



# Cornton Baptist Church

Demonstrating God's love in action  
in the community of Cornton

Through the Bible

Exodus  
Nehemiah  
2Chronicles Luke  
Acts 2Timothy 2Peter  
Zephaniah  
Ecclesiastes  
1Timothy Joshua  
Psalms James  
Isaiah  
Titus  
Daniel  
Hebrews  
Zechariah  
1Samuel 2Corinthians  
Malachi  
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Esther  
Obadiah  
Hosea  
Revelation  
Philippians  
1John  
Proverbs  
Esther  
Obadiah

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*Finally these men said “We will never find any basis for charge against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God.” (v.5)*

When the great Chrysostom was arrested by the Roman emperor he sought to make the Greek Christian deny his faith. But he was unsuccessful. So the emperor discussed with his advisors what they could do to this prisoner. “Shall I put him in a dungeon?” the emperor asked. “No,” one of his counsellors replied, “For he’ll be glad to go. He longs for the quietness where he can delight in the mercies of his God.” “Then he shall be executed!” said the emperor. “No,” came the answer, “For he’ll be glad to die. He declares that in the event of death, he will be in the presence of the Lord.” “Well, what shall we do then?” the ruler asked. The counsellor replied, “There’s only one thing that will cause him pain. Make him sin. He’s afraid of nothing but sin.”

Wouldn’t that be awesome if that’s what people were saying about us? That’s what people were saying about Daniel. There is a new king in the land and he has appointed a number of people to help him. Daniel shines from among them and the king wants to put him in charge of everything. The others don’t like it so hatch a plan to deal with Daniel. The trouble is...they can find no fault in him. Verse 4 tells us *‘they could find no corruption in him because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent.’* What a record! What a testimony! He was loyal and conscientious on the job - all the while giving God first place. Daniel’s life was so far above reproach that his enemies had to create a situation in which his commitment to God would come into conflict with his government position.

Would we stand up under close examination like this? Are we so faithful in our work that our fellow employees could “find no charge or fault” in us? It’s commendable to witness for Christ. But consider the influence of a godly life and a job so faithfully performed that others could find no fault. That would silence the critics and glorify God.

**Pray:** asking God to help us live good and godly lives.

**Reflect:** is my behaviour blameless?

*The court was seated and the books were opened. (v.10)*

The first half of Daniel has been a biography of his life. The second half is about the dreams he had and the prophecy he was given. Daniel 7 records one of the most amazing visions in the Bible. It tells of a strange dream Daniel had in the year 553 BC in which God revealed to him a symbolic outline of human history stretching from Daniel's day to the very end of time. Although much of his dream has been fulfilled, the final parts are yet future to us. I cannot in these short devotionals cover the visions in depth (my disclaimer at the start).

A defendant in a lawsuit involving large sums of money was saying to his lawyer, "If I lose this case, I'll be ruined." "It's in the judge's hands now," said the lawyer. "Would it help if I sent the judge a box of cigars?" asked the defendant. "Oh no!" said the lawyer. "This judge is a stickler for ethical behaviour. A stunt like that would prejudice him against you. He might even find you in contempt of the court. In fact, you shouldn't even smile at the judge." Within the course of time, the judge rendered a decision in favour of the defendant. As the defendant left the courthouse, he said to his lawyer, "Thanks for the tip about the cigars. It worked." "Well, I'm sure we would have lost the case if you'd sent them," said the lawyer. "But I did send them," said the defendant. "What?!? You did?" "Yes. That's how we won the case." "I don't understand," said the lawyer. "It's easy. I sent the cheapest cigars that I could find to the judge, but enclosed the plaintiff's business card."

When it comes to the judgment of God, there will be no question about it being correct. In Daniel's dream he sees the court come into session and the book of judgment being opened. God is a fair judge and he sees everything for what it is. We cannot hide anything from him. The antichrist mentioned towards the end of the chapter may seem to have things his way for a while but in the end God's judgement will be final. Our future is secure – as long as we have put our trust and faith in Jesus Christ.

**Pray:** thanking God for Jesus and his everlasting rule.

**Reflect:** do I try and hide my sin from God?

*I am going to tell you what will happen later in the time of wrath, because the vision concerns the appointed time of the end. (v.19)*

A guy was down on Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco when he saw a seafood restaurant and a sign on the Specials Board which read, "Big Lobster Tales, \$5 each." Amazed at the great value, he said to the waitress, "\$5 each for lobster tails...is that correct?" "Yes", she said, "It's our special just for today." "Well", he said, "they must be little lobster tails." "No," she replied, "It's the really big lobster." Are you sure they aren't green lobster tails - and a little bit tough?" "No", she said, "it's the really big red lobster." "Big red lobster tails, \$5 each?" he said, amazed. "They must be old lobster tails!" "No, they're definitely today's." "Today's big red lobster tails - \$5 each?" he repeated, astounded. "Yes", she insisted. "Well, here's my five dollars," he said, "I'll take one. She took the money and led him to a table where she invited him to sit down. She then sat down next to him, put her hand on his shoulder, leaned over close to him and said, "Once upon a time there was a really big red lobster ..."

We're thinking a nice dinner and instead we get a nice story instead. Things don't always turn out the way we want them to. And yet we should not be surprised at how things turn out in the world and indeed should not be surprised when the end does come – God has it all planned out and all under his control. Daniel has had a vision of the future and he is trying to work it all out when an angel of the Lord (Gabriel who we will meet later announcing the births of John the Baptist and Jesus) comes and helps him.

In this chapter we see the sure fulfilment of prophecy. This chapter records a remarkably detailed outline of ancient history that was meticulously fulfilled (check out the story of Alexander the Great). It demonstrates once again that the Word of God is true. Reading this chapter ought to increase our confidence in a God who knows the future because he ordained the future. Gabriel tells Daniel of the antichrist who will be destroyed at the last time as well. God is in control. Trust in him.

**Pray:** thanking God that He is sovereign over all.

**Reflect:** do I trust in the Word of God?

*I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures...so I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes. (v.2, 3)*

When we get to chapter 9 people generally rush to the prophecy about 70 weeks and begin to think through how all this applies to time and history. And there is nothing wrong with that for prophecy is interesting and what all the weeks mean is thrilling to investigate. And yet there is a tendency to miss the early part of the chapter and it is in here that we rediscover some very basic elements of our faith and practice.

This is the first year of Darius' reign – the same year Daniel was to be appointed prime minister of the land as it were and then thrown to the lions. Now we don't know if this all happens before or after that and in a sense it is unimportant. What is important is how Daniel acts. Daniel is reading the Word. He had a new job - one with incredible responsibility and time commitment. He was overseeing the largest nation on earth. But he still found time for Bible study. Interesting, isn't it, that most of us have convinced ourselves that we don't have time for Bible study? But the fact is, the busier we are, the more desperately we need the Bible study.

