

The curse of complacency

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- [0 : 00] A horrified audience burning nearly 2 million litres of fuel in just a few seconds.
- It created an ominous cloud of gas. And of course, not a single one of the seven astronauts on board survived. The US President Ronald Reagan ordered a thorough investigation of what went wrong.
- The problem was discovered was with the rocket booster's O-rings. Now these were thin rubber bands designed to seal each of the rocket boosters to make it airtight. But on that morning, because it was so cold, those O-rings failed to do its job.
- So hot pressurised gases escaped, made contact with the fuel tank, and boom, that was that. But actually, that wasn't the real problem.
- What the investigation discovered was that NASA had known about problems with these O-rings for a while. Senior management had known rather that they were vulnerable at low temperatures, but decided to ignore them.
- [1 : 24] After all, the previous flights had been problem-free. Besides, although the manufacturing engineers had expressed deep concern about launching the Challenger on that cold morning, they had recommended postponing the launch, they were overruled.
- Their bosses thought, hey, these guys didn't raise any concerns before, so why now? Basically, the investigation discovered a culture of complacency amongst NASA's management.
- Richard Feynman, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist who served as part of the investigation team, described NASA decision-making as a kind of Russian roulette.
- NASA, he said, began to believe all sorts of risks were increasingly acceptable. So they could lower their standards on safety issues just a little bit, because they got away with it the last time, and the time before that, and the time before that.
- The real problem was complacency. And sadly, complacency led to disaster.
- [2 : 43] This morning, we're in our fifth sermon on Amos. We've heard him preach to Israel and by extension to us quite a number of times already.
- And these sermons, after a while, can all feel the same. Maybe you're thinking, if you've read one chapter of Amos, you've read them all.
- That's not quite true. Amos isn't merely repeating himself. But it is certainly true that Amos keeps circling back to a few big themes again and again.
- A failure to truly acknowledge the sovereign Lord of creation and history. A belief that people won't be held to account with God.
- Basing our confidence on the wrong things. He's constantly bringing up these matters. And we could say to him, stop already. Let's end this sermon series.
- [3 : 45] And I can sympathize with that. There's a part of me that also wants to tell him, stop already. You're so depressing. It's no fun preaching your words.
- And Amos will come back to me and say, hey, that's God's word. And it's also got me thinking, why is Amos so persistent?

You might remember, especially if you've been to God's big picture, that the message of the prophets tend to consist of two big things. Judgment and hope. And there is hope in Amos, just in case you're wondering.

It's just mostly right at the end. But why are his sermons beforehand so focused on the bad news? And I think one big reason is this.

Because Amos knows complacency leads to disaster. In fact, that's the big theme of our passage this morning.

[4 : 48] Amos knows his audience. He knows that if he just says it once or twice, they weren't here. Because God's people here are covered head to toe in the clothing of complacency.

They believe that they can get away with all their indifference and injustice and lack of concern because, well, didn't they get away with it the last time?

And the time before that? And the time before that? Life has been good to them for nearly 40 years. They would be the sort of people who would go to church on a Sunday, hear God's word, shrug their shoulders, and go home and forget all about it by the time lunch is over.

They don't have any real intention to change. So Amos needs to keep reinforcing his key points.

The alarm bell needs to keep ringing until people know there's a fire. And it's actually love that ensures he keeps speaking so that we might not go the way of the challenger.

[6 : 03] Because complacency leads to disaster. How complacent were they? Well, look at chapter 5, verse 18 to 20.

There you will see that the people were feeling confident. They were feeling triumphant. For they were clearly longing for the day of the Lord.

What is this day of the Lord? Well, traditionally for the Israelites, it would be a day of joy and salvation. It would be the day when God wins over his enemies decisively and right the wrongs done to his people.

Just look, for instance, at Isaiah chapter 34, verse 8. Okay, it's not coming up. If you can try to click it to the next one.

For the Lord has a day of vengeance, a year of retribution to uphold Zion's cause. Or later on in Isaiah chapter 61, verse 1 to 2, hear these words from the lips of someone known as the servant.

[7 : 11] Let me just try again. One more, one more slide. Yeah, thanks, Sang-Yin. The spirit of the sovereign Lord is on me because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour and the day of vengeance of our God to comfort all who mourn.

