

Amos 5 • There is No Formula

Introduction

Throughout history, and even to this very day, there are people that treat God like a chemistry experiment: “A little of this, a little of that, and now I have something ‘new’ and ‘improved!’” To be sure, many inventions and structures have come about as the result of combining disciplines or elements in ways never tried before, but Christianity is one that is instead corrupted by whatever variation is attempted. The very definition of the Greek word “heresy” is actually to lay truth side-by-side with error. Just as you wouldn’t drink a cup of water with only one drop of poison in it, neither does 99.99% truth abide well with even just .01% error. And just like the science of chemistry, it seems that people are constantly looking for the formula that will make everything work right for them, often seeking such formulas from the pages of the Bible itself.

¹Hear this word which I take up for you
as a dirge, O house of Israel:
²She has fallen, she will not rise again—
The virgin Israel.
She lies neglected on her land;
There is none to raise her up.
³For thus says the Lord GOD,
“The city which goes forth a thousand
strong
Will have a hundred left,
And the one which goes forth a hundred
strong
Will have ten left to the house of Israel.”

[Read v.1-3]

Q: What is a dirge? How is it applied here?

A: A dirge is a mournful song most often sung at funerals **AFTER** someone has died. It speaks volumes of how God now sees the northern kingdom of Israel, judged already dead for its wickedness and rebellion.

Q: If they have become so spiritually corrupt, why are they referred to as “the virgin Israel”?

A: It’s a statement about what has been permanently lost, both spiritually and physically. Physically in that the northern kingdom of Israel had never before been conquered, spiritually in that they have turned so completely to other gods there is little chance they will turn back. Neither her government nor the false gods in which she’s trusted will be able to rescue her.

Q: To what does v.3 speak?

A: It speaks first to the fact that they will most certainly be defeated, and secondly that only a small remnant will survive.

Point: It is about 25 years before the final destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel and its being carried away into captivity by Assyria. Amos’ words come at a time of relative peace and prosperity when the people don’t see that their behavior is leading in this direction. In fact, because they’re acting the way they are and not suffering bad consequences, they don’t see any benefit to changing their way. How does this sound exactly like the situation today?

[Read v.4-7]

⁴For thus says the LORD to the house of
Israel,
“Seek Me that you may live.
⁵But 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.
⁶Seek 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,
⁷For those who turn justice into
wormwood
And cast righteousness down to the
earth.”

Q: What is the phrase used here that specifically identifies that God is speaking to the northern kingdom of Israel?

A: “O house of Joseph”. (v.5) It’s the tribe of Joseph’s son Ephraim that is most often the short name given to mean the whole of the northern kingdom of Israel.

Q: Why should they seek God, but “not resort to Bethel”?

A: Although “Bethel” means “House of God”, a place where both Abraham and Jacob had special encounters with God, it has become a center of false worship, one of the places Jeroboam set up a golden calf and a false temple and priesthood. In Scripture it is sarcastically renamed “Beth-aven”, the “House of Idols”.

Q: Why should they seek God, but “do not come to Gilgal”?

A: Although it was a place where Abraham erected an altar and the first place occupied by Israel when it crossed the Jordan, it too was turned into a center of idolatry and false worship.

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Q: Why should they seek God, but “not cross over to Beersheba”?

A: Although it was once a place of worship for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, it was now a center of idolatry and false worship as well.

Point: A major component of their false spiritual legacy was to “re-write” history, so to speak, converting those places of special heritage and testimony to the One True God into “new” testimonies for the false gods they now worshipped.

Q: How are these transformation described?

A: As turning “justice into wormwood” (v.7) – a representation of something sweet made extremely foul and bitter – and as casting “righteousness down to the earth” – a way of summarizing their actions as holding God’s Word and ways so utterly worthless that they threw them out with the garbage, so to speak.

Point: When people begin to “re-write” their spiritual heritage and misapply God’s ways, the end result from God’s point of view is a complete lack of respect or regard for His Word in general, and for Him specifically. This is not about keeping traditions established by men, but adhering faithfully to His Word and ways.

[Read v.8-9]

⁸He who made the Pleiades and Orion
And changes deep darkness into morning,
Who also darkens day into night,
Who calls for the waters of the sea
And pours them out on the surface of the
earth,
The LORD is His name.

