

## **Amos 6:1-14 (1984 NIV)**

### ***The Woe of Wasted Opportunities***

#### **Introduction**

Christians in China have faced persecutions from the 1950s, but the church still prevails until today in China.

One of these Christians who had been imprisoned for her faith was Mama Kwong. She was imprisoned in April 1961 for conducting a major evangelistic campaign. At a church growth meeting in South Korea in 1983, she spoke and shared the four periods of persecution under communist rule in China.

- 1950-58
  - Six thousand missionaries were expelled from China. The government demanded that churches be independent and self-supporting, i.e. severing all ties with foreigners. As a result, numerous churches were closed down and many Christians were arrested. No one under 18 was allowed to attend church.
- 1958-66
  - The government outlawed the possession of a Bible, and anyone found with a copy of it would be imprisoned.
- 1966-76
  - The government sought to crush the underground church, as opposed to the government-controlled “3-Self” church (self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation). Christians belonging to the underground church were imprisoned and Bibles were burned. Some were even nailed alive to the walls of churches, including Mama Kwong’s son.
  - However, the Gospel continued to be preached boldly and many new converts were invited to home meetings.
  - When the government decided that all Christians belonging to home churches should be arrested, the local authorities responded—“How can we do that? There are so many of them. We just don’t have the facilities to imprison them all. Besides, these Christians are the best workers we have in our factories. We really need them!”
- 1977 onwards
  - Christianity spread dramatically. There were an estimated 80,000 protestant Christians before the purge and persecution. Today, that figure must be in the millions.

Persecution like what happened in China may sound so alien and remote to us here in Singapore. In fact, we are not the only ones to feel this way. God’s people in Amos’ time felt the same sense of remoteness too.

- They felt so at ease and secured in their comfort that they believed it was impossible for disaster to strike them. Amos 6:4-6 describes how comfortable they felt.

4 You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves. 5 strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments. 6 You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph.

- Life was like paradise on earth to them. But where would this lead them to—better or bitter times? In v. 7, we read of this shocking answer:

7 Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile; your feasting and lounging will end.

- Imagine how shocking it would be for them. They presumed that by being and remaining comfortable in where they are, things would become better and better. But the shocking prophetic words of Amos revealed to them that instead of leading a victorious procession like a conqueror, they would be led away as a conquered people into exile.

Why did the Israelites in Amos' time miss the opportunity of being a better people; were they not warned? Earlier In v. 2, Amos called them to go and see what had happened to Calneh, Hamath, and Gath, and be forewarned.

- These were pagan cities that were once great cities in their golden years.
- In Amos' time, they had become devastated by the judgment of God upon them, lying in waste and barrenness.
- Amos told the Israelites to look at these cities and be warned that they too would end up with the same devastation ... if they would stubbornly and selfishly continue to indulge in the ease and security of their own comfort.
- Amos warned the Israelites of his time that their expected destiny was not that of better times, but one of bitter times—one of barren and fruitless lives because of the opportunities they had missed and wasted.

The caution for us today is that when we are too comfortable with where we are, we will miss and waste the opportunities to become better. Of course, it is a comforting thought to know that ...

- God loves us.
- He sent Jesus Christ to die for us.
- We are saved when we place our faith in Jesus Christ.

But this is also a dangerous thought because ...

- It can make us feel so casual with our faith.

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- It can make us feel so comfortable with being “once saved, always saved” in Christ that we neglect the challenge to walk close with Him.
- It can make us feel so secure that we choose to live as we like in this life because we think we have already booked our place in heaven.

Our text today cautions us against at least two failures that will lead us from being comfortable to being complacent in our faith walk and faith work in this world. These two failures will lead us to woefully miss and waste the opportunities to be better people for God in this world.

The first failure for us to guard against is ...

### **I. Failure to be and to do our best for God.**

Note the pronouncement of woe by Amos in v. 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!”

The saying “you who are complacent” literally means “you who are at ease”. So, “you who are at ease ... who feel secure on Mount Samaria” speaks of the false sense of security of the people, especially those “notable men”. Instead of being a source of blessing to others, these “notable men” had indulged themselves in serving their own interests.

Indeed, one danger of being at ease is that we become content to be where we are and as we are—i.e. we become complacent. This may be evident ...

- In our easy tolerance of sin.
- In our ready excusing of things that God’s Word and our conscience both condemn.
- In our allowing of things that have once caused us to shudder in disgust.
- In our unconcern about our own falling short of biblical standard.

