Amos 5:1-17

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[0:00] I don't know about you, but I live in a family full of seekers. We're always seeking something.! Where are my keys? Where are my scissors? Where's my phone gone?! And you never know that you've lost something until that crucial moment when you need it.

So about three or four weeks ago, it's Saturday night, we're just putting Zoe and Joel to bed, and Mary and I looked at each other and said, Where's Dylan? Dylan is a rather scratty-looking toy dog that Joel has had for nearly two years, which is almost surgically attached to him, and somehow it had disappeared.
So at that point we had to put all our plans on hold, all our dreams of getting the kids in bed and relaxing for the evening, and mount a major search for Dylan. So Mary went to the car, we went through the kitchen, we went through the living room, we went through the bedrooms, the bathroom, couldn't find Dylan anywhere.
In our desire to seek him, Mary got back in the car, drove back to Cue, to the shop we'd been in several hours earlier, which mercifully was still open, was the last place we could remember seeing Dylan, and she went to seek him there.
Sadly, to no avail. Now we actually found him the next day, but not after a night of great panic and turmoil. He wasn't lost after all, he was buried behind some cushions at Duke Street. That's incidental.
[1:14] The point was, in searching for this animal, this toy, all our resources, all our energy, all our plans without the window, and everything was focused on that search. Now we live in an age, don't we, where many people are searching for something, they're searching for life and what it's about.

And for a lot of people that means accumulating money, working hard, hoping that the next pay rise, the next bonus, will give them enough for satisfaction and happiness.
Other people opt out of that search, or believe it's fruitless, and they seek meaning in life in something spiritual. I remember a few years ago, we were out for dinner with a former colleague of mine from my old life and business, and she introduced us to her new boyfriend, Glenn, and it was around New Year.
And Glenn, when he heard I worked in a church now, was very excited. He said, oh, that's great. I've been thinking, I need to work on my spirituality this year. I was trying to imagine that he perhaps had a program for his physicality, going to the gym twice a week, and then his spirituality, I don't know what he was going to do with that.
But it was obviously a search for some kind of meaning, something a little bit more. A few years ago, Elizabeth Gilbert, who was a journalist in New York City, left her husband, who she said was a very decent man, but just wasn't quite enough.
[2:33] She left her well-paid job and secure career and reputation, and went off searching for something. Now what she ultimately found was a lot of money, because she published her memoirs in the book Eat, Pray, Love, which was then sold as a film, starring Julia Roberts.

And in the film version, at least, Julia Roberts, playing the real-life Gilbert, says this, I used to have this appetite for life, but now it's gone. I just want to go someplace and marvel at something.
There was this woman with everything material in her life, yet seeking something to marvel at. Seeking something more in life. A lot of people are like that, aren't they?
Seeking something. Well, the people of Israel, in Amos' day, weren't seeking anything, because they thought they had it all. They were prosperous. They lived in a time of relative peace and security.
They extended their borders. They were feeling safe. And they were, after all, God's chosen people. He told them back in Exodus 19, that you'll be my chosen people, my treasured possession out of

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all the nations of the earth.
[3:37] So they thought they had everything. But God confronts them through the prophet Amos. Because a bit like us putting the kids to bed, we suddenly realise we had something, we didn't have something we thought we had.

Well, it turns out Israel didn't have something they thought they had. And that something was God. Let's pick up the story in verse 3. Amos is warning them of the judgement to come.
We'll cover verses 1 and 2 a bit later on. But here it is in verse 3. Look what's going to happen to these people. Remember, this is God's people he's speaking to. He's speaking to the church, effectively.
For thus says the Lord God, the city that went out a thousand shall have a hundred left. That which went out a hundred shall have ten left to the house of Israel. The point is, Israel, you may feel secure, but you're about to be destroyed.
You're about to be destroyed in my judgement. So what are you going to do about it? As we read on in the following verses, we'll see two things are commanded of them. Two actions commanded.
[4:39] And there's a third one that they're to do as an implication. The first command comes in verse 4. Thus says the Lord God to the house of Israel, seek me and live.