As Daniel reads he learns from Jeremiah's writing about the desolation of Jerusalem and how they would be in captivity for seventy years. Daniel realises this time is almost up – only three years to go. This grabs his attention and he turns to prayer. Our Scripture reading should draw us to prayer too – to praise God, to confess our sin, and to seek God's help in our lives. As we know already Daniel was a man of prayer – he prayed at three specific points during the day. Here he goes deeper, pleading with God for his people. Then we see the magnificent prayer that begins with praise to an awesome God, moves on to confession before dealing with petition.

We would do well to remember the simple lesson of regular reading from the Scriptures and daily times of prayer.

**Pray:** asking God to help us spend more time in his Word and prayer.

**Reflect:** do I read God's Word regularly and pray often?

*Since the first day you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard and I have come in response to them. (v.12)*

John Wesley was convinced that the prayers of God's people rather than his preaching accounted for the thousands who came to Christ through his ministry. That's why he said, "God will do nothing except in answer to prayer." An overstatement? Yes. But the fact is that our praying is a powerful weapon in the war between God and Satan.

In today's Scripture reading, Daniel was so disturbed by a revelation about Israel's future that he could do nothing except fast and pray. Three weeks later a heavenly messenger appeared, saying that God had sent him when Daniel prayed, but that the prince of Persia had detained him (v.13). This "prince" was an evil spirit who sought to influence the rulers of Persia to oppose God's plan. He had detained God's messenger, until the archangel Michael came to his aid.

A cosmic conflict between good and evil is continually being fought in the invisible spirit world. Paul reminded us that it involves Christians. He listed the spiritual armour and weaponry we need for these battles (Ephesians 6:13-17), and then he added "praying always" (v.18). Our prayers can have a significant impact on the outcome of those spiritual battles. May we, therefore, faithfully pray as we fight the good fight (1 Timothy 1:18).

A few points to remember – our prayers are heard immediately by God so don't be downhearted. The angel tells Daniel in verse 12 that his prayers were heard in heaven the moment he sought wisdom from God. Secondly, unseen spiritual warfare may at times delay answers to our prayers – it happened to Daniel. And thirdly, wrestling in prayer is hard work – Daniel mourned and fasted for three weeks. So don't give up – keep praying and keep looking for God's answers.

**Pray:** thanking God for the privilege of prayer.

**Reflect:** do I persist in prayer or give up too easily?

*The people who know their God will firmly resist him. (v.32)*

An angel has come to Daniel and is giving him a prophetic message regarding what will happen to his people, the Jews. They will be caught in conflicts between nations. The kings of the north and south are specifically mentioned before the prophecy turns once more to the antichrist.

One of the main lessons from this chapter is the need to know God and to know him well. Daniel affirms that those who know God will firmly resist the flattery and deception of Antiochus (v.32). Jesus speaks of watching for those wolves who will dress in sheep's clothing. How can we tell evil and deceptive people – by knowing God well. How do we know God well - by reading His Word and being in regular communion with him.

If we know God well we will spot impostors and importantly when the day comes we will spot the antichrist. The antichrist is described as being self absorbed and interested only in himself – exalting himself above all else (v.36). As humans, we have an interesting trait when it comes to conversations we have with one another. If you pay attention, most people are really only interested in talking about one thing – themselves. In a way that makes it kind of easy to have a conversation with people, just ask them about themselves and many people will talk for hours. Just don't expect them to return the favour and ask about you. How many times have you been in a conversation with a person when you realised you weren't even paying attention to what they were saying, but you were instead focusing on what you were going to say next?

The antichrist will be the epitome of being self-absorbed. He will also say unheard of things about God. He will make himself to be god and try and draw people away from following the one true God. The best way to counter all of this is by knowing God then we will be able to resist the devil and his ways.

**Pray:** asking God to help us know him better.

**Reflect:** do I know God well?

*As for you, go your way till the end. You will rest and then at the end of your days you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance. (v.13)*

A prominent citizen in town was dying. As he lay in his lovely home, the best doctors surrounding him heard him whisper with a note of despair, "I'm leaving home; I'm leaving home!" Across town, there lay a solitary figure in modest surroundings. In her eye was a gleam of joy. Before she died she was heard to say, "I'm going home, I'm going home." When you leave this world, will you say, "I'm leaving home" or, "I'm going home?"

Daniel knew where he was headed. He had some questions about how long it would be before the prophecies he had received would be fulfilled (v.6) and questions of the outcome of all of this (v.8) but was told not to worry about those – God was sovereign and he had it all under control. He knew heaven lay in front after all the trials of life. He is given some times and many have tried to work all these out. Daniel was simply told to go on his way until the end.

And the final words to Daniel are words for each of us as God's servants too. Remain on course. Go your way. You've been faithful. Now stay the course. You've been through the lion's den. Keep standing strong and you'll be all right. Be faithful until God calls you home. Then you will rest. And this won't be in some old folks home but in heaven. We all die – that's part of life unless the Lord returns before then. Be assured that your place is in heaven if you have put your trust and faith in Jesus. Then Daniel is told he will rise. This is a promise of bodily resurrection. Though Daniel will die, he will eventually rise again. We have been given the same promise. And finally Daniel will receive his allotted inheritance – a place in glory with his Lord.

Friends the call is for us to remain faithful and to keep serving God and then at the end we will receive those welcome words 'well done, good and faithful servant.'

**Pray:** thanking God for the promise of spending eternity with him.

**Reflect:** am I sure I'm going home at the end of my life?



*The land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD. (v.2)*

Let's begin today with a hypothetical question: if you found out that you were a victim of adultery, could you forgive your spouse? Imagine that the unfaithfulness was not a one-night stand, but a long affair. Imagine further that your spouse wasn't very repentant and was even rather open about what he or she was doing. Would you still love your spouse? Would you want him or her back?

We have asked this question to highlight the incredible love of God. When we - His people - are unfaithful, spurning the love of our true Husband, He continues to love us. He pursues us, wooing us back and disciplining us. That's the picture we see in the lives of Hosea and his wife Gomer.

Hosea was commanded by the Lord to marry a harlot, a woman who was a prostitute, renting out her body and sexual services to men for money. What a nightmarish request to be placed on any man, especially a man of God like Hosea! Hosea chose a woman named Gomer to be his wife. She bore three children: a son, and daughter, and then another son. The Lord instructed Hosea what to name them, and told him why.