For example, if we become complacent about how our bad temper is affecting our spiritual growth and Christian witness ...

- We can put it down to our natural temperament—i.e. “I can’t help it. I am born like that.”
- Sometimes, we can justify it by calling it as righteous anger when there is really nothing righteous about it.

This is what Amos would call “at ease in Zion”—i.e. be so comfortable with some indulgence that we become complacent about all the accompanying bad effects on us. Amos is cautioning the Israelites of old and us today not to look for “ease in Zion”; not to be easy with ourselves as far as growing in our faith walk and faith work with God is concerned. Rather, Amos is challenging the Israelites of old and us today that we should not retreat from what God has for

us to be and to do by taking easy our faith walk and faith work; by allowing our comfort to lead us into deeper complacency instead of higher commitment.

Someone once said, “God gives us work until our life is done, and He gives us life until our work is done.”

- However, we read in v. 1 that the Israelites retreated to find “ease in Zion”, and lost the vision to be God’s witness to the nations and to do God’s work among the nations.
- The Israelites seemed to think that they and God had no more use of each other.
- Their memories of God would likely be some past stories of yesteryears rather than fresh experiences with God in their time.
- As they enjoyed their “ease in Zion”, they were experiencing some kind of spiritual inertia or lethargy.
- The Bible does not teach us that we are saved to experience spiritual inertia or stagnation, but to be constantly challenged to exercise initiative to walk and work faithfully with God for His glory.
- Yes, God wants us to be and do our best for Him in our faith walk and faith work here on earth.

When Amos looked at the Israelites, he saw that they were very comfortable people—feeling “at ease in Zion” and “secure on Mount Samaria”.

- Mount Samaria and Zion represented the practice of religion in Israel in the north (where Samaria was located) and Judah in the south (where Zion was located) respectively.
- The spirituality of both locations during this period of the divided kingdom had degenerated into “easy” religion that stressed much on convenience rather than commitment, compromise rather than consecration, and outward compliance rather than inner conviction.
- Amos saw that the whole people of God during this time of the divided kingdom were so contented and comfortable with what they had been blessed that they lost that holy ambition to be and to do their best for God.
- As a result, the whole people of God eventually failed and collapsed as God’s light to the nations, missing and wasting all the opportunities they had to be a nation of influence and witness for God.
- Their enemies eventually conquered them and they became an exiled people—the Assyrians conquered Israel in the north in 722 B.C. and the Babylonians conquered Judah in the south in 586 B.C.

As a people of God today, we too need a sense of holy ambition to constantly remind ourselves not to be complacently contented and comfortable with where we are and what we have; not to miss and waste the many opportunities and resources that God has blessed us with so that we can be better people for His glory.

We have been given opportunities and resources by God to:

- Seek Him, serve one another, and share Christ.
- Are we using these to be and to do our best for God?
- Are we adopting an “at ease” (“switch off”) mentality, letting these go to waste?

When we are too comfortable with where we are and what we have been blessed by God, we can miss the opportunity to be a better people for God's glory. And such wasted opportunities can lead to barrenness and fruitlessness in our faith walk and faith work.

Our text today cautions us against failures that will lead us from being comfortable to being complacent. These failures will lead us to woefully miss and waste the opportunities to be better people for God in this world.

The failure to be and to do our best for God is one we are to guard against. God's challenge is for you and me to be and do our best for Him. This implies two things:

- One, our honest best is good enough for God no matter what others may say. Some people are even harder to please than God Himself. But God delights in our honest progression and does not demand our human perfection. You and I may still be imperfect, but as long as we are progressing on this long road of obedience, God is pleased with us.
- Two, anything less than our honest best is not good enough for God no matter what others may say. We cannot mislead God to be delighted and to approve us with our less than honest best. Yet, we can manipulate others to be deceived and to applaud us with our less than honest best. E.g. Ben Johnson of Canada should have been on top of the world when he won gold in the 100-metre sprint at the 1988 Seoul Olympics in Seoul. But days later, his medal was stripped due to a positive steroid test. He was one of those caught and penalised for giving his less than honest best. I believe there are still many who have not been so caught and penalised by the world, but they are on God's “wanted” list.

A second failure for us to guard against so that we will not miss and waste the opportunities to be better people for God is ...