If you want life, it's not found in other things. It's found in me. Seek me and live. Don't seek the abundance of wealth. Don't seek your own spiritual religious experiences.
Seek me and live. See, what they had been seeking was just religious experience. Like my friend Glenn. Like Elizabeth Gilbert. Wanting something spiritual and religious.
Well, they were doing the same. So hear what the Lord says. Seek me and live. But do not seek Bethel. Do not enter into Gilgal or cross over to Beersheba. Now, Bethel was a city in Israel, in Samaria.
Where about 200 years earlier, King Jeroboam, the first king of Israel, had built a shrine, put two golden casts there and said, Israel, these are your gods who brought you out of Egypt.
[5:38] Worship them. And so Bethel was the religion of their imagination. It wasn't God's revelation. It wasn't what God had commanded. It's what they imagined. It was their own spirituality, if you like.

Gilgal. They're not entering to Gilgal. Gilgal was, we don't know much about it, but in the book of Judges, in chapter 3, we read that maybe 400 or 500 years earlier, there'd been idols in Gilgal.
For a long time, it'd been a place of worship. Presumably, originally for the Canaanites in the land.
So in going there, they were seeking religious tradition, religious pluralism, doing what the nations around them did, instead of seeking the Lord.
And of course, others were seeking pilgrimage. Do not cross over to Beersheba, he says.
Beersheba was way, way south. If you imagine Israel as being Scotland, Beersheba was right in the south of Judah, the southern kingdom.
It's like going down from Edinburgh to Cornwall on pilgrimage. That's what they were doing. They were seeking God on a pilgrimage. It's like, oh, we've gone all the way to Beersheba. Abraham met God there once.
[6:43] It's got to be a good thing to do. People today still go on pilgrimages, don't they? To Rome, to Lourdes, to Mecca, to Bali, to India.

Seeking meaning, seeking themselves, seeking identity. But the Lord says, don't seek those things.
Don't seek the religion of your imagination. Don't seek the traditions of the world around you.
Don't seek pilgrimage. Seek Me. That's where life is. That's where life is. And you hear the warning here as well. Why should they not seek these other things?
Verse 5. Do not seek Bethel. Do not enter into Gilgal. Do not cross over to Beersheba. For Gilgal shall surely go into exile, and Bethel shall come to nothing. People long for religious experiences.
For the spiritual dimension in life. But if it comes from our imagination, if it comes from just doing what the world around us doing, if it comes from seeking a pilgrimage, it will ultimately amount to nothing.
[7:46] Because it's only the living God who counts. It's only the true God. So how do we obey this command of verse 4? How do we seek the Lord? Of course the answer is he's not hiding.

He makes himself known all around us in one sense. And he is the creator of God. And the creation around speaks of his invisible qualities, his power, his wisdom, his creativity.

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But more than that, he speaks to us specifically through the scriptures of the Bible. His word breathed out. And most concretely, through the person of Jesus Christ.
God who came to earth to seek and save lost people, like we all are naturally. So for us to seek God means to seek Christ in the scriptures.
That's where we see God. There is nothing un-Christ-like about God. We see what it is like in Jesus. Jesus said, if anyone has seen me, they've seen the Father. So we seek God through seeking Jesus.
[8:51] And as we seek him, we find out it's not about what we've done. It's not about our religious experiences. It's not about our pilgrimages. It's not about our imaginings. It's about what God has done. That Jesus came to seek and save the lost.

