

Amos 4:1-3
Justin Beadles
September 9, 2007

Today we'll be in Amos, Chapter 4, where the central theme is located that we are going to "motor around." If you need to look in the Table of Contents, that's fine. If you don't have a Bible there's one in the pew back in front of you. Some of you are probably wondering, "Why doesn't Justin just put the Bible verses up on the screen in the back?" It's because I don't want you to be lazy and stop bringing your Bible. So... that's my theory ... because then you'll lose it and you'll be saying, "I don't even know where it is anymore!" [laughter]

Amos, Chapter 4: We're going to be in three verses today. In these verses Amos describes particular sins and their coming consequences.

In verse 1 of chapter 4 he says:

Hear this word, you cows of
Bashan on Mount Samaria,

You may be saying to yourself, "I thought he was preaching to the people of Israel, not the livestock. Why in the world would he say you 'cows of Bashan?'" An important thing you might want to note here if you were studying livestock in the ancient Near East is Bashan is a land that was known as being very lush – had very good crops – it was the steak and potatoes of the livestock world. If you had livestock that grazed in that particular area they would be sleek and fat. And so he says:

Hear this word, you cows of
Bashan on Mount Samaria,

And then he says:

You women...

So what did he just call them? Fat cows – and you think I'm hard on you! Amos is starting his sermon by saying, "You fat cow women!" [laughter] Amos is not afraid to immediately offend them in order to make a point.

Hear this word...

In your Bible it may say:

Woe to you, you cows of
Bashan on Mount Samaria,
You women who oppress the poor
and crush the needy.

In this, he is likening these women to cows – he may not be describing their physical characteristics – or he may be, who knows? – but he's saying that this particular audience of women is living a lifestyle that is in excess.

He says:

You women (which points back to cows of Bashan – and then he describes their activities)
who oppress the poor
and crush the needy

It can't be anything other than that these women's lifestyles were so "over the top" that they didn't even care about hurting other people as long as they got what they wanted. He describes it further by saying:
And say to your husbands, "Bring us some drinks!"

Ladies, you're probably saying, "That's what my husband says to me," but that's not in there – it has nothing to do with that. What he's saying there is that these women, who are oppressing the poor and crushing the needy, and fattening themselves up in the process (I'm not real comfortable with this – sorry – [laughter]) – they're putting their husbands in a world of hurt by putting unrealistic demands on them when they say: "Bring us some drinks!"

What they are saying to their husbands is, "Bring us the finer fare of life!" In this day and time it might look like this. Let's say you own a transmission shop and you are the husband of a home-making wife. You're making an honest living fixing transmissions. But your wife is not content AT ALL with what you're making. So she keeps needling and pressing you – needling and pressing you – and desiring to have the finest things! You cave in as a man (which would be wrong), but you cave in and say, "Okay. What I'll start doing is cheating in my business so that my wife can have all these fine things that she is demanding." As a result of that cheating you can do something similar to oppressing the poor and crushing the needy.

These women's lifestyle was being lived in such a way that they were crushing the needy, they were ruining their families, and were fattening themselves up in the process. So we have a total "over the top" living experience in view here.

Do you think that frustrates God? I know your easy answer is going to be, "Yes." Well, let's look and see how much it does. It doesn't seem like the biggest sin in the world to me. However we will soon find that my assumption is wrong.

In verse 2 he says:
The Sovereign LORD has sworn by his holiness:

Any time in the Bible you see that sentence you should just write down there, GUARANTEED, that what he is talking about is going to happen! God doesn't have to swear as though he were going to tell a lie – he never tells a lie. In fact, he's incapable of telling a lie. So when he says, "I swear this is going to happen..." he doesn't have anything greater to swear by than himself. It is going to happen! He is about to tell them what is going to happen to them as a result of this life that they were living. He says:

“The time will surely come (pointing to a future event)
when you...

Who is “you”? Can it be anyone other than these women that he’s talking about? That’s what is called the nearest antecedent in case you ever want to get that one on a test correct [laughter]. It’s the nearest thing it’s pointing back to which are these women that he is likening to the cows of Bashan. And he says:

“...you will be taken away with
hooks,
the last of you with fishhooks.

The Hebrew there is a little bit difficult, but I think contextually this is how we should understand it: When we research how they conducted themselves in war, particularly the Assyrian people, who were the ones who did come in and take over the nation at different points. They would thrash all the people and then pick a few that they were going to haul away into captivity. Perhaps you’ve seen prisoners-of-war on TV? Typically, their hands are tied and possibly the group is tethered together to form a chain of prisoners, but no one is being injured in this process. The Assyrians would run hooks through your top and your bottom lip and then chain those together and lead you out. It would be a gruesome sight.

God is telling these ladies the time is coming when they will be hauled away with hooks, the last of them with fishhooks.

