

Introduction to Amos Chapter 5

Seek Me and Live: The Lament, the Doxology, the Hatred of the Feasts, and the Call to Let Justice Roll

Amos chapter 5 is the theological heart of the book and the most complex chapter in the entire collection. It opens with a funeral lament for a community that has not yet died — the prophetic proleptic mourning of the one who sees what is coming and grieves it in advance. It contains two of the most urgent calls to seek the LORD in the prophetic literature. It holds two doxologies that interrupt the prophetic speech with the praise of the Creator. It contains the most direct statement of the divine rejection of worship in the Old Testament. And it culminates in one of the most famous lines in all of prophecy: let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Twenty-seven verses that move from the graveside to the courtroom to the sanctuary to the street, and the movement is not random but the most carefully orchestrated argument in the book.

The chapter's structure has puzzled commentators for centuries because it does not proceed in a simple linear argument. The lament of verses 1–3 is followed by the seek me and live of verses 4–6, which is interrupted by the first doxology of verses 7–9, which gives way to the social indictment of verses 10–13, which is followed by the second seek him appeal of verse 14–15, which is interrupted by the woe announcement and a second doxology in verses 16–20, which leads into the most devastating passage of the chapter: the I hate, I despise your feasts of verses 21–24, and the final word of verses 25–27. The chapter's non-linear movement is not confusion but the theological strategy of the prophet who is weaving together the grief of the lament, the urgency of the call, the praise of the Creator, the indictment of the oppressors, and the rejection of the worship into a single complex argument about what the living God requires and what the living God despises.

The chapter's governing question is whether the community will seek the LORD and live before the judgment that the lament has already mourned arrives. The seek me and live of verse 4 and the seek the LORD and live of verse 6 are not commands but invitations, and the urgency of the invitation is the urgency of the lament that precedes it: the community that is already being mourned as fallen still has the possibility of the return. But the return is not to Bethel or Gilgal or Beer-sheba; it is to the LORD Himself. And the LORD who is to be sought is the one who can invert the order of justice — who can turn justice to wormwood and cast righteousness to the ground (verse 7) — and who has made the Pleiades and Orion and who turns darkness into morning (verse 8). The seeking of this LORD is the only alternative to the judgment that the lament anticipates.

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father,

We come to Amos chapter 5 as the community that needs to hear the lament before it is too late for the lament to produce the return. The fallen maiden Israel who has been abandoned on her land, with none to raise her up — we see ourselves in this image, and we come to this chapter asking for the gift of the tears that the lament is designed to produce before the lament becomes merely a record of what has been lost rather than a warning of what can still be averted.

Lord, let the seek me and live be the word that reaches through the religious activity that has been comfortably maintained at Bethel and Gilgal and Beer-sheba. The seeking You are calling for is not the seeking of the sanctuaries but the seeking of Your face — the personal, relational, whole-hearted seeking that the covenant relationship has always required and that the sanctuaries have been substituted for. Let the I hate, I despise your feasts be the word that cuts through the comfortable worship of the community that has been performing the religious forms while justice has been perverted in the gates and righteousness has been cast to the ground.

And let the let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream be the vision that forms the covenant community's understanding of what the covenant God actually desires: not the religious performance of the feasts but the sustained, inexhaustible, river-like flow of justice and righteousness through every dimension of the common life. Form us toward this. Let the ever-flowing stream be the image of what we are becoming.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Amos 5:1–6

The Funeral Lament and the Seek Me and Live: Mourning the Fallen Before She Falls

*(1) Hear ye this word which I take up against you,
even a lamentation, O house of Israel:*

*(2) The virgin of Israel is fallen;
she shall no more rise:*

*she is forsaken upon her land;
there is none to raise her up.*

*(3) For thus saith the Lord GOD;
The city that went out by a thousand shall leave an hundred,
and that which went forth by an hundred shall leave ten,
to the house of Israel.*

*(4) For thus saith the LORD unto the house of Israel,
Seek ye me, and ye shall live:*

*(5) But seek not Beth-el,
nor enter into Gilgal,*

*and pass not to Beer-sheba:
for Gilgal shall surely go into captivity,
and Beth-el shall come to nought.
(6) Seek the LORD, and ye shall live;
lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph,
and devour it, and there be none to quench it in Beth-el.*

The Context

The taking up of a lamentation in verse 1 is the most arresting opening in the middle section of the book. Amos is performing a funeral lament — a qinah — for a community that is still alive. The qinah was the specific form of the Hebrew funeral song, characterized by a distinctive limping rhythmic pattern (3+2 beats rather than the normal 3+3) that enacted in the meter itself the stumbling, bereft, incomplete quality of grief. Amos deploys this form not over the dead but over the living — the prophetic proleptic mourning of the one who sees with certainty what is coming and grieves it before it arrives. The funeral song is the most urgent available form of the warning: when the prophet is already mourning you, the judgment is as close as the mourning implies.

The fallen virgin of Israel of verse 2 is one of the most painful images in the book. The virgin — the young woman who has not yet been given in marriage, whose future is entirely before her — is fallen on her land with no one to raise her up. The forsaken quality of the image is the most devastating element: she is not merely fallen but abandoned, lying on her own land with no one to lift her. The city's future has been ended before it could be realized; the community is like the young woman whose life has been cut off before it could be fully lived. And the none to raise her up establishes that the intervention that the fallen community needs will not come from any human source — it can only come from the God who is being sought in verse 4.

The ninety percent military attrition of verse 3 is the specificity that grounds the lament in demographic reality: the city that marched out with a thousand will have a hundred left; the city that marched out with a hundred will have ten. Ninety percent losses — the destruction of the military capacity of the northern kingdom — is the specific content of the fallen that the lament mourns. This is not hyperbole but the prophetic projection of what the Assyrian conquest will accomplish in 722 BC, approximately forty years after Amos is preaching.

