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THE LOOKOUT

MARCH 2023

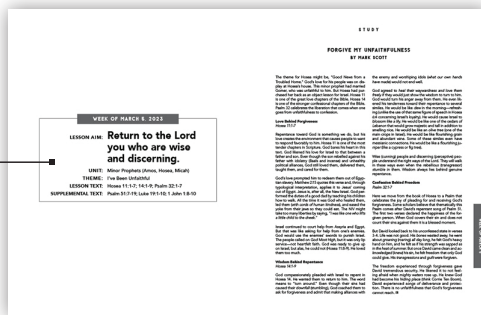
Unit: Minor Prophets (Amos, Hosea, Micah)

Theme: I've Been Unfaithful

Overview: *Unfaithfulness* is a painful word. It is painful for the wounded party, for sure, but it is also painful for the one who wounded. Recognizing one's unfaithfulness just might be the first step toward grace. The earlier of the Minor Prophets—Amos, Hosea, and Micah—will help us understand that. These eighth-century BC Minor Prophets cried out against Israel's (and Judah's) unfaithfulness. God's punishment for his people's unfaithfulness would come from Assyria and Babylon. Students will learn the progression of returning to God by seeking God's forgiveness and mercy, getting help for one's brokenness, and getting back on the trail of righteousness.

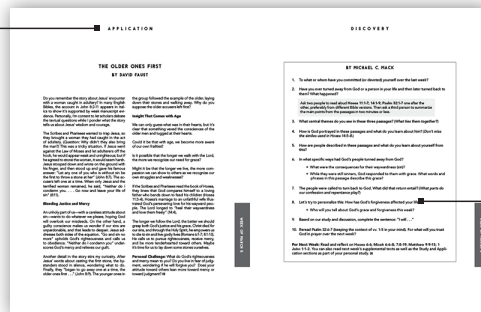
HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery**.



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

WEEK OF MARCH 26, 2023

LESSON AIM: **Live out righteousness
like a never-failing stream.**

UNIT: Minor Prophets (Amos, Hosea, Micah)

THEME: I've Been Unfaithful

LESSON TEXT: Amos 5:6-15, 21-24

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Isaiah 45:5-8; James 2:21-26

LEAD ME TO RIGHTEOUSNESS

BY MARK SCOTT

The beauty of Amos 5:24 is hard to surpass: “*But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream.*” Two of the most significant words in the Hebrew Bible are in the verse, namely *justice* (right judgment) and *righteousness* (rightness and conforming to a standard). The water metaphor also stands out. One of the most famous uses of the verse was in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech. Amos continued to plead with Israel to embrace righteousness and to jettison unrighteousness.

Unrighteousness that Needs to Be Eradicated

Amos 5:6-7, 10-13, 21-23

The farmer prophet pleaded with Israel to *seek* (inquire or pursue with care) *the Lord and live*. Heeding Amos’s plea might just avert God’s judgment. Several unrighteous deeds were identified as needing to be eradicated. The most pronounced was idolatry. *Bethel* is mentioned. The name of the city means “house of God,” but Bethel was not acting godly. Bethel became the seedbed of disobedience. Jeroboam II had built a false sanctuary there and urged Israel to worship there instead of Jerusalem. God said he would *sweep* through the idolatrous tribes like fire.

In addition to worshipping idols, the people disregarded justice and righteousness. Justice was turned into *bitterness* (wormwood or bitter pulp), and righteousness was being cast to the ground (cf. Daniel 8:12). The casting aside of these great standards showed up in people who disdained those who sought justice. Some also detested truth tellers.

Mistreatment of the poor was further evidence of unrighteousness. They were being unduly taxed. The judges who should have defended them were accepting bribes and depriving justice to the poor. God had little patience for such abuse. Some people had built fancy and expensive houses (*stone mansions*), but God would see to it they would not live in them. Some also had planted *lush vineyards*, but God would see to it they would not drink wine from them. Even *prudent* people (wise or those who acted circumspectly) were hesitant to speak up. The times were just too evil.

A final unrighteousness was religious hypocrisy. This was a constant problem in pre-exilic Israel. They were just going through the religious motions. Their hearts were far from God (Isaiah 29:13). The *religious festivals* and *assemblies* that God had commanded were offensive (a *stench*) to him. They were obeying Leviticus 1–7 about the sacrifices and offerings but not in ways acceptable to God. He would not *accept* them or *have regard* for them. Even the songs that were part of these religious festivals were odious to God. All of these had to be eradicated if Israel was to be led to righteousness.