The first son was named Jezreel - this was to remind His people of the crimes and sins which had never been repented of. The main crime was that of Jehu who had been too zealous in undertaking a task and killed more people than he had been told to. The second child was named Lo-Ruhamah which means "no mercy." The reason for this was obvious: God would soon show no mercy to this rebellious nation of Israel. Finally, the third child was born, and was named Lo-Ammi, meaning "not My people." For generations, the people of Israel had forsaken the Lord as God, and He was now returning their actions: they would no longer be His people.

Hosea's message for the people is simple, blunt and clear: God will judge us on account of our sin. The solution: turn from your wicked ways and follow the Lord; confess your sin and walk in God's ways from now on.

**Pray:** confessing your sin to God.

**Reflect:** am I walking in the light of the Lord?

*There I...will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. (v.15)*

Some years ago, Donna Rice's name hit the American tabloids in a highly publicised sexual scandal with former Colorado senator Gary Hart. In the aftermath, Hart's bid for the 1988 Democratic nomination was trashed and so was Rice's reputation. Rice disappeared from the public eye, but she's back - passionately committed to God and to "Enough is Enough," a Christian organisation fighting to keep pornography out of the hands of minors. Thankful for the support of her family, friends, and her Christian husband, Jack Hughes, Rice is most thankful for God's work in her life: "God loves us, but he doesn't grant us immunity from the consequences of our choices. However, when we mess up, if we ask his forgiveness, he'll redeem those choices, using our mistakes as a 'door of hope' for other people (Hosea 2:14-15). I have great empathy for victims of sexual abuse and pornography. God has brought purpose to my pain."

The Lord speaks to Hosea in chapter 2, telling him that his mother - the nation of Israel - is just like his wife. She is an adulterer against her husband. Her children are children of prostitution. Hosea's wife Gomer had not been content at home. She missed the pleasure of many men's company. She missed the gifts and the attention. She missed the benefits of her promiscuity. Thus, she had gone out after these things, leaving her husband at home in his extreme sorrow.

This is how God feels when His people leave Him in search of pleasure, of riches, of satisfaction in other places. But this is also how God deals with it: He makes sure that the pleasure is temporary, the riches slip through your fingers, and the fulfilment you try to find is unsatisfying.

Amazingly God then seeks to draw his unfaithful people back to him. He offers them a door of hope (v.15). God's love for his people is great. He offers them the opportunity to confess their sin and turn back to him.

**Pray:** thanking God for his grace and mercy.

**Reflect:** am I trying to find my pleasure in the things of this world rather than in God?

*Go, show your love to your wife again...love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods. (v.1)*

According to an old legend, a man became lost in his travels and wandered into a bed of quicksand. Confucius saw the man's predicament and said, "It is evident that men should stay out of places such as this." Next, Buddha observed the situation and said, "Let that man's plight be a lesson to the rest of the world." Then Muhammad came by and said to the sinking man, "Alas, it is the will of God." Finally, Jesus appeared. "Take my hand, brother," he said, "and I will save you."

This picture illustrates the picture before us in today's reading as well. Hosea's wife has turned from his unending love to seek her thrills from the world around. God tells him to go and show his love for his wife. And Hosea does it. Hosea paid an inexpensive fifteen shekels to buy back his wife Gomer. Hosea followed the Lord's command when he purchased Gomer to bring her back, just as he did in marrying her. Through Hosea's act, God showed His people that He was taking the initiative to reveal His love to a faithless nation.

We can only imagine the condition in which Hosea found Gomer. As one Bible commentator observed, even if Gomer had been an attractive woman before this occasion, it is doubtful that any man looked on her with desire at the time her husband purchased her back. She had travelled the hard way of the transgressor. But Hosea reconfirmed his love for Gomer and helped lead her to restoration (v.3). All the while, the prophet's actions were a mirror of God's loyal love for the nation. The people had sinned against God and left him. Yet he still loved them and longed to bring them back into the fold.

What a great picture that is of us too – lost in sin, rebelling against God, forgetting him and going our own way. And then he showed his love for us *'for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.'*

**Pray:** thanking God for saving you.

**Reflect:** do I love the Lord with all my heart, soul, mind and strength?

*There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery. (v.2)*

John invited his mother over for dinner. During the meal, his mother couldn't help noticing how beautiful John's roommate was. She had long been suspicious of a relationship between John and his roommate and this only made her more curious. Over the course of the evening, while watching the two interact, she started to wonder if there was more between John and the roommate than met the eye. Reading his mum's thoughts, John volunteered, "I know what you must be thinking, but I assure you, Julie and I are just roommates." About a week later, Julie came to John and said, "Ever since your mother came to dinner, I've been unable to find the beautiful silver gravy ladle. You don't suppose she took it, do you?" John said, "Well, I doubt it, but I'll write her a letter just to be sure." So he sat down and wrote: "Dear Mother, I'm not saying you did take a gravy ladle from my house, and I'm not saying you didn't take a gravy ladle. But the fact remains that one has been missing ever since you were here for dinner." Several days later, John received a letter from his mother which read: "Dear Son, I'm not saying that you do sleep with Julie, and I'm not saying that you do not sleep with Julie. But the fact remains that if she was sleeping in her own bed, she would have found the gravy ladle by now. Love, Mum"

We are so adept at ignoring the ways of God and pretending we are doing nothing wrong. A little white lie here won't harm anyone, cursing at the idiot on the phone from the call centre isn't a problem, taking the odd packet of paper home from the office because it won't be missed is ok, and stealing a lustful look at the pretty lass in the office doesn't do anyone any harm. And yet all of these are sin according to the Bible.

Israel has sinned against God. In his charge against the nation He lists five of the Ten Commandments they have broken – cursing, lying, murder, stealing and adultery. They have been found out. We too have been found out. We can hide nothing from God. He knows everything. Stop sinning and start living God's way.

**Pray:** asking God for the strength to resist temptation.

**Reflect:** do I grade sin? Admit that sin is sin, confess it and turn from it.

*But he is not able to cure you, not able to heal your sores. (v.13)*

A business executive injured his leg skiing one weekend. By the time he got home on Saturday, the leg was very swollen and he was having difficulty walking, so he called his doctor at his home. The doctor told him to soak it in hot water. He tried soaking it in hot water but the leg became more swollen and painful. His maid saw him limping and said, “I don’t know, I’m only a maid, but I always thought it was better to use cold water, not hot, for swelling.” He tried switching to cold water and the swelling rapidly subsided. On Sunday afternoon he called his doctor again to complain. “Say Doc, what kind of a doctor are you anyway? You told me to soak my leg in hot water and it got worse. My maid told me to use cold water and it got better.” “Really?!?” answered the doctor, “I don’t understand it; my maid said hot water.”

