic achievements and his important monuments. And there's even a thanksgiving service at the Jewish temple.

[3 : 49] With a famous praise and worship band declaring how great God is for blessing them. And then Amos comes. And he says things like we've heard in the last two weeks in chapter 2 verse 13.

Now then, I, the Lord, will crush you as a cart crushes when loaded with grain. Or last week in chapter 3 verse 11.

An enemy will overrun your land, pull down your strongholds, and plunder your fortresses. Israel, hear these words.

You're going to get invaded and conquered and plundered. And you can just imagine the people looking at him and asking, Amos, what have you been smoking?

What drugs are you taking? Have you seen our economy? Have you seen our military? Have you seen our enemies? We're strong.

[4 : 57] They're weak. We're rich. They're broke. We're prepared. They're a mess. And most of all, Hey, Amos, we've got God on our side.

We go to the temple every week. In fact, some of us go every day to offer our worship. Heya, why don't you go balik kampung lah, Amos?

Stop talking rubbish. But Amos stands firm. He has a message to bring, one that is consistent in its emphasis.

Having told of God's coming judgment in chapters 1 and 2, now in chapters 3 to 6, Amos is trying again and again to tell Israel, God's people, you're not prepared, even though you think you are.

Three times in this section, he starts his mini sermons this way. Hear this word. Hear this word.

Hear this word.

[6 : 08] Chapter 4 verse 1. Hear this word, Israel. Chapter 5 verse 1. His concern for them shines true.

He wants them to hear God's authentic word. And nearly 3,000 years later, Amos is still saying the same thing to us. You could be totally unprepared to meet God, even though you think you are.

You see, right now we could look around and say, we're okay. We're okay now because we've changed governments. So our economy is going to improve.

We're okay now because we have good schools. So our kids are going to improve. We're okay now because we've been going to church. We've been attending and tithing and doing things.

We have God with us. We are prepared. And Amos asks, are you really? Well, let me give you three signs that you might be unprepared, even if you think you are.

[7 : 22] And then you go and judge for yourselves. Now when Amos 4 was read earlier by Andrea, she ended by saying, this is the word of the Lord.

And so Amos says to us, if you believe that, then hear this word. So keep your Bibles open in front of you. And we're going to see the first sign you're not actually prepared.

Number one, you remain self-indulgent. You remain self-indulgent. Amos begins by addressing the women and he pulls no punches.

Verse one, hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, bring us some drinks.

Is the prophet being rude? Is he insulting women? Well, he's certainly using a heavy measure of sarcasm. But he's not simply calling them names like little kids do on the playgrounds.

[8 : 38] Bashan, you see, is famous for being a place that is very fertile and so the animals there were very well fed and well nourished.

So the cows there would end up being the best quality beef. So just like if we were to go into a supermarket today and we see something marketed as 100% grass-fed New Zealand beef or pure Argentinian beef tenderloin and we know that those are premium kind of things.

So a person heading towards into an Israelite supermarket or a farm during that time would see the label cows of Bashan and know that those are luxury items.

And so this is not a derogatory term per se. What it is though is descriptive. It's not that the women are literally cows but the way they think and behave and act are like animals and nothing more.

They're only thinking about their pleasure moment by moment. They look good and impressive and luxurious but in the end they're empty.

[10 : 04] Less than human. Less than what God has designed them to be. And the reason they're less than human is because they treat others similarly.

They treat them like animals. we're told verse 1 that they oppress the poor and crush the deity all so that they can be pampered.

Bring us something to drink they call out to their husbands as they obsess over the latest fashion trends their body mass index and their peers latest going ons.

And so they're a bit like animals like cows who never give any thought to the spiritual side of life but who only worry about what's going on in the here and now.

And don't forget these are women who say that they are part of God's people not those on the outside. You would see them in church as we'll see just a little later on when we get to verses 4 and 5.

[11 : 12] But although they sat through many sermons and Bible studies although they closed their eyes piously during prayer time and mingle easily during fellowship time they are not at all spiritual in the truest sense of the word.

They might use the language of God easily they say thank God praise God give glory to God but God does not actually fit in their lives.

