

## What does it Mean to Seek God & Live?

Amos 5:1-17

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October 1, 2017

What is the key to living today? If someone asked you that question, how would you answer? Well, it would probably depend on what is meant by the word living. If living means physical health, then the key to living would include making healthy choices – exercise, eat healthy, getting enough sleep, avoiding destructive habits. That’s the key to living a physically healthy life.

But if living meant experiencing the good life, then you might have a different answer. Maybe the key to living is getting a good job that pays well so you can buy what’s needed. You can pay for vacations or fun stuff or going out to be entertained. So a good job or money may be the key to living.

But if living means loving, then the key might be to find a person or a group or a community where you feel loved. Of if living means family, then the key is to pursue and participate in whatever deepens your family life. So your answer to the question “What is the key to living” depends a lot on the definition of living.

What kind of living are we pursuing? From God’s perspective, would He say the choices we’re making right now in our lives are leading to living or dying?

Today’s passage will help us explore this. Amos has confronted the Israelites with a message from God about the way they were living and worshipping. Their choices were leading toward death. God sends Amos with a message of warning and hope to find the way to life. But what kind of living does He call us to? What is the key to this living? I pray that God will speak to us all today about the life He wants for us. I pray you will touch your heart with the desire to discover this living and how to experience it more fully than you might be right now.

### **Amos 5:1-17 (ESV) (Page 652)**

**5** Hear this word that I take up over you in lamentation, O house of Israel:

<sup>2</sup>“Fallen, no more to rise,  
is the virgin Israel;  
forsaken on her land,  
with none to raise her up.”

<sup>3</sup>For thus says the Lord GOD:

“The city that went out a thousand  
shall have a hundred left,  
and that which went out a hundred

shall have ten left  
to the house of Israel.”

<sup>4</sup>For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel:

“Seek me and live;

<sup>5</sup> but do not seek Bethel,  
and do not enter into Gilgal  
or cross over to Beersheba;

for Gilgal shall surely go into exile,  
and Bethel shall come to nothing.”

<sup>6</sup>Seek the LORD and live,

lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph,  
and it devour, with none to quench it for Bethel,

<sup>7</sup>O you who turn justice to wormwood  
and cast down righteousness to the earth!

<sup>8</sup>He who made the Pleiades and Orion,  
and turns deep darkness into the morning  
and darkens the day into night,

who calls for the waters of the sea  
and pours them out on the surface of the earth,  
the LORD is his name;

<sup>9</sup>who makes destruction flash forth against the strong,  
so that destruction comes upon the fortress.

<sup>10</sup>They hate him who reproves in the gate,  
and they abhor him who speaks the truth.

<sup>11</sup>Therefore because you trample on the poor  
and you exact taxes of grain from him,  
you have built houses of hewn stone,  
but you shall not dwell in them;  
you have planted pleasant vineyards,  
but you shall not drink their wine.

<sup>12</sup>For I know how many are your transgressions  
and how great are your sins—  
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,  
and turn aside the needy in the gate.

<sup>13</sup>Therefore he who is prudent will keep silent in such a time,  
for it is an evil time.

<sup>14</sup>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.

<sup>15</sup> Hate evil, and love good,  
and establish justice in the gate;  
it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts,  
will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

<sup>16</sup> Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of hosts, the Lord:

“In all the squares there shall be wailing,  
and 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,  
<sup>17</sup> and in all vineyards there shall be wailing,  
for I will pass through your midst,”  
says the LORD.

The passage begins with something called a lament or lamentation. This was a song sung about some disaster or death. Lament was a very common practice in Israelite culture. But it’s not very common in our world or even the church today. One of the most famous laments sung in recent history was when Elton John rewrote one of his songs for Princess Diana’s funeral back in 1997. We just came past the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her death. Instead of “Goodbye Norma Jean” it became “Goodbye England’s Rose,” which was a lament over the passing of Diana. But I think we are less familiar with them today.

Yet here we see Amos announce a lament over Israel, the nation he preaches to. Notice his heart. He has been pretty hard on the people in the first chapters of this book. But he reveals his and God’s sorrow over Israel’s condition and coming catastrophe. God takes no pleasure in judgment upon these people. He does not enjoy seeing His people struck down and defeated because of their sin. He cares deeply and laments over their rebellion that our sins cause us.