And give his life as a ransom for many. So for us to seek God means to seek Jesus. To set our hearts and eyes on him. For Merrill and I, as we went to seek that little toy dog, Dylan, it meant all our other plans went out the windows.
The focus of our attention, the focus of our desires became finding that dog. To seek the Lord and live means to focus our attention, our desires, our ambitions, on seeking this Jesus who makes God known to us.
So that's the first command. Seek the Lord and live. The second command really comes in verses 7 to 15. See, it's not just enough to believe. As we believe in Jesus, our lives must be changed.
For Israel to believe in the living God should have transformed their lives. But sadly it didn't. And so the second command is not only seek the Lord and live, but seek the good for others, and not personal gain.
[10:04] You can see the hint of that in the judgment, in verse 7. O you who turn justice to wormwood, and cast down righteousness to the earth. What does that mean?

See, justice and righteousness are big words in the Old Testament. They're words that are defined by God. Psalm 97 verse 2 tells us that God's throne, the foundation of God's throne, are righteousness and justice.
This describes the way God rules. It describes the way God is. He defines what is just and right and true. Not us. Not human beings with our warped view on what is just and fair.
When we read those words, righteousness and justice, they have very concrete meanings in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, righteousness is primarily not about our right standing with God, as becomes clear in the New Testament it is, but it's mainly about how we write relationships with other people.
It's about relating to other people in a way that is consistent and correct with God's norms and God's rules and God's ways. And justice is about bringing those right relationships into being.
[11:13] It's about taking action to make things right again. Taking action to ensure that people are paid fair wages. Taking action to make sure people in the church family are looked after and cared for in a fair way.

And it's sweet when justice is done, isn't it? For those of you who are at school, if you find you have a problem with bullying, it's sweet when the teachers finally sort that out.
For all of us in our work situations, if we feel we're being underpaid or bullied or mismanaged in some way, it's sweet when that gets sorted out. Justice is a sweet thing.
And Israel is God's people. Given God's law to live out in front of the nations, we're supposed to bring a sweet taste in their land. But what have they done?
Verse 7, you turn justice to wormwood. To something bitter. You cast down righteousness to the earth. You chuck out treating people rightly and fairly like a piece of scrap paper.
[12:15] Like an empty Coke can to chuck away. You throw it down to the earth. How could they do that? Well, as we look on through the next few verses, we see there's a problem with their heads and a problem with their hearts.

There's a problem with their heads, verses 8 and 9, in that they've forgotten who this God was. They're thinking in the wrong ways about him. There's a problem in their hearts in that they had the wrong ambitions.
So let's look at who is this God they've forgotten about. Verse 8, He who made the Pleiades and Orion. Israel seems to have forgotten that their God was not something in creation, but was the great creator.

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He turns darkness into morning and darkens the day into night. You've turned justice to wormwood, sweetness to bitterness. God is a God who brings light in the darkness and darkens the day again into night.
He is a God who is in control of everything. He calls for the waters of the sea and pours them out on the surface of the earth. The Lord is his name. In other words, Israel is your God who brings fruitfulness to the earth.
[13:22] He makes the rain. He brings the harvests. He's the one who actually makes you wealthy and fruitful. Not the pagan gods you started worshipping. And for us too, who is it actually who makes us fruitful?

Who is it who makes our companies work? Perhaps the obvious cause is the global market and how the economy is doing.
But behind all that is the sovereign God who rules over everything. That's how great and big this God is. He's creator. He's provider.
And he's also judge. Verse 9, He who makes destruction flash forth against the strong. So the destruction comes upon the fortress. So these people thought they were so secure in their big houses.
In their flash cars. They didn't have cars in 7th century BC, admittedly. But you know what I mean. But no one was safe from this God who would judge. Do you remember those words that Julia Roberts spoke in the film I mentioned earlier on?
[14:28] I've lost my appetite for life. If you've lost your appetite for life, then maybe you need to realise you were made for something bigger to satisfy your appetites. That's something bigger being the God who made us.