## **II. Failure to be a world Christian.**

To be a world Christian is to look beyond ourselves to the needs of the community and the world, and have an urgency to help meet these needs. Verse 6 tells us how God's people in Amos' time had failed miserably in this regard.

6 You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph.

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The word “Joseph” here is significant. You see, the Northern Kingdom of Israel consisted of several tribes, all descended from Joseph. Thus, the mention of Joseph here is an appeal to these tribes to exercise brotherly love towards their less fortunate countrymen. Apparently, there was no sense of grief, love, concern, and pity on the part of those who had more resources than the others. It was a case of total indifference; a case of using the resources that God had blessed them with only for themselves. Indeed, the snare of plentiful resources and blessings is that we too can feel so easy, secured, and comfortable that we become indifferent to the needs, cares, and sorrows of others.

In our country of Singapore where we are blessed with plentiful resources, the price we pay is the increase of stress-related problems. No wonder we are facing a sharp increase in mental-health issues among our people—both the young and the old. Stress affects every strata of our society.

- It affects families, schools, workplaces, communities, and even churches.
- It affects both Christians and non-Christians alike.

The Christian is not exempt from the dangers of family breakup, examination tension, and office politics. And the struggle and frustration of stressed-up Christians can affect their own relationship with God.

- Their faith walk suffers.
- Their faith commitment suffers.
- Their joy fades.

As a result, the vitality and vibrancy of church life is threatened. The church does not have to be harmed directly—like being burnt down by arsonists—in order to have problems. The church can be harmed when individual Christians struggle personally in their home life, school life, and work life.

Thus, we as members of the church and together as a people of God, have the responsibility to help one another in our stress-related problems through prayers, encouragement, and sharing one another’s burden. And it is in such a context of prayer, encouragement, and burden-sharing that we can learn to help, care, and comfort one another.

It is when we trust someone who truly loves us and wants the best for us that we will allow ourselves to be accountable to that person. To be accountable to someone means:

- Being vulnerable—sharing struggles and hurts.
- Being teachable—hearing and heeding correction and counsel.
- Being honest—speaking the truth, even hard truth, but in love.
- Being accessible—allowing interruption in order to be available.

Obviously without the context of love and affirmation, such authentic accountability can be very, very threatening indeed. However, in an age of increasing individualism, we need such kind of accountability if we are to truly help, care, and comfort one another.

Sadly, the Israelites in Amos' time were too individualistic and comfortable to even grieve over the ruin of Joseph; to be concerned with the plight of their less fortunate countrymen. They lost the sense of community with their fellow countrymen and said, "I just live my own life. If someone has a problem, that's his business."

This still happens today in where we are. We call it guarding our own privacy.

William Holden was a well-known, Oscar-winning actor in his Hollywood days. But in spite of his very public persona, he was really a very private man ... and he died a very private death.

One day, alone in his apartment in Santa Monica, California, he bled to death from a gash in his forehead caused by a drunken fall against his bedside table. It was four or five days later that his body was found. He was 63 when he died on 12 Nov. 1981.

Rumours existed that he was suffering from lung cancer, which Holden had denied. His death certificate made no mention of cancer. He dictated in his will that he be cremated and his ashes scattered in the Pacific Ocean. In accordance with his wishes, no funeral or memorial services were conducted.

President Ronald Reagan, once a Hollywood actor himself, released this statement after Holden's death—"I have a great feeling of grief. We were close friends for many years ..."

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Holden#:~:text=Kenya%20Game%20Ranch.-,Death,and%20hitting%20a%20bedside%20table](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Holden#:~:text=Kenya%20Game%20Ranch.-,Death,and%20hitting%20a%20bedside%20table))

Indeed, we can be so individualistic and private that no one (even a so-called close friend) knows we have a problem until the unfortunate happens. We can guard our individualism or privacy to the extent of keeping ourselves so out of touch and accountability to others. Both the much blessed and less blessed can be guilty of such unhealthy individualism and privacy.

- The much blessed keep to themselves, hoarding their resources to protect their sense of comfort.
- The less blessed keep to themselves, hiding their lack to protect their sense of shame.

The Israelites in Amos' time enjoyed their good times so much that they isolated themselves from their less fortunate countrymen, and from their neighbouring

nations. Their isolation led to their self-centred individualism and privacy. In this sense, they did not make themselves accountable to others. Perhaps, even without being aware of it, they stumbled and got away with their self-willed, unwise, and sinful actions and decisions.