The seek me and ye shall live of verse 4 is the most urgent positive invitation in the book, and it arrives as the direct alternative to the lament: the community being mourned as fallen can still live, but only through the seeking of the LORD Himself rather than the sanctuaries. The but seek not Bethel, nor enter into Gilgal, pass not through Beer-sheba is the specification of what the seeking is not: it is not the multiplication of the sanctuary visits, not the performance of the religious forms at the approved locations. The sanctuaries themselves are under judgment — Gilgal shall surely go into exile, and Bethel shall come to nothing. The seeking that produces life is the seeking of the LORD Himself, not the seeking of the institutions that have been substituted for the LORD.

Plain American English

Listen to this funeral song I'm singing for you, Israel. The virgin Israel has fallen down — she will never get up again. She lies abandoned on her own land, and there is no one to lift her up. For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: The city that sends a thousand soldiers into battle will have only a hundred left. The city that sends a hundred soldiers will have only ten left alive. This is what the LORD says to Israel: Come back to me and live. Don't go looking for God at Bethel — and don't worship at Gilgal or go to Beer-sheba either. Those places of worship will be taken into exile. Bethel will be reduced to nothing. Come back to the LORD and live, or else he will sweep through the family of Joseph like a fire that will consume them. No one will be able to put out the flames. And this will happen in Bethel, the city they think will protect them.

Key Observations

“The virgin of Israel is fallen; she shall no more rise: she is forsaken upon her land; there is none to raise her up”: This signifies **The Prophetic Proleptic Lament Mourns the Community Before It Falls — the Funeral Song for the Living Is the Most Urgent Available Form of the Warning That the Judgment Is as Close as the Mourning Implies.**

The fallen virgin of Israel is one of the most emotionally resonant and theologically precise images in the chapter. The virgin — the young woman whose entire future is before her, who represents the potential and the promise of the community's life — is fallen, abandoned, with none to raise her. The prophetic proleptic mourning treats the future as if it has already happened: the prophet who sees with certainty what is coming mourns it before it arrives, as the most urgent available form of the warning. The funeral song for the living community is the declaration that the judgment is as certain as the mourning implies. And the none to raise her up establishes from the beginning of the chapter that the only possible rescue from the fallen condition is the seeking of the LORD who alone can raise what has fallen.

“Seek ye me, and ye shall live: but seek not Beth-el, nor enter into Gilgal, and pass not to Beer-sheba”: This signifies **The Seek Me and Live Is the Direct Alternative to the Lament — and the Specification of What the Seeking Is Not Establishes That the Religious Activity at the Sanctuaries Cannot Substitute for the Personal Seeking of the LORD Himself.**

The seek me and live is the most urgent positive invitation in the book, and the but seek not Bethel, nor enter Gilgal, pass not to Beer-sheba is the specification that prevents the invitation from being misheard as an invitation to the multiplication of the sanctuary visits. The seeking that produces life is not the seeking of the approved religious locations; it is the seeking of the LORD Himself. The sanctuaries — Bethel, Gilgal, Beer-sheba — are themselves under the judgment that the seeking of the LORD is the alternative to. The community that goes to Bethel in response to the seek me has misunderstood the invitation: the LORD is not to be found at the sanctuaries that have become the occasions of the transgression's multiplication. He is to be found in the direct, personal, whole-hearted seeking that no sanctuary can substitute for.

What This Means for Us Today

1. Receive the Funeral Lament for the Living Community as the Most Urgent Form of the Prophetic Warning — When the Prophet Is Already Mourning, the Judgment Is as Close as the Mourning Implies:

The qinah performed over the living community is the prophetic tradition's most extreme form of urgency: the mourning that has already begun, the grief that has already been taken up, the funeral song that is being sung before the death occurs. The contemporary application is the willingness to recognize when the prophet is mourning the community in advance — when the signs of the judgment are already visible in the community's life and the mourning is the appropriate response to what is coming rather than a premature exaggeration of a manageable situation. The funeral song for the living is the warning to seek the LORD while the seeking can still produce the life that the lament is mourning.

2. Distinguish the Seeking of the LORD from the Seeking of the Institutional Forms That Have Been Substituted for Him — and Examine Whether the Religious Activity That the Community Is Engaging in Is the Seeking That Produces Life or the Visit to Bethel That Multiplies the Transgression:

The seek me and live / but seek not Bethel is the most direct available challenge to every form of the religious activity that has been substituted for the direct, personal seeking of the LORD. The community of faith that measures its spiritual health by the frequency and quality of its institutional religious activity — the attendance, the giving, the program participation, the worship service quality — rather than by the genuineness of its direct personal seeking of the LORD has built its spiritual confidence on the Bethel that the LORD has declared will come to nothing.

How This Relates to Today

The funeral lament for the still-living community is one of the most pastorally challenging forms of the prophetic word for the contemporary church, because the community being mourned does not recognize itself in the mourning. The congregation that is still filling its sanctuary, still conducting its programs, still performing its religious forms has no natural reason to believe that it is the fallen virgin being mourned in the lament. The prophetic wisdom of the proleptic mourning is the wisdom of the one who can see the trajectory more clearly than the community can see it from the inside: the community that is still alive but is on the trajectory toward the fallen condition is being mourned now precisely so that the mourning can produce the return that averts the trajectory.