In verse 2 Amos paints a tragic picture. “Fallen, no more to rise, is the virgin Israel; forsaken on her land, with none to raise her up.” Amos pictures a young woman lying dead in a field. She was in the prime of her life and ready to burst forth into the next stage. But she has been struck down. The tragedy increases with where she was struck down - her land. This was not some tragedy that happened when she was away. She was at home and fell. No one is there to

raise her up. It is the picture of the coming judgment upon Israel when she will be conquered by the invading Assyrians and struck down on her own soil.

Then Amos switches images in verse 3. He describes Israel's soldiers marching out to battle. A city will send out a thousand soldiers. A smaller town will send out a hundred. Yet they will both experience a 90% casualty rate. Only 10% will survive or return home. It is a grim picture sung as a lament.

But then the mood changes a bit in verse 4. It sounds like there is still some hope. And here we discover the simple key to life. For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel, "Seek me and live." What is the key to living? **Seek the Lord and live.** To seek means "to try to get or reach; to try to locate or discover; to go to or towards." Reaching towards, discovering, going towards the Lord is the key to living.

But what kind of living? The people to whom Amos spoke were already alive. They were living but many were not seeking the Lord. So living must mean more than physical existence. Living must mean more than breathing and having a pulse.

#### **What kind of living might the Lord be talking about here?**

In this context, it might mean living that physically **survives a life threatening event** like the onslaught of God's judgment - Amos 5:4. He's just said there will be 90% casualties in the military. But the Lord may be promising those who heard this message that He might protect them from the judgment. Though the nation would be swept away, some individual believers would not. We know that even in some of the darkest moments of Israel's history, God still preserved a remnant. Back about 125 years from Amos' time an evil King Ahab and his wife Jezebel ruled Israel. They were passionate worshippers of Baal a local god. They oppressed Elijah, God's prophet at that time. They killed those who worshipped anyone but Baal. In fact, Elijah got so discouraged one day that he wanted to die. Yet the Lord reveals to him in 1 Kings 19:18 that there were still 7000 in Israel who refused to worship Baal and remained true to the Lord. God had protected and preserved them in the midst of this oppressive godless regime. So there are times when seeking the Lord can lead to literal physical protection.

But not every true believer would be saved. There were surely some who were part of the army. They would go out to defend their nation when the Assyrians invaded. Yet some of them would be part of the 90% that died or were

taken captive. Many Christians have lost their lives while remaining faithful to the Lord. So seeking the Lord is not a 100% guarantee of survival.

So what else might make the life the Lord points to? When we seek Him, we can experience living that **receives the Lord's strength**. Psalm 105:4 – “Seek the Lord and His strength; seek his presence continually!” So it's possible to seek the Lord and find Him and receive strength from Him. When we seek the Lord, we can also **experience living where our prayers are heard and our sins forgiven**. 2 Chronicles 7:14: “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” It is a great comfort to know the Lord hears our prayers and forgives our sins and brings healing into our lives. We receive this if we humble ourselves, pray and seek His face.

When we seek the Lord, we can also experience **living that discovers God's beauty**. Psalm 27:4 – “One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple.” So when we seek the Lord, when we seek after His presence, can discover the Lord's beauty.

Seeking the Lord can also lead to a living **that understands justice**. How about Proverbs 28:5 - Evil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the Lord understand it completely. So when we seek the Lord we gain an understanding of true justice.

But seeking Him does not only bring understanding of justice. It can bring justice. So we experience a living that **gets justice**. Proverbs 29:26 – “Many seek the face of a ruler, but it is from the LORD that a man gets justice.” Some of you have been treated unjustly or wrongly accused. Some of you have been cheated or slandered or robbed. Seek the Lord and you will get justice but you might have to wait until the next life. You may get it in this life where the Lord brings justice into your situation. But if not God promises justice on the Judgment Day.

Seeking the Lord can also lead **to living where your deepest longings are fulfilled**. Psalm 112 talks about a righteous person who trusts in the Lord. He experiences different blessings. He distributes his wealth freely; he gives to the poor and his righteousness endures. Then the Psalm speaks about the wicked or those who don't seek God. Psalm 112:10 – The wicked man sees it and is angry; he gnashes his teeth and melts away; the desire of the wicked

will perish! Or “the longings of the wicked will come to nothing!” So without God your deepest longings will not be fulfilled. But those who seek the Lord will have fulfillment of their deepest longings.

Jesus talks about seeking in the Sermon on the Mount. Maybe you’ve heard this before. Matthew 6:33 - But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. What are these things? **Food and clothing.** The Lord promises to provide food and clothing for His people who seek Him.

