

Seek God and live

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[0 : 0 0] All this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. A.N. Wilson is an award-winning English writer and journalist known for his biographies, works of fiction, and history.

He graduated from Oxford in the 1970s and considered becoming an Anglican priest. But by the 1980s, he had become a full-blown atheist. Indeed, in the 1990s, he wrote a book about Jesus in which he basically said that Jesus isn't God and his miracles are fake.

But by 2009, he released an article in the magazine The New Statesman. That's a bit like the British equivalent of Time magazine or The New Yorker.

And it was titled, Why I Believe Again. He wrote something similar as well for another newspaper. And in those articles, he explained why he had returned to God.

They were basically two factors. One was based on experience. He had seen too many Christians, he said. Ordinary people like you and me, who had approached life and death with a calm and a courage that he could not explain away.

[1 : 1 5] There was a confidence in them he could not rationalize. The other factor was based on reason. He realized that in the end, he just couldn't make sense of the fullness of life if there was no God.

If there was no God, he had no satisfying explanation for why we enjoy beauty in art or music, or why we seek the experience of love, or how people like Dietrich von Haifa, the German pastor, could heroically oppose Hitler during World War II.

In other words, without God, he had no basis for explaining beauty, love, or heroism. And he began to understand that a world untouched by God is really a world with no true life in it.

A world in which we are simply a bunch of chemical or pieces of meat. And because he realized that a world without God was a world without life, he began to seek God again.

Now last week, in Amos, we saw that God called on Israel to seek him again. So far in Amos, there have been warnings all throughout, haven't they?

[2 : 3 7] Of the dangers of going in the opposite direction from the living God. The prophet has been pretty straight-talking, proclaiming unambiguously the realities of judgment and punishment.

But the sad thing is, Israel still has not returned to God. You might remember that phrase, yet you have not returned to me, that we kept hearing last week.

And what we are really getting, in one sense, is the setup for today's passage. Because this morning, what we are really doing is attending a funeral service.

That's what Amos 5 is all about. That's why, at the end of the chapter, we hear about wailing in the streets, cries of anguish in the public square, and mourners wailing in the vineyards.

We're at Israel's funeral. By not returning to God, God's people have sentenced themselves to death. Without God's touch, they have no life.

[3 : 47] But this is really important to get. God takes absolutely no pleasure in the death of the nation he calls his son.

In verse 1, notice how Amos describes God's speech. He's lamenting. He's crying. He's mourning. God is sad and sorrowful, grieving over the stubbornness of his people.

I heard recently about a mother who had to turn in her teenage son to the police after discovering that he had been involved in the kidnapping and murder of another child.

She saw something on his Facebook page that exposed his involvement, and so she had no choice but to make the phone call. Interviewed by the media, she broke down in tears as she described what she did.

Her neighbour called it the most loving, difficult thing. She knew that justice had to be done, but she took zero pleasure in it.

[4 : 56] Indeed, she knew that her son had just forfeited his own future, and that brought her anguish. And in a sense, that's God here.

He's doing the most loving, difficult thing. We shouldn't picture God as a smiling, trigger-happy executioner, all too ready to zap his people, but as a lamenting, loving father who is upset that his people have thrown away their future, even as he has to ensure that justice has to be done.

And this morning, as we sit through this funeral service, God is appealing to us today not to repeat the mistake of Israel back in the 8th century BC.

Funerals can be good occasions for soul-searching, can't they? They force us to confront questions of life and death, to determine what is truly important, to make preparation to meet your maker.

And so this morning, God is appealing to us to search our souls and to seek him again. Through Amos 5, he wants us to see why returning to him is so significant.

[6 : 19] And like A.N. Wilson, we'll discover that seeking him is really the only viable option. For life without God is completely barren.

And so we're going to go through Amos 5 as if it's a funeral service with an arbitrary, a eulogy, and an entreaty.

So firstly, the arbitrary. Listen to the announcement of Israel's death in verses 1 and 2. Hear this word, Israel, this lament I take up concerning you.

Fallen is virgin Israel, never to rise again, deserted in her own land with no one to lift her up. You're a gone case, Israel.

You have no standing left. You have no friends left. You have no future left. Indeed, your death comes in the most tragic of ways. Verse 3.

[7 : 21] Your city that marches out a thousand strong will have only a hundred left. Your town that marches out a hundred strong will have only ten left.

You will be completely decimated with 90% of your armies perishing. And there will be no allies coming to your aid. Now you must remember that this arbitrary is being read to Israel in her prime.

Imagine if you just had a health checkup and you've been given a complete clean bill of health. Cholesterol levels excellent. Vital organs all functioning well.

No sign of any problems anywhere. But I come and tell you that you are as good as dead. You might think I'm crazy. Well, that's how Israel would have heard Amos' message.

