

Group Study: The Broken Covenant (Amos 8; Jeremiah 25:1–11)

1. How do Amos and Jeremiah each describe the consequences of a broken covenant?
2. What role did economic injustice play in Israel's spiritual decline?
3. What does Amos's image of "summer fruit" symbolize, and how does it contribute to the message of judgment?
4. In what ways does Jeremiah 25 function like a "covenant lawsuit"?
5. Why is idolatry considered the ultimate sign of covenant breakdown?
6. Why is the hope in Jer 25:12-14 important to understanding the lesson's conclusion?
7. The prophets Amos and Jeremiah connect Israel's idolatry with social injustice. Why are the two so intertwined? What are some modern examples of this?
8. How can we be attentive today to signs that our covenant relationship with God is at risk?
9. What is one area of your life where you see a disconnect between religious observance and practical justice? What step can you take this week to bring the two back into alignment?

Good Faith Bible Study

Kathy and Nathan Maxwell

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"The Broken Covenant"

Amos 8 and Jeremiah 25:1-11

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We participate in a new covenant. It is beyond the reach of any human power and survives any unfaithfulness we have on record. But it remains that nothing will determine the outcome of our lives more than our covenantal relationship with God. For that reason, we should heed the warnings of the prophets, ensuring that relationship never decays and always flourishes.

That's how this week's Bible study in *Good Faith Magazine* concludes.

The thing that makes the New Covenant, well, new is that "the Word became flesh" and dwelt among us, as John 1:14 describes. The incarnation unveils for all the world to see exactly what

the covenant was supposed to look like all along. There on the cross Christ reforged the divine-human relationship out of grace.

But our emphasis at the moment isn't so much on what makes the New Covenant unique, or even our membership in that community of grace. Instead our focus is on what the New Covenant has in common with all its predecessors—the Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic covenants. Each of these formulations of the divine-human relationship depicts a direct correlation between a healthy, nurtured participation in that covenant and an enduring, thriving human experience—in both an individual and corporate sense. Healthy covenant, happy life, I guess you could say.

More specifically, we're trying to tune-in to the prophetic broadcast, so to speak, to see how their message might offer us some guardrails for staying on track toward an ever-deepening relationship and avoiding the covenant-rot that comes with a neglected inner-life of faith. We observed how the prophets frequently turned their attention to examples of injustice and tainted worship among God's people. And we can have a tendency to focus our attention there as well, because in our own context we see the exploitation of the poor and marginalized, as well as hypocrisy at the house of worship.

But for the prophets, justice and right worship were just ways of taking the people's temperature. When something was wrong in these outward, measurable areas, it was a tell-tale sign that something was wrong inwardly—they were merely symptoms of a more fundamental condition. The prophets pointed them out in an effort to communicate the urgency and seriousness of the underlying problem. For the prophets, the real cancer eating away at those old covenants was idolatry.

Alright, so—I don't know about you, but I just can't recall the last time I had any sort of itch to craft a statute of a Philistine deity and sacrifice an animal to it. For many, idolatry is something of a disconnect in the message of the prophets, tempting us to think there isn't much overlap with our practice of faith. But the message of the prophets hits closer to home than we usually realize.

For the apostle Paul, all sin is essentially idolatry. His opening address in his letter to the Romans conceptualizes sin in just this way:

“For the wrath of God” he writes, “is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and injustice of those who by their injustice suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. Ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been seen and understood through the things God has made. So they are without excuse, for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the desires of their hearts to impurity, to the

dishonoring of their bodies among themselves. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator ..." (Romans 1:18-25).

Described in this way, idolatry is essentially disordered worthiness or misplaced value—it's ascribing ultimate worth to the wrong thing. And that is the underlying, root disease Paul calls sin. It's worth noting that our word "worship" comes from an Old English word that I'm not even going to attempt to pronounce—but it essentially meant, "having the condition or attribute of being worthy."

All this is precisely what the prophets are up in arms about, and in this way both Paul and the prophets call us out in an uncomfortably direct way. The most important thing, what we truly can't live without, whatever is the first order of business, to which we ascribe fundamental worth—that is what we worship. I'm not going to ask for a show of hands, but does any part of creation compete for the Creator's spot in your heart? While I can neither confirm nor deny my own answer, I'll just say that idolatry is, regrettably, 100% alive and well in the community of believers. Paul picks up on the centrality of idolatry in the prophetic warning, and that informs the paradigm of sin he presents to the Romans, which in turn describes the realities of our own practice of Christian faith.

