

The Books of Hosea, Joel, and Amos, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 9: You Only Have I Known: Privilege and Accountability

Amos 3:1–4:13

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

The doctrinal heart of this section is the relationship between privilege and accountability, and it must be handled with care. Amos 3:2 is one of the most misunderstood verses in the Old Testament. God's choosing of Israel was not an unconditional guarantee that every Israelite was eternally and irresistibly saved regardless of how they lived. It was an election to covenant purpose: God set Israel apart to know Him, to walk with Him, and through her to bless all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:3). That calling carried responsibility, and Amos states the sobering consequence plainly: 'therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.' Guard the class against the Calvinist misreading that turns God's choice into an unbreakable, individual guarantee of salvation. Scripture everywhere teaches that covenant standing must be lived out in faithfulness, that those who presume on grace can fall, and that God holds the privileged to a higher account (Luke 12:47–48; Romans 11:20–22). To be known by God is the greatest privilege and the most serious responsibility a person can carry.

The formational aim is to bring the class under the tender weight of God's fivefold plea, 'yet have ye not returned unto me.' Chapter 4 reveals a God who sends a graded series of disciplines, famine, drought, blight, plague, military defeat, each one a smaller mercy designed to turn His people home before the final judgment falls. This is the heart of a Father, not the cold sentence of a tyrant. Help the class read the hard providences of their own lives not as proof that God has abandoned them, but as His patient knocking, calling them to repentance (Hebrews 12:5–11). Yet the chapter also ends with unbending realism: 'prepare to meet thy God, O Israel.' The call to return is genuine and urgent precisely because the meeting is certain. Every person will stand before God (2 Corinthians 5:10). The aim is to send each student home asking not 'Am I safe because of my heritage?' but 'Have I returned to the Lord, and am I walking with Him today?'

Question 1

Student Question:

God says to Israel, 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities' (3:2). What does this verse teach about the purpose of God's choosing of Israel, and why does being known by God increase, rather than remove, accountability?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Chapter 3 opens with a summons: 'Hear this word that the Lord hath spoken against you, O children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up from the land of Egypt.' God reminds them at the outset of the redemption that made them His people. The very Exodus that proves His love is now invoked as the basis for His judgment, because grace despised becomes grounds for greater accountability.

Then comes the thunderclap of verse 2: 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.' To be 'known' by God here means to be chosen, loved, and entered into intimate covenant relationship. Israel assumed this knowledge made her untouchable. God says the opposite. Intimacy with God raises the standard; it does not lower it.

This verse must be read rightly. God's choice of Israel was an election to covenant purpose, to know Him and to bless the nations through her (Genesis 12:3), not an unconditional promise that every Israelite would be saved regardless of obedience. The 'therefore' is crucial: privilege creates responsibility. The same principle runs through the New Testament, where the servant who knew his master's will and did it not is beaten with many stripes (Luke 12:47-48).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God grounds His claim on His people in the redemption of the Exodus (3:1).
- To be 'known' by God is covenant intimacy, the highest privilege a people can have (3:2).
- Election was to covenant purpose and blessing for the nations, not an unconditional guarantee of individual salvation (Genesis 12:3).
- Privilege increases accountability: 'therefore I will punish you' (compare Luke 12:47-48).
- Presuming on God's choice while living in sin is a deadly error.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it dangerous to treat being chosen by God as a guarantee that we can live however we please?
- How does being 'known' by God change both our security and our responsibility?
- Where might you be presuming on grace instead of walking in obedience?

Question 2

Student Question:

God's covenant with Israel was meant to carry responsibility and to bless the nations, not to guarantee that every Israelite was automatically and permanently saved no matter how they lived (Genesis 12:3; Amos 3:2). How does this protect us from presuming on God's grace in our own walk with Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Amos defends his right to prophesy with a chain of rhetorical questions drawn from ordinary life. 'Can two walk together, except they be agreed?' Companions on a road have met by appointment. 'Will a lion roar in the forest, when he hath no prey?' The roar signals that the kill is at hand. Each question presses the same logic: every effect has a cause.