The creator, the sustainer, the judge. Who calls us to seek him. See, Israel was wrong in their life and in their living. Because they were wrong in their thinking about who God was.
And that affected their ambitions. We see what their ambition was as we look on to verses 10 to 13. But before we do that, what's the big ambition in our society, do you think?
What's the driving motivation for most people? What is it most people want? Isn't it basically more? More. We live in a consumeristic culture and that's always driven by discontent. It's always driven by people saying, you can have better, you can have more. In our road in Isleworth, where we live, we've noticed we get property papers through every week advertising properties in Chiswick.
[15:32] Now, I don't know if you've looked at property prices in Chiswick or I suppose basically the same as Ealing and Richmond and everywhere else. You look at a little two-bedroom flat and think, why would I pay £950,000 to live in a car park called Chiswick?

What's that about? But they keep giving us this stuff. Why? Because they want us to desire more. They say, you could leave your terrorist house in Isleworth and live in Chiswick, that's a better postcode.
Have more. And that same drive for more was what drove the Israelites as well. As well as driving much in our society. So look down at verse 10. See the criticism the Lord lays on them.
They who hate him and who reproves in the gate. They abhor him who speaks the truth. The gate of the city was where the court dealings were, where the business transactions happened. So the idea is the rich and the wealthy and the powerful, they hate the whistleblowers.
They hate the straight lawyers. They hate anyone who gets in the way of them gaining as much from themselves as possible. Therefore, because you trample on the poor and exact taxes of grain from him, you've built houses hewn of stone.
[16:37] Why have you exploited people? Because you want a lovely big house in Chiswick, so to speak. You want a house made of stone, not the usual wood-fired bricks that most people would have lived in.

But costly, precious stone dug by human hands out of a quarry somewhere. Much more expensive. Much better show. You've built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them.
You've planted pleasant vineyards. You've got to be wealthy to plant a vineyard, remember? Most people couldn't afford to do that. Most people would have just used the land they had to feed their crops and to grow the basic cereals they needed, basic crops.
And to have a vineyard, you must have luxury, you must have wealth, you must have land to spare. And as you read through the whole of Amos, you'll see that most of that was to do with self-indulgence as well. Because they would use the vineyard to produce wine, and they'd use that

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to get drunk.
And that's what the Lord criticised them for here. You've planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. You're all about selfish gain, personal accumulation. You shouldn't be that.
[17:45] Verse 12. For I know how many are your transgressions, how great are your sins, you who afflict the righteous and take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate. Therefore he who is prudent will keep silent in such a time, for it is an evil time.

In other words, it's no use the righteous speaking. God's people were so corrupt, so into seeking personal gain, instead of seeking the good of others. There was no point even speaking.
The Lord's verdict is to say, it's a rotten time, rotten to the core. Corruption in the courts, exploitation in the tax system, desire for excess wealth. So what does the Lord want from them, in contrast to all that?
Verse 14. 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. Seek good for others, not personal gain.
Seek good for others, not personal gain. So the Lord will be with you. See, they complacently thought they were God's people, so the Lord is bound to be with them. The Lord says, no, you need to change.
[18:51] You need to show signs of repentance in your life by treating others fairly. Now how does this apply to us? Remember, Amos is speaking not to any old nation state.

He's speaking to God's covenant people. Effectively, he's speaking to the church. So I think the first application of this for us is not so much what things do we need to do, but what do we love?
What are our ambitions? What are our desires? Do we love seeing the needy among us helped?
Do we love it when we hear of people within our church family who, yes, may have suffered greatly in some way, perhaps a big bill for a broken down car or heating that's gone wrong, but then we hear that others have helped them.
Do we love the beauty of God's people caring for each other? Do we love to show mercy and kindness helping people in their needs? Or do we love our own selfish gain?
When we come to think about extending our houses that some of us need to do, we're decorating our houses, how do we make decisions about that?
[19:59] Do we flick through the catalogues and look for the most glamorous, beautiful properties and ideas and go for that and see how much we can borrow from the bank, the biggest loan we can get to make everything look as beautiful as possible?