It is amazing how many times we seek help in the wrong places and listen to the wrong voices. Here in Hosea 5 God is bringing his judgment against Israel. God brought progressive punishment upon the people, giving them many chances to turn from their sin. Like a moth eating a garment, or dry rot affecting the garden shed, it progressed gradually. But instead of turning to the Lord in repentance, Ephraim turned to the king of Assyria. But the entire Assyrian army could not stave off the judgment of God upon the nation of Israel.

Because they had not acknowledged their guilt and repented of it, God proclaimed that he was going away and returning to His place (v.15). When the Lord leaves, you’re really in hot water. The challenge for us is to make God our first port of call and not the last resort. Many times when difficulties come in our lives we seek help here there and everywhere before in the end crying out to God in prayer. Why not try speaking to God first? And when someone points out sin in our lives or indeed when the Lord warns us directly, let’s not seek to bury our heads in the sand or look elsewhere – let us simply confess our sin to God and receive his forgiveness.

**Pray:** asking God to forgive us for not always turning to him in repentance  
**Reflect:** do I seek help from others first before turning to God?

*Come let us return to the LORD. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us. (v.1)*

The only survivor of a shipwreck washed up on a small, uninhabited island. He prayed feverishly for God to rescue him, and every day he scanned the horizon for help, but none seemed forthcoming. Exhausted, he eventually managed to build a little hut out of driftwood to protect him from the elements, and to store his few possessions. But then one day, after scavenging for food, he arrived home to find his little hut in flames, the smoke rolling up to the sky. The worst had happened; everything was lost. He was stung with grief and anger. "God, how could you do this to me!" he cried.

Early the next day, however, he was awakened by the sound of a ship that was approaching the island. It had come to rescue him. "How did you know I was here?" asked the weary man of his rescuers. "We saw your smoke signal", they replied. Sometimes the pain has to come before the healing can begin.

Hosea has a sense of that as he encourages the people in the opening verses of chapter 6 that God has punished them for their sin but he can and will heal them if they return to him. He proclaims to his people, "Let's return to the Lord. Let's get right with Him. Yes, He has proclaimed judgment, but the Lord delights in showing mercy to the repentant sinner." All God has sought to do with Israel over a period of time is show them the consequences of their wickedness in the hope that they would turn from their downward path and return to walk in his ways.

Unfortunately Israel is unrepentant. They continue in their wicked ways. They bring their burnt offerings but they do not acknowledge God. And that is a warning to us of going through the motions of being in church without actually living the Christian life and worshipping God.

May we take the opportunity while we have it to return to the Lord.

**Pray:** asking God to help us walk with him always.

**Reflect:** do I simply go through the motions when I come to church?

*They do not turn to the Most High; they are like a faulty bow. (v.16)*

There's this little guy sitting in a bar just looking at his drink. He sits that way for a half an hour. Then this big trouble-making truck driver step up next to him, takes the drink from the guy and drinks it. The poor man starts crying. The trucker says, "Come on, man, I was just joking. Here, I'll buy you another one. I can't stand to see a man cry." "No, that's not it", the little guy says to the thug. "It's just that today was the worst day of my life. First, I overslept and missed an important meeting and the boss fired me. When I walked outside to drive home, my car was stolen. The police said they could do nothing. "I got a cab to return home, and after I paid the driver and the cab was gone I discovered I had left my wallet in the cab. "I got home only to find my wife in bed with the gardener. I left home and came to this bar. And just when I was thinking about putting an end to my life, you show up and drink my poison."

For some of us, it's kind of a reflex action to trust in the wrong thing. We get angry. We worry. We rant and rave. And like the poor guy in the story nothing helps. We are looking in the wrong places for our help. How many times does that happen in our lives? Something bad happens or a tricky situation comes up and we turn here and there looking for help and answers. For some reason we never think of looking to the creator and sustainer of the world to help us.

Hosea is writing in a time then the people have turned from God and gone their own way. God states through Hosea that they people don't even realise they have sinned against God (v.2). Even when trouble is upon them they do not turn back to God to save them. God longs to redeem them (v.13) but somehow they keep ignoring him. And in the end God says their leaders will fall and they will be ridiculed by neighbouring nations.

When hard times come...look to God and ask for his help. Confess your sin and seek his forgiveness.

**Pray:** thanking God for his compassion and mercy.

**Reflect:** do I look to others for help rather than God?

*They sow the wind and reap the whirlwind. The stalk has no head; it will produce no flour. (v.7)*

A tenant farmer had worked hard for many years to improve the production of the land. Then something happened that caused him to become very bitter. When it was time to renew his lease, the owner told him he was going to sell the farm to his son who was getting married. The tenant made several generous offers to buy it himself, hoping the man's decision would be reversed. But it was all in vain. As the day drew near for the farmer to vacate his home, his weeks of angry brooding finally got the best of him. He gathered seeds from some of the most pesky and noxious weeds he could find. Then he spent many hours scattering them on the clean, fertile soil of the farm, along with a lot of trash and stones he had collected. To his dismay, the very next morning the owner informed him that plans for his son's wedding had fallen through, and therefore he would be happy to renew the lease.

He had sown. Now he would reap. Sowing and reaping is a common illustration in the Bible. It makes sense to us when we read Galatians 6:7 '*Do not be deceived, God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.*' When you sow, you receive back much more. These Israelites steeped in idolatry were worshipping nothing. They had tried to make their own gods – take the calf for instance which would be broken into pieces. It was like sowing the wind. And yet, they would receive back much more - the whirlwind. Assyria was coming, and would accomplish the judgment of God.

George Munzing wrote, "If you cheat in practice, you'll cheat in the game. If you cheat in your head, you'll cheat on the test. You'll cheat on the girl. You'll cheat in business. You'll cheat on your mate. Sow a thought, reap an act. Sow an act, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a character. Sow a character, reap a destiny." On the other hand, if we sow to the Spirit, we will reap huge rewards. Let's be sowing the Word of God in our lives and in the lives of those around us.

**Pray:** asking God to help us keep our eyes fixed on him.

**Reflect:** what am I sowing in my life at the moment?



*For you have been unfaithful to your God... (v.1)*

Two small children are playing on the floor, each with plenty of toys. Suddenly, Junior decides he doesn't like what he has and wants the toy his sister is playing with. So he proceeds to confiscate it, and a struggle ensues. After the dust settles, his sister loses interest in the toy and discards it. Interestingly, the toy is now Junior's, but he doesn't want it any more. Every parent has witnessed a scene like this at one time or another.

