

What is the Danger of Worship that Pleases Us?

Amos 4

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On the first weekend of September, I shared with you my own journey in learning about worship. I worshipped at the same church for 20 years from childhood to young adulthood. So I grew up learning a form and approach to worship. I thought our way was the only way. I discovered songs that I liked that became favorites. Our church had a rich preaching tradition. So I looked forward to the messages.

Then I moved to Edmonton to begin seminary. I went to different worship services and gatherings. I noticed that I often experienced frustration at those services. Why? Sometimes they didn't choose any of the songs I liked. Sometimes, they chose one of my favorites but they didn't sing it the way I was used to. Sometimes they cut short a song I liked. Or they did something different in the worship service that I wasn't used to. Sometimes the messages were very different. So I found worship frustrating or unsatisfying if it wasn't something I liked. I would only feel at home when I was home.

But looking back, I wonder how often I really engaged in the worship of God. I wonder if sometimes I looked more for sentimentality or a warm feeling. I wonder if sometimes I came not with a desire to please God but a checklist to grade the worship service. Maybe more often than not, I thought much more about myself and whether I was pleased rather than if He was pleased.

There's nothing wrong with having favorite songs or that feeling of home when you get to a church that does things in a familiar way to you. The problem arises when we expect these as a necessity for worship. If we can only worship when our favorite songs are sung or we feel at home, are we actually focused on pleasing God?

We're exploring worship this fall. We've started into the minor prophet Amos. God commissioned him to deliver a message to Israel, the nation north of his home country Judah. Some of this message concerned their worship. Today we are going to see God through Amos call out the Israelites for their worship.

He will have a hard message for them. But I want to encourage you to look for God and His character through this passage. You may be here today hard pressed by life. You may have had a difficult week or you're journeying through a tough time in your life. But I want to encourage you and all of us today with what we will discover about God in this passage. We will see more of Him. The more we see of God as He really is and has revealed Himself to be, the more we will know the One we can turn to especially in difficult moments in our lives.

Today we seek an answer to one question. What is the danger of self-pleasing worship? We will see what the Israelites were doing and how God responded to it. But we will also see God and the benefits of God-pleasing worship. I pray that God will encourage all of us today in what He reveals about Himself through His Word.

Amos 4 (ESV) - (Page 652)

4 “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan,
 who are on the mountain of Samaria,
 who oppress the poor, who crush the needy,
 who say to your husbands, ‘Bring, that we may drink!’

²The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness
 that, behold, the days are coming upon you,
 when they shall take you away with hooks,
 even the last of you with fishhooks.

³And you shall go out through the breaches,
 each one straight ahead;
 and you shall be cast out into Harmon,”
 declares the LORD.

⁴“Come to Bethel, and transgress;
 to Gilgal, and multiply transgression;
 bring your sacrifices every morning,
 your tithes every three days;

⁵offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving of that which is leavened,
 and proclaim freewill offerings, publish them;
 for so you love to do, O people of Israel!”
 declares the Lord GOD.

⁶“I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities,
 and lack of bread in all your places,
 yet you did not return to me,”
 declares the LORD.

⁷“I also withheld the rain from you
 when there were yet three months to the harvest;
 I would send rain on one city,
 and send no rain on another city;
 one field would have rain,
 and the field on which it did not rain would wither;

⁸so two or three cities would wander to another city
 to drink water, and would not be satisfied;

yet you did not return to me,”

declares the LORD.

⁹ “I struck you with blight and mildew;

your many gardens and your vineyards,

your fig trees and your olive trees the locust devoured;

yet you did not return to me,”

declares the LORD.

¹⁰ “I sent among you a pestilence after the manner of Egypt;

I killed your young men with the sword,

and carried away your horses,

and I made the stench of your camp go up into your nostrils;

yet you did not return to me,”

declares the LORD.

¹¹ “I overthrew some of you,

as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah,

and you were as a brand plucked out of the burning;

yet you did not return to me,”

declares the LORD.

¹² “Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel;

because I will do this to you,

prepare to meet your God, O Israel!”

¹³ For behold, he who forms the mountains and creates the wind,

and declares to man what is his thought,

who makes the morning darkness,

and treads on the heights of the earth—

the LORD, the God of hosts, is his name!

What was happening? The first three verses describe a problem with the wealthy women of the nation. These women live “on the mountain of Samaria” the capital city of the northern kingdom. Amos calls them the “cows of Bashan.” I don’t think that’s a compliment. If I went into the fireside room on Thursday morning at Ladies Morning Out and remarked “look at the gathering of the cows of St. Albert,” I don’t think I’d receive a positive response. Bashan was a very fertile region known for prosperity in croplands and farm animals. The actual cows from Bashan enjoyed plenty of food and great health because of land quality.

