

Amos 6:1 Woe to you who are complacent in Zion, and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria, you notable men of the foremost nation, to whom the people of Israel come! ²Go to Calneh and look at it; go from there to great Hamath, and then go down to Gath in Philistia. Are they better off than your two kingdoms? Is their land larger than yours? ³You put off the evil day and bring near a reign of terror. ⁴You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves. ⁵You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments. ⁶You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph. ⁷Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile; your feasting and lounging will end.

Dear Friends in Christ,

About 150 years ago in America, before the war fought with guns called the American Civil War, there was a war of ideas. It was about slavery. The most influential book on the subject—in fact, after the Bible, it was the world’s best-selling book in the 19th century—the book was *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

The book follows a devout Christian slave named Tom. Through his life he had three masters. His second master began to be bothered by slavery. He began to be aware that slavery was a great evil. So eventually (as I remember the book) his owner followed a custom of growing popularity and said, “Tom, upon my death, all of you slaves shall be free.” Now that is strange. He held a growing conviction that slavery was evil, but to give it up would cost him too much. So instead of doing something about his own part in slavery, he would do nothing until he was dead. He would help—as long as it didn’t cost him anything. He wanted a life of ease. The problem was that this owner incurred debts and sold some of his slaves, Tom included, to pay his debts. Tom was sold to a wicked man who persecuted and finally killed Tom because of his Christian faith. Tom’s former master’s love of a life of ease cost Tom his life.

Isn’t that human nature? We like a life of ease. We don’t want to be troubled. We would like to retire early and not have to work. The more wealth we have, the more we find ways that others do our work for us. We spend lots of money on entertainment, clothes, vehicles, and a thousand things we don’t need so that we can really have fun in this life. None of that is necessarily wrong. But our reading from Amos urges us to reconsider that “Life of Ease”

THE LIFE OF EASE

I. Seeking a life of ease brings ruin

II. There is One who didn’t seek a life of ease

Before we get far, we must understand two phrases you heard in our reading:

1) “*Woe to you...*” were the first words. Do you know what “Woe to you” means? It doesn’t just mean, “You’re going to have bad luck.” It means “God will surely judge you.”

2) “*Woe to you who are complacent...and do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph.*” What does “grieving over the ruin of Joseph” mean? The first Biblical Joseph that comes to mind may be Joseph, son of Jacob, who was sold into slavery, did some time in prison, interpreted a few dreams and then got to be prime minister of Egypt. We are *not* talking about that Joseph. Go forward several hundred years. There was a civil war among the Israelites, and Israel split into two nations. The northern kingdom was called the Kingdom of Israel, but it was also referred to as the “house of Joseph” because the most powerful tribal group in that northern Israel traced their ancestry back to Joseph. The book of Amos is written to that northern kingdom of Israel, the house of Joseph. In Amos’ day, about 200

years after the civil war where Israel split in two, the house of Joseph was having a revival. The borders were expanding, business was flourishing. People were bold and optimistic about the new Israel. But in God's eyes, this up and coming, prosperous nation—the house of Joseph—was in ruins. Yes, many were prospering, but the rich couldn't have cared less about the poor outside their gates. (Remember Jesus' parable about the rich man and Lazarus?) Justice could be bought. These were signs of a deeper and more deadly disease, religious apostasy. The northern kingdom, Joseph, had abandoned its God, the God who had established these desert wanderers as one of the nations. And all the rich continued to dress in their fancy clothes, put on the expensive perfumes, drink their expensive wine. ***“Woe to you who [are not sick to the stomach] over the ruin of Joseph.”***

Woe to you, who, when you look around at the fallen world around you do not feel pity, do not feel sorrow, do not feel sick to your stomach over the ruin of the world around you. As Amos points out, God is concerned about the whole person, soul and body. Therefore we Christians are, too! We see the problems of poverty and disease, disaster and disenfranchisement, and we want to reduce the pain. We share the hopelessness of the abandoned. And while we realize that the biggest need people have is that of a Savior, we also realize God has called us to minister to people's earthly needs.

Have you ever been there, the beggar at the car door. And you feel a tension, and we resent that tension. We resent being made to feel guilty. And we resent having to make the check—am I helping a truly needy person, or am I helping a derelict continue in dishonest and lazy ways? We would rather have easy choices. And while I can't tell you the right answer in every instance, I want to tell you this, I am glad that you feel the tension, because it means that by God's grace you haven't sunk to complete complacency. Our consciences rightly agree with Amos and says complacency in the face of suffering is the opposite of what God wants.

But ***“The ruin of Joseph,”*** and the ruin of America, is not just a poverty problem. Most people aren't even aware of their sin-without-a-Savior problem. It is easy to be complacent about the spiritual ruin about us. It is easy to ignore spiritual ruin because while you may see people beg food, no one goes around saying, “Sir, Ma'am, I am a sinner who needs to be saved. Got any salvation?”

Yes, it is easy to be complacent about spiritual ruin. And there are a hundred different ways to be complacent. You can be hard-hearted – “Who cares?” You can be flippant – “Isn't it their responsibility?” You can be lukewarm – “Look, I would love to help, but I just have too many things to do.” You know your own heart's at-the-ready excuses. I know mine. But the basic reason is that I prefer a life of ease, I'd rather not be bothered.