⁹It is He who flashes forth with
destruction upon the strong,
So that destruction comes upon the
fortress.

¹⁰They hate him who reproves in the gate,
And they abhor him who speaks with
integrity.

¹¹Therefore because you impose heavy
rent on the poor
And exact a tribute of grain from them,
Though you have built houses of well-
hewn stone,

Yet you will not live in them;
You have planted pleasant vineyards, yet
you will not drink their wine.

¹²For I know your transgressions are
many and your sins are great,
You who distress the righteous and accept
bribes

And turn aside the poor in the gate.

¹³Therefore at such a time the prudent
person keeps silent, for it is an evil
time.

¹⁴Seek good and not evil, that you may
live;
And thus may the LORD God of hosts be
with you,

Just as you have said!

¹⁵Hate evil, love good,
And establish justice in the gate!

Q: Why are these verses a kind of “reality check” to contrast Israel’s behavior as discussed so far?

A: Israel is worshipping all sorts of false gods, even ones associated with stars, the heavens, and things on earth. The “reality check” is that they are falling short of reaching the One True God, Creator and Sovereign over all. They are forsaking the worship of Him who has real power and authority for lesser things which, in reality, have none.

[Read v.10-15]

Q: What are the specific charges God levies against Israel? What defines the depth of their wickedness?

A: Their mistreatment of others and their selfish desire for only their own personal needs, also at the expense of others.

Point: God does not have to point out that they’ve completely disregarded the first tablet of the Law to love God with all their heart because their mistreatment of others clearly shows their disregard for the second tablet of the Law to love their neighbor. One might be able to argue to some degree that it can’t be proved whether one loves God or not, but their actions in life undeniably prove the degree of their love for their neighbor, especially if they reprove (v.10), abhor (v.10), impose heavy rent (v.11), exact a tribute (v.11), accept bribes (v.12), and turn aside the poor (v.12). There can be no right relationship with God without a right relationship with one’s neighbor. This is a prelude to why God rejects their worship of Him personally in v.21-27.

Q: Based on the admonition provided in v.14-15, how would you describe Israel’s spiritual condition? How were they acting?

- Instead of seeking good, they were **seeking** evil. (v.14)
- The **loved** evil and hated good. (v.15)
- They had no interest in fairness or justice. (v.15)

These were not merely “backsliders” who had temporarily strayed from God’s path, but are wholly devoted to behaviors and ways completely contrary to His Word and character.

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Perhaps the LORD God of hosts
May be gracious to the remnant of
Joseph.

¹⁶Therefore thus says the LORD God of
hosts, the LORD,

“There is wailing in all the plazas,
And in all the streets they say, ‘Alas!
Alas!’

They also call the farmer to mourning
And professional mourners to
lamentation.

¹⁷And in all the vineyards there is
wailing,
Because I will pass through the midst of
you,” says the LORD.

¹⁸Alas, you who are longing for the day of
the LORD,

For what purpose will the day of the
LORD be to you?

It will be darkness and not light;

¹⁹As when a man flees from a lion

And a bear meets him,

Or goes home, leans his hand against the
wall

And a snake bites him.

²⁰Will not the day of the LORD be
darkness instead of light,

Even gloom with no brightness in it?

²¹I hate, I reject your festivals,
Nor do I delight in your solemn
assemblies.

²²Even though you offer up to Me burnt
offerings and your grain offerings,
I will not accept them;

And I will not even look at the peace
offerings of your fatlings.

²³Take away from Me the noise of your
songs;

I will not even listen to the sound of your
harps.

²⁴But let justice roll down like waters
And righteousness like an ever-flowing
stream.

²⁵“Did you present Me with sacrifices
and grain offerings in the wilderness for
forty years, O house of Israel? ²⁶You also
carried along Sikkuth your king and
Kiyyun, your images, the star of your
gods which you made for yourselves.

²⁷Therefore, I will make you go into exile

Application: How well do you consider that one of the strongest, personal testimonies of the quality of your walk and faith in Christ is the way you treat and deal with others? How does this prove/disprove your Christianity?

[Read v.16-20]

Q: Throughout all of Scripture, what are the similarities displayed by people that come into direct contact with God, even those in the New Testament that suddenly realized they were in the presence of the True Messiah?