So you can see why Israel was longing for the day. God's going to win the victory for them. They're going to enjoy all the favour, all the blessings, all the nice stuff, whereas their enemies, the bad guys, the people on the other side, were all going to get all the bad stuff.

Hooray. But Amos says, you can go to the next slide, Sang-Yin, you've gotten the day of the Lord completely wrong. Trust me, he says, you should be hoping for its delay.

Verse 18, Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord. Why do you long for the day of the Lord? That day will be darkness, not light.

[8 : 27] For on that day is your hour of disaster, not safety. Verse 19 shows how badly the people got it wrong. Amos compares that day as if you're facing up to a lion, which is generally not a good place to be in.

After all, a lion can run 50 miles an hour. Usain Bolt, the fastest man in the world, can only run half that speed. But let's just say, somehow, you manage to escape this lion by setting a new 200-metre world record.

And so you are triumphant. Of course you'll be. Because generally speaking, if you run away from a lion, you will only die tired. But this time you've beaten the odds.

But while you're patting yourself on the back for surviving, you've outran the lion, you bump into a grizzly bear. And in a fight between a grizzly bear and a lion, I think my money is on the bear.

So good luck to you. That's what it would be like, Amos says. Or, think about your nice house with its high fences, its grilled door, its fancy CCTV.

[9 : 47] You go in, feeling all secure, only to be bitten by a snake that sneaks under the gate. The point is, you think you are safe, but you're not.

For you haven't gotten the full picture of the day of the Lord. For instance, just look at Isaiah 2, verse 12 to 18. Next slide. The Lord Almighty has a day in store for all the proud and lofty, for all that is exalted, and they will be humbled, for all the settlers of Lebanon, tall and lofty, and all the oaks of Bashan, for all the towering mountains and all the high hills, for every lofty tower and every fortified wall, for every trading ship and every stately vessel.

The arrogance of man will be brought low and human pride humbled. The Lord alone will be exalted in that day and the idols will totally disappear.

On the day of the Lord, God declares, He brings down the arrogant. He brings down every man-made thing.

He brings down every false god. And Amos says, that's you, Israel. That's not just your enemies. And if that's you, verse 20, will not the day of the Lord be darkness, not light, pitch dark, without a ray of brightness?

[11 : 30] Complacency, leads to disaster. But how can we tell complacency has set in? After all, that's still a pretty abstract word.

So Amos says, okay, I'll give you snapshots of complacency. I'll show you snapshots of Israel's religious, social, cultural, and political life.

And I will pin these photos up under the Safety Precautions Notice Board. And remember, these lead to disaster.

So make sure you look at those photos and take the right precautions. So we're going to take a look at those snapshots now, and I've decided to put them into two categories.

So warning snapshot number one. Empty religious routines lead to disaster. That's verses 21 to 27.

[12 : 36] When I was studying in Sydney for Bible College a few years back, one of the things I noticed was the huge number of Christian conferences in the city.

There would be a conference expounding an Old Testament book here, another conference for incoming missionaries there, yet another conference for Christian business leaders on this weekend, and another conference for kids' ministry on that weekend.

You could, if you wanted to, go to a Christian conference or event every weekend of the year. And it wasn't so different during Amos' day.

You could attend this celebratory festival here, or if you preferred something with more reverence, you could go to that solemn prayer assembly over there.

Or if you were in the mood, you could go to the psalm singing session just over the road. They certainly took their religion seriously.

[13 : 41] And they knew the routines by heart. I always have trouble keeping track of what the burn and grain and fellowship offerings are. But these people have no trouble.

They know the drill. In today's terms, they would be the Anglican who knows the Apostles' Creed and Lord's Prayer by heart, or the charismatic who can belt out the entire latest Hillsong album, or the BEM evangelical who has memorized all sorts of Bible verses and can quote Hudson Southwell extensively.

They know the drill. They look respectable. Their discipline in temple going is quite admirable, isn't it? And hey, you know all those animal sacrifices, they cost money, don't they?

You have to give credit for the way they went about their worship. except God doesn't. Verse 21, I hate, I despise your religious festivals.

Your assemblies are a stench to me. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them.

[15 : 04] Away with the noise of your songs. I will not listen to the music of your harps. Just imagine if you were at church this morning and a prophet emerged to say those very words to us.