Their stumbling cautions us that we need to learn to be accountable with what God has blessed us with not only to God, but also to others. We can do this by cultivating and sharing a deep relationship with someone or a few others. E.g. we can cultivate relationship with one or two people who can encourage us in God; who can check our own spiritual sensitivity from time to time. Yes, we need such accountability to help us guard or regain the sense of community in our increasingly individualistic, even narcissistic world.

As God's people today, we can cultivate such a sense of communal love and accountability if we are to be world Christians—i.e. to look beyond ourselves to the needs of our community and the world with the urgency to help meet these needs. As we learn not to isolate ourselves from one another in the church, we learn also not to isolate ourselves as a people from those outside the church and beyond our land. When we present the love of God to these people outside the church and beyond our land, we are not just verbally sharing the love of God with the words of a Gospel tract (needed it may be), but more importantly, we are visibly sharing the love of God with our works of love.

We are in the world, but not of the world. This implies that we are to:

- Witness for God by moving out of our own comfort zone to the community and the world.
- Demonstrate to those in our community and the world that God loves them by way of our interest in, and not our indifference to, their needs.
- Affirm that God's will for us as His people is not to exist for our own sake, but to impact and influence lives beyond our own confines with the resources He has blessed us with.

Indeed, when we are a Christian for our own sake, we can become a worldly person who very much affirms the values of this fallen world. Conversely, when we are a Christian for the sake of others, we learn to be a witnessing person who very much affirms the values of God and His love for people in this fallen world—i.e. we learn to be a world Christian.

God's will for the Israelites in Amos' time was not to keep their blessings to themselves and isolate themselves from others. They are not to live like hermits in their seclusion and make no difference and no stand for God in their world. Rather, God's will for them was to share their blessings with others; be interested and involved in the lives of others, especially those in need spiritually and otherwise.

In the same way, God's will for us today as His people is not to live like hermits in our seclusion and make no difference and no stand for God in our world.

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Rather, His will is for us to live as heralds of His Good News of grace, love, and mercy in our inclusion of people around us so that we can make a difference in their lives and in our stand for God.

## Conclusion

On 15 May 2024, we inaugurated the 4<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister of our country here in Singapore—Lawrence Wong who has openly declared himself to be a Christian. In a newspaper report just after his inauguration, he was quoted as saying this:

Instead of emphasising competition, Singaporeans need to be reminded to foster collaboration. Instead, of every man for himself, the focus has to be on how we're in it together. And instead of the strong forging ahead, I hope the country will be one where the strong look out for and take care of the vulnerable ...

Rippled down through society, this means a country where people stop maximising the limits of what their wealth and privilege can buy so they win the game of life, and instead use their power and influence to help level up the playing field for others.

*(The Straits Times, 17 May 2024, pp. B1-B2)*

Lawrence Wong's words are indeed inspiring as we re-examine and reshape our social compact and cohesion in the years to come. We want to be a kinder and more compassionate society—a society where the much blessed will use their opportunities and resources to share with the less blessed; a society where the much blessed will use their opportunities and resources to be more like contributors and less like consumers in order to counter the threat of widening inequality in our society.

Some suggestions to be better people for God with the opportunities and resources we have are:

- One, seek the good of others (1 Cor. 10:24). We are not to exclusively seek our own good, but also the good of others. When we make lifestyle choices for the good of others, we glorify God.
- Two, give generously (2 Cor. 9:13). We glorify God not only by our verbal witness of the Gospel, but also our visible work of generosity.
- Three, don't deny the Lord in better times and don't dishonour Him in bitter times (Prov. 30:9; Matt. 5:16). There will be ups and downs in our lives. In times of prosperity, we may deny our need for God and say, "Who is the LORD? Who needs Him?" And in times of adversity, we may dishonour Him with sinful acts like stealing what is not ours. We are blessed to be a blessing—the much blessed are to help the less blessed; the less blessed are to keep believing in God's grace of provision. Jesus Himself reminded us that regardless of better or bitter

times, we are to “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven”.

Yes, God gives us many opportunities to better people for His glory. But when we become too comfortable with where we are and what we have, we can often become complacent and this will lead us to miss and waste the opportunities to be better for God’s glory.

Let’s pray to be better people for God and experience better things from God by deciding this day not to isolate and indulge ourselves in our own abundance with indifference, but to step out of our comfort zone and go beyond where we are now with interest for the good of others. Amen!