

Amos 5:4-7

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/amos/amos-5/amos-54-7/>

Although the nation Israel will be destroyed in the prime of her youth, Amos calls Israel to seek God so that they may live.

In the face of Israel's impending demise, there was still a ray of hope because God is merciful, and His steadfast love never ceases (Lamentations 3:22–23). Therefore, Amos reported what the LORD had said *to the house of Israel: Seek Me that you may live!* To *seek* God means to repent from evil and turn to God in faith (v. 14). In Chapter 4 we saw that the rulers were very observant in their religious activities, but this performative religion was only used to justify their evil behavior; the worship was not affecting the way they lived, so was therefore useless. Seeking God involves true repentance, turning our hearts toward God's ways, believing that His ways are the way of our true self-interest. God now provides some instruction on what the people can do in order *that you may live*. It seems from the following instructions God has in mind both preserving their physical life, as well as restoring their quality of life by leading them to follow God in Spirit and truth.

God admonished the people, saying *But do not resort to Bethel and do not come to Gilgal. Bethel and Gilgal* were cited in Chapter 4 as being the places where empty worship was occurring. Both are cities within the kingdom of Samaria (Israel). Perhaps in telling them to *not resort* to these places, God is encouraging them to stop relying on false worship, and start actually following God's ways, as God admonished them to *seek Me*.

Bethel is one of two cities established as a seat of worship for the northern kingdom (Israel) by its first ruler (1 Kings 12:26–30). Jeroboam placed a golden calf there. So part of the reason the worship might have been empty is that the people were treating the true God the same as they would an idol—as a power to be manipulated to their own end.

Gilgal was a seat of power, so also might have been a place of refuge. God might be telling them not to rely on the military capability of Samaria. God has already made it clear these cities would fall, so Israel will have an opportunity to *live* by staying away from the battle, and relying on God rather than on the Samaritan military, which will be decimated, figuratively and literally.

God adds an instruction for them to “live,” *nor cross over to Beersheba*. Beersheba is located in the southern part of Judah, and was not a part of the kingdom of Samaria (also called Israel). God might be also telling them to not flee into the neighboring country of Judah in order to live. It might be that God is telling them their best way to live is to submit to going into exile.

Like *Bethel and Gilgal*, the city called *Beersheba* was a religious site where the children of Abraham worshiped. Unlike Bethel and Gilgal, Beersheba was located in the far south of the land in the territory of the kingdom of Judah. Abraham worshiped the LORD there (Genesis 21:33), and it was also there that the sons of Samuel operated as judges (1 Samuel 8:1–2).

The Israelites voluntarily frequented their religious sites and prostrated themselves before the Suzerain God, expecting Him to be satisfied with their religious formalism and to bless them. But the LORD told His people that He would not be impressed by religious rituals offered at any of those sites. He then used a play on words to give the reasons why it was necessary to avoid those sites: *For Gilgal will certainly go into captivity*. In a similar vein, God said, *Bethel will go to trouble*. The word translated as *trouble* here can also be translated as “nothing.” Thus, *Bethel* which means “the house of God” would be reduced to nothing. There was no true spiritual sustenance at these places, and there was no source of effective military protection to be had. It seems likely that as the invasion approached, conventional wisdom would be to seek refuge in these strongholds. God advises the people against it, because God is not heeding the worship there, and defeat is certain.

Having told the people what the LORD had decreed, Amos admonished them, saying, *Seek the LORD that you may live!* It seems the LORD had just advised individuals on how they might survive the coming onslaught. But now God seems to offer hope that even now, with judgement certain, the LORD might relent if they would repent of their wicked ways and *seek the LORD*. At this point, it is clear that the nation will fall under judgement; it is just a matter of time. They need to repent immediately now, *Or He will break forth like a fire*. The *fire* here likely represents God’s judgement. The Bible calls God a “consuming fire” (Deuteronomy 4:24; 9:3; Hebrews 12:29). Evil is torched in God’s presence.

The fire of God’s judgement will come, and Amos now aims this admonition to *O house of Joseph*, telling them the *fire will consume with none to quench it for Bethel*. Again, we see Bethel is going to be destroyed.

The phrase *house of Joseph* is another term used to refer to the northern kingdom of Israel, whose main tribe was Ephraim. Ephraim was one of the two sons of Joseph (Genesis 48:14–20). Both of Joseph’s sons, Ephraim and Manasseh were awarded allotments of land, so that there were twelve tribes who gained land (with the Levites not getting land, since their job was to attend to matters of worship.)

To *quench* means to extinguish (a fire), to cause the fire to cease to burn. Like *fire* which consumes everything on its path, with none to *quench* or extinguish it, the LORD would *break forth* to judge His disobedient people residing in *Bethel*. The judgement would come, and nothing would stop it. The only hope is immediate repentance, seeking God and His ways.

The reason for God’s consuming judgment of Israel is clearly spelled out in the next verse which reads, *For those who turn justice into wormwood and cast righteousness down to the earth*. The word *wormwood* is used metaphorically for bitterness. The idea is that the Israelites turned sweet justice into bitter exploitation. In doing so, they *cast righteousness* given to them from heaven *down to the earth*. Their covenant with God provided them heavenly guidance which they have ignored. As such, they violated God’s covenantal laws, which focus on leading God’s people to be self-governing, caring for one another, and loving their neighbor as they love themselves (Leviticus 19:18) as well as administering justice with full equality for all.

In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses commanded the people of Israel, saying, “You shall not distort justice; you shall not be partial, and you shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the righteous. Justice, *and only* justice, you shall pursue, that you may live and possess the land which the Lord your God is giving you” (Deuteronomy 16:19–20). Because the people of God ignored His covenantal laws, they would be severely judged. God would act as a consuming fire, judging His disobedient people.

Biblical Text

⁴ For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel,

“Seek Me that you may live.

⁵ “But do not resort to Bethel

And do not come to Gilgal,

Nor cross over to Beersheba;

For Gilgal will certainly go into captivity

And Bethel will come to trouble.

⁶ “Seek the Lord that you may live,

Or He will break forth like a fire, O house of Joseph,

And it will consume with none to quench *it* for Bethel,

⁷ For those who turn justice into wormwood

And cast righteousness down to the earth.”