Amos draws a parallel between those well fed and healthy cows with the well fed and wealthy women. But their wealth and health came at the expense of others. “Here this word, you cows of Bashan, who oppress the poor, who crush

the needy,” Amos portrays a group of women who likely have wealthy husbands. Yet they have not recognized God’s blessing in this wealth nor have they been humble about it. Maybe they have servants and workers. Maybe they drove them mercilessly with hard labor to oppress them. Maybe they paid them poorly or went back on their word to pay fair wages so they crushed them.

But they were also demanding of their husbands. They command them to “Bring, so we may drink.” It’s almost like they treat their husbands as servants or demand their husbands provide so that they can simply order bottles of wine for their pleasure. So these wealthy women oppressed the poor, crushed the needy and were very demanding towards their own husbands. Last week how we saw Amos called out the Israelites for flaunting their oppression of the poor while they worshipped. Here is another instance of this oppression.

So in verses 2 and 3, God responds. He swears by his holiness that He will act. Now when someone swears by something or someone, they add power or strength to their oath. So when people used to swear on the Bible in court to tell the truth, they claimed that there was more power behind their oath than their own word. It was like they added something more than their word – the truth of the Bible or the certainty of God’s Word. Now God doesn’t need to add strength to His own oaths. But to communicate with us about the seriousness of His oaths, He sometimes refers to parts of His character. So in Isaiah 62:8, He swears by his right hand and mighty arm. This means He will do what is promised based on His strength. In Jeremiah 44:26, the Lord swears by His great name. He backs up His oath with the reputation of His great name.

Here He swears on His holiness. He strengthens the certainty that He will certainly do what He says. God’s holiness demands that He not lie. It demands that He must deal with sin. These wealthy women oppressed the poor and crushed the needy, both sins in God’s eyes. So He takes an oath by his holiness that judgment will come upon them. “The days are coming upon you when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks. And you shall go out through the breaches, each one straight ahead.” This describes an ancient city whose walls have been breached. The battle is over. The conquerors now take the surviving citizens as captives. These wealthy women will somehow be attached to a hook or hooked onto a line and led out as captives. One commentator notes that ancient Assyrian reliefs or pictures carved into stone show captives marching off into exile with each prisoner connected to a rope through a hook in their nose or lip. They won’t have to turn left or right when they approach the city walls. There will be so many holes

in the walls that they can go straight ahead. It is the picture of total defeat of the nation and removal of privilege from these women. So God will certainly respond to their oppressive behavior.

Amos then then makes a shocking statement. “Come to Bethel and transgress or sin.” Or in today’s terms “come and worship in a sinful way.” Last week we learned Bethel was an alternative worship center set up in the northern kingdom as a rival to the Lord’s temple in Jerusalem. Amos invites the worshippers to go to their alternative worship center and sin. Gilgal was another alternative worship place. He says “Go to Gilgal and multiply your transgressions or sins.” So he tells them to go worship while alerting them that their worship actually was a sin against the Lord.

Then he describes what they did. “Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every 3 days; offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving of that which is leavened, and proclaim freewill offerings.” Well that sounds like pretty standard Israelite worship. Yet there is something wrong with it.

They didn’t bring sacrifices every morning. Nor did they tithe every three days. They would bring sacrifices to the temple maybe 3 times a year. When they arrived, they might offer their sacrifice on the first day and bring their tithe on the third day. But here they sacrifice every day and bring repeated tithes. Amos portrays a people very devoted to their religious practices. But it was not a worship that pleased God. Why? Because they oppressed the poor and needy and they focused on themselves in worship. Look at what Amos says in the last part of verse 5. “Proclaim free will offerings and publish them for so you love to do O people of Israel.” This was self-pleasing worship that focused on them. So, I tried to step back for a moment and imagine what picture of God did they have to worship in this way?

What kind of God were the Israelites worshipping in Amos 4:4-5? They thought it was okay to worship at Bethel and Gilgal, not God’s designated place of worship on Mount Zion in Jerusalem at the temple. So they dictated to God where he needed to come so he could receive worship. It was like they worshipped a **needy God who desperately depended on people’s worship**. They acted like they were doing God a favor and they were in charge. They acted like God was needy. He is so desperate for their sacrifices and praise that he would accommodate to whatever they wanted and meet them wherever they desired.