Last week I was preaching through Philippians at the Next Gen Conference and in Philippians chapter 3 verse 18 to 19 on the screen Paul says a similar thing. Isaac on the screen for as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears many live as enemies of the cross of Christ their destiny is destruction their gall is their stomach and their glory is in their shame their mind is set on earthly things and that's the New Testament equivalent of these women these are people in church notice that Paul says he weeps for them so he knows them but in the actual fact they do not live cross shaped lives they will say that they believe in Jesus but they don't want to put Jesus first if it includes inconvenience or suffering their God is their stomach their mind is set on earthly things they're only thinking about the here and now they're self indulgent and so Paul says they're actually living as enemies of the cross of Christ even though they'll deny it even though they'll say they're singing about the cross and so on and their destiny is destruction and that's exactly what Amos says too come back with me to Amos chapter 4 verse 2 and 3 the sovereign lord has sworn by his holiness the time will surely come when you'll be taken away with hooks the last of you with fish hooks you'll each go straight out through breaches in the war and you'll be cast out towards Hamon declares the lord you see the lord takes these women seriously seriously enough to actually take an oath he swears by the very character of his very being to move into action you want to know what moves God a people who live their lives based on self-indulgence a people who only care about their appearance to others not about their eternal state before God a people who seek to please themselves and not

God that moves God to action and what is God going to bring about well he's going to let Israel be conquered within 30 to 40 years of Amos saying verses 2 and 3 the nation of Assyria attacked Israel and one of the things they did was to tie together their captives with ropes and attached to these ropes were hooks which was placed through their noses or mouths and then they would drag them through the holes of the city walls it's a horrific picture but as my friend the Old Testament scholar Paul Barker puts it if they behave like cows God will treat them like cows and they would be led to harm on which seems to be some sort of place or state of disgrace so I guess the question [15:22] Amos is asking us to reflect on this morning is this are we only concerned about our comfort here and now our pleasure here and now ourselves in the here and now is life merely about going on the next nice holiday the next fun experience the next investment product well God grieves if that's what your life amounts to because God made you for so much more than that he made you so that you could enjoy him and live according to his purposes to bring glory to Jesus in all that you do in this world yes it's scary at times and difficult and tiring when you're constantly working out what it means to give your time and your money and your energy all to Jesus but it's worth it because that's when you become most human but when we don't live for

God but only for ourselves ironically that's when we become less than human we become mere cows of Bashan moo is that what you want to moo away your lives in temporary luxury well God grieves to see us living like fattened cows fit only for slaughter he wants us instead to invest in a life of God dependence for something far greater so don't be unprepared don't live for yourself and put yourself above others but live for God and put others above yourselves but maybe you're thinking well that's not me I definitely am

God dependent I'm in church every week and I'm a pretty active member and Amos says well let's keep digging let's look at sign number two and see if that applies to you and here's sign number two you worship wrongly you worship wrongly the prophet continues on a sarcastic note verse four go to battle and sin go to Gilgal and sin yet more bring your sacrifices every morning your tithes every three years or three days as it says in the footnote you see battle occupies a special place in Israel's history it's where their ancestor Jacob met with God back in Genesis if you like it's a bit like the equivalent of a Mecca for the Muslims and Gilgal as well occupies a special place in Israel's history because it's where

Israel first crossed the river Jordan into the promised land to claim the place that God had gifted them to fulfill his promises to Abraham see these are religious centers of worship places Israel considers sacred and now Amos is mimicking what is likely to be the core to worship that Israel often hurt go to battle go to Gilgal bring your tithes bring your sacrifices be as religious as you like but here's the shocker Amos says it doesn't matter for it exposes their hearts what you're really doing Israel he says is sinning not worshipping for you guys it's a sin to go to church now it sure