This is a rough analogy of Israel's attitude toward God's abundant blessings. He had blessed the nation with material and spiritual gifts beyond what any other nation had ever enjoyed. In fulfilment of God's covenant promises, the fertile land produced an abundant harvest (Deut. 8:7-9). But Israel was not content to worship God for these blessings. The people looked at the pagan nations around them and decided they liked the idols these nations worshiped. So instead of serving God, the Israelites bowed down to Baal, the Canaanite fertility god. They then attributed their abundance to him and implored him for continued fruitfulness.

God had no choice but to punish such arrogant faithlessness. And as we have seen throughout the book of Hosea, God's judgment was perfectly appropriate to Israel's sin. If the people wanted to defile themselves by worshiping unclean idols, God would see to it that they would eat unclean food during their captivity in Assyria (Hosea 9:3).

Moreover, while in exile Israel would not be able to offer the sacrifices to God prescribed by the Mosaic covenant, and her great feast days would pass unobserved. Once more, God matched His chastening to Israel's sins. They had treated His blessings as nothing and discarded Him. So they would waste away in a foreign land while their possessions and homes back in Israel became overgrown with briars and thorns (Hosea 9:6).

The encouragement for us is to remember and count our blessings – and give thanks to the faithful God who provides for us.

**Pray:** thanking God for his bountiful provision in your life.

**Reflect:** do I neglect to thank God for his daily provision of my needs?

*Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of unfailing love, and break up your unploughed ground; for it is time to seek the LORD. (v.12)*

As a new vegetable grower a year or so ago I soon learned that uncultivated soil in my garden was resistant to seed planting and growth. But when I planted good seeds in well-prepared soil, heaven's sun and rain did their part until the harvest came – some of the cabbages in particular last year were beauties. The secret was digging over the soil well. So this year I spent a good while digging over the soil, preparing it well for planting season. Well-prepared soil, the right seeds, and God's blessing are essential for fruitfulness, not only in gardening but also in Christian living.

God's prophet Hosea preached this principle to the people of Israel. God had blessed them abundantly to begin with but they soon had a greed for more and more (v.1). How true that is in our lives. God points out here that the more they received in blessing, the further they turned from the Lord. It really makes me wonder why we always want to be more wealthy and have more things. As part of that process of turning from God they had sown seeds of wickedness and trusted in their own way instead of God's. Now they were eating the bitter fruit of lies, especially the lie that their safety and success came from their own military strength (Hosea 10:13).

Hosea pleaded with Israel to go God's way - to break up the sin-hardened soil of their hearts and to 'seek the Lord' (v.12). If they would sow seeds of righteousness, they would reap the Lord's mercy and He would rain blessings on them.

Is the soil of your heart resistant to God and His Word, rather than receptive? Do you trust in your own way rather than in God's? Then it's time to seek the Lord in honest repentance, to sow right actions and attitudes in your life, and to grow His way. Above all, depend on His power rather than your own to make you fruitful.

**Pray:** asking God to help us trust in him more and walk in his ways.

**Reflect:** do I trust in my own way rather than in God's?

*My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. (v.8)*

An elderly man lay in a hospital, with his wife of 55 years sitting at his bedside. “Is that you, Ethel, at my side again?” he whispered. “Yes, dear,” she answered. He softly said to her, “Remember years ago when I was in the Veteran’s Hospital? You were with me then. You were with me when we lost everything in a fire. And Ethel, when we were poor - you stuck with me then too.” The man sighed and said, “I tell you, Ethel, you are bad luck!”

It’s only a humorous story, but it reminds us how we can twist the facts and fail to recognise the love and loyalty of someone who cares about us. For the third time in Hosea’s prophecy, God looks back with favour on Israel’s early history. Here He is, Israel’s loving Father, tenderly calling His child out of Egyptian slavery and into the land of milk and honey (v.1). The tender reminiscence continues in v.3-4. God took His helpless nation by the arms and taught Israel to walk. He healed the nation’s wounds and fed them from His hand.

But like a rebellious child running from its father’s outstretched arms, Israel ran from God into the arms of Baal. Instead of loving Him in return, they burned incense to carved images (v.2), refused to repent (v.5), and were bent on backsliding (v.7). To say that this showed arrogance and an astonishing lack of gratitude on Israel’s part is an understatement. But even in His anger, when discipline became necessary, God did not stop loving them. He said, ‘*My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused*’ (v.8).

God still loves us, even in our sin. He longs for his wayward child to return to him. He will not give up on us no matter how far we run. So stop running, see his love and come running back to the Father, seeking his forgiveness for your sin.

**Pray:** thanking God for his unfailing love.

**Reflect:** do I need to come running back to the Father?

*The LORD has a charge to bring against Judah. (v.2)*

Mr. Smith was terribly overweight, so his doctor put him on a diet. “I want you to eat regularly for 2 days, then skip a day, and repeat this procedure for 2 weeks. The next time I see you, you’ll have lost 5 pounds.” When Mr. Smith returned, he had lost nearly 20 pounds. “Why, that’s amazing!” the doctor said, “Did you follow my instructions?” Mr. Smith nodded. “I’ll tell you though, I thought I was going to drop dead by the end of that 3rd day.” “From hunger, you mean?” “No, from skipping!”

Some people do not listen and follow instructions. They fail to see the danger they are in. And Israel is like that. They are still feeding on the wind which means they are eating nothing at all. God’s witness list against them in today’s text is an impressive one. It includes Jacob, the father of the nation, and Moses, the nation’s greatest prophet. Both had a lesson to teach Israel, but both lessons went unheeded.

Jacob’s story is referred to twice (v.2-5, 12). His famous and first act as a newborn was grabbing his brother Esau’s heel (Genesis 25:26). This was a clue to Jacob’s usurping and scheming character, but he eventually had to face God and repent of his sin. Like him, Israel needed to return to God and seek His favour. In Hosea 12:12, God called on Jacob again to remind Israel of her humble beginnings. The nation’s father had to tend sheep just to secure a wife. Then in his old age, Jacob had to take his family to Egypt to avoid starvation in the famine. From Egypt, God used the prophet Moses to lead His people to their promised land. Moses’ incredible ministry is condensed here into one verse (v.13), but the message of God’s continual goodness to Israel suffers nothing from this abbreviation.

Around these witnesses, the text continues to weave a tapestry of Israel’s utter spiritual faithlessness, injustice, and boasting. We should not be surprised to learn that Israel, again represented by the prominent tribe of Ephraim, was a place where a person could not expect to be treated honestly (v.7). Violence and lies were the order of the day (v.1).