Quite a shock it would be within it. But that's kind of the sense of what's happening in Israel. For God, the whole experience leaves a bad taste in the mouth.

He thinks they smell bad. their assemblies are more like being stuck in a sewage pipe for him. He thinks they look bad. Verse 22 can literally be translated, I cannot bear to look at your fellowship offerings.

Like pictures of plane crash victims, they make me vomit. And he thinks they sound bad. they could be singing, Oh praise the name of the Lord our God, oh praise his name forevermore.

But to God, they are worse than your drunk uncle singing karaoke at your cousin's wedding. Why? Why? Why is God so against them?

[16 : 26] Well, verse 24, possibly the most famous verse in Amos, clues us in. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream.

This is why their religious routines were ultimately empty of justice and righteousness. we've been seeing that all throughout Amos, haven't we?

Their routines had no connection with their real lives. And so their routines and their lives were ultimately empty of God himself.

As verses 25 to 26 puts it, it's the same as bringing sacrifices and offerings, but worshipping other things in the end. And that's empty.

Vita, pointless. You see, empty religion is religion in a sealed box.

[17 : 35] It's compartmentalised Christianity. So say that you're looking at a big office building which represents your life. And you see lots of windows which represent different parts of your life.

God family, health, leisure time, and so on. But here's the problem. There are many parts of your life represented by those office windows, but none of them are connected with each other.

They're all compartmentalised. And so God might be in the top corner, but he's sealed off from other parts of your life making no impact on them. That's compartmentalised Christianity.

It's the sort of Christianity that stays within the confines of a church hall, but never leaves the building to enter your family homes, your business settings, your hangout cafes, your online activities, your cultural pursuits, your entertainment choices, your monetary investments.

It has no connection with your real lives. Now, imagine a bicycle wheel.

[18 : 57] I see it, it's on the slide. Now, this time, the hub where all the spokes meet together represent God. It's right there in the centre.

And each of those spokes, again, represent parts of your life, family, work, politics, etc. But now, each of those areas find its centre in God.

It's not sealed off. Well, that's uncompartmentalised Christianity. That's gospel-centred Christianity. That's authentic Christianity.

Siang, you can go to the next slide. You see, what God desires to see, to hear, to smell, is a Christianity that overflows from a Sunday into a Monday, from the Bible into your being, from compartments to integration.

He wants to give you the privilege of using you to let his streams of justice and righteousness go forth and bring waters of life into a barren world.

[20 : 15] He wants Jesus to be so big to you that your whole life is one big heartbeat for Christ. And if your heart beats for Christ every moment of every day, you will be asking, how can I practice justice and righteousness?

How can I live in such a way to try to ensure that the wrong ways of doing things are made right? How can I cultivate a right relationship between me and God and me and each other?

Those, by the way, are the biblical definitions of justice and righteousness. righteousness. And ultimately, the biggest question to ask is simply this.

How can I be God centered in all that I do? When I'm using my smartphone and handling technology, how can I be more thoughtful and godly in the way I use it?

Come to my workshop at church camp to find out more. When I'm making art, how can I shape it in ways that are more meaningful according to God's standards?

[21 : 31] When I'm reading the news, how can I see it from God's perspective? Authentic Christianity is uncompartmentalized Christianity.

Now, you might say, I don't think I know how to do that. Well, that's where a good Christian book or two can help. And if there's an area of your life in which you want to grow in God centeredness, well, come find me and I'll recommend one or two to you.

And look for good models. Ask our veteran doctors how they try to be God centered in their vocations or our many teachers or ask our cancer survivors in this congregation how they remain God centered in their trials.

And God gets excited excited when he sees that in us. But when we reduce our Christianity to empty religious routines that never impact the actual routines of our lives, well, God hates that.

He hates it when we only get upset about dress coats in church or insist on doing things a certain way purely to uphold tradition and yet never think about how the gospel shapes our habits, our politics, or our cultural beliefs.

[23 : 01] A surefire sign of complacency is when we get obsessed with the intricate details of our external routines and traditions, rather than being focused on God himself, his thoughts, his desires, his goals, his doctrine, his gospel.

And complacency leads to disaster. Verse 27, Therefore, I will send you into exile beyond Damascus, says the Lord, whose name is God Almighty.

Well, that's snapshot number one. Here's snapshot number two. Empty God substitutes lead to disaster. That's Amos chapter 6 in a nutshell.