Or do we look at the money in our bank accounts and realise this is God's money? He's the one who's rescued us. He's the one who gives us everything we have. He's our creator, our sustainer. This is something He's given me to help look after other people, not just seek personal gain for myself.
See, the Lord commands us to seek good for others, not just excess for ourselves. And that you think about our attitudes within the church family, but also about our attitude to things more broadly in society.
For example, it's public policy. So let me use just one little red hot topic, the topic of immigration. How do we begin to think about that as Christians?
See, if we read the newspapers around us, depending on if you read the Daily Mail or the Guardian, you get a different opinion. So some people will be prone to think immigration is terrible. Immigration means there aren't enough jobs for us people who've been here longer.
[21:10] It's a sort of Daily Mail response, I suppose. You get a kind of more Guardian-like response. So it's bound to be good to let as many people in as possible and then we'll be able to get some cheap, reliable plumbers.

Now if that's our thinking, then in both cases, what's our heart leading us to? It's leading to personal gain. Oh, I don't want immigration because there won't be jobs for me.
Or I do want immigration because I'll get a cheap plumber to get out of my bathroom. It's actually the attitudes about selfish gain. What should drive our attitudes? It's being the people who are loved and cherished by the God whose throne is founded on justice and righteousness.
The God who has treated us with amazing grace that when we were his enemies and far from him, he sent his son to rescue us. But through his poverty, we became rich.
We're to seek the Lord, not religious experience. We're to seek the good of others, not personal gain and accumulation. And much more briefly, there is a third application here as well.

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[22:23] We're to seek the Creator and weep over the judgment to come. Seek the Lord, seek the good, and weep over the judgment to come. The judgment is described in verse 16.

Look what Amos says there. Therefore, thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, because you won't turn to me, because you won't turn to being good to others. In all the squares there will be wailing. In all the streets they shall say, alas, alas. They shall call the farmers to mourning and to wailing those who are skilled in lamentation. Do you see where this judgment is going to strike? It's going to strike in the cities and the streets and the squares.
It's going to strike in the countryside where the farmers are. Everyone's going to be called to wailing. Why? In all the vineyards there shall be wailing for I will pass through your midst, says the Lord.
The language there, he's echoing the language of Exodus where he promised Israel he would pass through the land of Egypt and act in judgment upon the Egyptians. Now he's warning them his own people have become his enemy by the way they've lived.
[23:26] They say he's going to pass through their land and judge them. What's Amos' response to this? Look back to verse 1 shall you?

Can you? How does Amos respond to God's forthcoming judgment? Hear this word I take up over you in lamentation O house of Israel.
A lamentation. He is weeping about it. Fallen no more to rise as the virgin Israel. Forsaken on her land with none to raise her up.
The image there is Israel, God's people were this beautiful young woman with a whole future, a whole life of fruitfulness ahead of her. And she's forsaken the Lord and so now the Lord has forsaken her.
There's no one to lift her up. For Amos this is a sad, sad message to bring. He weeps over the judgment to come. How do we feel about the judgment to come?
[24:27] We were praying for it in a sense earlier on in that great song Come Lord Jesus, Come Lord Jesus. It was a good thing to pray. It's a good New Testament prayer. But when that judgment comes what will that mean for our neighbours?

For our family members? For anyone who hasn't trusted in Christ? We should weep over the judgment to come and tell people the good news.
They can seek God and live. They can seek him in Jesus not in their religious experience. They can seek life in Jesus not in personal gain. We need to weep over the judgment to come and recognise what it is we've been saved from.
How do we get life? Seek good. Seek God. And we seek God in Christ. Because Christ himself has paid for our judgment.
He went to the cross to be judged in our place so that we do not need to be destroyed by God's judgment. What does Jesus say to those who have come after him? With this I close.
[25:37] Mark chapter 8 verse 34. Calling the crowd to him with his disciples he said to them If anyone would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

For whoever would save his life will lose it. Whoever would seek personal accumulation personal gain will lose it. Whoever would seek their own religious experience it will come to nothing. Whoever would save his life will lose it. Whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels will save it. Seek God and live. Seek good for others and live.
And weep over the judgment to come. Let's pray.

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