doesn't look that way

I mean the Israelites seem to be following the law very religiously and intensely you could say that they're even practicing Torah in hyper fashion animal sacrifices were not required every morning but you can see in verse 4 they brought them every day tithes were only required once every three years but if you look at the footnote of verse 4 in the NIV they were bringing them every three days and that's what every major English translation other than the NIV also says these guys look absolutely devout if they were around today we might even call them mature Christians they're going above the core of duty right they're the ones in your church giving generously they're the ones happy to come to church every Sunday and attend the extra weekday meeting they're the ones who want the pastor to pray for them on every occasion they look committed but [20 : 52] Amos says all they're simply doing is multiplying their transgressions it's all sin why well verse 5 tells us one reason this is what you love to do declares the sovereign lord their worship had become self satisfying instead of god glorifying this ritual was all an empty charade it was to shiok sendiri simply to make oneself feel good it's certainly not for the sake of serving others but it was all completely unreal in the sight of god the truth is there are people who do enjoy religion they enjoy the churchy side maybe they like the singing or they like the sense of peace they say it gives them they like the sense of self importance it gives them to be serving on stage or they like having the power to direct people in the ministries that they're involved in maybe they like the fire and brimstone preaching more preacher they say they may even be the pastor delivering such sermons they may be the elder or deacon they but the point is whoever they are they might be going through the acts of worship but their heart is certainly not a heart of worship they're worshipping wrongly with their hearts fixed on self rather than

God and all of this the praise the Lord the prayer requests the mission pledges simply become a game people play and God says such activity is pointless such religion is useless such Christianity is hopeless because it's not the real thing my friends if you're simply playing games today Amos is telling you to stop it's simply too dangerous because this isn't simply harmless fun it's actually disobedience to God's word look at the other reason why God calls their worship sin the beginning of verse 5 burn leavened bread as a thank offering and brag about your free will offerings in Leviticus chapter 7 verse 11 to 14 we read that it is unleavened bread that should be used for thank offerings leavened bread was forbidden but the Israelites wanted to make up their own rules when it suited them they preferred to apply God's word selectively bring your sacrifices oh we love that we're willing to even do it every morning no problem burn unleavened bread as a thank offering anyway isn't leavened bread nicer well God let's do it my way and again if they were living today they might have said come to church every week and serve on the music team sure I don't mind I like playing the guitar anyway you ask me to come three times a week also can but ask me to get out of my comfort zone and make an effort to build relationships with others not like me a seek out Bible study no thanks but hey I'm serving the Lord I'm on the drums every week but the Lord says there's no picking and choosing we don't get to decide what worship looks like we don't get to decide what worship requires of us we have to worship God's way not ours in all of life not just on a Sunday so are we worshipping rightly if we're not that's a big sign we're unprepared when we are not truly worshipping the Lord in our hearts when we are selectively applying God's word and deciding what to follow and ignore when we simply like the externals of church life but dislike the internal work that Jesus wants to do in our lives then it's a sin to come to church wrong worship leads to woe

Jesus himself gives a similar warning in Matthew chapter 23 verse 23 to 24 he warns the Pharisees woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees you hypocrites you give a ten of your spices mint dill and cumin but you have neglected the more important matters of the law justice mercy and faithfulness you should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former you blind guides you strain out a net but swallow a camel so what can we do to prepare rightly how can we worship rightly well it begins by acknowledging that apart from the Holy Spirit there can be no true worship we need the Holy Spirit to transform our hearts to open our ears to his word and our eyes to see the all encompassing glory and mercy of Jesus true worship begins not with a musical note but with an acknowledgement of how we have gone off key in our lives so that we can subsequently hear the riches of the gospel true worship begins not with us but with

[27 : 10] Jesus it's quite interesting that sin offerings are not mentioned in chapter 4 verse 4 to 5 did the Israelites choose not to offer those we don't know and yet that's what we need the most for

us to worship God rightly and be prepared to meet him we need the ultimate sin offering Jesus and thank God that he himself has provided that and so to worship him is to run to Jesus and to boast in him alone you see this is ultimately what God desires for us these harsh words of verses 1 to 5 are there because his heart is ultimately tender towards us he wants us to return to him five times you will have noticed in verses 6 to 11 he declares that there is his intention he wanted the people to return to him and that's why he gives warning after warning but here's the third sign that we might be unprepared we ignore