A: They commonly fall to the ground, unable to look up, acknowledging not just God’s sovereignty and authority, but their own personal inadequacy and sinful nature. Even for the most righteous of examples such as Moses or Daniel or Isaiah, it is a moment of great fear and trepidation to suddenly come into the actual presence of the One True God. **NO ONE** measures up!

Q: How does this compare to the generation Amos is addressing?

A: Having no real respect for God or His ways, their embrace of false gods has also led to a false notion of what the “day of the LORD” means, what coming before a holy and righteous God in their present wicked and unrighteous condition would really mean. When it comes, there will be “wailing” and “mourning” as described in v.16-17. They have not just changed God’s holy places into redefined corruptions, but done the same to the meaning of His Word.

Q: How does the Bible define the “day of the LORD”?

A: It is that day in which the wrath of God’s judgment is released upon the wicked. It is **NOT** the day that all believers go to live with Him or receive heavenly rewards or anything connected with subsequent actions He will take on behalf of the righteous. It is something to be witnessed and experienced by those that have resolutely rejected and defied Him.

Point: When people begin to redefine their unbiblical behavior and beliefs as somehow being “biblical”, most of their understanding of Scripture in general becomes equally corrupt. Even the “obvious” meanings of Scripture are twisted.

[Read v.21-27]

Q: What is God refusing and why?

- “I reject your festivals” (v.21)
- “your offerings...I will not accept...” (v.22)
- “Take away from Me the noise of your songs” (v.23)

Although they were actually devoted to other, false gods, these people apparently still continued observing the Old Testament rituals so that they could claim that they were being lawfully observant and still providing right, legal worship of the One True God. Knowing the true nature of their heart and loyalty, God refuses to accept what is essentially their “going through the motions”.

Q: What is the precedent for this as explained in v.25-26?

A: During the time of the unfaithful generation in the wilderness, their worship was actually divided between false gods (such as the golden calf and the Egyptian gods here mentioned) and the One True God, who recognized this and therefore refused to accept their efforts.

Note: Go back to v.4-7 and revisit how they took the places where God once worked in great, spiritual ways, and turned them into centers of idolatry.

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beyond Damascus,” says the LORD, whose name is the God of hosts.

Q: Does v.25 really say that those Israelites did not offer ANY sacrifices or offerings?

A: No, it specifically states that they did not present **“Me with sacrifices”**. Worship that is divided between God and false gods is, in reality, no worship of God at all, as again was the case for the people of Amos’ time.

Q: What do these false gods represent and how are they contrasted to the One True God?

A: They are names for the stars and planets to which was ascribed godhood. Sun, moon, and star worship was very common in the ancient world. However, they are contrasted by the final statement, “says the LORD, whose name is the God of hosts.” This literally means the God of all the heavens, of all the stars. Just as He points out in v.8-9 that they are elevating created things over their Creator, so here too they are elevating things to godhood that are subject and beneath God who created and rules over them.

Application: Can God be “forced” to act in a certain way? Can He be “bound” to respond to us because of a ritual, prayer, or formula? While He wants us to do things His way, is that enough if our heart is not in it? [This is what Israel was trying to do.] How does this relate to people that believe the “Prayer of Jabez” or of the “Word Faith” movement obligates God to bless them financially?

Q: What is the irony of their punishment as proscribed in v.24?

A: Whereas they are withholding justice in their earthly dealings, God will unleash the working of His true justice. It’s a way of setting straight their redefinitions of His Word and ways.

Q: What will this result in?

A: As explained in v.27, some 25 years or so before it actually happens, they will go into captivity, displaced from Israel into lands belonging to the Assyrian Empire. This is indicated by the fact that one must go through Damascus to get to Assyria, a common way of describing this in the jargon of their day.

Overall Application

- *How can your relationship with God be precisely measured? [Answer: In the way we treat others.] Does our love for others equal our love for God?*
- *What is a pretty good indication that we’re straying from God? [Answer: When we begin to change the original meaning of His Word, creating stranger and biblically unsupportable versions of the Truth, even changing the meaning of history or our heritage.] How can we ensure we’re steady and on the right spiritual course?*
- *What happens to our worship of God when we embrace other things as well? [Answer: Divided worship if no worship of God at all.] How can we ensure that our worship remains true and pure and acceptable?*
- *What happens when we attempt to use formulas to bind an outcome from God? In reality, where do all things have to start in order to be right? [Answer: A right heart.]*