Israel, as we've just seen, are clearly very religious. They're probably really sincere too. They sincerely brought all those offerings. But in the end, their religion was not actually about God, but about themselves.

They were sincerely looking to God substitutes. not God. And God's substitutes are in the end empty. They promise much, but give you nothing.

[24 : 27] They lead you to tragedy. Sincerity on its own is not enough. So what were some of these God's substitutes?

Well, here's one. Their own national and communal achievements. nations. Look at chapter 6 verse 1 and notice how they describe their own countries right there in the middle as the foremost nation.

Amos is likely quoting their own thoughts. As mentioned before, Israel had a successful military. They had the latest fighter jets, the best strategists.

And so they looked at their army and their leaders and they felt totally secure. But what does Amos say to that?

Let me read verse 1 and 2 again. Woe to you who are complacent in Zion and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria, you notable men of the foremost nation to whom the people of Israel come.

[25 : 37] Go to Kaunei and look at it. Go from there to Great Hamath and then go down to Gath in Philistia. Are they better off than your two kingdoms? Is their land larger than yours?

Woe! Because your political leaders and your strong armies cannot secure you in the end. And that's what verse 2 seems to be about.

Amos is saying that those cities of Kaunei and Hama and Gath used to be just as great. But where are they now? Defeated.

That's what happened to them. And Israel, where will you be in 30 to 40 years time? And so the Bible says, be careful of confusing Christianity with national achievements.

There's nothing wrong with being patriotic. We pray for our country. We honour and give thanks to our leaders. But the source of our faith and security is not national leaders and institutions or a new era in Malaysian politics.

[26 : 56] Those are God's substitutes. and they cannot play the role of saviour. Expecting them to only leads to disaster.

Only God can be God. And so in our church gatherings, we want to magnify God and our heavenly citizenship in Him, not our earthly ones.

We must be careful of blurring too much the line between the two. Church gatherings are not patriotic gatherings. We point not to the flag but to the cross.

Well, here's another God's substitute. Material security. That's what verses 4 to 6 are all about. We're at a party.

And what a party it is. Those nice fluffy beds you get at five-star hotels. Lamb and beef steak, the diet of the rich. All accompanied by wine.

[28 : 05] And not just a bottle or two, but whole basins full of the best alcohol from France. And the type of lotions that you're not going to find at your local body shop.

But Amos isn't here to condemn the wealth. He's not a communist. The end of verse 6 tells us his true concern.

But you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph. That's referring to Israel. Israel, Amos says, you don't care about what God cares about.

You don't care about the state of God's people. You don't care about whether you're ignoring God or not. And that's trouble for you. Because you can be rich and honour God, but you can't honour riches above God and what he cares about.

You can't make material security a God substitute. Verse 7 tells us that leads to disaster. Therefore, you will be among the first to go into exile.

[29 : 19] Your feasting and lounging will end. Now, we might feel that's not quite our issue this morning. You're not lasting after the finest wine or the latest body products.

Yet you're happy with the simple stuff. But it's worth asking, what makes me feel secure? You might not be a big spender, but does seeing the digits go up in your bank account bring you ultimate comfort?

Does it feel difficult to let go of that amount to give to our mission partners? Because, you know, you might need that amount for a rainy day? Do you keep looking over the details of your insurance plan without thinking about other Christians in need?

me? Well, I know that sometimes that's true of me. And those are all signs that maybe we are looking to material security rather than God himself as our refuge.

We are subconsciously trusting in our savings accounts or our pension plans to save us. They're our God substitute. But what if we ask instead, how can we be rich towards others?

[30 : 40] Not just in terms of money, but in terms of our friendship, of sharing resources, and so on. How can I practice justice and righteousness towards others?

Well, if we are thinking in that way, then we're on the right track. Very briefly, one more God substitute. verses 12 and 13.

Do horses run on the rocky crags? Does one plow the sea with oxen? But you have turned justice into poison, and the fruit of righteousness into bitterness.

You who rejoice in the conquest of Lodabar, and say, did we not take karmine by our own strength? And this time, our God substitute is our own strength.

That's what Amos pinpoints. Because it's never nice to be thought of as weak, or incapable, or have to give credit to someone else.