They were confident that they were healthy in every way. Materially, physically, spiritually. But of course, they were actually like the British in Singapore over 70 years ago.

[8 : 38] During World War II, the British in Singapore were very confident that they could withstand any attack from the Japanese. They thought the Japanese were poor fighters.

One young soldier even said something like this, I really hope we don't grow too strong because if we do, the Japanese will never attack and I won't have a chance to go into battle.

But as we know, the Brits were actually overconfident and suffered one of their worst losses in World War II. Nearly 100,000 men taken prisoner, overwhelmed by an army on bicycles and without artillery support.

Overconfidence was the cause of Britain's downfall and overconfidence was the cause of Israel's downfall. She had a bright future in front of her.

But decades later, it was cut down by Aziria. Just like that. So what is the significance of this particular arbitrary forest today?

[9 : 52] Well, first of all, it reminds us that simply claiming to be part of God's people is no guarantee of life. Simply saying you're a Christian is no sure sign of spiritual health.

Simply thinking that all looks fine now is no promise your eternal future is secure. Overconfidence is possible.

Often we imagine that if one professes faith, one possesses faith. He says he must be a Christian. He says he's a Christian, sorry, and therefore he must be a Christian.

But of course, that's silly when we apply it to other areas of life. He says he's a doctor, so he must be a doctor. She says she's an Olympic athlete, so she must be an Olympic athlete.

We know it doesn't work that way. Saying you're something doesn't necessarily make you one. And indeed, Jesus warns against such overconfidence of thinking that we are alive when we are not.

[11 : 00] Many will say to me on that day, he says in Matthew 7, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?

Then I will tell them plainly, I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers. And so Jesus is saying he will exclude from the kingdom even some pastors and missionaries, Sunday school teachers and miracle workers.

Why? Because they were overconfident. Thinking that just because they look amazing with their prophecies and their miracle making, they thought they were alive to God when actually they had no life in Christ.

so be honest with yourselves. Don't be overconfident. Pay attention to your heart, spiritually speaking.

Is it beating or is it dead? Remember, we're not talking about whether you go to church every week or whether you're involved in noble community work or whether you once put your hand up and went forward at a Christian rally.

[12 : 24] we're asking, is your heart a blaze for the glory of God? When you hear preaching, are you truly desiring to know Jesus more?

Or do you just want practical living tips? Does your heart long to make a difference for Christ in this world? If there is none of that, you could be suffering from what the Bible calls hardness of heart.

A hardened heart does not seek the Lord at all. And when you don't seek the Lord, you're as good as dead. You're fallen. Even if, like Israel, you claim to have enjoyed God's blessing upon you for the last 40 years.

And second of all, briefly speaking, this obituary should remind us as the Malaysian Church not to be too quick to deflect responsibility if we are in decline.

If the Church in Malaysia as a whole is decreasing in numbers and shrinking, well, we could so easily blame it all on external factors, couldn't we? Persecution, materialism, the majority religion.

[13 : 47] We complain, oh, why is God not bringing young people to the Church? Why is it that we are losing so many to the world? And the answer could very well be, not because God is not strong enough to protect His people, but precisely because God is sorting out His people.

just like He sorted out Israel all those centuries ago, bringing them large numerical decline. Could it be that we have been too content with doing things our own way and not consumed enough with God Himself?

Could the problem be inside, not outside? Are we seeking God truly or not? And as a church, collectively, it's something we should reflect upon.

But let's move on in our funeral service. And next we come to the eulogy. The eulogy. Now this is the part of the funeral service where someone gets up to say some nice words about the deceased and remember his good points.

Unfortunately for Israel though, Amos does not go through the usual cliches. Instead, he states Israel's faults plainly. Verse 7, there are those who turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground.

[15 : 20] Why is Israel dead? Because she has been unjust and unrighteous. In verses 10 to 12, Amos details their shortcomings, one which should be familiar to us by now.

Efforts to manipulate the system so that it serves only particular people. A desire to silence those who are in the business of truth telling.

Walking all over the poor and trying to squeeze every last bit of cash from them, even if it means unfair taxes. And therefore, God declares verse 11, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them.

Though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine. They are not going to enjoy the fullness of life. Remember, these are not just occasional failings.

These are things that are entrenched in the people, something that have become so habitual to them that they probably don't even think twice about it anymore. And that's why Amos highlights it in his eulogy.

[16 : 39] Verse 12, For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. There are those who oppress the innocent and take bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts.

And if you were present at this funeral, you have nothing to say. Why? Because you know that you cannot defend the indefensible.

The eulogy may not be nice to hear, but it is accurate. And therefore, verse 13, the prudent keep quiet in such times, for the times are evil.

Now, at this point, allow me just a few minutes to go down a side route and to explore just a little deeper why injustice and unrighteousness is such a big deal.