**Pray:** thanking God for his incredible patience with me.

**Reflect:** do I learn from lessons passed on to me?

*Like a bear robbed of her cubs I will attack them and rip them open. (v.8)*

If you have visited Alaska, you have no doubt seen warnings about the bears that roam the wilderness. Experienced old-timers who know the habits of bears offer these suggestions for safety: “Don’t climb a tree. Bears climb.” “Don’t run. Bears can run faster.” “If the bear is brown, curl up and play dead. If it’s black, move wildly and make lots of noise.” “Never, never offer food to a bear.” “Above all, don’t get between a mother bear and her cubs.”

In our Bible reading from Hosea, God described Himself as being as angry with Israel as a mother bear who has been deprived of her cubs (v.8). God had done so much to show His love, but His people had wandered away from Him and taken the path of disobedience. So He disciplined them, while reminding them of His love (v.4-6).

God had warned them over and over again in the Law that they were to have no God except him, yet they were ‘*guilty of Baal worship*’ (v.1). He warned them not make idols yet they kept making ‘*cleverly fashioned images*’ (v.2). God had cared for them, but they stopped caring about Him (v.5). The more they were blessed with, the less reliant on Him they became (v.6). And so, He is bringing judgment, comparing Himself to three ruthless predators of their land: the lion, the leopard, and the bear.

Verse 4 shows that when it came to disobeying God, Israel started right at the top. She had failed to keep the most foundational of God’s requirements. God’s statement in the latter part of this verse references His first Commandment (Exodus 20:1-3). So it is no surprise that we see the nation taking a downward spiral, from gratefully receiving His care in the desert to receiving His care with indifference in Canaan (v.5-6).

Our God is a jealous God (Exodus 34:14). He loves us but He will not tolerate disobedience. Beware of the Bear!

**Pray:** asking God to forgive our disobedience.

**Reflect:** does God have first place in my life?

*Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously. (v.2)*

The fires that swept across the early American prairie were said to move so fast that not even the fastest horse could outrun them. In anticipation of the fire's arrival, the pioneers would burn the grass in a designated area around them. Then they would take their stand in the burned area, safe from the blaze because fire had already passed over the place where they stood. This is a good picture of the refuge God offers to the people of Israel.

Here in Hosea 14 is the final invitation God makes to His straying nation. He wants to see the people return to Him, so that He might bless them. There was no mystery as to the problem that created the rift between God and Israel and invited His judgment. The people's sins were the cause of their downfall (v.1).

Throughout Hosea, God has passionately pleaded for His people to return to Him. We find more of this heartfelt passion in these final verses. God even gives the people the words of repentance He longs to hear from their lips: '*Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously*' the plea begins (v.2).

Notice how thoroughly this confession deals with the sins that had driven Israel away from God. The people had failed to praise God and give Him glory for what He had done, so now they were to offer '*the fruit of our lips*' (v. 2). We know from Hebrews 13:15 that this is a '*sacrifice of praise*.'

The confession continues in v.3, where Israel is urged to deal with two sins we have encountered repeatedly in the book: the futility of making foreign alliances and the heinous sin of idolatry. For those who return to the Lord with these words, He offers incredible blessings (v.4-8).

Stop running away on your own and turn back to the Father in repentance.

**Pray:** thanking God for his grace and mercy.

**Reflect:** in what ways am I running from God at the moment?

*To you, O LORD, I call. (v.19)*

A man is sitting at home one evening when the doorbell rings. When he answers the door, a 6 foot tall cockroach is standing there. The cockroach immediately punches him between the eyes and scampers off. The next evening, the man is sitting at home when the doorbell rings. When he answers the door, the cockroach is there again. This time, it punches him, kicks him and karate chops him before running away. The third evening, the man is sitting at home when the doorbell rings. When he answers the door, the cockroach is there yet again. It leaps at him and stabs him several times before making off. The gravely injured man manages to crawl to the telephone and summon an ambulance. He is rushed to intensive care and they save his life. The next morning, the doctor is doing his rounds. He asks our hero what happened, so the man explains about the 6 foot cockroach's attacks, culminating in the near fatal stabbing. The doctor thinks for a moment and says, "Yes, there is a nasty bug going around."

There is nothing funny about the bugs that have invaded Israel here in the prophecy of Joel. The consequences of Israel's disobedience in Joel's day had been painful for both man and beast. A combination of locusts and drought had destroyed the crops. Men and animals alike were suffering. What is more, the shortage of food had interrupted the cycle of temple sacrifices and festivals (v.16). The pitiful lowing of hungry cattle and the bleating of starving sheep mirrored the anguished cries of God's people (v.18). As Joel watched wild fires consume land and crops, he added his voice to this chorus of suffering (v.19). This was God's intention. His design was that Israel's suffering would make them aware of their own sin and would instil in them a longing for restoration. These sufferings prompted God's creation to '*pant*' or long after God (v.20). It could only be hoped that His people would be as wise as the animals they tended.

Don't let it get to the stage you are suffering on account of your sin...learn to confess it quickly and move on in God's grace.

**Pray:** confessing your sin to God.

**Reflect:** do I long after God?

*Even now, declares the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. (v.12)*

Religious observances like fasting can have great value. But they were never meant to serve as a substitute for genuine repentance. In Joel's day God's people engaged in religious rituals like fasting and tearing their garments. The problem with these efforts was that they were not performed with a repentant heart (v.12). As far as God was concerned, the outward form of such rituals was not nearly as important as the attitude of the heart. He challenged them saying, '*Rend your hearts and not your garments*' (v.13).

True repentance is not a matter of perfunctory observance of certain rituals but is grounded in relationship. Those who turn to God in repentance do not base their appeal for forgiveness on their own performance but upon God's character. In verse 13 the prophet gives them five reasons for 'rending their hearts': God's grace, compassion, patience, love, and mercy. Based upon this, the prophet called upon the priests to declare a sacred assembly in the hope that sincere repentance would result in restoration. This was to be a universal expression of grief over sin. Although public and formal, it was also to be sincere (v.12).

As we have seen, the devastation of the locust plague was intended to move God's people to genuine repentance. The wonderful promise was that God would respond with zeal for the devastated land and pity for His afflicted people. He would '*repay you for the years the locusts have eaten*' (v.25).

When we confess our sin to the Lord, He is quick to forgive our past and fill our future with hope. He can bring good out of our wasted years. He does that by teaching us humility through our failures, and by helping us to understand the weaknesses we have in common with others. Although our previous years may have been blighted by sin, God is eager to restore us and give us much fruit from our labour.

