

THE MESSAGE OF AMOS
(1) INDICTMENTS AND REFORM
OR
COMING TO TERMS WITH PAST MISTAKES

Amos Chapters 1-2

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PROLOGUE

One of the challenges in trying to reform people's behavior is that we are so reluctant to take responsibility for our own. Two kids sat down for lunch. One opened his lunch box and began to gripe. "Baloney again? This is the fourth day in a row! I'm sick and tired of baloney!" His friend said, "I bet if you just tell your mom you don't like baloney, she'll fix you something else." "Mom?" replied the first kid. "I fix my own lunches."

SCRIPTURE

Reading from 7:14-15; and 5:14, 24 and also selected readings from Amos 1-2 using NIV.

From 7:14-15; and 5:14, 24.

14 Amos answered Amaziah, "I was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. 15 But the Lord took me from tending the flock and said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel'" (7:14-15).

14 Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is (5:14).

24 But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream! (5:24).

Selected readings from Amos 1-2.

The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa—the vision he saw concerning Israel two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of Israel. 2 He said: "The Lord roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds dry up, and the top of Carmel withers."

3 This is what the Lord says: "For three sins of Damascus, even for four, I will not relent. Because she threshed Gilead with sledges having iron teeth,

4 I will send fire on the house of Hazeal that will consume the fortresses of Ben-Hadad. 5 I will break down the gate of Damascus; I will destroy the king who is in the Valley of Aven and the one who holds the scepter in Beth Eden. The people of Aram will go into exile to Kir,” says the Lord (1:1-5).

4 This is what the Lord says: “For three sins of Judah, even for four, I will not relent. Because they have rejected the law of the Lord and have not kept his decrees, because they have been led astray by false gods, the gods their ancestors followed, 5 I will send fire on Judah that will consume the fortresses of Jerusalem.”

6 This is what the Lord says: “For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not relent. They sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. 7 They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed. Father and son use the same girl and so profane my holy name. 8 They lie down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge. In the house of their god they drink wine taken as fines (2:4-9).

INTRODUCTION

Today’s message is the first in a series of three based on the prophetic book of Amos. Amos takes a hard look at injustice and gives a call to righteousness. Amos was a herdsman from an area south of Jerusalem. God sent him to the northern kingdom of Israel.

Amos lived during the 8th century before the birth Christ. It was a time of great prosperity. But it was also a time of social injustice, gross immorality, and religious apostasy. The parallels with our own day are striking.

Although a major theme of Amos is judgment even in the midst of judgment we find words of mercy and hope.

PRAYER

Let us pray.

Almighty God, may your justice roll on like a river, your righteousness like a never-failing stream! Amen.

1. PROPHET OF JUSTICE (1:1-2; 7:14-15)

Amos was a prophet of justice even though he saw himself as merely, “one of the

shepherds of Tekoa” (Amos 1:1a), a rural area in the southern kingdom of Judah. In the 7th chapter Amos says this about himself, "I was neither a prophet nor a prophet's son" (7:14). This was a strange way for a prophet to describe himself; to deny that he was a prophet. But Amos uses a different term here for prophet (nabiy', naw-bee'), one that is usually translated as “seer.” In his day there was a group of professional seers, prophets-for-hire, sort of the ancient equivalent of the “Psychic Network.” Amos was not part of that group but was a true prophet. He says in verse 15, “But the LORD took me from tending the flock and said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel’” (7:15) and that is what Amos did. He went north to Israel. He became a prophet of justice.

2. SINS OF THE NEIGHBORS ESPECIALLY JUDAH (1:3 - 2:5)

The first thing he said to the Israelites was that God was going to judge the neighboring nations surrounding Israel. He spoke of the sins of the neighbors especially Judah.

The pattern of this judgment is found in the first and second chapters. He uses a literary device. In verse 3 we read, “This is what the LORD says: ‘For three sins of Damascus, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath’” (1:3). Then in verse 6, “‘For three sins of Gaza, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath’” (1:6). And so on and so forth.

“For three sins...even for four” is a figure of speech indicating a great quantity. Many were the sins of the neighboring nations.

The word that is translated as “sins” here is a term that is usually associated with rebellion. These nations were in rebellion against God. And their crimes were crimes against humanity.

The promised judgment is the same in each case: fire! Specifically, it is fire on structures. So you have fire on great houses, fire on fortresses, fire on the city walls, and so on. These various structures were a source of pride for these nations. These structures made them feel safe and independent, even independent from their Maker. The judgment of fire had two aspects to it: on the one hand, it was a punishment, but on the other hand, it was an expression of mercy. By destroying their sources of pride and exposing their vulnerability it gave them the opportunity to come to their senses and turn to God. Sadly, from what we know of history, this did not take place.