“You will each go straight out
through breaks in the wall,

That is picturing the city that has been laid siege to and the enemy has broken holes in the wall, they’ve taken these women captive, and they’re dragging them out. And it says:

“...you will be cast out toward
Harmon,”
declares the LORD.

Why in the world would God be so mad about this? About the oppression of the poor and the crushing of the needy? Why would that get him so angry that he says this is one of the reasons that you are going to be taken captive?

To answer that question we’re going to have to answer a few other questions.

First, let’s think about the nation of Israel and why they were even formed. They were formed by God in part to be the nation of people that collectively represented Him on earth. Do you agree? If you want to be right you should say, “Yes.” [laughter] As a nation, God gave them a blueprint for a society that would behave itself in such a manner that others would desire to be part of it. It was a “come and see” – a “Come and see what’s going on.” Did the people do it? Well, no.

As part of Israel the ladies Amos is referring to were representing God on earth. However, they were doing so in a manner inconsistent with His character. We can all do that, can we not? I am a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. I am representing God whether I want to or not. I am capable of representing God in such a way that it deviates from his character. For example: If I started publicly telling lies as the pastor then people could begin to get the idea, "I guess it's okay to tell lies because he's doing it." But God is the God of truth, right? So I would be representing God wrongly. I would be representing him apart from his character. I can do it, but the facts are I do not have the right to represent God apart from his character. That's a big take-away principle – **I do not have the right to represent God apart from his character.**

When we look at the whole of God's character, we see that how we treat the poor figures in very, very squarely with God's character as a whole.

Let's try to answer this question: Who are the poor? No doubt you've probably said to yourself, "Well, I am." We all are in relation to Bill Gates, right? However you find in the Bible, the poor are very rarely described in terms of financial abilities alone. In fact, a study of words like poor, needy, destitute, etc., reveals basically three classes of people, particularly in the Old Testament. These three groups are: widows, orphans and foreigners. Next a study of these three classes of persons reveals that they had two very big things in common:

1. They were weak and vulnerable
2. They had no voice in their communities

Therefore, if I were going to answer from the Old Testament, "Who are the poor?" I would say; "Anyone that was weak and voiceless in the community." Not having money just came along with it. Widows, orphans and foreigners are the ones in the Old Testament who were particularly among those who were weak and voiceless in their communities.

What is meant by weak and voiceless is they didn't have, on their own, the ability to stand up for themselves. Even if they wanted to do it, they couldn't. A widow could not go out and get a conventional job. She didn't have help as there weren't government agencies – no social security, welfare – none of those things to help. She was at the mercy of the benevolence of other people. Orphans were in the same situation. And the foreigner couldn't speak the language, didn't know how to deal in the particular society ... is any of this sort of ringing a bell?

Let's relate this to ourselves. If you were to ask, "Who are the poor in this community?" what do you think the answer would be? You wouldn't just look and see who has less money than yourself. No, you would look for who around you was weak and voiceless? Persons who couldn't stand up for themselves – even if they wanted. They are in an impossible spot – if they are not helped they will suffer.

What does God think of this and is it related to his character? When God sees the poor, what goes through His mind? A couple of things:

Number one, **he sees them as bearers of his image** – as holders, as owners, as possessors of his image; I get that from Proverbs 22:2. It says:

**Rich and poor have this in common:
The LORD is the Maker of them all.**

Initially you would take from this that God is the distributor of wealth. That's what rich and poor have in common. He gives some people money and he gives other people no money. In a sovereign sense that is true; however, another observation of this verse shows simply that God made them both! He made both of them as humans. They both have the same foundation, which would point to equal worth in God's sight. Therefore, if I am weak and voiceless God does not look at me and say, "You have a particular theological advantage and I'll slant the scales in your favor and you get a free pass to heaven." None of that! He looks at me and says, "You are a human." And if I am filthy rich, he doesn't look at me and say, "You are inherently wicked and the scales are slanted against you and you'll be lucky if you make it." He says, "You are a human." That is the point of saying the Lord is the maker of them both.

What's the take-away for me in this? I must adopt the same theology of the poor that God has. I must see them the same way that he sees them. So when I look at people who are weak and voiceless I don't first start off by looking at them and saying, "You're weak and voiceless; ergo, you're less than me. I'm on the Varsity and you're on the JV of life." I look at them and say, "You are a fellow human being that is made in the image of God and you are one for whom Christ has died."

What else can we discover about God and the poor? The Bible says that **He feeds them**. It says it in a lot of different verses. Here is one: Psalm 146:7

**He upholds the cause of the
oppressed
and gives food to the hungry.**

The Bible also says that **He protects them**.