Key Lesson: **The opening section of the chapter establishes the book's most urgent pastoral argument: the prophetic proleptic lament for the still-living community that is already on the trajectory toward the fallen condition, followed by the most direct positive invitation in the book — seek me and live — with the specification that the seeking is not the seeking of the sanctuaries but the seeking of the LORD Himself, whose sanctuary visits the ironic invitation of chapter 4:4–5 has already established are the occasions of the transgression's multiplication rather than its address.**

Amos 5:7–15

Justice Turned to Wormwood, the Creator Doxology, and the Second Call to Seek Good

*(7) Ye who turn judgment to wormwood,
and leave off righteousness in the earth,
(8) Seek him that maketh the seven stars and Orion,
and turneth the shadow of death into the morning,
and maketh the day dark with night:
that calleth for the waters of the sea,
and poureth them out upon the face of the earth:
The LORD is his name:
(9) That strengtheneth the spoiled against the strong,
and shall bring the strong hold against the mighty.
(10) They hate him that rebuketh in the gate,
and they abhor him that speaketh uprightly.
(11) Forasmuch therefore as your treading is upon the poor,
and ye take from him burdens of wheat:
ye have built houses of hewn stone, but ye shall not dwell in them;
ye have planted pleasant vineyards, but ye shall not drink wine of them.
(12) For I know your manifold transgressions and your mighty sins:
they afflict the just, they take a bribe,
and they turn aside the poor in the gate from their right.
(13) Therefore the prudent shall keep silence in that time;
for it is an evil time.
(14) Seek good, and not evil, that ye may live:
and so the LORD, the God of hosts, shall be with you,
as ye have spoken.
(15) Hate the evil, and love the good,
and establish judgment in the gate:
it may be that the LORD God of hosts
will be gracious unto the remnant of Joseph.*

The Context

The you who turn justice to wormwood of verse 7 is the social indictment that interrupts the sequence between the seek me of verse 6 and the doxology of verse 8, establishing the connection between the cosmic power of the Creator being invoked in the doxology and the specific social crimes being committed in the gate. The wormwood is the bitter plant — the most bitter available — and to turn justice to wormwood is to make the process that should produce the sweetness of the right outcome produce instead the bitterness of the perverted outcome. The ones who turn justice to wormwood are the judges and the powerful of the gate who have converted the legal system from the instrument of the covenant justice into the instrument of the oppressor's will.

The first doxology of the chapter in verses 8–9 is placed in deliberate contrast to the justice-to-wormwood of verse 7. The God who makes the Pleiades and Orion, who turns deep darkness into morning, who turns day to night, who calls for the waters of the sea and pours them on the face of the earth — this is the God whose justice has been turned to wormwood in the gate. The cosmic power of the Creator who controls the stars and the waters and the light and the darkness is being placed alongside the specific social crime of the corrupt judge, establishing the most comprehensive available statement of the incompatibility: the God who made the Pleiades will not accept the perversion of justice in the gate. And verse 9 specifies the direction of that power: he makes destruction flash against the strong, so that destruction comes upon the fortress. The cosmic power is not neutral; it is deployed against the strong who have perverted justice.

The social indictment of verses 10–13 is the most specific in the chapter. They hate the one who reproves in the gate — the person who speaks the uncomfortable truth about the injustice being practiced in the court. They abhor the one who speaks the truth — the prophetic witness. They trample on the poor and take grain levies from them — the economic exploitation. They have built houses of hewn stone but shall not dwell in them; planted vineyards but shall not drink their wine — the curse formula of Deuteronomy 28:30 applied to the specific forms of the prosperity that the exploitation has produced. The I know your manifold transgressions and your mighty sins of verse 12 is the divine claim of omniscient awareness: every specific form of the injustice — the afflicting of the righteous, the taking of bribes, the pushing aside of the needy in the gate — is in the divine record.

The therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time of verse 13 is one of the most pastorally important observations in the chapter: the conditions that the social indictment describes are the conditions in which silence becomes the only available response for the person who cannot change them and who would be destroyed by speaking. The prudent silence is not the cowardly silence of the person who knows what is right and refuses to say it; it is the realistic silence of the person who has understood that the evil time is so thoroughly evil that the speaking will produce no fruit and will only destroy the speaker. The observation is the description of the social conditions that the corruption of the gate has produced: the corruption is so comprehensive that the truth-telling cannot succeed and the truth-teller can only endure.

The second appeal of verses 14–15 is the most ethically specific in the chapter: seek good and not evil that you may live, and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you as you have said. Hate evil and love good; establish justice in the gate. The seek me of verse 4 and the seek the LORD of verse 6 have been the appeals to the personal divine relationship; the seek good of verse 14 is the appeal to the practical ethical consequence of that relationship. And the it may be that the LORD God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph is the most honest pastoral statement of the possibility rather than the guarantee: the return to justice in the gate may — may — produce the divine grace toward the remnant. The uncertainty is not theological cowardice; it is the honest acknowledgment that the divine sovereignty cannot be commandeered by the human moral performance.

Plain American English

You twist justice into bitter poison and throw righteousness to the ground. Seek the one who made the Pleiades and Orion, who turns darkness into the dawn and day into night. He draws up the water of the sea and pours it across the earth. The LORD is his name! With a blinding flash he destroys the strong and demolishes their fortresses. How you hate honest judges! How you detest people who tell the truth! You trample the poor and steal their grain through taxes and rent. You have built beautiful stone mansions, but you won't live in them. You have planted lush vineyards, but you won't drink the wine from them. I am fully aware of how many crimes you commit and how many sins you are guilty of. You oppress good people by taking bribes and depriving the poor of justice in the courts. In times like these, the smart person keeps quiet, because it is an evil age. Do what is good and run from evil so that you may live! Then the LORD God of Armies will truly be your helper, just as you have claimed. Hate evil and love what is good; turn your courts into true halls of justice. It's possible that the LORD God of Armies will have mercy on the remnant of his people.

Key Observations

“Ye who turn judgment to wormwood, and leave off righteousness in the earth”: This signifies **The Wormwood Justice Is the Most Precise Available Description of the Legal System That Has Been Inverted — the Process That Should Produce the Sweetness of the Right Outcome Produces Instead the Bitterness of the Perverted One.**

The turning of justice to wormwood is the image of the legal process whose function has been inverted: the process that should produce the sweetness of the right outcome — the vindication of the righteous, the protection of the needy, the redress of the wrong — produces instead the bitterness of the wrong outcome: the condemnation of the righteous, the exploitation of the needy, the confirmation of the oppressor's claim. The leaving of righteousness to lie on the ground is the image of the moral norm that has been knocked down and left to lie there without anyone picking it up and restoring it to its proper place. The wormwood and the abandoned righteousness together are the description of a society in which the legal and moral order has been so thoroughly inverted that the instruments designed to produce justice have become the instruments of its destruction.