Righteousness that Needs to Be Vindicated

Amos 5:8-9, 14-15, 24

At day’s end, God will always have the last word. He will be vindicated even if every person were held to be a liar (Romans 3:4). After all, he is Creator. He made *Pleiades* (a constellation in the heavens that signaled spring when it was high) and *Orion* (a constellation that signaled winter when it was high)—see Job 9:9; 38:31. Daylight becomes longer or shorter based on how God arranged the seasons. Another aspect of his creative genius is what he does with the earth’s waters. God can certainly make a flood if he so chooses (Genesis 6–9). In a moment, God can bring down strongholds and fortified cities with water or fire.

So, the only thing that makes sense is to *seek good, not evil*. This would guarantee life and the presence of the *Lord God Almighty*. (This phrase can also be translated “the God of hosts” or “the Lord God of Heaven’s Armies.”) To love the things God loves requires that his people hate the things God hates. Evil is to be hated and good is to be loved. Justice in the courts for all will bring mercy from God to the *remnant of Joseph* (a rare occurrence of Joseph’s name as a metonymy for Israel).

God is more than pleased when his people long for his righteousness. When this happens, God reverses his judgment and vindicates his people and their cause in the world. And when that happens, justice and righteousness will roll down on creation and people like a river and a never-ending stream. ■

SERVICES EVEN GOD DOESN'T WANT TO ATTEND

BY DAVID FAUST

Church attendance is declining in America. The Hartford Institute for Religion Research estimates that in the 314,000 Protestant churches in the United States, fewer than one member out of four (23 percent) attends worship services every week. When a Pew Research Center survey asked why people stay away from church, the answers included these:

"I practice my faith in other ways."

"I don't like the sermons."

"I don't have time to go."

"I don't feel welcome there."

"I haven't found a church I like."

"My health prevents me from attending."

Adding to the list, Lifeway Research notes that our nation's economic turmoil and social unrest cause people to stay away because they "disagree with the church's stances on political/social issues" and "work responsibilities prevent them from attending."

Here is a troubling thought. What if the Lord himself doesn't like our services and would rather not attend? Through the prophet Amos, God left no doubt how he felt about the Israelites' gatherings. The Lord declared, "I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me" (Amos 5:21). Why was God so displeased?

They professed faith, but didn't live it. There's a big difference between being a "professor" and a "possessor" of faith. Jesus reserved some of his harshest words for the Pharisees who "do not practice what they preach" (Matthew 23:3). It does little good to talk about faith on Sunday if we don't practice it the rest of the week. The Israelites talked blithely about the approaching "day of the Lord," but for them it would be a day of judgment, not mercy (Amos 5:18-20).

They mistreated their neighbors. Selfish and unmerciful, the Israelites turned "justice into bitterness and

cast righteousness to the ground" (Amos 5:7). They misused the court system, taking bribes and depriving the poor of justice (5:12). Showing up for weekend worship doesn't give us a license to mistreat our neighbors during the week. Amos urged, "But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" (5:24).

They gave offerings, but their hearts weren't right.

Complacent and obsessed with personal comfort, the Israelites lounged around on beds and couches and ate fancy food, but they showed little concern about the spiritual health of their nation (Amos 6:1, 4-7). The Lord said, "Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring me choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them" (5:22).

Their music may have pleased them, but it didn't please God.

Sick of their fake worship, the Lord said, "Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps" (Amos 5:23).

Amos's prophecy is a wake-up call for the church. It's good if big crowds show up at our services, but are we doing everything we can to make sure our assemblies please the Lord? The apostle Paul told the Corinthians their meetings did "more harm than good" (1 Corinthians 11:17). Instead, let's put our faith into action, care for the needy, and speak up for justice. Let's sing what we believe and believe what we sing. Let's give our offerings with glad and grateful hearts.

"Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is" (Amos 5:14).

Personal Challenge: How do you think the hard-hitting prophecies of Amos relate to the American church? What can you do to ensure that your church's worship assemblies please the Lord? **L**

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DISCOVERY

BY MICHAEL C. MACK

1. How and with whom did you share the message about the Lord who repairs, restores, and rebuilds last week?
2. What injustice in our culture would you most like to see eradicated?

Ask two people to read aloud **Amos 5:6-15, 21-24** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to summarize the passage in two minutes or less.

3. What do you learn about justice (and injustice) and the role of God's people in pursuing it?
4. What are the consequences for those who do not seek God and his desire for justice?
5. What do you learn about God from this passage?
6. What do you learn about people?
7. How does God respond to people whose religious practices are insincere, ritualistic, and superficial, and whose hearts are not in it—whose hearts are far from God? (See *Isaiah 29:13, Mark 7:6-7*)
 - What does God truly desire of his followers?
8. This passage includes several commands (see vv. 6, 14, 15). Pick one of these, and then share specifically the actions you will take this week to do what God says to do.
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."
10. What do you need from God to fight for justice and live righteously this week?

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Mark 11:1-19** as we begin a new unit on the Gospel of Mark called "Everyone's Invited." You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. **L**