

Amos 4:6-11

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/amos/amos-4/amos-46-11/>

Amos spells out several calamities that the LORD sent to Israel to catch their attention so that they might return to Him. But all this was done to no avail. The Israelites refuse to return to the LORD their God.

The prophet now spells out several calamities the LORD had sent to Israel to get their attention: famine, drought, crop failure, blight, mildew and caterpillar, plague and war, and overthrow. Each is something the LORD had sent to Israel. Each had caused great pain and sorrow among the Israelite community. Yet the people did not recognize that the LORD was speaking to them through those calamities. They continued to exploit their neighbors and self-justify with religious hypocrisy, with no intention of serving the LORD their God in obedience, loving others as themselves (Leviticus 19:18).

The first calamity was famine. This was one of the disciplines the Lord promised in His covenant with Israel if they departed from following His ways of treating their neighbor as they desired to be treated (Deuteronomy 28:48, 57). The LORD declared, *But I gave you also cleanness of teeth in all your cities and lack of bread in all your places*. The phrase *cleanness of teeth* is an idiom for famine. It is synonymous with the phrase *lack of bread*. The idea is that when people have nothing to eat, their teeth remain clean. Here God said that when He sent famine to the Israelite land, it covered *all their cities and all their places*. God did so to punish His covenant people to see if they would be willing to return to Him. Yet *the LORD* declared that they had *not returned* to Him. Israel should have recognized this famine as a promised discipline for departing from their covenant. Verses 4-5 imply that they were too steeped in their own self-justification to be able to see God's perspective.

The second calamity God sent to His people was drought, a prolonged period of abnormally low rainfall which led to a shortage of water. The LORD *withheld the rain from Israel while there were still three months until harvest*. In Israel, *rain* is seasonal and is linked to the cycles of vegetative growth, harvest, and dormancy. The *rain* would normally fall from October to April (in the winter) to allow crops to germinate, grow, and mature during Summer (May and June).

However, God withheld *the rain while there were still three months until harvest*, which would cause the crops to fail. He *would send rain on one city and on another city, He would not send rain*. This meant the rain would come in spots, *one part would be rained on, while the part not rained on would dry up*. As a result, *two or three cities would stagger (or wander) to another city to drink water but would not be satisfied*. People from various cities went *to another city* with the hope of finding fresh water to satisfy their thirst but there was not enough water for them to drink. Such a drought was intended to send a signal that God was trying to get their attention. The selective rain was highly unusual, and was directed by God. It was meant to teach and direct Israel. Yet, as the *LORD* declared, they had *not returned* to Him.

The third and fourth calamity are found together in the same verse. The LORD said, *I smote you with scorching wind and mildew; and the caterpillar was devouring your many gardens and vineyards, fig trees and olive trees.* The term *scorching wind* refers to hot east winds blowing for days at a time. It can potentially dry up vegetation and destroy crops (Isaiah 37:27; Psalm 90:5–6). The term *mildew* means “paleness” and refers to the disease caused by a type of fungus. This fungus could have occurred because plants were made vulnerable from the damage from destructive east winds.

The fourth calamity was occasioned by *caterpillar*. This Hebrew word is translated in Joel as “locusts” (Joel 1:4). These diseases and insects devoured the Israelite *gardens, vineyards, fig trees and olive trees*. God sent pests to the Israelite land to see if the people would return to Him. Yet, *the LORD* declared that they had *not returned* to Him.

The fifth chastisement was occasioned by *plague*. The LORD stated, *I sent a plague among you after the manner of Egypt.* The image of *plague* as a corrective blow would have reminded Israel of the ten plagues that the LORD their God sent to Pharaoh and the Egyptians during the Israelite sojourn in Egypt. God sent the plagues to get Pharaoh’s attention, to prompt him to listen to God and follow His ways. The Egyptians suffered great defeat because they refused to listen to God’s word through Moses and release the enslaved Israelites (Exodus 7–11). So, after the tenth plague in which the LORD struck all the firstborn of Egyptians, Pharaoh finally released the people of God (Exodus 12:29–32). Here in Amos, the Israelites learned that the LORD their God *sent a plague* to them in a similar manner to that with which He struck the Egyptians, to get their attention and command their obedience.

The LORD’s sixth chastisement was to wage war against His people. God stated, *I slew your young men by the sword along with your captured horses.* In the ancient Near East and in the Greco-Roman world, the *sword* was the most important weapon of warfare. With that weapon God slew the *young men* among Israel and took away their *horses*. The *young men* are those mustered as soldiers to go into battle. Being without *horses* or *swords* means the people were defeated, disarmed, no longer able to defend themselves. The LORD then *made the stench of the Israelite camp rise up in their nostrils*. This could mean that He caused them to smell the bad odor of the dead bodies in their camp, indicating a terrible slaughter. God did all these things to see if the Israelites would turn from their wicked ways to cling to Him. Yet, as He declared, they had *not returned* to Him.

The seventh and final visitation in this inventory was a disastrous event in which the LORD *overthrew* Israel as He *overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah*. In Genesis 19, we learn about the destruction of *Sodom and Gomorrah* because of the wickedness of the people: “Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven, and He overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground” (Genesis 19:24–25). The overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah was divine intervention. As when the LORD *overthrew* Sodom and Gomorrah, He *overthrew* Israel.

Although Israel was overthrown, God had spared them from total defeat and exile. He pictures their rescue with an image: they *were like a firebrand snatched from a blaze*. This means that the Israelites who survived were like a burning branch plucked or *snatched* from the fire before it

was consumed (Zechariah 3:2). *Fire* is often used in the Bible as a picture of judgement. Israel had been saved from complete ruin at the last moment. Again, God was trying to send them a message to repent and begin to follow His covenant law, and treat one another well. Despite all these calamities, the LORD declared that His covenant people had *not returned to Him*. As we will see, since they had not learned and repented, now they are going to be fully defeated and go into exile.

Within this paragraph, the refrain *Yet you have not returned to Me, declares the LORD* is repeated five times to display Israel's level of disobedience. God sent calamity after calamity to try to catch His people's attention, telling them they needed to repent, to change their perspective about what was in their self-interest, and begin to treat others as they desire to be treated, to love their neighbor as themselves (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39). But the covenant people of God did not learn from any of those calamities and did not return to their LORD, their Suzerain (Ruler) God. Therefore, in the next section, the LORD will meet His people in a terrifying confrontation of judgment.

Biblical Text

**⁶“But I gave you also cleanness of teeth in all your cities
And lack of bread in all your places,
Yet you have not returned to Me,” declares the Lord.**

**⁷“Furthermore, I withheld the rain from you
While *there were* still three months until harvest.
Then I would send rain on one city
And on another city I would not send rain;
One part would be rained on,
While the part not rained on would dry up.**

**⁸“So two or three cities would stagger to another city to drink water,
But would not be satisfied;
Yet you have not returned to Me,” declares the Lord.**

**⁹“I smote you with scorching *wind* and mildew;
And the caterpillar was devouring
Your many gardens and vineyards, fig trees and olive trees;
Yet you have not returned to Me,” declares the Lord.**

**¹⁰“I sent a plague among you after the manner of Egypt;
I slew your young men by the sword along with your captured horses,
And I made the stench of your camp rise up in your nostrils;
Yet you have not returned to Me,” declares the Lord.**

**¹¹“I overthrew you, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah,
And you were like a firebrand snatched from a blaze;
Yet you have not returned to Me,” declares the Lord.**