“Seek him that maketh the seven stars and Orion, and turneth the shadow of death into the morning: The LORD is his name”: This signifies **The Creator Doxology Placed Alongside the Justice Indictment Is the Declaration That the God Being Invoked in the Seeking Is the God Whose Cosmic Power Makes the Perversion of Justice in the Gate the More Inexcusable and the More Certainly Addressed.**

The doxology of verses 8–9 is placed immediately after the justice-to-wormwood indictment of verse 7, and the placement is the argument: the God whose justice is being turned to wormwood is the God who makes the Pleiades and Orion. The cosmic power that controls the stars and the waters and the alternation of light and darkness is the power that the judges who take bribes are defying. The LORD is his name — the name that no bribed judge can bear as an honorific for the god they are supposedly serving, because the god they are supposedly serving is not the god who makes the Pleiades and Orion. The doxology is simultaneously the praise of the Creator and the indictment of the idolaters who claim His name while denying His character in the gate.

“They hate him that rebuketh in the gate, and they abhor him that speaketh uprightly”: This signifies **The Hatred of the Truth-Teller in the Gate Is the Social Mechanism by Which the Justice System Is Maintained in Its Perverted Condition — the Suppression of the Prophetic Voice That Could Interrupt the Cycle.**

The hatred of the one who reproves in the gate and the abhorring of the one who speaks the truth are the social mechanisms by which the perverted justice system maintains itself. The gate — the city gate where legal proceedings took place in the ancient Near Eastern world — is the specific setting for the truth-telling that is being suppressed. The person who reproves in the gate is the person who speaks the uncomfortable truth about the injustice being practiced there: the witness who names the bribery, the plaintiff who insists on the legitimate claim, the prophet who names what the powerful are doing. And the hatred and abhorrence with which the powerful respond to the truth-teller is the social violence that enforces the silence: the truth-teller who is hated and abhorred cannot easily speak the truth again. The social mechanism of the hatred is the mechanism that makes the prudent silence of verse 13 the only realistic option for the one who has seen what speaking produces.

“It may be that the LORD God of hosts will be gracious unto the remnant of Joseph”: This signifies **The It May Be Is the Most Honest Pastoral Statement Available — the Genuine Possibility of the Divine Grace Toward the Returning Community, Held Without the False Guarantee That the Human Performance Commands the Divine Response.**

The it may be that the LORD God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph is the most honest pastoral statement in the chapter and one of the most important in the book. The may be is not the theological cowardice of the prophet who cannot commit to the promise; it is the theological honesty of the prophet who understands that the divine sovereignty cannot be commandeered by the human moral performance. The seeking of good, the hating of evil, the loving of good, the establishing of justice in the gate — these are the human responses that correspond to the divine character and create the conditions in which the divine grace can be expressed. But they do not guarantee the divine grace; they create the possibility of it. The may be is the honest acknowledgment of the divine freedom within the covenant relationship: the seeking of good and the establishing of justice are the human responses that the covenant God desires and that open the space in which the divine grace can work, but they do not bind the divine hand. The sovereignty remains His.

What This Means for Us Today

1. Read the Creator Doxology as the Theological Correction That Must Accompany Every Social Indictment — the God Whose Justice Is Being Perverted in the Gate Is the God Who Makes the Pleiades and Orion: The doxology of verses 8–9 is placed alongside the justice indictment of verse 7 not as a digression but as the most important theological context for the indictment. The injustice being practiced in the gate is not merely a social problem; it is the defiance of the Creator whose power controls the stars and the waters and the alternation of light and darkness. The community of faith that reads the social justice dimension of Amos without the doxological dimension has reduced the prophetic word to a political program. The doxology insists that the pursuit of justice is not merely the political agenda of the covenant community but the expression of the character of the God who makes the Pleiades and Orion.

2. Practice the Seek Good and Not Evil as the Ethical Specificity of the Seek the LORD — the Personal Seeking of the LORD That the Chapter Has Been Calling for Is Not Abstract Spiritual Devotion but the Concrete Pursuit of the Good That the LORD Loves and the Evil That He Hates: The seek good and not evil of verse 14 and the hate evil and love good of verse 15 are the ethical specifications of what the seek me of verse 4 looks like in the practice of the covenant life. The seeking of the LORD is not abstract spiritual devotion that is disconnected from the specific practical choices of the gate — the legal proceedings, the economic transactions, the social arrangements. The seeking of the LORD that produces life is the seeking that manifests as the concrete pursuit of the good and the concrete avoidance of the evil in every dimension of the common life.

3. Hold the It May Be as the Honest Pastoral Acknowledgment That the Return to Justice Does Not Guarantee the Divine Response but Creates the Conditions in Which the Divine Grace Can Be Expressed: The it may be is the pastoral model for the honest communication of the possibility of the divine grace without the false guarantee of the transactional theology. The community of faith that has genuinely turned from the evil and pursued the good and established justice in the gate has created the conditions in which the divine grace can be expressed; it has not bound the divine hand to the specific outcome it desires. The honest pastoral communication of this distinction is the protection of the community from both the despair that assumes the turning has no effect and the presumption that the turning guarantees the specific outcome desired.

How This Relates to Today

The you who turn justice to wormwood is one of the most enduringly applicable descriptions in the prophetic literature of the legal and social system that has been inverted from the protection of the vulnerable to the instrument of the powerful's exploitation. The contemporary equivalents of the wormwood justice — the legal systems and economic arrangements that systematically produce the wrong outcomes for those without resources while producing the right outcomes for those with them — are the contemporary targets of the same divine indictment. The God who makes the Pleiades and Orion does not accept the wormwood justice of the gate in any century.

The hate him that reproves in the gate is also one of the most diagnostically useful observations in the chapter for the contemporary community of faith, because the social mechanism that maintains the perverted justice — the hatred and abhorrence of the truth-teller — is the same social mechanism that maintains every form of institutional injustice in every age. The community of faith that finds itself hating or abhorring the person who speaks the uncomfortable truth about its own social arrangements has become the community of verse 10: the community that hates the reproof in the gate.