Psalm 12:5

**"Because of the oppression of the
weak
and the groaning of the needy,
I will now arise," says the LORD.
"I will protect them from those
who malign them."**

So we have two things he does – he feeds them and he protects them. The third thing He does is **secure justice for the poor**.

Just like we had three categories of poor (we had widow, orphan, and foreigner) and they are voiceless and weak, we have three ways in which God cares for the poor, throughout the whole of scripture: **he feeds them, he protects them from harm, and**

he secures justice for them. He sees to it in a large sense that they are not victims of their own weakness. He sets about balancing the scales of justice so that they get a fair shake in life. Psalm 140:12 says:

**I know that the LORD secures justice
for the poor
and upholds the cause of the
needy.**

That's a snapshot of what the Bible has to say about God and the poor. Can you see that he is intimately aware of the poor and caring about their condition and desirous to see their condition improved? That doesn't mean for them to be made wealthy – it means for them to be fed, to be protected and to be given equal justice.

If God cares all about that, the question I would want to ask myself is, "Do I, personally, have obligations to the poor?" Let's see if God gave obligations to the Israelite people to care for the poor? The answer is, "Yes," but let me show you how He did that. He essentially gave them exactly the same obligations that reflect his own character; that they treat the poor in the same way that he understood them and the same way that he cared for them. You'd almost get the idea that He's saying, "I'm using YOU to care for them" the same way He says "I'm using your enemies to do my will that brings you discipline."

Here is a big take away point for Israel. **If you are going to represent me you must do so in accordance with my character.**

Here are some verses:

Deuteronomy 10:17-19

For the LORD your God (this is what God is telling the people when they've come out of Egypt. While he's building their country; he's setting up their social and judicial system now)...

For the LORD your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner, giving him food and clothing. (here's the command) And you are to love those who are foreigners (why? Because) for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.

Leviticus 23:22

"When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the LORD your God."

At harvest time, if you have a square field, leave the corners for people who are poor and who are foreigners.

While studying I found something incredible! As I looked in the whole of the Old Testament on how Israel was commanded to respond to the poor. I found that every three years they were supposed to bring a tithe, which was a tenth of what they earned,

and give that to the Levites (a tribe of priests that didn't own land). Some of that money was then distributed by the Levites to the poor. However, in the rest of the Old Testament Israel is not told to give money to the poor. They are not told to just hand them some money and then walk away. The whole system was designed to provide opportunities for the poor and to look out for them, care for them in such a way that they were given a fair chance. That's amazing! God says, "Leave some over here so they have a chance." On purpose, it says, "Leave some of the gleanings of your harvest. So if you've harvested a bunch and there's a little left standing, just leave some." Then the poor can come along – it took preparation on Israel's part, it took intentionality – to show that they were ready and preparing for the poor.

Here's the question I want you to ask yourself: **Am I taking observable actions in my business and home that demonstrate my care for the poor?** Remember that care for the poor is feeding, protecting, and securing justice for them as best I understand it.

If you don't understand the 'taking action' part, perhaps this illustration will help. I have four kids. Two of them are really little and two of them are a little bit bigger. Before I had kids there were none of those little plastic things in the electric sockets. I didn't care if the toilet lid was up or down ... well, I did... up ... we all know that's the right way. [laughter] There were none of the brackets holding the cabinets closed. The lawnmower gas could be anywhere. What difference did it make? There weren't any people in my house that were weak and voiceless, unable to care for themselves. However, when I brought children into my home I put those things into effect. Now if you came to my house you wouldn't say he's a freak show of safety but you'd say, this guy is prepared to care for the weak and voiceless in his home.

That's precisely what God is calling us to do. He is calling us to prepare our lives in such a way that we can be looked at and seen as ready. He is calling us to be ready to feed, protect and secure justice for the weak and voiceless in our communities. This brings us back to that quiz we took earlier... If we don't even know anybody that's poor it's going to be really hard for us to convince one another that we really care.

Don't just run down to Godtel and introduce yourself to someone today, but start living your life in such a way that you're around the weak and voiceless. Here is something you might consider. There are a couple of guys – one is Brett Banner and the other is Paul Moore. They work with a thing called the *Glory Gang*. This is a ministry to weak and voiceless children in our community. Talk to them about how you could get involved. There's another organization called *Solid Foundation*. It's a group that tutors kids who are weak and voiceless in our community. We can give you information on involvement there as well.

There are a ton of other things you can do, but it all starts with a change in our heart regarding how we treat the weak and voiceless in our community. Remember, **I don't have the right to represent God apart from his character.**

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for the opportunity to look into the scriptures and to see that you do care. I pray, Father, that we would be a people that care, as well. I pray, Father, that we would be like the son in the Proverbs who speaks up for those who cannot speak for themselves – for the rights of all who are destitute, who speaks up and judges fairly, and defends the rights of the poor and the needy. In Christ's name I pray. Amen.