The questions build toward the point: 'Shall a trumpet be blown in the city, and the people not be afraid? shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it?' Amos is insisting that calamity does not strike a city apart from God's governing hand, and that the prophet's alarming words are not random; they are the trumpet warning of a real and approaching danger.

The climax is verses 7 and 8: 'Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets.' God does not strike without warning; He sends His word first. And once He has spoken, the prophet cannot be silent: 'The lion hath roared, who will not fear? the Lord God hath spoken, who can but prophesy?' The roar of the lion from chapter 1 sounds again, and it compels a response.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Every effect has a cause; God's words and actions are never empty or random (3:3–6).
- God reveals His purposes through His servants before He acts; He warns before He judges (3:7).
- Once God has spoken, faithful messengers are compelled to speak (3:8).
- The roar of the lion is the recurring image of God's certain word and judgment.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it teach us that God warns His people before He acts in judgment?
- When God's word is clear, do we feel compelled to obey and to speak, or do we make excuses?
- How should the certainty that God's warnings are real shape the way we hear Scripture?

Question 3

Student Question:

Amos asks, 'Can two walk together, except they be agreed?' (3:3) and follows with a chain of cause-and-effect questions (3:3–8). What is Amos teaching about the certainty that God's word and God's actions are connected, and that His warnings are never empty?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

God issues a startling summons: 'Publish in the palaces at Ashdod, and in the palaces in the land of Egypt.' He calls the pagan nations, Philistia and Egypt, to assemble on the mountains around Samaria and witness what goes on inside Israel. The implication is devastating: even hardened pagans would be appalled at the injustice within God's covenant people.

What they would see is summarized in verse 10: 'For they know not to do right, saith the Lord, who store up violence and robbery in their palaces.' Israel had so lost her moral bearings that doing right had become foreign to her. Her storehouses, which should have held provision, were filled with the spoils of violence and theft.

God will not protect His people's reputation at the expense of truth. He is willing to expose the sin of His own before the watching world rather than excuse it. This is a sobering reminder that God's holiness is not for sale, even to spare His own people embarrassment, and that the church too must value integrity over image.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Israel's injustice was so great that even pagan nations are called to witness it (3:9).
- Sin can so corrupt a people that they 'know not to do right' (3:10).
- God prizes truth and holiness above the reputation of His own people.
- Wealth gained by violence and robbery is stored-up guilt, not security.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that God would expose His own people's sin before the watching world?
- How can a person or a church lose the ability even to recognize what is right?
- Why is God's commitment to truth over reputation actually a mercy?

Question 4

Student Question:

Amos says, 'Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets' (3:7), and 'the Lord God hath spoken, who can but prophesy?' (3:8). When God makes His will clear to you through His word, do you feel a similar compulsion to respond and to speak, or do you find yourself making excuses for silence?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Judgment is now pronounced: 'An adversary there shall be even round about the land; and he shall bring down thy strength from thee, and thy palaces shall be spoiled.' The wealth Israel trusted in will be plundered by an invading enemy. What she gathered by injustice will be torn from her by force.

Amos uses a vivid shepherd's image in verse 12: 'As the shepherd taketh out of the mouth of the lion two legs, or a piece of an ear; so shall the children of Israel be taken out.' A shepherd could legally prove an animal was killed, not stolen, by rescuing a scrap of the carcass. The picture is grim: only a pitiful remnant of Israel will be salvaged, like a torn ear pulled from a lion's jaws.

God specifically targets their false religion and their luxury: 'in the day that I shall visit the transgressions of Israel upon him I will also visit the altars of Bethel.' The horns of the altar, the

place of supposed refuge, will be cut off. The 'houses of ivory' and 'great houses' built on oppression will be smashed. Both their corrupt worship and their ill-gotten comfort fall together.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Wealth gathered by injustice will be plundered; false security cannot stand (3:11).
- Only a small remnant will be rescued, like a scrap from a lion's mouth (3:12).
- God targets the false worship at Bethel; counterfeit religion offers no refuge (3:14).
- Luxury built on oppression invites God's judgment (3:15).

