

How God Views Religion
Amos 4:1-5:17

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In The Washington Post on February 2, 2018, Bob Smietana wrote an article titled, *“For Tom Brady, Football has Become Religion.”*

He noted that Tom Brady, who was quarterback for the New England Patriots, at that time, was on a spiritual quest. Football had become Brady’s religion.

Gotham Chopra, a filmmaker who did a behind-the-scenes documentary about the quarterback’s preparations for that past NFL season stated:

“What’s really at the epicenter of this is his devotional love for the game. It is his vocation—it’s what gives his life meaning and purpose.”

Brady stated, *“I want to know the whys in life. I want to know why we’re here, where we’re going; trying to find that deeper purpose. To live it, through sports, in a very authentic way, makes so much sense to me.”*

For Chopra, son of best-selling spiritual writer Deepak Chopra and a devoted Boston sports fan, seeing sports as religion makes sense.

Both create community, have saints and rituals, and take place on hallowed ground.

One of the great challenges we face today is how to worship God. All people have an understanding that there is a God and that He is to be worshiped.

But, because people are in rebellion against God, we want to worship either the god we fashion, like Tom Brady, or the true God in the way we fashion.

Yet God has told us that we're to worship Him in the way that He had prescribed in Scripture. That's known as the Regulative Principle of Worship.

This is one of the reasons that Amos was sent by God to speak to His covenant people in the northern kingdom of Israel.

Remember, earlier in this book, when Amos was pointing out the sins of the surrounding nations.

As Amos was pointing out these issues, the people were happy that God's prophet spoke against those pagan nations.

Then, Amos turned the table and surprised the Israelites when he told them that God had a message for them, too—and it wasn't a pleasant one.

Now, at this time, the people of Israel and Judah were experiencing tremendous prosperity, and, because of this, they believed it was a sign of God's blessing on them.

As far as they were concerned, God was blessing them because they were religious and worshipped the one, true God.

The problem, however, was that they were determining how to worship God, and God wasn't pleased with their self-determined worship.

So, let's learn how God views religion.

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Amos 4:4, *“Go to Bethel and sin; go to Gilgal and sin yet more. Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three years.”*

Amos 5:5-6, *“Seek me and live; do not seek Bethel, do not go to Gilgal, do not journey to Beersheba. For Gilgal will surely go into exile, and Bethel will be reduced to nothing. Seek the Lord and live, or he will sweep through the tribes of Joseph like a fire; it will devour them, and Bethel will have no one to quench it.”*

Here we see how God views problematic worship. The Israelites believed that God was pleased with their religious expressions, but He wasn't. They had corrupted the worship of God and turned to idols.

In Amos' day, the religion of the northern kingdom was focused in three locations Bethel, Gilgal, and Beersheba.

This first location, Bethel, was where Amos began his prophecy against Israel and, perhaps, conducted most of his ministry. But why was the worship at Bethel problematic.

Now, you may recall that Bethel was associated with the patriarch Jacob. He rested there when he fled from his brother Esau, after cheating him out of his birthright.

That night, as Jacob slept, he had a dream in which he saw angels ascending and descending on a ladder that reached to heaven.

It was here that God spoke to Jacob and restated the covenant He had made with Abraham and Isaac.

Genesis 28:15, *“I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”*

When Jacob awoke that morning, he was impressed that God was in that place and called it *“Bethel,”* which means *“house of God.”*

Later, when Jacob returned from Paddan Aram, he visited Bethel remembering that it was there *“where God had talked with him.”*

Over time, God’s people began to worship there thinking that God would meet with them, too.

King Jeroboam even built a temple in Bethel, set up a golden calf, appointed priests to serve in the temple, and made it the center of a special national festival that was to be held every year.

1 Kings 12:31-33, *“Jeroboam built shrines on high places and appointed priests from all sorts of people, even though they were not Levites. He instituted a festival on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, like the festival held in Judah, and offered sacrifices on the altar. This he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves he had made. And at Bethel he also installed priests at the high places he had made. On the fifteenth day of the eighth month, a month of his own choosing, he offered sacrifices on the altar he had built at Bethel. So he instituted the festival for the Israelites and went up to the altar to make offerings.”*

This was religion, but it wasn’t the kind God prescribed. So, Amos said sarcastically in Amos 4:4, *“Go to Bethel and sin.”*

Or again, with the inability of anyone to find God at Bethel, he quoted God as saying in Amos 5:5, *“Seek me and live; do not seek Bethel.”*

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Second, let’s look at Gilgal. Amos 4:4b, *“Go to Gilgal and sin yet more.”* Now, what’s so important about Gilgal that made it a place of worship?