Key Lesson: **The central section of the chapter holds together the social indictment of the wormwood justice and the hatred of the truth-teller with the Creator doxology that establishes whose justice is being perverted, the curse of the built houses and planted vineyards that will not be enjoyed, the omniscient divine awareness of the manifold transgressions, and the second call to seek good and establish justice in the gate — with the most honest pastoral statement in the chapter: it may be that the LORD will be gracious to the remnant.**

Amos 5:16–20

Woe to You Who Desire the Day of the LORD: The Darkness That Has No Morning

*(16) Therefore the LORD, the God of hosts,
the LORD, saith thus;
Wailing shall be in all streets;
and they shall say in all the highways, Alas! alas!
and they shall call the husbandman to mourning,
and such as are skilful of lamentation to wailing.
(17) And in all vineyards shall be wailing:
for I will pass through thee, saith the LORD.
(18) Woe unto you that desire the day of the LORD!
to what end is it for you?
the day of the LORD is darkness, and not light.
(19) As if a man did flee from a lion, and a bear met him;
or went into the house, and leaned his hand on the wall,
and a serpent bit him.
(20) Shall not the day of the LORD be darkness, and not light?
even very dark, and no brightness in it?*

The Context

The wailing in all the streets and the alas, alas in all the highways of verses 16–17 echo and amplify the lament of verses 1–3. The mourning has spread from the prophetic proclamation of the funeral song to the lived reality of the community's streets and vineyards. The calling of the farmers to mourning — the people of the land, not the professional mourners — and the summoning of those skilled in lamentation establish that the grief has become too widespread to be handled by the professional funeral industry. And the for I will pass through you establishes the cause of the universal mourning: the Lord's passing through Israel echoes the Passover passing-through of Egypt (Exodus 12:12), but with a terrible reversal — in Egypt, the LORD passed through to destroy the firstborn of the Egyptians and to pass over the Israelites marked by the blood. Now the LORD will pass through Israel.

The woe to you who desire the day of the LORD of verse 18 is the most theologically subversive statement in the chapter, because the day of the LORD was a concept that Israel used to express its eager anticipation of the divine vindication that would destroy Israel's enemies and establish Israel's supremacy. The community that has been worshipping enthusiastically at Bethel and Gilgal has been looking forward to the day of the LORD as the day when the divine power will be unleashed on Israel's behalf. Amos demolishes this expectation with the most direct available

theological reversal: the day of the LORD is darkness and not light. Not the day of Israel's vindication, but the day of Israel's judgment.

The double image of verse 19 is one of the most vivid and most darkly comic images in the book: a man flees from a lion, only to meet a bear; he escapes the bear by reaching the safety of his house, leans his hand against the wall in relief, and a serpent bites him from the crevice in the wall. The day of the LORD for those who have been expecting it to deliver them is like this sequence of inescapable disasters: every apparent escape route leads to a worse danger. The lion (the Assyrians? the divine judgment approaching from outside?) is avoided only to encounter the bear (the internal social collapse? the judgment approaching from inside?); the house (the covenant relationship? the sanctuary? the self-evident righteousness of the chosen people?) provides no safety when the serpent bites from the wall.

The shall not the day of the LORD be darkness and not light? even very dark and no brightness in it? of verse 20 is the chapter's most emphatic negative: not merely dark but very dark, not merely without light but without brightness. The day that the community has been anticipating as the day of divine vindication and their own elevation will be the day of the deepest available darkness for the community that has been worshipping with enthusiasm while practicing injustice in the gate.

Plain American English

Therefore, this is what the LORD, the LORD God of Armies, says: There will be weeping and mourning in every public square. Even the farmers will be called to mourn, and professional mourners will be called to weep. There will be wailing in every vineyard — because I will pass through your midst, says the LORD. What sorrow awaits you who say, "If only the day of the LORD were here!" You have no idea what you are wishing for. That day will bring darkness, not light. In that day you will be like a man who runs from a lion only to meet a bear. Escaping from the bear, he leans his hand against a wall in his house and gets bitten by a snake. Yes, the day of the LORD will be dark and hopeless, without a ray of joy or hope.

Key Observations

“Woe unto you that desire the day of the LORD! to what end is it for you? the day of the LORD is darkness, and not light”: This signifies **The Theological Subversion of the Day of the LORD Expectation Is the Most Direct Available Statement That the Covenant Privilege Does Not Guarantee the Covenant Protection — the Day That Israel Desires Will Be the Day of Its Judgment Rather Than Its Vindication.**

The woe to those who desire the day of the LORD is the most theologically subversive statement in the chapter because it takes the community's most fervent religious hope — the anticipation of the divine vindication that the day of the LORD represents — and inverts it: this is not the day you are hoping for. The community that has been enthusiastically worshipping at Bethel, eagerly awaiting the day when the LORD will unleash His power on Israel's behalf and vindicate His

people before the nations, has fundamentally misunderstood the day and its implications for a community that has been practicing the injustice that the chapter has been cataloguing. The day of the LORD's judgment does not discriminate between Israel and its enemies if Israel has been practicing the same injustices that its enemies practice. The darkness that has no morning is the day that the community has been eagerly anticipating.

“As if a man did flee from a lion, and a bear met him; or went into the house, and leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him”: This signifies **The Three-Stage Inescapability of Verse 19 Is the Most Vivid Available Image of the Day of the LORD as the Day from Which No Apparent Escape Route Provides Actual Safety.**

The lion to bear to serpent sequence of verse 19 is the most darkly comic image in the book, and its comedy is the comedy of the recognized human experience: the moment of apparent escape that turns out to be the moment of the worse disaster. The man who fled the lion congratulates himself on his escape; the bear is waiting. The man who evaded the bear congratulates himself on reaching the safety of his house; the serpent is in the wall. Each moment of apparent safety turns out to be the setup for the next and worse danger. The day of the LORD for the community that has been expecting it to vindicate them is exactly like this: every apparent refuge from the judgment will be occupied by the next form of the judgment. There is no sanctuary in a house whose wall conceals the serpent.