Discussion Prompts

- Where are we tempted to find security in possessions or comfort rather than in God?
- Why can no false or counterfeit worship provide real refuge in the day of judgment?
- What 'houses of ivory' might God be calling you to hold loosely?

Question 5

Student Question:

God commands the pagan nations to gather and witness the 'great tumults' and 'oppressed' within Israel (3:9–10), saying His people 'know not to do right.' What does it mean that God would expose His own people's injustice before the watching nations, and what does this say about His commitment to truth over reputation?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Chapter 4 opens with one of Amos's most cutting images: 'Hear this word, ye kine of Bashan, that are in the mountain of Samaria.' Bashan was famous for its fat, well-fed cattle. Amos addresses the pampered, self-indulgent women of Samaria as sleek cows, demanding luxury while 'which oppress the poor, which crush the needy, which say to their masters, Bring, and let us drink.'

The charge is that their comfortable lifestyle was built directly on the backs of the oppressed. Their demand for ease and indulgence drove the very oppression of the poor that Amos has been condemning. Self-centered luxury is never neutral; it has a cost, and here the cost was paid by the crushed and needy.

God swears by His holiness that judgment is coming: 'he will take you away with hooks, and your posterity with fishhooks.' The picture is of captives led away like fish on a line, dragged out through breaches in the broken walls. The fattened cattle will be led to slaughter; the indulgence of today becomes the captivity of tomorrow.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Self-indulgent luxury that demands ease at others' expense is a grievous sin (4:1).
- The comfort of the powerful was built on the oppression of the poor.
- God swears by His own holiness that judgment is certain (4:2).
- Indulgence today leads to captivity tomorrow; sin has consequences.

Discussion Prompts

- How can the pursuit of personal comfort blind us to its cost in other people's lives?
- Why does God take the oppression of the poor and needy so personally?
- Where might a love of ease be quietly shaping how you treat others?

Question 6

Student Question:

God announces that He will punish the altars of Bethel and tear down the winter and summer houses, the houses of ivory and the great houses (3:14–15). Where might you be placing your security in comfort, possessions, or religious routine rather than in a right relationship with God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

God turns to their worship with biting irony: 'Come to Bethel, and transgress; at Gilgal multiply transgression.' These were Israel's busy religious centers, and people flocked to them with offerings. But God says their very acts of worship were acts of transgression, because they were offered by people who refused to do justice.

The sarcasm sharpens: 'bring your sacrifices every morning, and your tithes after three years... proclaim and publish the free offerings: for this liketh you, O ye children of Israel.' Their religion was zealous, frequent, and showy. The fatal phrase is 'for this liketh you,' that is, this is what you enjoy. Their worship was designed to please themselves, not God.

Here is a vital and sobering truth: religious activity can itself become rebellion when it is divorced from justice and genuine obedience. God is not impressed by frequency, generosity, or enthusiasm in worship if the worshiper's life contradicts His character. This anticipates the great theme of the next lesson, where God says, 'I hate, I despise your feast days' (5:21).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Worship offered by the unjust is itself transgression, not devotion (4:4).
- Frequent, showy, generous religion can still be self-pleasing rebellion (4:5).
- God is not impressed by zeal in worship divorced from justice and obedience.
- True worship and righteous living cannot be separated.

Discussion Prompts

- How can worship become something we do to please ourselves rather than God?

- What is the connection between how we treat people and whether our worship is acceptable?
- Where might zeal in religious activity be masking a lack of obedience in your daily life?