When we seek the Lord, we experience living **anchored to the only stable and sure one in the universe.** Psalm 73:25-26 – “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”

So seeking the Lord can lead to life that experiences survival in life threatening situations; access to the strength of the Lord; hearing of our prayers and forgiveness for our sins; discovery of the beauty of the Lord; understanding of justice; getting justice; fulfillment of our deepest longings; food and clothing; and an anchor to the only sure and stable One in the universe. This is the kind of living God offers. All this God will provide for those who seek Him.

God through Amos appeals to the Israelites to come and receive this life even if they don’t physically survive the coming war. There would be maybe another 40 years of life in Israel before this judgment came to pass. That was a lot of God-bathed life they could have experienced before the nation’s end.

But they did have to choose. Verse 5 back in Amos 5 – “But do not seek Bethel, and do not enter Gilgal or cross over to Beersheba.” So here is an alternative to seeking the Lord. WE can either seek the Lord and live, or seek something else; worship someone else and die. We’ve learned Bethel was the alternative worship center set up in the northern kingdom as a rival to God’s temple in Jerusalem. It turned into a site of false worship and is one Amos’ main targets throughout his messages. Gilgal was another ancient worship site. Some apparently still went there in hopes of connecting with God. Some even traveled to the southern kingdom of Judah, Amos’ homeland. They went to a place called Beersheba. It was associated with the forefathers of Israel – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Perhaps people thought “if we go worship there, we will more likely connect with the god they connected with.” But Amos warns against that. Those who go to Gilgal will surely go into exile. Bethel will amount to nothing. Nothing of the life God promises to be found at Bethel. Seek something other than God and it will eventually amount to nothing.

So Amos appeals again in verse 6. “Seek the Lord and live, lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and it devour with none to quench it for Bethel.” So here the seeking again will protect from judgment. But if they don’t, the Lord will devour like fire. No amount of prayer or worship at Bethel would stop His destructive judgment.

They needed a reminder of how far they had strayed. So in verse 7, he reminds them that they were the ones who turned justice into wormwood and cast down righteousness to the earth!”

What are the two most basic commands given to God’s people? Love God and love others. In Old Testament terms, they showed up as live righteously before God and do justice to others. What have the Israelites done? They have turned justice into wormwood; a plant in the Middle East that produced bitter tasting fruit. Though justice was supposed to bring sweetness to those victimized, their justice brought bitterness to those unjustly treated. And though they were supposed to live righteously before the God in heaven, they cast righteous living down to the earth. It is the image of violently hurling something down that is seen as useless.

It was like they thought they could take on this Lord and reject righteous living to Him forever, so Amos inserts another hymn to remind them. So last week, remember Amos 4 ended with verse 13 giving us about 6 pieces of information about God? Verses 8 and 9 here give us more.

So who is the Lord? He is the one who made Pleiades and Orion. These are star clusters that we know today by their Greek names. They aren’t called Pleiades and Orion in Amos but the Hebrew “Kima” and “Kesil.” Why mention these? Well lots of ancients worshipped stars and believed that they controlled the days and the weather. But the Lord made the stars. The Lord changes the days. So though the Israelites turned justice into wormwood but the Lord turns deep darkness into morning. The stars don’t control the rain. It was the Lord who oversaw this. He also had the power to make destruction flash forth. So this description of God challenges their self-confidence in their ability to throw down justice in the Lord’s face and expect no consequences. They’ve picked a fight with the wrong God.

After this revelation about God’s power, Amos launches into exposing what shows up in the lives of those who do not seek the Lord. If you see this in your life or the life of someone close to you, it could indicate that they or you are not really seeking the Lord right now. Verse 10 – “They hate him who reproves in the gate and they abhor him who speaks the truth.” Now we need to understand the purpose gates served in ancient cities to get this reference. Because of the constant threat of invasion from another tribe or nation, the ancients built their cities with walls to protect people. But

you had to have openings at certain points to let people in and out – the gates. Some cities would have multiple gates you had to pass through. These served as a secondary layer of protection from the invader. Now these were big gates and often they had to build a gate house to house the gate. These were pretty big structures. So they would use them for public meetings and gatherings. These gates were also high traffic areas because people had to enter or leave through the gate.

The gate provided a shady place where some of the older men could sit and observe comings and goings. And if someone needed a judgment from a wiser person, they could approach the elder at the gate. Or sometimes they signed legal contracts at gates. You could go and meet your party at the gate and gather together some witnesses to seal the contract. Some ancient gates even contained side rooms for meetings. So the gate was a place of conversation, community and supposed justice.