What This Means for Us Today

1. Receive the Day of the LORD Is Darkness, Not Light as the Permanent Correction of Every Version of the Eschatological Hope That Treats the Coming of the LORD as Automatically Beneficial for the Covenant Community Regardless of Its Covenant Faithfulness: The woe to those who desire the day of the LORD is the permanent correction of the eschatological presumption that treats the Lord's coming as the automatic vindication of the community that bears His name. The community that eagerly anticipates the return of Christ as the day of its vindication and the destruction of its enemies, while maintaining the social arrangements and the worship practices that the prophetic tradition consistently identifies as the occasion of the divine judgment, has desired the day that will be darkness for it rather than light. The day of the LORD is not the day of the covenant community's automatic vindication; it is the day of the covenant God's comprehensive justice, which the covenant community will face alongside every other community.

2. Apply the Lion-Bear-Serpent Sequence as the Diagnostic of the Inescapability That the Covenant Violation Has Produced — Every Apparent Refuge from the Judgment Will Be Occupied by the Next Form of the Judgment: The lion to bear to serpent sequence is the prophetic tradition's warning against the community that believes it can manage the divine judgment through the sequential movement from one apparent refuge to the next. The house that turns out to have the serpent in the wall is the final image of the inescapable judgment: even the place that should be safe turns out to be the place of the next danger. The community that has been moving from one institutional, theological, or social refuge to the next, always finding that the apparent safety of the new position is undermined by the next form of the judgment, is in the lion-bear-serpent sequence. There is no escape from the judgment through the sequential management of the apparent dangers.

How This Relates to Today

The woe to those who desire the day of the LORD is the most directly applicable verse in the section to the contemporary church's engagement with eschatology, because the eschatological hope has always been susceptible to the misuse that Amos identifies: the community that treats the coming of the LORD as the automatic vindication of its own position and the destruction of its enemies has desired the day that is darkness rather than light. The eschatological hope is rightly directed toward the comprehensive justice of the God who comes — the justice that will be applied to the covenant community as well as to the surrounding nations, and that requires the covenant community to have the same covenant faithfulness it expects to be vindicated for.

Key Lesson: **The woe section establishes the most theologically subversive element of the chapter: the day of the LORD that the enthusiastic worshipping community at Bethel has been eagerly anticipating as the day of divine vindication will be the day of divine judgment for the community whose justice has been wormwood and whose worship has been the multiplication of the transgression — the lion-bear-serpent sequence of inescapable disasters for the community that has been expecting to be rescued by the very day that will judge it.**

Amos 5:21–27

I Hate and Despise Your Feasts: The Divine Rejection of Worship and the Call for the Ever-Flowing Stream

(21) *I hate, I despise your feast days,
and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies.*
(22) *Though ye offer me burnt offerings
and your meat offerings, I will not accept them:
neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts.*
(23) *Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs;
for I will not hear the melody of thy viols.*
(24) *But let judgment run down as waters,
and righteousness as a mighty stream.*
(25) *Have ye offered unto me sacrifices and offerings
in the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel?*
(26) *But ye have borne the tabernacle of your Moloch
and Chiun your images, the star of your god,
which ye made to yourselves.*
(27) *Therefore will I cause you to go into captivity
beyond Damascus, saith the LORD,
whose name is The God of hosts.*

The Context

The I hate, I despise your feasts of verse 21 is the most direct and the most devastating statement of the divine rejection of worship in the entire Old Testament. Every verb in verses 21–23 is a verb of rejection: I hate, I despise, I take no delight in, I will not accept, I will not look upon, I will not listen to. The comprehensive accumulation of the rejection verbs covers every dimension of the worship: the festival gatherings (your feast days), the corporate assemblies (your solemn assemblies), the burnt offerings, the grain offerings, the peace offerings, the songs, the melody of the harps. Nothing is left standing. The entire worship system of the northern kingdom — everything that the community at Bethel has been doing with such enthusiasm — is declared to be the object of the divine hatred and contempt.

The I hate and I despise are the strongest available Hebrew verbs of rejection. The hate (*sane*) is the covenantal term for the opposite of the covenantal love — the complete covenantal rejection. The despise (*ma'as*) is the word for the utter rejection of something as worthless, the throwing away of the contemptible. These are not the words of mild divine preference for a different form of worship; they are the words of the comprehensive, total, absolute rejection of the worship as it is currently being practiced. And the noise of your songs — the word translated noise implies the *din*, the *din* of the enthusiastic musical worship — and the melody of your harps are specifically the musical dimension of the worship that is being rejected. The worship that the community finds most moving, most genuinely expressive of its religious devotion, most effective as the vehicle of its emotional connection to the divine — this worship is noise to the God it claims to worship.

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream of verse 24 is the most famous verse in the book and one of the most famous in all the prophets. The contrast with the rejected worship of verses 21–23 is total and deliberate: instead of your noise of songs, let justice roll; instead of your melody of harps, let righteousness flow. The justice (*mishpat*) and the righteousness (*tsedaqah*) are the two great covenant virtues whose absence the book has been diagnosing since chapter 2:6. And the image of the water is the image of the inexhaustible, the irresistible, the all-encompassing: not the trickle of the seasonal stream that dries up in the summer, but the ever-flowing river (*nahal ethan*) that flows in every season. The covenant God does not want the occasional burst of religious enthusiasm; He wants the constant, inexhaustible, all-encompassing flow of the covenant justice through every dimension of the common life.

Verses 25–27 are the most difficult in the chapter for their historical and text-critical complexity, but their theological argument is clear: the wilderness period — the forty years of the Exodus — was not characterized by the elaborate sacrificial system of the Bethel worship; yet even in the wilderness, where the elaborate worship was not being practiced, the people were carrying the idols of Molech and Chiun. The argument is that the idolatry predates the elaborate worship system, that the elaborate worship system has been practiced alongside the idolatry, and that the judgment is the exile beyond Damascus that the accumulated idolatry has produced. The LORD whose name is the God of hosts is the one who sends the exile.