This love of ease is wrong. My love of ease brings pain, suffering, even eternal torment in hell to other people. Indeed, to me, God should say, ***“Woe to you who are complacent.”***

For these Israelites, this was their curse, ***“Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile; your feasting and lounging will end.”*** Yes. About 30 to 40 years after Amos the Assyrians swept through the land, brutally conquered and deported virtually every single Israelite. So much so that these northern Israelites are never seen again in world history or literature. They were erased.

To choose to ignore God means that you choose God as your enemy. To be complacent in the face of need, whether spiritual or physical, is to invite God's judgment. Sometimes he does bring it even in this life.

There is another important verse in Amos. It is in Amos chapter 8, verse 7: ***“The LORD declares, ‘I will never forget anything they have done.’”*** That should make all of us uneasy. ***“I will never forget anything...”*** Even if your only sin were calling your brother a bad name when you were eight years old, God counts that sin against you. God will simply not forget any wrong you have ever done. How much more is God's judgment of “GUILTY” hanging over us who have neglected the poor, ignored the needy, been indifferent to the unbelief of our neighbors. In truth, every time you have done these

things, God has entered them into his book of reasons to throw you into the fires of hell. God will not forget.

II. Which is why Good Friday happened. Even when you became a Christian, God did not forget any of your sins. No, none of your sins were forgotten. But your sins were forgiven, the punishment was transferred. Your sins were not forgotten, but they were punished in someone else. They were forgiven because there was someone who did not love a life of ease. The book of Isaiah puts God's dramatic rescue plan this way, "*The LORD looked and was displeased...He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm worked salvation for him.*" (Is.59:15-16) God in heaven saw us humans destined for destruction. But he would not sit by. Jesus would leave everything to be our Savior. Jesus took the form of a servant and suffered death on a cross. He died in agony in order to rescue us from our trouble.

Because we humans take things for granted, we often do not appreciate how good this good news is. Let me share but a pale reflection... Back in 1984 in Washington, DC, there was a plane crash. A plane crashed across a bridge and sank into a cold river full of ice. If you are in icy water you have, at most, 20-30 minutes before you will die from hypothermia. Because of the river and the ice, no one was able to reach the few survivors 100 yards out in the middle of the river. After 19 minutes a helicopter arrived. But it was not a rescue helicopter, so all the crew could do was drop a rope and drag people through the water to the shore. They did this once and returned. On the second try, a certain Arland Williams grabbed the rope...then tied the rope around another passenger! The helicopter towed that man to land and returned for a third trip. Mr. Williams grabbed the rope again...and again tied the rope around another injured man. This man grabbed in his arms a woman who was swimming in the water. The helicopter returned, now 29 minutes after the crash, to rescue Mr. Williams, but it was too late. He had put everyone ahead of himself. Jesus did that and more.

And now Jesus' will is that we not love a life of ease. He wants us to love God and one another. It requires God working in us. It requires self-discipline.

But the world says the exact opposite. The world says, "Blessed are those who live at ease." Isn't it great to have entertainment—satellite TV, devices to play your favorite music anywhere anytime, games to play if you should happen to have 30 seconds of boredom. "***You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments.***"

Isn't it great to indulge yourself and look good; have good cologne or perfume, expensive haircuts and great clothes. "***You use the finest lotions...***"

Isn't it great to live at ease and have the best possible food in plenty? "***You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves.***"

Isn't it great to be comfortable: comfy chairs, comfy couches? "***You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches.***"

The world says, "Blessed is the one who lives at ease." And we want to drink it up like cold water on a hot day. We look to see what others are wearing, eating, watching, listening to, buying, furnishing their houses with, and we think, "That is what I need!" You ought to sense a tension. No—more than tension—an explosion.

The only way we can measure the things of this world in a God-pleasing way is to remember God's Word. Think of 1 Timothy 6:6: "*Godliness with contentment is great gain.*" It isn't to say that we must hate all good things. Godliness with contentment is this: we will be content with what we have. We will think, "Money, entertainment, everything else, you are blessings of God. But you will help me to be a better Christian, to love my God, to love my neighbor. I will not spend my life in pursuit of you."

It hurts, at first quite a bit, to do this. It means that we can never fully mimic the great people of this world, though it is our heart's desire to look like and be like the celebrities of this world. It stings when our children don't have the toys their friends do because we give a percentage to God. It angers us when people look at us and dismiss us because we are not as well-dressed or attractive as we should be – because, to God's glory, we have chosen to help the poor around us. It hurts when the judging eyes of the world judge us as strange because we are not devoted to the things of this world, but to our Savior and our fellow man. But God has called us to something different and better, not to a life of ease, but a life for His glory, and for eternal life.

By God's grace, this hurt, diminishes the longer we practice it. No, it doesn't go away as long as we have our selfish sinful flesh with us. But by God's grace the world's insults hurt less and we become more and more content with the approval of God rather than man.

Let us help our fellow people in the world around us. Let Christians be known as people who love to lessen the pain, loneliness and suffering of their neighbors. And do not forget that God has a more important work for you in this sin-sick world. *“Let your light to shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”* Amen.