When the Israelites left Egypt and finally entered the Promised Land, the first place they stopped was Gilgal.

Joshua 5:9-12, "Then the LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you." So the place has been called Gilgal [circle of stones] to this day. On the evening of the fourteenth day of the month, while camped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, the Israelites celebrated the Passover. The day after the Passover, that very day, they ate some of the produce of the land: unleavened bread and roasted grain. The manna stopped the day after they ate this food from the land; there was no longer any manna for the Israelites, but that year they ate the produce of Canaan."

It was at Gilgal where they erected a monument of 12 stones in commemoration of their crossing and consecrated themselves as God's covenant people.

It was here where all the males were circumcised there because they had not done so for the forty years that they had been wandering in the wilderness.

It was at Gilgal that the manna God had given them stopped when they began to eat the fruit of the Promised Land.

So, Gilgal symbolized possession of the Promised Land. But Amos said sarcastically in Amos 5:5, *"Do not go to Gilgal,... For Gilgal will surely go into exile."*

Historically, Gilgal was important. However, the people were superstitiously worshipping God at Gilgal.

It was a place where they set up idols, because it had been made famous in the days of Joshua by God's wonderful appearances to and for His people.

So, religion without reality means nothing.

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Finally, the third place of worship was at Beersheba, a location that had been famous in the days of the patriarchs. It was now just another rendezvous with idols.

Amos 8:14, *“Those who swear by the sin of Samaria—who say, ‘As surely as your god lives, Dan,’ or, ‘As surely as the god of Beersheba lives’—they will fall, never to rise again.”*

Now here’s an interesting fact. Beersheba was located in Judah. Apparently, the Israelites used to make pilgrimages to Beersheba.

But why was this place so important. It was important because it figured prominently in the lives of the Israelites’ three great patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

At some point in his life, each patriarch found himself at Beersheba, and each time God spoke to that patriarch, essentially saying, *“I am with you.”* (Genesis 21:22-23; 26:24; 46:3-4).

But in Amos 5:5, God told the people *“do not journey to Beersheba,”* because God wasn’t going to meet with them in their self-styled worship.

Even the church fathers understood this. This is why they made it a part of their *Confessions of Faith*:

“But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures.”

Because of their self-styled worship, God sent many prophets and warnings to His covenant people. He wanted them to repent and return to Him.

Throughout Amos God warned His people. He sent famine, drought, crop failure, military defeat, and near destruction.

And Each time He sent a warning, there was that dreadful refrain, *“yet you have not returned to me, declares the Lord.”*

Every so-called “natural disaster” must be seen as God warning His covenant people to examine their worship.

Are we worshiping God according to His Word, or are we worshiping God in the way we want to worship him?

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Conclusion

Listen again to what God said about this in Amos 5:4-5, *“This is what the LORD says to Israel: “Seek me and live; do not seek Bethel, do not go to Gilgal, do not journey to Beersheba. For Gilgal will surely go into exile, and Bethel will be reduced to nothing.”*

Then Amos reiterates his plea again in Amos 5:6, *“Seek the Lord and live.”* God wants His people to seek him.

He wants His people to have a vital relationship with Him. He wants His people to submit to Him and His word.

He wants His people to do what He says in His Word. God doesn't want His people to decide what they think will be a nice way to worship Him.

Think about this. Suppose it's Susen's birthday and I decide that I'm going to really spoil her. So, the first thing I do is I get her up early and take her to McDonald's for breakfast.

After breakfast, I take her to Home Depot and buy her a really nice tool set, so she'll have what she needs for projects around the house.

In the afternoon, I surprise her with tickets to a football game and watch the Cowboys lose, again. That evening, I take her to my favorite restaurant for dinner because, you know, it's her special day.

What's wrong with this picture? I'm doing all the things that I enjoy and not what she'd enjoy. In just the same way, we think God will be pleased with how we'd like to worship Him.

But, let me tell you, He's not pleased. He doesn't want to be worshiped in ***“any other way not prescribed in Scripture.”***

Therefore, having seen how God views religion here in Amos 4 and 5, we must worship Him in the way He prescribes.

We must pay attention to how we think about worship. We must pay attention to what we do in worship. It's no trifling matter, we must ***“Seek the Lord and live.”***