They were also comfortable with oppression. Amos describes religiously devoted people who did over and above what was actually required in the worship rituals. But they are cruel and oppressive towards the poor and needy. Yet they apparently believed that God would still accept their sacrifices. So they act as if they serve a **corrupt God who can**

be bought off to ignore injustice. “As long as we give sacrifices and tithes, God will accept our worship regardless of what we’re doing with the rest of our lives.”

They also engaged in a worship of celebration exclusive of any other aspect of worship. They sacrificed thanksgiving and freewill offerings. These indicate a worship of celebration. Now celebration is certainly part of worshipping the Lord. But it can be inappropriate if God called from them a different kind of response. We’ve seen God’s perspective on their hearts. God has pointed out many areas of concern about their lifestyle and worship. So celebration was not appropriate in light of their current relationship with God.

If your boss or manager came to you with news that the company’s survival along with your job was in question, you wouldn’t say to them “well let’s go out and party! You would hopefully want to hear the concerns and try to figure out a way to help save your job or company. It would not be time for a social celebration but serious deliberation.

That was the case here. But the Israelites were so out of tune with God they just kept on celebrating when they needed some confessing. They worshipped as if God was **an unholy god who did not care about sin and repentance.** If our worship is only celebration all the time, we might be missing what God calls from us or what others need to offer the Lord during difficult times.

Amos also notes “They proclaimed and published their freewill offerings. They “loved to do” this. So they loved worship that brought them praise. Can you imagine if we advertised that people should come to our worship service because someone give a big gift next Sunday? “Come to Sturgeon Valley next week. Someone will place 100 hundred thousand dollars cash in the offering plate.” So people tell their friends to come and lay eyes on all this cash. The offering plate approaches this person with a spotlight on them. Then the offering plate stops and the person begins dumping their hundred dollar bills onto the plate. We have our camera zoom in and the whole congregation awaits holding their breath. When the person finishes, everyone claps. After the service, many people talk to the person, pat them on their back and praise them for their generous gift. And no one leaves talking of the Lord.

Now there’s certainly nothing wrong with someone who decides to give 100 thousand if God blesses them and calls them to do this. But the motive for giving must not be to get glory. Yet by publishing their giving in this way, it was like they worshipped a **weak god whose glory could be easily overtaken by a person who does a good deed.**

Remember the quote from Danny Carroll, a professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College, said “We think if we get worship right, we will encounter God. But we’ve got to get God right so we can worship God appropriately.” The Israelites had a very warped view of God and it showed up in a self-pleasing, self-focused worship. Danny Carroll points out that churches do this all the time and worship a god of their own making. If it’s a health and wealth church, then they sing to the god of health and wealth. If it’s a left wing church, they sing and worship the God of the environment and equality and rights and activism. If it’s a right wing church, it can worship a god of country and nationalism and capitalism. Without even knowing it, a church can begin worshipping an idol of their own creation rather than the one true God.

This is what Israel was doing. They pleased themselves in worship. They worshipped a god of their own making.

What is the problem with self-pleasing worship?

It can blind us to God’s actions. (4:6-11) They celebrated while God called them to repentance. Verses 6-11 describe God’s intense actions on behalf of Israel. God attempted to get them to turn back to Him. He put them through famine where their teeth were clean because they had no food. But they did not return to Him. He withheld rain so many of them had to wander for water. Yet they didn’t return to Him. He struck their crops with blight and mildew. But they didn’t return to him. He sent war and allowed them to be conquered so that they lost horses and smelled their own dead. Yet they did not return to him. He overthrew them like Sodom was overthrown way back in Genesis 19. Yet they did not return to Him.

They just kept on celebrating in their worship because they were blind to God’s actions. They were blind to His call of repentance on their lives. They sensed nothing because they weren’t worshipping the one true God.

But the second perhaps more damaging result of self-pleasing worship is that **It can blind us to God’s true character. (4:12-13)** The Israelites worshipped a god who was needy, corrupt, unholy and weak. So they worshipped accordingly. But what is God really like? The last 2 verses correct the Israelites misconceptions about God.

But what is the true character of God?

He is a God who follows through on Judgment. Verse 12 “Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel; because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel.” This verse is a little mysterious. What is God going to do to Israel? All he says is “This I will do to you.” But what is this? We don’t know. But we do know that it’s not good news. It’s not

like God calls them to celebrate. He calls them to prepare to meet the Almighty God. They must brace themselves for His arrival. They will face what He has decided to do because they did not return to Him.