What Paul writes immediately before and after this definition of sin is telling. Before he characterizes "all ungodliness" as idolatry, he first proclaims that the gospel is God's saving power for everyone who believes. In the gospel, he explains, the "righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith." Paul then quotes from the prophets—Habakkuk 2:4: "...as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'"

Alright, so which is it? Are we saved by the power of the gospel or have we wrecked ourselves with idolatry? Is the good life lived by faith, or by keeping sin at bay? For Paul, it's both, but it's the order of those things that is so very crucial. It's no accident that Paul begins with the saving power of the gospel, and then proceeds to describe the corrosive effects of sin. Paul's letters to the early churches are filled—you could almost say saturated—with sharp critiques of sinful behavior. He's always urging those struggling churches to eradicate that sin with haste. Because Paul devotes so much attention to sin, we might be tempted to think that fixing sin was the means to living a Christian life—but reaching that conclusion would be a crucial error, and the apostle is probably rolling in his grave just for me having said it. For Paul it was grace, just grace—only grace that finally achieved the reconciliation that the old covenants sought after. The ongoing practice of godliness and justice simply aligned with the facts of the gospel, and allowed those communities of faith to experience the freedom that the gospel had already afforded. All of Paul's discipleship efforts really boil down to a simple message: "This is who you are in Christ; so, be who you are in Christ." By grace you've already arrived, so act like it—live a life that acknowledges the reality Jesus achieved on the cross.

Again in this way Paul mirrors the prophets. As we've already observed, when Amos points out the exploitation of the poor or gross hypocrisy at the temple, those are symptoms of an

underlying issue. They're what the prophets use as evidence to make their case to the people. That's also why idolatry is such a central concept for both the prophets and Paul—it's the clearest, most direct evidence that something was wrong with the divine-human relationship. Idolatry is to the covenant what infidelity is to a marriage.

When Paul describes sin in terms of idolatry in Romans 1, he follows that discussion with a picture of the results:

“And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God,” he concludes, “God gave them over to an unfit mind and to do things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of injustice, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God’s decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die, yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them” (Romans 1:28-32).

That's the sort of endless misery that awaits us when we fail to recognize that our relationship with God, afforded by means of the New Covenant in Christ, is the fundamental root that defines all human experience. It's the result when we aren't committed to the ongoing practice of nurturing and deepening that relationship. Left to neglect, we end up ascribing worth in all the wrong places, and so we suffer the toxic effects of idolatry. The message of the prophets to you is to keep the main thing the main thing, to pay attention to the underlying, root issue, so that you are equipped to live a life—and be contributing members of a community—that practices justice and reflects godliness. It's who you already are in Christ.

Okay, I know I should probably just wrap things up here. But I also know there are probably some A+ church-goers listening in ... I mean if you're subscribed to *Good Faith Magazine*, reading Bible studies and listening to podcasts, you're making some kind of commitment to the ongoing practice of your faith. And we, the committed faithful, have been immunized against the sort of thing the prophets are talking about, right? But the prophets, with all their nuanced insight, have a word for us, too. When Amos describes those who kept the Sabbath but whose hearts were far from God, or when Jeremiah decries the religious leaders who mistakenly thought the temple itself was their source of salvation, those are all references to Israel's own religious practice—not the veneration of the false gods of their neighbors. It's just like the prophets to be so, well, meta, but they recognized that religious practice itself could become an idol all of its own. The divine-human relationship, permanently reconciled by grace through Jesus, is the soul of Christian religious practice. Without it, your church is just another building, your practice is just another religion, and your piety is just another idol. If you happen to fall into the category of mature, seasoned Christians, this is the subtle trap to guard against. The traditions of Christian practice are certainly essential—as a pastor once told me, “Show me a faith without form, and I'll show you a faith with no capacity to transmit from one generation to the next.” But

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don't mistake the forms of our religious practice for the relationship that was always meant to inhabit them.