The crime of Damascus was cruelty. Amos gives this example, “Because she threshed Gilead with sledges having iron teeth” (1:3). This refers to a time when soldiers from Damascus came into Gilead, rounded up prisoners, laid them on the ground and took plows and plowed over them ripping their bodies to shreds. This was representative of the kind of cruelty they frequently inflicted on others.

The crime of Gaza was slavery. They would capture neighboring villages and sell the villagers into slavery. This was the 8th century B.C. but let us not forget that 26 centuries later (750 B.C. - 1850 A.D.) this barbaric practice was still going on in this country.

The crime of Tyre was also slavery but it involved the breaking of an international treaty. So there are two crimes here: the slave trade and violating a sacred oath to another nation.

The crime of Edom was that he “pursued his brother with a sword, stifling all compassion” (1:11). The Edomites were relatives of the Israelites by way of Esau who was the brother of Jacob. The Israelites were descendants of Jacob who was the brother of Esau. Yet these two groups hated each other. Whenever Israel was in trouble, Edom helped their enemy. When refugees from Israel came into the land of Edom, the Edomites inflicted unspeakable indignities upon them.

The crime of Ammon was against women. It was common practice for their military when occupying enemy territory to slay women who were with child. They would thrust a sword into the abdomen, killing both mother and child at the same time. In the minds of the Ammonites this was a way to destroy two enemies with one stroke. But it was a bloodthirsty madness, reflecting intense ethnic hatred. If Amos were alive today and he were to read our newspapers and see the headlines about places like Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Sudan, and more, he may well say, “Not much has changed in more than 27 centuries.”

The crime of Moab was that of burning the bones of Edom’s king (2:1). Not only did they murder this king but they also desecrated his personhood by violating one of the most sacred laws of decency at the time. Furthermore, the Moabites believed that if you burned someone’s skeleton, then that person would not find peace in the afterlife. Not content with simply killing this man, they wanted their intense hatred to live on forever.

Here were six neighboring nations who were guilty of heinous crimes. They were not part of the covenant with God but they would be judged by God according to the light they had received; according to God’s moral law implanted within the conscience (Rom 1:19-20).

The seventh indictment that Amos delivered was different. It was against Judah, the southern neighbor of Israel. The people of Judah should have known better as they were included in the covenant with God and were recipients of God’s special revelation. So to them the Lord says, “For three sins of Judah, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. Because they have rejected the law of the LORD and have not kept his decrees, because they have been led astray by false gods” (2:4).

Try to picture this in your minds. A rural herdsman, somewhat unsophisticated, comes north to an urban area in Israel, stands up in the marketplace, and makes a speech. This was before television, video games and smart phones. Speakers in the marketplace often attracted a crowd if for no other reason than the fact that people lacked diversions and they hoped that such speakers would be a source of entertainment. Amos, who had the additional characteristics of strange appearance and accent, quickly drew a large gathering.

He told the Israelites that Damascus, their hated enemy, was going to be judged by God. How do you think the crowd responded? “Oh, this is wonderful news! Tell us more!” Then Amos said, “And Gaza, your enemy, is going to be judged by God.” The Israelites let out a cheer. “And Tyre, your enemy, is going to be judged by God.” The cheers got louder. And on with Edom, and Ammon, and Moab. Then, as this was building to a crescendo, Amos says, “And Judah, your rival, is going to be judged by God.” At this point Amos has the crowd eating out of the palm of his hand. The people are hanging on every word, cheering every pronouncement of judgment on their neighbors, especially Judah.

3. CHIEF OF SINNERS: ISRAEL (2:6-9; 12-16)

Then at the zenith of this feverish pitch, Amos says, in effect, “And the worst sinner, and the one that is going to be judged most harshly by God Almighty, is you!” The cheers stopped. The crowd went into stunned silence. They had fallen into a prophetic trap.

If the neighbors of Israel were going to be judged, if Judah, the keeper of the Covenant with David, was to be judged, then how foolish to think that Israel would not be judged. The indictment against Israel in the 2nd chapter is the longest of the indictments.

"For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath" (2:6). The sins of Israel can be placed into three categories:

- Social injustice - the rich and influential, political and social leaders abused their power. These people knew better. They were responsible for dispensing justice but instead they corrupted it. A wealthy man who committed a crime could pay a bribe and avoid conviction. A poor man, even if innocent, would not get justice. The poor were often in debt, society was structured that way (and still is, I am sad to say). Amos tells us in verse 6, that even if that debt was as small as a pair of sandals, it was an excuse to sell that man into slavery. Social injustice was rampant.
- Gross immorality - Amos gives this horrific example: “Father and son use the

same girl and so profane my holy name” (2:7). Father and son were having sex with the same woman – a kind of secondary incest. According to Amos such behavior shows utter disrespect for the character of God.