**Pray:** thanking God for being gracious and compassionate.

**Reflect:** do I have a repentant heart?



*But the LORD will be a refuge for his people. (v.16)*

A farmer was in his house when he saw his fields of grain had caught on fire. He ran out but it was too late. Later as he wandered over the burnt out crops he saw the charred body of a hen. He kicked it over, and to his surprise out ran five little chicks from under it. The hen had covered her little ones to protect. The hen was a safe refuge for her chicks. The wrath of God is an all consuming fire! Nevertheless, it need not touch those who are covered by the Lord Jesus Christ. There is refuge in Him.

Joel's purpose in today's passage was to give God's beleaguered people something to cheer about. Although things looked bleak, the prophet promised them that a time was coming when God would judge their enemies. He predicted that this would take place at a time when the Lord would '*restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem*' (v.1). At that time, all the Gentile nations that had gloated over Judah's destruction and exile would be gathered together for judgment in the Valley of Jehoshaphat. The name of this valley, which literally means "Jehovah judges" or "Jehovah has judged," appears to be symbolic. It is also called "the valley of decision" (v.14).

Why is God going to judge the nations to eternal fire? He says here that it is because they have scattered Israel among the nations (v.2 and 6), they have divided up His land (v.2), they have enslaved the Jews (v.3 and 6), and have stolen the temple treasures (v.5). Their destruction is clearly marked out. The Lord will roar into action.

But there is a wonderful contrast here. First of all the Lord comes roaring as a lion from the tribe of Judah to shake the heavens and the earth in judgment. It is the wrath of God being poured out upon a Christ rejecting world. But, for those who come to the Lord, He is a shelter to them, He is their protection, their safety (v.16). That should be of great comfort to each of us, knowing that God desires to shelter us and protect us. The question is, "Are you seeking Him and running into His arms of protection?"

**Pray:** thanking God for being our safe refuge.

**Reflect:** am I running into the arms of God's protection?

*The LORD roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem. (v.2)*

Nineteenth-century Anglican pastor Charles Bridges made this observation concerning the effect that sin has upon the nation: “No nation is so low, as not to sink under it. While in the mightiest people, it is a blot . . . that no worldly glory can efface.” We know that God is deeply interested in the righteousness of His people. But what does He expect of unbelievers? The book of Amos provides us with the answer. He shows us that everyone is accountable to God.

The introduction of the book of Amos indicates that the primary focus of the prophet’s ministry was directed toward the Northern Kingdom of Israel (v.1). The book opens on a note of warning, with the Lord pictured as one who roars like a lion and shakes the earth like thunder (v.2). As a result, there is widespread devastation from the lowest valleys, where the sheep were pastured, to the mountain heights. All had been blasted by drought. According to Amos, this was far more than a meteorological event. It was an act of divine judgment emanating from Israel’s God.

Yet instead of reproving the people of Israel for their sin, beginning in verse 3, Amos addressed Israel’s Gentile neighbours. Damascus and its ruling dynasty were condemned for using military tactics, which was so brutal that Amos compared it to a threshing sledge with iron teeth (v.3). Gaza, Israel’s Philistine neighbour to the south, was singled out for selling entire communities of Israelites into slavery to Israel’s long-time enemies, the Edomites (v.6). In each of these cases the predicted penalty would be a similar fate. The Lord promised to destroy their rulers and “send fire” upon their cities and fortifications (v.5, 7–8).

The lesson for us is that God will deal with sin – our personal sin and the personal sin of each and every person on earth. The time is now for us to get right with God, confessing our sin and seeking his forgiveness. The time is also now for us to be sharing that same message with others so that they too can be saved.

**Pray:** asking God to forgive your sin.

**Reflect:** am I warning others of the dangers of sin?

*Because they have rejected the law of the LORD and have not kept his decrees. (v.4)*

Most of us who are parents have seen someone else's children behaving badly in the supermarket. Perhaps they threw a temper tantrum because mum or dad refused to buy them a toy. They may have pushed the shopping trolley into other customers. On occasion we may have looked sternly at the child or even asked them to stop. Most of the time, however, we simply walked by, a little annoyed but grateful that our child was not the one making the fuss. When the disturbance is caused by one of our own children, however, our response is quite different.

This is also true of God. While He was angered by the sinful acts of the pagan nations that surrounded Jerusalem, He was also deeply concerned by the sins of His own people. In Amos 2:4 the prophet moves from Israel's pagan neighbours to Judah, its sister nation to the south. Employing the same formula used to accuse Moab and the other pagan nations in the preceding verses, the prophet condemned Judah. The formula '*For three sins . . . even for four,*' indicated that Judah's sin had grown to full measure. This phrase is a figure of speech that the Lord uses to express a multitude of transgression. We would understand it better as Him saying, "For sin after sin after sin after sin..."

Judah's sin, however, had gone one step further than the transgressions of Israel's pagan neighbours, who had sinned against man - Judah's sin was primarily against God. Judah had rejected God's Law and had followed the fake gods that had deceived their ancestors (v.4). Because of this, they would eventually face the same kind of fate as Israel's enemies. The Lord promised to send '*fire upon Judah that will consume the fortresses of Jerusalem*' (v.5).

We ought to watch for double standards in sin, condemning others whilst being guilty ourselves. Get yourself right with God first.

**Pray:** asking God's forgiveness for disobeying his law.

**Reflect:** do I have a double standard when it comes to sin?

*You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins. (v.2)*

When John F. Kennedy was President of the United States, his two young children Caroline and John would sometimes wander into his office. One famous photograph shows his son John playing beneath the President's desk. Because they were family members, they had a level of access to the President that others did not.

The nation of Israel also had the privilege of having a unique "family relationship." Along with the nation of Judah, they had been chosen to be God's people. In verse 1 the Lord refers to them as '*the whole family I brought up out of Egypt.*' As such, they enjoyed a distinct privilege that was not shared by other nations. This privilege, however, also brought with it a responsibility. Those chosen by God were also liable to God for their response to Him. They had rejected God's truth and the warnings of His prophets. As a result, they were subject to His punishment (v.2).

In these verses, God lists seven things which have a cause and effect. People don't travel together without making plans to meet up. Birds don't get caught in traps unless they are baited. Cause and effect. The last thing listed is that if calamity occurs, the Lord has done it. Many times, man's hardened heart refuses to believe that the terrible things which have come upon him are a result of their own sin and rejection of God. Things are written off as coincidence or freak accidents. But God wants them to know that the disasters which are befalling them are directly resulting from their rejection of Him. They have caused it, and He is effecting it.

Christians are often described in the New Testament with the same kind of language used to refer to God's Old Testament people. They are '*a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God*' (1 Peter 2:9). Since we are God's people we have many privileges but there is also great responsibility upon us. We are called to live God's way – to love him above all else and to love our neighbours as ourselves.