So what was happening? Back to verse 10 – They hate him who reproves at the gate. Apparently, prophets or preachers stood by the gates and delivered their messages. Sometimes they confronted the people’s immorality. The Israelites hated that. They also hated those who told them the truth. So you know when you’re really excited about some idea or someone and you want to run with it or run with them? But someone comes along with a dose of reality that might force you to abandon the idea. But you don’t want to hear such truth. So you hate the person who does that. Maybe there’s someone in your life right now who has been speaking truth to you. But you have been resisting and rejecting them. Such resistance may mean you’re not seeking the Lord.

Verse 11 – “Therefore, because you trample on the poor and exact taxes of grain from him, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not dwell in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards but you shall not drink of their wine.” Another activity at the gate could be the collection of taxes or debts. So apparently the rich waited until poor people entered or left who owed them something. They took grain from the poor – maybe their last bits of grain. The rich person didn’t need the grain to survive. They wanted the grain so they could build fancy houses and pleasant vineyards. Most houses were built out of stones slapped together. Hewn or cut stones had to be quarried and transported and fit. This was the stuff of expensive living. But they wouldn’t enjoy these houses for long. Nor would they have time to grow and develop their vineyards to the point of tasting the wine. It would be taken away.

Verse 12 – “For I know how many are your transgressions and sins – you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe and turn aside the needy at the gate.” There’s the gate again. It was supposed to be a place of justice. For the needy, it turned into a place of oppression. Bribes took place where judges or the elders could be bought off to render verdict in favor of the rich. Verse 13 seems strange at first. You’d think a prudent or wise person would speak up. But the corruption is so widespread that it seems that if anyone spoke out against the injustice, they were taking their lives in their hands. It was an evil time so the wise remained silent. It was to people engaged in this oppressive behavior that Amos appeals. Turn and seek the Lord.

So he does it again in verses 14 and 15. But notice here He doesn’t tell them who to seek. He tells them how seeking the Lord will show up in their lives. Verse 14 – “Seek good and not evil that you may live.” So in verse 4 and 6, it was “seek the Lord and live.” Now it’s “seek good and not evil that you may live. Then in verse 15 – he says it in a different way. “Hate evil and love good, and establish justice at the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.”

So what’s this all about? Well, anyone can “I’m going to seek the Lord.” We can seek the Lord during a worship service. But it’s quite another thing to have that seeking result in a change of lifestyle. **What does this have to do with worship? Seeking God in a worship gathering is good but shouldn’t be the end of our seeking. Seeking God in worship should lead to seeking good for others in life. Seeking good should lead to establishing justice for the vulnerable.** Seeking the Lord in worship should result in doing good, hating evil and establishing justice. If we just come to church, sing some songs, feel good and then go into our week with no concern for the vulnerable, it’s questionable whether or not we’ve really sought the Lord. Earnestly seeking the Lord should show up with a compassionate heart for the needy. That’s what God is like and those who seek Him will be like Him.

Worship is not just something we do for an hour on Sunday mornings. Our entire lives need to be an offering of worship to the Lord. That’s what Amos points out in the lives of the Israelites. They were very devoted to their religious ceremonies. But they thought worship ended the second you stepped out of the temple. They thought you could just pay God off with some worship and then you could go and do whatever you wanted with your life. God sent Amos to wake them up to this inappropriate practice.

God doesn't want people to come and pay Him off so He'll turn a blind eye to what they're doing. God wants relationship with us. God made a way to be close to us. God wants to give us life that includes all we listed earlier. That life should naturally lead to seeking good and doing justice on behalf of others. I want to commend many of you for doing this. I see this in kid's ministry as you reach out to help parents with little ones. I see you tenderly caring for kids, helping them and teaching them. I see many of you reach out to our deaf community and refuse to let the language barrier get between them and you. I see some of you stop to spend time with the lonely, quiet, grieving and troubled assisting the elderly; assisting the little ones that you have engaged in. You show by your actions that you have let seeking the Lord seep into your whole life. We need to continue and grow in this as a community.

So there are 2 simple questions to leave you with today. **1 – Who have you been seeking in your life the last while?** Have you sought the Lord and experienced His life? Or have you sought Bethel – whatever the alternative god is in your life? If you've been seeking Bethel, did you know that according to the Lord, you're choosing death? Exile? Judgment? Lostness? No satisfaction for your deepest longings? God offers you life.

**Question 2 – Who will you seek from today onward?** Will you seek the Lord today and live? You can show that today by joining the worship team to sing in a moment. You can show it by lifting up your hands as if you are reaching out to the Lord to go towards Him. Or you can come forward and just be here in front and declare, "Lord, I want to seek you more than I have been from this day onward."