Now, you might be thinking, well, isn't that self-evident? After all, surely all of us can easily see that injustice and unrighteousness are bad things. There's no defense for what Israel was doing.

[17 : 52] And even if you're not a Christian here this morning, I'm sure you will feel just as outraged at the descriptions of subverting legal justice and exploiting the poor, maybe even more so than the Christians.

But the good question to ask is, why the outrage? why is it that stealing from the rakyat is wrong? Why is supporting equality and safeguarding the dignity of all people right?

Well, we could simply answer, because it's right law, what is right is right, what is wrong is wrong. But is that sufficient? After all, who gets to decide what is right and wrong?

one common modern answer is that we ourselves get to decide. As enlightened, progressive human beings, we just know if something is wrong, like stealing from the rakyat, or if something is right, like upholding the dignity of all.

But then the question becomes, what if people disagree with each other about what is wrong and what is right? what if different cultures argue with each other about what unrighteousness and injustice means, saying that, oh, that's true for your culture, but not true for mine?

[19 : 28] Then we have no justification to fall back upon. You see, if there is no living God, while it's very easy to pinpoint certain things as unjust and unrighteous, it's harder to explain why exactly those things are unjust and unrighteous.

All we can say is, ah, yeah, because it's right, because it's wrong, but we can have no meaningful conversation about why.

But, if there is a God who is righteous and just, and who expects people to practice righteousness and justice, then we have a surer foundation to stand upon.

We can make moral evaluations based on God's revelation. Now, isn't it interesting that right after God brings the charges of injustice and unrighteousness against Israel in verse 7, that we get a meditation of who God is in the very next verses, in verses 8 and 9, we're told about God.

He controls the constellations, that's Pleiades and Orion. He controls the sun and the stars, the seasons and the times, and he controls the seas.

[21 : 03] Amos seems to be saying, don't forget. There is only one God over the entire universe and he alone gets to be judged.

And as we're reminded in Psalm 33 verse 5, this judge, the Lord, loves righteousness and justice. The earth is full of his unfailing love.

And so that's why injustice and unrighteousness is such a big deal. Those who are unjust and unrighteous cross a moral objective line.

More than that, they are actually turning away from God, not just not living up to some abstract ideal. And so we have grounds to say, they are doing wrong, even when they claim to be his people.

And the consequences are serious. They invite God's wrath. Just look down with me for a moment to verse 17. There will be wailing in all the vineyards, for I will pass through your midst, says the Lord.

[22 : 30] Now this would have been especially shocking for the Israelites to hear. Why? Because Amos is saying, this is Exodus all over again, except this time you're on the receiving end.

In the book of Exodus, God sent plagues against Israel's enemy, Egypt, with the final plague being the death of the first born. And in Exodus chapter 12 verse 12, God describes what he is doing to Egypt as passing through them.

But now in Amos chapter 5 verse 17, he is passing through Israel in the same way. He's treating Israel as the enemy.

He's the reason for their wailing. And so they fall. They die. That's how big a deal injustice and unrighteousness is.

God himself acts against them. So what is the significance of this eulogy for us today? Well, I hope it's clear already.

[23 : 48] Justice and righteousness matter dearly to God. One of the core convictions of our church, as we've been saying this morning, is to be centred on the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But that could be easily misunderstood, as if being gospel centred means that we endlessly repeat John 3 16. But to be truly gospel centred means that we understand what the implications of the gospel are.

And one of the implications of the gospel is that as a people rescued by God, we now reflect his character. And so we want to reflect his justice and righteousness as well.

Now, we might not be lawyers or serving on a jury, but every day we have to deal with matters of justice and righteousness.

How will we treat our children and family and those around us? How are we doing at telling the truth? How are we doing at trying to ensure that we know what is right and do what is right?

[25 : 04] Those are matters of righteousness and justice. And perhaps for a couple of us, God is calling us to reflect his justice righteousness on a larger scale by being directly involved in speaking for the voiceless or formulating policy that promotes righteousness.

And I hope we also see the consequences of being unrighteous. We invite God's wrath. And that should sober us.

for when we look within ourselves, if we are honest, we know that there's a streak of unrighteousness within us all. I remember reading about aid workers who help child refugees during the day, but use child prostitutes at night.

Well, we are capable of going so high and so low at the same time, aren't we? maybe not as extreme as those aid workers, but how often have we been kind to strangers, only to go home and shout at our spouse?

And so that means we need rescuing, not just from sin, not just from death, but ultimately from God himself. Now, that might come as a surprise because we don't normally think of God's salvation that way.

[26 : 37] But actually, what Israel needed was God to rescue them from himself. And what we need is God to rescue us from himself.

For as Romans 1 verse 18 puts it, the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth by their wickedness.

God will be going to do this. But how? How is that possible? How can we not end up on the same path as Israel and endure this funeral service?