**Pray:** thanking God that we are his chosen people.

**Reflect:** do I live as a child of God?

*Brag about your freewill offerings – boast about them you Israelites for this is what you love to do. (v.5)*

Some people feel that if they put money in the offering plate that that will take care of their sin. Others feel if they do some service in church all will be well. Others think being in church each week is all that is needed to keep the scales tipped in their favour before God. How wrong we can be.

There were two men shipwrecked on this island. One started screaming and yelling, “We’re going to die! We’re going to die! There’s no food! No water! We’re going to die!” The second man was propped up against a palm tree, so calm it drove the first man crazy. “Don’t you understand? We’re going to die”! The second man replied, “You don’t understand, I make £100,000 a week” The first man looked at him quite dumbfounded and asked, “What difference does that make? We’re on an island with no food and no water. We’re going to DIE!!!” The second answered, “You just don’t get it, I make £100,000 a week and I tithe on that £100,000 a week. My pastor will find me!”

Now don’t get me wrong, it’s an important step in our maturity that we learn to give. It’s been said that a good indicator of just how much of your heart the Lord has is by measuring how much of your wallet He has access to. But as important as tithing is, God would rather that you learned to walk with Him in obedience in all your life. He doesn’t want you going through life thinking you can just pay your way out of your problems. He would rather that you don’t get into problems.

The message to the people here in Amos 4 is that they are boasting in the good they think they have done...but it’s pointless. God wants their hearts over their sacrifices. He wants them to love him and follow him all their days. We would do well to learn the lesson too that God wants all of us – not just a little sacrifice here and there. He wants us to bring all of our lives as a living sacrifice for this is our spiritual act of worship (Romans 12:1-2).

**Pray:** asking God’s forgiveness for boasting in the wrong things.

**Reflect:** do I love God with all of my heart, soul, mind and being?

*But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream. (v.24)*

Catherine Booth, along with her husband William Booth, co-founded the Christian Revival Association, a precursor to the Salvation Army. She pioneered the women's work for that movement, and she was so well-loved that when she died, 36,000 people attended her funeral. A tireless worker, she once observed that revival ministry could often be discouraging. "What a deal there is of going to meetings and getting blessed," she complained, "and then going away and living just the same, until sometimes we, who are constantly engaged in trying to bring people nearer the heart of God, go away so discouraged that our hearts are almost broken."

Perhaps Amos felt the same way as he preached to the people of Israel. On the surface there seemed to be considerable religious interest. Many people claimed to long for the Day of the Lord, perhaps interpreted by them as a day when God would give them a decisive victory over their enemies. Amos corrected their thinking by pointing out that the Day of the Lord would be a day of judgment. He warned that for the unprepared, it would be an unremitting series of calamities. He compared the people of Israel to a fugitive who runs away from one threat only to find another (v.18-19).

Amos is encouraging the people to seriously consider the state of their own hearts and to seek out God while they can. Three times he says to seek – '*seek me and live*' (v.4), '*seek the LORD and live*' (v.6), '*seek good not evil that you may live*' (v.14). Despite the people's continual sin against God, God is willing to reach out. Still the Lord appeals for their repentance. Although Israel had time and again defiled themselves with idolatry and sin, God still called for their return.

God is not willing that any perish...but there is a day coming when it will be too late. Let's not tire of trying to share the gospel with others that they may return to the Lord.

**Pray:** asking God for strength and boldness in sharing the good news.

**Reflect:** am I discouraged because people do not respond to the gospel?

*Woe to you who are complacent in Zion, and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria. (v.1)*

In his book “Seize the Day: Seven Steps to Achieving the Extraordinary in an Ordinary World”, author Danny Cox writes about a problem that arose when fighter jets were first invented. When some pilots ejected, they had a tendency to grip the seat instead of letting go, keeping their parachutes from opening. In order to solve this problem, engineers had to find a way to force the pilot out of his seat. Cox writes: “The new design called for a two-inch webbed strap. One end attached to the front edge of the seat, under the pilot. The other end attached to an electronic take-up reel behind the headrest. Two seconds after ejection, the electronic take-up reel would immediately take up the slack, and force the pilot forward out of his seat, thus freeing the parachute.”

God was on a similar quest with His people, seeking a way to force them “out of their seats.” One of the main reasons Israel’s spiritual life had declined was because God’s people had grown complacent (v.1). They had grown smug and self-confident, deriving a sense of false security from the prosperity they had enjoyed over the years. This had led them to believe that they were exempt from divine judgment. This was true of both the southern kingdom of Judah (Zion) and the northern kingdom of Israel (Mount Samaria). The leaders of Judah and Samaria seemed to have believed that, since they had a special place in God’s plan, they would enjoy prosperity and escape the judgment of their neighbours (v.2). Yet they had consistently ignored God, rebelled against him and gone their own way. They had ignored the warnings through the prophets and carried on in their sin.

There is a warning here for us to not settle for complacency and to keep striving to live for God and be all he has called us to be. May we never think we have made...because when we do there is nothing surer than the fact that we have not made it!

**Pray:** asking God to keep us from becoming complacent.

**Reflect:** in what areas of my life am I tempted to become complacent?

*Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel; I will spare them no longer. (v.8)*

Writer Calvin Miller once noted, “Great communication is based on liking our audience rather than fearing them.” One of the secrets to being an effective evangelist is to empathise with those you hope to reach. We may not like everything that they do but we must care about them.

This was true of Amos. The compassion he felt for those to whom he had been sent infuses today’s passage. When the Lord showed him a series of visions foretelling the destruction of Israel, Amos pleaded with God on Israel’s behalf. In the first vision he saw a swarm of locusts ready to destroy the harvest. This was after the first harvest had been gathered and just as the second crop was starting to come up (v.1).

In our culture today we may miss the significance of this timing. The second crop was planted late in the season in order to benefit from the spring rains. A swarm of locusts then would mean that there would be no time left to plant another crop. Anything planted would die, since there was no rain to sustain it. Since the first crop was ‘*the king’s share*’ people depended upon the second crop for their survival. In Amos’s vision, the locusts ‘*stripped the land clean.*’ Instead of rejoicing because God’s sinful people were getting what they deserved, Amos cried out in anguish and begged God to forgive (v.2). The Lord granted the prophet’s request and relented.

Sometime after this Amos saw another vision. This time the Lord called for ‘*judgment by fire*’ to destroy the crops and dry up the underground water supply (v.4). Many Bible scholars believe this referred to a possible drought. Once again, Amos pleaded with God to relent and judgment was delayed (v.5–6).

May we have a heart of compassion like Amos that we would continually be on our knees pleading with the Lord for people we know and love.

**Pray:** for someone you know and love who does not yet know the Lord.

**Reflect:** do I pray regularly for the lost?