Question 7

Student Question:

God rebukes the 'cows of Bashan' who oppress the poor and crush the needy while demanding luxury (4:1), and He condemns their corrupt, self-pleasing worship at Bethel and Gilgal (4:4-5). How can religious activity actually become an act of rebellion when it is divorced from justice and genuine obedience?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Now comes the most poignant passage in the two chapters. God recites a series of disciplines He had already sent, each meant to turn Israel back. 'I have given you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and want of bread in all your places: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the Lord.' Famine was a warning, a mercy meant to drive them home, and they ignored it.

The refrain tolls again and again. He sent drought, withholding rain from one city and not another (4:7-8); He sent blight, mildew, and locusts that devoured their gardens and fields (4:9); He sent pestilence 'after the manner of Egypt' and the sword that slew their young men (4:10). Five times the same heartbreaking line returns: 'yet have ye not returned unto me.'

This reveals the very heart of God. These calamities were not arbitrary cruelty; they were graded mercies, each a smaller blow designed to awaken His people before the final judgment fell. The Lord chastens those He loves precisely to call them back (Hebrews 12:5-11). The tragedy of Israel is that the door of repentance stood open again and again, and again and again they walked past it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God sent a graded series of disciplines, each a mercy meant to bring His people back (4:6-11).
- The fivefold refrain 'yet have ye not returned unto me' reveals God's patient, fatherly heart.
- Hardship can be God's loving discipline, calling us to repentance (Hebrews 12:5-11).
- The tragedy of sin is repeatedly refusing the open door of repentance.
- God always prefers to call His people home rather than to destroy them.

Discussion Prompts

- How do you tend to interpret hardship, and could God be using it to call you back to Himself?
- Why is repeated refusal to repent such a serious and dangerous condition?

- What does the fivefold plea reveal about the kind of God we serve?

Question 8

Student Question:

Five times God recalls the calamities He sent, famine, drought, blight, locust, plague, and overthrow, each followed by the refrain, 'yet have ye not returned unto me' (4:6–11). When God allows hardship into your life, how do you tend to respond, and what would it look like to read such moments as a call to return to Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Amos even alludes to a past judgment so severe it recalls Sodom and Gomorrah: 'I have overthrown some of you, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and ye were as a firebrand plucked out of the burning.' They had been snatched from disaster, given another chance, a smoking stick pulled from the fire, and still 'ye have not returned unto me.'

The cumulative effect of these verses is to show that God had exhausted His gentler remedies. He had tried famine, drought, blight, plague, defeat, and even partial overthrow. Each was a smaller judgment offered as an invitation to repent. None of them worked, because the people would not turn their hearts back to God.

This pattern warns us not to despise the smaller corrections of God in our lives. A disappointment, an illness, a loss, a failure, any of these may be the Lord plucking us as a firebrand from the fire, giving us one more opportunity to come home before something greater is at stake. The question is always whether we will read His hand rightly and return.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God had already spared Israel from worse, like a firebrand plucked from the fire (4:11).
- God exhausts His gentler remedies before final judgment falls.
- Smaller corrections are invitations to repent that should not be despised.
- The hardness that ignores every warning leads to a settled and dangerous condition.

Discussion Prompts

- Has God ever 'plucked you from the fire,' and how did you respond to that mercy?
- Why might we be tempted to ignore the smaller corrections God sends?
- What would it look like to read a present hardship as God's invitation to return?

Question 9

Student Question:

After every warning is refused, God says, 'Therefore thus will I do unto thee, O Israel: and because I will do this unto thee, prepare to meet thy God, O Israel' (4:12). Taking the whole of chapters 3 and 4 together, what does this passage teach about privilege, the genuine and repeated call to repent, and the certainty that every person must finally stand before God (compare 2 Corinthians 5:10; Romans 14:12)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Because every warning has been refused, God moves to His final word: 'Therefore thus will I do unto thee, O Israel: and because I will do this unto thee, prepare to meet thy God, O Israel.' The repeated calls to return have been spurned, and so the meeting that could have been one of restored fellowship becomes a meeting of reckoning. Yet even here the language is not pure threat; it is a final, solemn summons to get ready.