Well, let's get to the last part of today's funeral service And that is the entreaty The entreaty In other words, Amos is making an appeal Verse 4 Seek me and live Or verse 6 Seek the Lord and live That's the plea That's the call Seek the Lord himself Notice the plea is not to be churchy The plea is not to be more busy Look at verse 5 Do not seek battle Do not go to Gilgal Do not journey to Beersheba For Gilgal will surely go into exile And battle will be reduced to nothing I'm not interested, God says, in mere activity I'm not interested in your religious pilgrimages

You can go to the places of supposed blessing Like battle and Gilgal and Beersheba Like the next big healing rally And the prayer mountain And the latest coolest megachurch All that means nothing If you're not seeking me You see, if we are suffering from hardness of heart Well, there's only one cure A new heart And that is a gift only God himself can give And that's why we have to seek him But I want you to know this morning That God himself wants to be found He's in the business of raising the dead to life In Amos, when the prophet is calling on people To seek God with all their hearts Notice that there is still a note of uncertainty

[29 : 20] In his pronouncements Look at the end of verse 15 Perhaps the Lord God Almighty Will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph Perhaps What a crushing word that is If we seek God, perhaps He might grant us mercy But perhaps he might not Isn't it frightening to not know?

But I want you to know this morning That the perhaps of Amos Is not the final word A couple of centuries later The prophet Ezekiel came on the scene And he had a similar message to Amos Except this time it's for Judah The southern kingdom But amidst his warnings He also delivered this promise of God In Ezekiel chapter 36 Verse 26 to 27 I will give you a new heart And put a new spirit in you I will remove from you Your heart of stone And give you a heart of flesh And I will put my spirit in you And move you to follow my decrees And be careful to keep my laws I will, I will, I will God isn't saying perhaps He's saying He's going to do it And fast forward a few centuries later

And God comes good on this gift To unrighteous people He says in Romans 3 The righteousness of God Has been given through faith in Jesus Christ To all who believe There is no difference between Jew and Gentile For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God And all are justified freely by His grace Through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus You see what did Jesus do?

Well when Jesus came He went to people like Zacchaeus The tax collector Who had imposed unfair taxes And cheated people of their money And he welcomed them And then he stood in a kangaroo court Where all the priests And teachers of the law And Pontius Pilate himself Was bringing false accusation After false accusation against him And committing a grave injustice And he was the only one Who stood in that court And told the truth And so they detested him Hating the one who upheld justice And sentenced him to die And Jesus went on his own Long funeral march Why?

So that as the righteous one He would take the place Of the unrighteous And bring those same Unrighteous ones To God You And me And when we seek Him There is no perhaps All are justified freely You will find mercy You will find life For Jesus went on His funeral march So that you don't have to And then later on in Romans We're told this But if Christ is in you That even though your body Is subject to death Because of sin The Spirit gives life Because of righteousness And if the Spirit of Him Who raised Jesus from the dead Is living in you He who raised Christ from the dead Will also give life To your mortal bodies Because of His Spirit Who lives in you

[33 : 20] You see when you seek Jesus When you trust Jesus You will have new hearts You will have the Spirit Living in you And you can live differently From Israel There's no perhaps That's guaranteed Have you given your life To Jesus If not Today is as good as any To give your life To Him But for many of us Praise God We have already Turned to Him But what is Amos' call to us then Well look with me Down to verse Verse 14 Seek good Not evil That you may live Then the Lord God Almighty Will be with you Just as you say He is

Amos isn't saying That doing good Is how you get right With God But he is saying That seeking God Means seeking good Loving God Means loving good And so the way To assure yourselves That the Lord Really is with you Is to keep Seeking the good Of others And the best way To stir yourself up To keep doing good Is to keep Seeking The Lord The two are Joined Together Don't think of Bible studies And coming to Sunday worship And praying As distractions From doing good In this world They are actually The engine That keeps you Doing good By keeping The love of Jesus Alive In your hearts It is the gospel Alone

That secures The continual doing Of righteousness And justice And that's why Seeking God Is so important Well Once again Amos has left us Uncomfortable But he has not Left us In despair As C.S. Lewis Once said In his book Mere Christianity The Christian religion Is in the long run A thing of Unspeakable comfort But it does not Begin in comfort It begins In dismay If you look For truth And in fact I will say it Stronger than him When you look For truth You may find Comfort in the end But if you look For comfort You will not get Either comfort Or truth Only soft soap And wishful thinking To begin with

And in the end Despair So seek the one Who says he is The way The truth And the life
And when you do Your final destiny Is not a funeral march It is a wedding feast There will
be no weeping And wailing There will be sweetness And gladness You won't just live In a
stone mansion You will live In the city Of the king of kings You won't just drink Fine wine
You will drink The living water That is all satisfying Seek Jesus And live Let's pray