

# Amos 9:1-4

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/amos/amos-9/amos-91-4/>

*Amos describes Israel's absolute inescapability from the impending judgment.*

Amos's fifth vision is different from the previous four. In the previous visions, the Suzerain (ruler) God "showed" Amos an object that symbolized His judgment, such as locusts, fire, or summer fruit (Amos 7:1, 4, 7; 8:1). However, nothing of this nature occurs here in the fifth vision. The prophet merely stated that he *saw the Lord standing beside the altar* (v. 1a) and reported what the Lord said from there (vv. 1b–15).

While the prophet did not specify the location of the *altar*, it is likely that he had in mind the one located in the main shrine of Bethel because of his use of the definite article "the" before the word "altar." By using the definite article, Amos seemed to point his audience to the royal sanctuary at Bethel, which exemplified Israel's hypocrisy and false religious worship (Amos 3:14). If this is so, then the LORD's presence at Bethel would lead His covenant people to anticipate blessings from Him. But the opposite was true: God was *standing beside the altar* at Bethel to pronounce judgment on His disobedient people. God would pronounce upon them curses for disobedience, according to the provisions of the covenant into which Israel entered with their Suzerain (ruler) God (Deuteronomy 28:14-68; 30:19).

Thus, the LORD said, *Smite the capitals so that the thresholds will shake*. To *smite* means to strike with a blow. Here the LORD issued a command to *smite the capitals*, referring to the tops of the pillars that uphold the roof of the building. The purpose of smiting *the capitals* was so that the *thresholds* or the foundations might *shake*. The entire building was targeted, from top to bottom. God is decreeing that the place of worship will be destroyed in the looming invasion. This would fulfill the covenant provision of cursings for disobedience from Deuteronomy 28, provisions Israel understood and had agreed to:

"The LORD will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, as the eagle swoops down, a nation whose language you shall not understand."  
(Deuteronomy 28:49)

"It shall besiege you in all your towns until your high and fortified walls in which you trusted come down throughout your land, and it shall besiege you in all your towns throughout your land which the LORD your God has given you."  
(Deuteronomy 28:52)

God also commanded to *break the capitals and thresholds on the heads of all the people*. That means, most of the Israelite worshipers who were inside the sanctuary would be killed when it collapsed. If any of them escaped, the Suzerain God would *slay the rest of them with the sword*. They would *not have a fugitive who would flee or a refugee who would escape* because God's judgment would be widespread and thorough.

That God's judgment would be widespread and thorough is exemplified in the next two verses in which God used two sets of extremities: 1) Sheol and heavens; and 2) summit of Carmel and bottom of the sea (vv. 2-3).

The LORD said, *Though they dig into Sheol, from there will My hand take them.* The term *Sheol* stands for grave and represents the lowest and deepest place imaginable. It is the underworld, the realm of the dead (Deuteronomy 32:22). If the Israelites were to *dig* into the depths of *Sheol* in an attempt to escape judgment, the LORD would stretch out His hand to retrieve them.

The LORD then used the complete opposite of Sheol to explain the magnitude of His judgment. He said, *And though they ascend to heaven, from there will I bring them down.* The term "heaven" is where the Suzerain or Ruler God has "established His throne" (Psalm 103:19). God used these two extremes (Sheol and heaven) to tell His covenant people that His judgment would be inescapable. No matter where the people of God tried to conceal themselves to avoid His judgment, He would find them because He is everywhere (Psalm 139:7-10).

Moreover, the LORD declared, *Though they hide on the summit of Carmel, I will search them out and take them from there.* Carmel was a mountainous ridge that had abundant woods, flowers, and vineyards (Amos 1:2). It stood eighteen hundred feet above sea level and was usually regarded as a place of refuge because of its multiple caves. The LORD told His people that neither the height of Mount Carmel, nor its abundant woods, nor its caves would provide refuge for them on the day of His judgment.

Like in the previous verse, the LORD here used another term, "sea" as an opposite of Mount Carmel to explain the magnitude of His judgment. He stated, *And though they conceal themselves from My sight on the floor of the sea, from there I will command the serpent and it will bite them.* From the *summit of Carmel* to the bottom of the *sea*, there is no place where God's people could hide themselves from Him. Even at the depths of the *sea*, God could command *the serpent* to bite anyone trying to escape His judgment.

Death was a part of the cursings for disobedience provision of the covenant which Israel had agreed to:

"The LORD shall cause you to be defeated before your enemies; you will go out one way against them, but you will flee seven ways before them, and you will be an example of terror to all the kingdoms of the earth. Your carcasses will be food to all birds of the sky and to the beasts of the earth, and there will be no one to frighten them away."  
(Deuteronomy 28:25-26)

Finally, God told His people that they would not be able to escape from His judgment by going into exile: *And though they go into captivity before their enemies, from there I will command the sword and it will kill them.* Those who would fall under God's judgment of death would not escape even if their enemies captured them and drove them out of the land of Israel. This makes clear that God's judgment would not be exile but death. Facing a different judgment such as exile would not satisfy God's wrath in this case. So, even if they fled from their land, they would be killed by *the sword*.

The disobedient Israelites who consistently took advantage of the poor and offered false worship to the LORD would be severely judged because the LORD would *set His eyes against them for harm not for good*. Early in Amos, the LORD had asked His covenant people to seek good and not evil so that they might live (Amos 5:14). But the Israelites refused to listen to God's warnings and continued to harm the poor and offer hypocritical worship to God.

Therefore, The LORD's hand would be against them *for harm*. God would invoke the covenant provisions of cursings for disobedience, which called for His disobedient people to experience death and destruction. God's preference was to bless them, but He did not have that opportunity, because they had not been faithful to His covenantal laws. The essence of the covenant laws is contained in the two great commands, to love God (Deuteronomy 6:5) and to love one's neighbor as one's self (Leviticus 19:18). Rather than loving their neighbors, the rulers of Israel were exploiting those whom they were supposed to be serving.

As the balance of this chapter will make clear, not all in Israel will die. This passage could be taken as insisting the inescapability that a large number of deaths will occur. It could also apply specifically to the leaders of Israel who were exploiting the poor, making clear that they would all perish.

### **Biblical Text**

**<sup>1</sup>I saw the Lord standing beside the altar, and He said,  
“Smite the capitals so that the thresholds will shake,  
And break them on the heads of them all!  
Then I will slay the rest of them with the sword;  
They will not have a fugitive who will flee,  
Or a refugee who will escape.  
<sup>2</sup>“Though they dig into Sheol,  
From there will My hand take them;  
And though they ascend to heaven,  
From there will I bring them down.  
<sup>3</sup>“Though they hide on the summit of Carmel,  
I will search them out and take them from there;  
And though they conceal themselves from My sight on the floor of the sea,  
From there I will command the serpent and it will bite them.  
<sup>4</sup>“And though they go into captivity before their enemies,  
From there I will command the sword that it slay them,  
And I will set My eyes against them for evil and not for good.”**