This is the heaviest doctrinal point of the lesson: privilege, the genuine and repeated call to repent, and the absolute certainty that every person must finally stand before God. Israel's chosenness never exempted her from this meeting; it made the meeting more serious. And the principle is universal. 'We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ' (2 Corinthians 5:10). 'Every one of us shall give account of himself to God' (Romans 14:12). No heritage, no membership, no past experience removes the necessity of being ready now.

Amos closes the chapter with a soaring doxology that reminds us who this God is: 'For, lo, he that formeth the mountains, and createth the wind, and declareth unto man what is his thought... The Lord, The God of hosts, is his name.' The One we must prepare to meet is the Maker of the mountains and the wind, who knows our very thoughts. Such a God is not to be presumed upon. He is to be sought, returned to, and met in repentance while the door still stands open.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- After every refused warning, God issues a final summons: 'prepare to meet thy God' (4:12).
- Privilege never removes the certainty that every person must stand before God (2 Corinthians 5:10; Romans 14:12).
- The call to return is genuine and urgent precisely because the meeting is certain.
- The God we must meet is the almighty Creator who knows our very thoughts (4:13).
- Readiness through genuine repentance now is the only wise response.

Discussion Prompts

- If you knew you were to meet God this week, what would you need to make right today?
- How does the certainty of standing before God change the urgency of repentance?
- What is the one specific way Jesus is calling you to return and prepare to meet your God?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over these two chapters. God's repeated plea, 'yet have ye not returned unto me,' is the aching heart of a Father who would rather forgive than punish. As you have studied the weight of privilege and the urgency of returning, name one specific way the Lord Jesus is calling you to come home to Him and forming His own heart of obedience in you.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone draws together the central nerve of these two chapters: 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth' (3:2) and the five times repeated lament, 'yet have ye not returned unto me' (4:6–11). The aim of the question is to move the student from understanding privilege and accountability as a doctrine to feeling it as a personal summons. Knowing God is the greatest gift a person can receive, and it is also the most searching responsibility. Help students see that the warnings of Amos are not God's coldness but God's persistence, the refusal of a covenant Lord to give His people up.

Press for specificity. The repeated tragedy of Amos 4 is a people who endured discipline after discipline and still did not turn. Ask students to name the gentle (or not so gentle) ways the Lord has already been calling them, the providences, the sermons, the convictions, the disappointments, that were invitations to return. The phrase 'prepare to meet thy God, O Israel' (4:12) can be framed not only as a warning of judgment but as the most important appointment any person will ever keep, and one that shapes how we live today.

Connect the privilege of Israel to the even greater privilege of those who are in Christ. Christians have been given more light, the full revelation of God in His Son, the indwelling work of the Spirit, the fellowship of the Lord's church. Greater privilege means greater accountability (Luke 12:48), but it also means greater grace. Guard against any Calvinist misreading: God's choosing of Israel was a covenant purpose to bless the nations, carrying real responsibility, not an unconditional guarantee that removed the need to return. The call to return is genuine, and the ability to respond is real.

Land the lesson on one concrete way Jesus is forming the student. Spiritual formation here is the daily discipline of returning, of not letting small distances from God become settled habits of heart. Invite each student to name one specific point of return and to take it to the Lord in prayer before the next class.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Knowing God as the highest privilege and the most searching responsibility ('you only have I known... therefore I will punish').
- God's repeated discipline as the persistence of covenant love, not coldness ('yet have ye not returned unto me').

- Greater privilege brings greater accountability and greater grace (Luke 12:48); Christians have received more light than Israel.
- Election as covenant purpose to bless the nations, not unconditional individual guarantee; the call to return is genuine and answerable.
- Spiritual formation as the daily practice of returning before small distances harden into settled drift.

Discussion Prompts

- In what ways has the Lord already been calling you to return that you have, like Israel, so far left unanswered?
- How does seeing your privilege in Christ as both gift and responsibility change the way you will live this week?
- What is one specific point of return you are willing to take to the Lord before we meet again?