God's warnings we ignore God's warnings in verses 6 to 11 what we now have is a list of the ways that God warns them these seem to be events that happened before the time of Amos and even King Jeroboam in verse 6 God sends famine empty stomachs lack of bread in verses 7 and 8 he sends drought there's no rain in verses 9 he sends blight and meal deal in other words he destroys their crops in verse 10 he sends disease and war and in verse 11 he sends some sort of disaster and all this is clearly from the Lord's hand I gave you empty stomachs I withheld rain from you I struck your gardens I sent plagues among you I overthrew some of you see these are not mere natural disasters or random accidents these are in the truest sense the acts of God they are his acts of discipline but Israel did not heed them did you hear the sad refrain repeated again throughout these verses yet you have not returned to me yet you have not returned to me yet you have not returned to me you see God does allow his people to go through pain and suffering why to ultimately help preserve them to call them back to himself this is not to say that every instance of disaster or pain is God's explicit judgment Jesus clearly discourages us from drawing such links and the example of Job makes clear to us that not all suffering is a result of sin but as one person puts it we can acknowledge that life's experience of trouble may function as sign posts they can encourage us towards self reflection as occasions for self evaluation as a time for contemplation to see whether we are on the right paths that's how pain in our body works doesn't it it alerts us to the fact that there's something wrong in our body so that it can be corrected and that's what

God is doing to Israel giving them warning signs so that they can correct cause he's even made those signposts very clear I mean if you are an Israelite and you're experiencing the exact same plagues that Egypt did back in verse 10 or 11 well that should be a very big clue that God is telling you to wake up and yet you did not return to me says the Lord and when we ignore the warnings that God senses repeatedly and when we know that God is speaking to us directly but we choose to tune him out well that's when we're nowhere near prepared to meet him are you prepared to meet your God but if we turn back to Jesus Christ then there is mercy for our sin and grace to change when we turn back to

Jesus we take hold of God's good news that there is forgiveness and hope for when we turn back to Jesus what we are really doing is what the Bible calls repentance and that's the main response that Jesus seeks the kingdom of God has come near he says in his first recorded words in Mark's gospel that's the good news of Christianity and his very next words repent and believe the good news in other words choose this day to turn away from following self to following him repentance is not the same as regret even though it usually does involve regret repentance is not the same as introspection although it does involve self reflection repentance is not about beating yourself up about how bad you are or saying how sorry you are that's regret and remorse but that's not repentance repentance in essence is about a you turn it's saying that the direction of my life is now different the goal of my life is now different the pattern of my life is now different it's now fixed on [33 : 15] Jesus alone that's repentance that's returning to God that's the way to become a Christian not just by repeating a formulaic prayer but by performing that you turn and that's the way to continue living as a Christian it's simply about daily saying to God Lord I know that I've wandered away from you today and so I return to you please Lord help me to worship you daily with the offering of my life with my every being and that's what it means to live as a Christian not so much about just the mere outward form of behavior and going through all those rituals or routines but an inward desire to return to God again and so the three signs that you're unprepared remaining self indulgent worshipping wrongly and ignoring

God's warnings and if we do that verse 12 this is what I will do to you Israel because I will do this to you Israel prepare to meet your God and in Amos 4 that is primarily God saying I'm bringing judgment but for us this morning there is still within those verses an invitation to repent there is still time you see you initially have to meet God as the Lord God Almighty of verse 13 that's literally the

Lord of hosts the God of all armies he's the one who forms the mountains creates the wind and who reveals his thoughts to mankind who turns dawn to darkness and treads on the height of the earth and if the book of Amos is all we had in the Bible then that's the only way we're going to meet God you meet him as that fearsome lion who will consume you

God but today you can also meet him verse 12 as your God now just turn with me this is the last Bible reference for today but if you could just turn with me to Colossians chapter 1 and we're going to start at verse 16 Colossians chapter 1 verse 16 and in verse 16 we see that Jesus is indeed the image of the Lord Almighty he created all things in heaven and on earth visible and invisible where the thrones or powers or rulers or authorities all things have been created by him and for him that's Jesus he's the Lord Almighty who formed the mountains and created the wind but we can meet him as our God because in verse 18 he is the one who is the head of the church he's the one down in verse 20 through whom all things are reconciled whether things on earth or in heaven by making peace through his blood shed on the cross is it through

Jesus you don't have to be worried any longer about being unprepared to meet your God not when you turn to him and that's what we have to do maybe for the first time today maybe for the thousand time today why not be prepared not just for retirement why not be prepared to meet your God let's pray go so why get way Sh