Plain American English

“I hate all your show and pretense — the hypocrisy of your religious festivals and solemn assemblies. I will not accept your burnt offerings and grain offerings. I won’t even notice all your choice peace offerings. Away with your noisy hymns of praise! I will not listen to the music of your harps. Instead, I want to see a mighty flood of justice, an endless river of righteous living. Was it to me you were bringing sacrifices and offerings during the forty years in the wilderness, Israel? No, you carried along the shrine of your king and the star images of your god — the idols you made for yourselves. So I will send you into exile, to a land east of Damascus,” says the LORD, whose name is the God of Armies.

Key Observations

“I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies”: This signifies **The Most Comprehensive Available Statement of the Divine Rejection of Worship in the Old Testament — Every Verb a Verb of Rejection, Every Dimension of the Worship Covered, the Comprehensive Accumulation Leaving Nothing Standing.**

The I hate, I despise is the most direct language available in Hebrew for the total covenantal rejection of what is being rejected. The hate is the covenantal rejection — the opposite of the covenantal love that the covenant relationship requires. The despise is the utter contempt — the throwing away of what is worthless. The accumulation of the rejection verbs across three verses — covering the festivals, the assemblies, the burnt offerings, the grain offerings, the peace offerings, the songs, the harps — is the most comprehensive available statement that the entire worship system has been rejected as worthless. Nothing in the list is salvageable; nothing is the exception to the rejection. The worship that the community finds most meaningful, most authentic, most emotionally and spiritually satisfying is the worship that the God being worshipped has declared to be the object of His hatred and contempt.

“But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream”: This signifies **The Most Famous Verse in the Book Is the Positive Counterpart to the Comprehensive Rejection of the Worship — Instead of the Noise of the Songs, the Ever-Flowing River of the Covenant Justice That the Songs Were Supposed to Express.**

The let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream is the positive statement of what the God who hates the feasts actually wants. The contrast is between the burst of the religious enthusiasm — the festival, the assembly, the sacrifice, the song, the harp — and the constant, inexhaustible, irresistible flow of the river. The feasts are seasonal; the river is constant. The worship is the concentrated burst of the religious activity; the justice is the steady, uninterrupted flow through every dimension of the common life. The ever-flowing stream (nahal ethan) is specifically the stream that flows in every season, not the wadi that is full in the rainy season and dry in the summer. The covenant God does not want the seasonal burst of religious enthusiasm; He wants the constant, all-season flow of the covenant justice that is as reliable and as inexhaustible as the perennial river.

“The noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols”: This signifies **The Divine Description of the Enthusiastic Musical Worship as Noise Is the Most Searching**

Available Indictment of the Worship That Has Been Severed from the Covenant Justice That Gives It Meaning.

The noise of your songs is the divine description of the musical worship that the community has been finding most moving and most expressive of its genuine religious devotion. The melody that the community hears in its harps is, from the divine perspective, noise — the din of the sound without the substance of the meaning that the sound was supposed to express. The musical worship has been separated from the covenant justice that gives the worship its meaning, and the separation has reduced the music to noise: technically proficient, emotionally engaging, liturgically authentic, and utterly empty of the content that would make it worship rather than performance. The most moving music in the worship service is noise to the God whose justice is wormwood in the gate. The melodies that the community finds most beautiful are the melodies that the God to whom they are addressed has declared He will not listen to.

What This Means for Us Today

- 1. Receive the I Hate, I Despise Your Feasts as the Most Direct Available Challenge to the Worship Culture That Has Been Severed from the Covenant Justice — and Apply It with the Full Force of Its Comprehensiveness:** The I hate, I despise is not directed at bad liturgy, poor musical quality, or incorrect doctrinal content. It is directed at worship that is performed with genuine enthusiasm, correct form, and sincere devotion by a community that has simultaneously turned justice to wormwood in the gate and crushed the needy. The contemporary church whose worship is liturgically excellent, musically moving, theologically orthodox, and emotionally authentic, and whose economic and social arrangements systematically disadvantage the poor, has received the divine rejection of its feasts. The worship is not redeemed by its quality; it is condemned by the justice failure that its enthusiastic performance is covering.
- 2. Receive the Let Justice Roll Down Like Waters as the Vision That Defines What the Covenant God Actually Desires and Measure the Health of the Community's Life by the Steadiness and the Inexhaustibility of the Justice Flow Rather Than by the Quality of the Worship Performance:** The ever-flowing stream of justice is the standard by which the covenant community's health is to be measured, and the image of the perennial river is the most precise available specification of what the justice must look like: constant, inexhaustible, all-season, not the seasonal burst but the steady flow. The community that evaluates its health by the quality of the worship service and not by the steadiness of the justice flow has chosen the measurement standard that the God being worshipped has specifically rejected. Measure the justice. The worship will take care of itself when the justice is flowing like the perennial river.
- 3. Apply the Noise of Your Songs as the Diagnostic of the Worship That Has Lost Its Covenantal Ground — the Technically Proficient, Emotionally Moving, Liturgically Authentic Worship That Has Been Severed from the Covenant Justice That Makes It Worship:** The most moving worship in the contemporary church may be noise. The most technically proficient music in the most liturgically authentic setting, performed with the most genuine emotional devotion, is noise to the God being worshipped if the community performing it has turned justice to wormwood in the gate and trampled the poor into the dust. The diagnostic is not the quality of the performance but the presence of the covenant justice in the life of the community that is performing it. Let the noise of your songs be the word that drives the question:

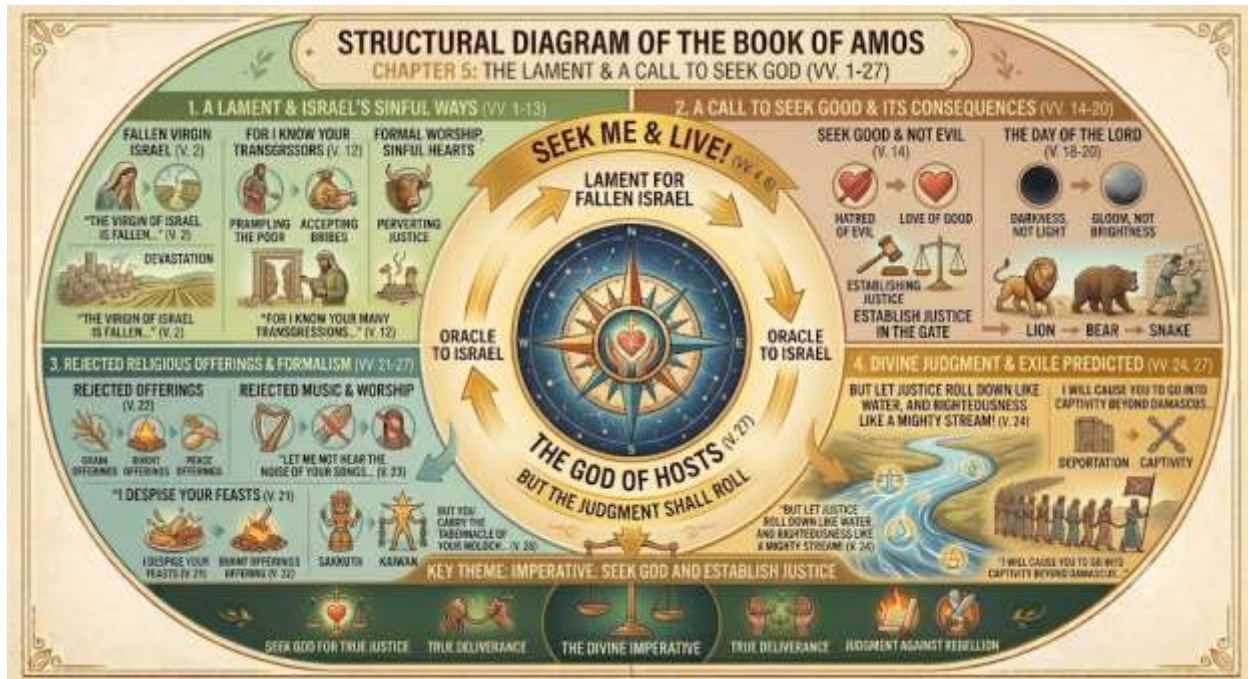
is the worship expressing the covenant justice in the community that performs it, or is it the enthusiastic noise that covers the covenant justice failure?

How This Relates to Today

The let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream is one of the most frequently quoted and most frequently misapplied verses in the prophetic literature. It has been quoted as a general exhortation to social activism, as a political slogan, as the basis for a theology of social justice that stands independent of the covenantal context in which it appears. The verse is all of these things, but it is primarily the specific counterpart to the specific rejection of the specific worship of the specific community at Bethel and Gilgal: the contrast between the noise of the worship that the God being worshipped has declared He will not hear and the justice that flows like the perennial river through every dimension of the common life. The justice roll-down is not a general social aspiration; it is the covenant God's specific declaration of what He actually wants from the community that has been worshipping with such enthusiasm and practicing injustice with such thoroughness.

The I hate and I despise are also among the most important verses in the prophetic tradition for the contemporary theology of worship, because they establish with unmistakable clarity that the quality, the sincerity, and the theological correctness of the worship do not make the worship acceptable when the community is maintaining the social arrangements that the God being worshipped has explicitly prohibited. The worship that is separated from the covenant justice is not merely inadequate; it is the object of the divine hatred and contempt. This is the word that the contemporary worship culture most needs to hear and most resists hearing: not that the music is too loud or the liturgy too informal or the theology too shallow, but that the excellent, sincere, authentic worship of the community that has turned justice to wormwood in the gate is noise.

Key Lesson: **The closing section of the chapter is the most devastating in the book: the comprehensive rejection of every dimension of the worship — the feasts, the assemblies, the offerings, the songs, the harps — with the verbs of the most thoroughgoing available contempt, followed by the most famous positive statement in the book: let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream; the contrast between the noise of the songs and the steady flow of the perennial river is the contrast between what the community at Bethel has been enthusiastically offering and what the God at Bethel actually wants — and the distance between the two is the measure of the covenant violation that the chapter has been diagnosing from the fallen virgin of verse 2 to the exile beyond Damascus of verse 27.**



Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father,

We close Amos chapter 5 having received the most searching word in the book. We have heard the funeral lament for the community that is still alive but is already being mourned by the prophet who sees what is coming. We have heard the seek me and live and the but seek not Bethel. We have heard the justice turned to wormwood and the hatred of the truth-teller in the gate. We have heard the woe to those who desire the day of the LORD and the lion-bear-serpent sequence of inescapable disasters for the community that expected the day to vindicate it. And we have heard the most devastating word: I hate, I despise your feasts — your noise of songs — your melody of harps. And the most beautiful word: let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Lord, we confess that we are more comfortable with the noise of our songs than with the perennial flow of the justice. We have invested heavily in the quality of the worship performance and lightly in the steadiness of the justice that the worship is supposed to express. We have sought Bethel when You have been calling us to seek You. We have desired the day of the LORD without asking what that day will mean for communities like ours that have turned justice to wormwood in the gate.

Let the let justice roll down like waters be the vision that reforms the community. Not the seasonal burst of the justice activity that is visible and photographable and socially creditable, but the steady, inexhaustible, all-season flow of the covenant justice through every economic

relationship, every legal arrangement, every social structure, every institutional practice. Let the river flow. Not in the worship service. Through the common life. Let the ever-flowing stream be what we are becoming, so that the noise of our songs can become the genuine expression of the justice that is flowing rather than the cover for the justice that is wormwood.

In Jesus' name — in the name of the One who is both the righteous One who was sold in the gate and the Judge before whom every gate proceeding will be brought to account, and in whose cross the justice has rolled down like waters and the righteousness has flowed like the ever-flowing stream — Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria
Glory to God Alone