- Religious Apostasy - “They lie down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge” (2:8). Clothing was regarded as valid collateral for securing debts. These garments had come from the poor and by law they should have been returned each night but they were not. These same people who took the garments from the poor took them with them when they gathered in their places of worship. They had divorced worship from justice. They had apostatized, that is, separated faith from practice.¹ And God hates this.

In the first film of the three-part *Godfather* series, there is a scene in which members of the featured crime family are presenting their child for baptism all the while the family’s henchmen were out assassinating people. Michael, who is the uncle and godfather of the child being baptized, is asked by the cardinal, “Do you renounce Satan and all his works?” Michael answers in the affirmative even though he knows that he has engineered a cold-blooded mass killing to take place at the same time as the baptism. Worship and justice had been divorced. They had separated religious ceremony from righteous behavior. If what we do on Sunday morning has nothing to do with the way we treat people the rest of the week, we have worshiped in vain.

4. RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS

The first two chapters of Amos deal primarily with social righteousness. Amos is concerned that we treat people the way they are supposed to be treated. To put it in the words of Jesus, “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31 NIV). This is commonly referred to as the Golden Rule. It is about having right relationships with others.

We are not to treat each other on the basis of prejudice or superficial judgements based on race or nationality or age or gender. We are to treat people on the basis of how God wants us to treat people. The most well known verse in Amos says, “But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” (Amos 5:24 NIV). This was a favorite text for the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. during the civil rights movement of the 1950's and 60's. King’s message was based on the Word of God. We are to live in right relations with each other because this is what God desires.

As Christians, we are to be concerned about justice for all people and to speak out against

¹Divorce and apostasy are English translations of similar NT Greek words.

injustice even if it offends the powers that be. But our understanding of justice needs to be consistent with what God has revealed to us in Scripture.

5. GOOD NEWS IN THE MIDST OF BAD: LIBERATION (2:10-11)

So what do you think of Amos so far? Now be honest, if you wanted to cheer someone up, would you tell them to read the first two chapters of Amos? Probably not. There is a lot of gloom and doom here. But even though we may not *like* to hear the message of Amos we *need* to hear the message of Amos. All people, everywhere, are accountable to their Creator.

But even in the midst of judgement there is grace. The Lord says, "I brought you up out of Egypt" (2:10). This was a reminder to the Israelites of another aspect of God. Yes, God is judge of all the earth but God is also our Savior. The Israelites were in bondage in Egypt and God set them free. We may be in bondage but God can set us free. So here is the good news in the midst of bad: liberation.

We may be slaves to sin and death, but God can redeem us. We may be shackled to the mistakes of our past, God can set us free.

But this is not some magic formula whereby you say the "right" words, believe in Jesus and then all your problems go away. It doesn't work that way. We are called to a life of faith not to a life of sorcery. Faith involves forming and reforming our lives according to the Word of God.

The first step is to admit our need for God's forgiveness. Before we can become right with God and be set free we must admit that we were in the wrong with God and then earnestly desire to turn away from anything which displeases God. This is what the Bible means by repentance.

Jurgen, the painter, would often thin his paint in order to make it go further. So when the Church decided to do some deferred maintenance, Jurgen was able to put in the low bid, and got the job. But he had never before worked for a church. Nevertheless, he thinned his paint way down.

One day while he was up on the scaffolding – the job almost finished – he heard a horrendous clap of thunder, and the sky opened. The downpour washed the thinned paint off the church and knocked Jurgen off his scaffold and onto the lawn. Jurgen knew this was a warning from the Almighty, so he got on his knees and cried: "Oh, God! Forgive me! What should I do?" And from the thunder, a mighty voice said, "REPAINT! AND THIN NO

MORE!”

Repentance is not simply a change of opinion or just saying you’re sorry. It also means wanting to change the way you think and act about something you know is wrong. Ultimately, true repentance is only possible with the help of God. It is God who comes to us and by the grace and power of his Holy Spirit we can **Admit** our need to turn from evil and turn toward God, **Believe** that Jesus Christ is the One whom God sent to save us, and **Commit** ourselves to following Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, showing his love and justice to the world. We can be freed from the mistakes of the past so we can be free to treat people the way they were meant to be treated.

CONCLUSION

John Ortberg tells of an event that took place in the 1960's that involved two first grade girls. One was African-American and the other was white. They met for the first time on the first day of school. Prior to that they had no association with each other because of segregation. At the end of that historic day, after learning that the two girls had been together, one of the mothers anxiously asked how it went. The one little girl replied, “We were both so scared, we just held each other’s hands all day long.”

Now what did those little girls know that we adults have such difficulty comprehending? It is far better to hold a hand than to clench a fist. I think Amos would have been pleased with those girls. We need to get rid of the fists of anger and injustice and replace them with hands of love in the name of the One who first extended his hands for us.