[31 : 49] Well, I know I certainly feel better if people think that I'm good, or skilled, or competent. I like getting the glory in my heart.

That's why I want to do things in my own strength, to show that it's all about me. But God says, that's a pale substitute that will fail you when trouble comes.

In verse 13, Amos says of Israel, you who rejoice in the conquest of Lord the Bar. And if you look at your footnote, it tells you that Lord the Bar means nothing.

Amos is being ironic here. Look to your own strength, seek your own glory, and you will end up rejoicing in nothing. Well, that's a sheer snapshot of complacency.

And complacency leads to disaster. Verse 14, for the Lord God Almighty declares, I will stir up a nation against you, Israel, that will oppress you all the way from Labo Hamath to the valley of the Arabah.

[33 : 05] And the rest of chapter 6 is basically a snapshot of God's judgment. It's intense enough that at the end of verse 10, no one would even dare to mention God's name.

So this morning, if you fall into that category, well, turn away from complacency, turn to God. For complacency led to disaster for Israel as they persisted in their empty religious routines and God substitutes.

Amos makes that crystal clear. Love compels him to keep ringing the alarm bell so that we will take heed.

Well, that seems to be the main thrust of the passage this morning. So if you know that you're in this group, well, then come before God and give up all those empty religion, all those empty gods, and don't hesitate.

Make that you turn. Seek God and live. But this morning, before we end, I just want to say a word to another group.

[34 : 27] There'll be plenty of you, I trust, who are not being complacent. You're not at church merely to go through the routines. You really want to live for Christ every day.

And some of you might have very tender consciences, and you might be feeling fearful after hearing Amos this morning. Am I headed for disaster?

You might think. Am I doing enough? Well, if that's you, then I want to say to you loud and clear this morning, do not be afraid, because the same Lord who stirs up disaster also gives you refuge.

I just want you to notice a thread of hope that has been in the background of Amos since last week. week. Remember last week in chapter 5, verse 3, when the armies of Israel were reduced by 90%?

Well, that's primarily a picture of judgment. But there is a positive side to that. They were not reduced by 100%. And this week, even in chapter 6, verse 9 to 10, well, we have a picture of judgment again, of all those dead people in their homes.

[35 : 47] God says, there's hope in the background. But notice, there are still individuals who are alive. And God, I believe, is hinting to Israel.

There will still be a remnant. There is hope amidst judgment. There are those who were not complacent. And God says, there's refuge for you.

there's hope in the background. And that hope moves to the foreground when centuries later, Jesus enters a synagogue.

He unfolds a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. And he reads these words. The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

[36 : 54] Jesus is quoting Isaiah 61, which we heard earlier. But notice which part he doesn't quote. He stops at the year of the Lord's favour, but he leaves out the part about the day of vengeance from our Lord.

Jesus is saying, today is the day of salvation. Today is the day of hope. Today is the day of favour. All who come to me have refuge.

Judgment is coming, but it will never fall on you. It will fall on me instead. I am the servant who came to be numbered amongst the transgressors.

And yes, there is still a coming day of the Lord. One day I will come as judge, but rest assured, I come as the judge for you, not against you.

I come not to crush you mercilessly, but to clothe you tenderly. Don't be complacent, but don't be frightened.

[38 : 12] When Ronald Reagan gave his speech after the Challenger disaster, he said this, the future doesn't belong to the faint-hearted, it belongs to the brave.

But the good news for Christians is this, the future does belong even to the faint-hearted if they belong to Christ.

Friends, if you are truly trusting in Christ today, then you will naturally long to be God-centered.

And if you are truly trusting in Christ today, you have refuge already. That's why these words from Hebrews chapter 9 verses 27 to 28 are true.

Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many, and he will appear a second time, that's the day of the Lord, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

[39 : 25] Let's pray. Amen. Heavenly Father, Father, as we listen to the words of Amos again, we pray, Lord, that we would not just let them brush over us, but we pray, Lord, that you will wake us up if we are complacent.

Help us not to rest in empty religious routines or empty God substitutes, but Father, help us instead rest in you alone.

Help us to come back to you and put you at the center of our lives. For those of us who are not complacent, but who are seeking to live for you every day of our lives, Father, we just ask that you help us to keep us going, help us not to be afraid, but to know that you are our refuge, that we can trust in you, that we know on that day of the Lord, we will be safe.

All this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.