One commentator writes *“The haunting uncertainty in Amos’s words makes the threat of judgment even more ominous. This yet to be specified judgment is to come when Israel meets her God, and she is told to prepare for that awful moment. Israel will meet her God not in a face to face sense, as he intervenes in history to bring her destruction. When she meets her God, she will finally learn the nature of the coming judgment.”* So God follows through on His promise to hold people to account.

But then verse 13 ends with a hymn. It is a glorious summary of the true nature of God. Perhaps God wanted to remind them of what He was really like as they prepared to meet Him. To the Israelites, these realities may have been terrifying. But to us they can be that great comfort today.

So what is God like according to Amos 4:13? **He forms the mountains.** Forms refers to God’s activity in creation. But notice the tense of the word form *“He forms the mountains.”* Wouldn’t we expect it to say *“He formed the mountains”* long ago? But Hebrew theology assumed a role for God in both creating and sustaining His universe. So God formed and continues to form mountains.

God **creates the wind.** Notice again it is an ongoing action. Create means to initiate or start. God is ultimately behind the start of the wind. In our study of Matthew we learned that even the wind and the waves obeyed Jesus when He was out on the boat. He created them after all.

God **declares what humans think.** He declares to man what is his thought whose thoughts will God declare. It might seem that God reveals His thoughts to man here. It could point to God revealing some of His thoughts to humans which would be a great and profound gift. But it can also mean that God reveals man’s thoughts to man. God reveals humanity’s real motives. Psalm 139:2 states *“You know when I sit and when I stand. You discern my thoughts from afar.”* In Matthew 9:4, Jesus knew the thoughts of the men who criticized Him for pronouncing forgiveness on the paralytic. In John 2:24-25 we read *“But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.”* God knows our thoughts and reveals them to us. He knows us better than we know ourselves. So we can turn to Him to help us understand ourselves.

God also **makes the morning darkness**. We get a clue to what Amos means by this in chapter 5:8. There Amos says “He who made Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into the morning and darkens the day into night, the Lord is His name.” So this points to Lord’s governance over the daily pattern of the earth. He is ultimately the one that performs that transforming miracle we experience every day – night is followed by the morning. .

God **treads on the heights of the earth**. This is a majestic metaphor of God striding over the hills and mountains. Since it takes man hours and days to accomplish such a feat, it demonstrates God’s superiority over man and sovereignty over His creation.

But perhaps the greatest revelation of God in this verse occurs in the final phrase. It names God and calls him “The Lord, the God of hosts is his name!” Hosts may mean heavenly bodies like stars or planets. But more likely it refers to spiritual beings or angels. God is Lord over angel armies and He is Lord over enemy angels. This is a picture of the all-powerful Lord over the universe. He is **Lord over the angel armies**.

This God is infinitely different than the one worshipped by the Israelites. One commentator states, *“Every believer can take comfort in the fact that while sometimes it seems that God does not interfere in human affairs, the world is never out of his control. His sovereignty extends to every aspect of human experience.”* Now Israel knows she is not dealing with some local mountain deity but the Lord of Hosts over the universe. This needs to be the God we worship.

So we must **ask for Jesus’ help to worship in a God-pleasing**. We must ask Him to help us worship in spirit and truth. We must ask Jesus to continually reveal God to us so we can respond with appropriate God-pleasing worship.

Worship that pleases us can justify our sins and ignore God’s warnings. Worship that pleases God heeds His warnings and exposes our sin.

Worship that pleases us reinforces a soul-destroying self-sufficient attitude towards God. Worship that pleases God exposes soul-destroying self-sufficiency and turns our focus to God-centered sufficiency.

Worship that pleases us turn us away from the greatest source of our encouragement and strength. But worship that pleases God reminds us of our great Provider who will help us.

Worship that pleases us reinforces a self-centered life purpose. Worship that pleases God reorients us to a God-centered life purpose.

Worship that pleases us can blind us from God's actions and true character. Worship that pleases God can open our eyes to God's actions and true character.

If you are experiencing frustration in worship, maybe it would help to examine why? Have you been worshipping the wrong God? Is the focus on you and whether or not you're getting what you like? I'm coming at you as some mature worshipper who has it all together in this area. It has taken decades for God to work on me in this area. But I testify that the more I aim to please God in my worship, the more I seem to connect with Him and the less frustrations I experience.

If you don't know God, the text of Amos 4 applies to you in a way. You are not prepared to meet God. But Christ has made a way for you to be prepared to meet God. He gave Himself up and spilt His blood on the cross so that you might know and fellowship with the Mighty Lord of hosts. Will you turn to Christ today?

I pray that we all will continue to grow in worshipping God as He really is.