

THE MESSAGE OF AMOS
(2) JUDGMENTS AND REPENTANCE
OR
COMING TO TERMS WITH PRESENT PRACTICES

Amos Chapters 3-6
Jeffrey S. Carlson
August 26, 2018

PROLOGUE

It seems to be human nature that we identify what is wrong with other people sooner than we recognize what is wrong with ourselves.

A man wants to see a psychiatrist. He is five feet tall and weighs over three hundred pounds. He's wearing rubber boots with spurs, leather lederhosen with bright purple suspenders, a cummerbund, a denim jacket with one sleeve torn off, and a woman's pillbox hat with a veil. One side of his face is clean-shaven, the other is bearded. There's a roofing nail in his nose, the eraser end of a pencil sticking out of his right ear, and perched on his left shoulder is a bantam chicken which has been plucked naked. As he walks into the office, the man lets out blood-curdling shrieks followed by piteous sobs and raucous laughter. "Good morning," the psychiatrist says, "What seems to be the problem?" "Well, Doc," the man begins, "I'm worried about my brother."

SCRIPTURE

Selected readings from Amos 3-6 using NIV.

Hear this word, people of Israel, the word the Lord has spoken against you—against the whole family I brought up out of Egypt: 2 “You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins.” 3 Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so? 4 Does a lion roar in the thicket when it has no prey? Does it growl in its den when it has caught nothing? 5 Does a bird swoop down to a trap on the ground when no bait is there? Does a trap spring up from the ground if it has not caught anything? 6 When a trumpet sounds in a city, do not the people tremble? When disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it? 7 Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets. 8 The lion has roared— who will not fear? The Sovereign Lord has spoken— who can but prophesy? (3:1-8).

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, “Bring us

some drinks!” 2 The Sovereign Lord has sworn by his holiness: “The time will surely come when you will be taken away with hooks, the last of you with fishhooks. 3 You will each go straight out through breaches in the wall, and you will be cast out toward Harmon,” declares the Lord. 4 “Go to Bethel and sin; go to Gilgal and sin yet more. Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three years. 5 Burn leavened bread as a thank offering and brag about your freewill offerings— boast about them, you Israelites, for this is what you love to do,” declares the Sovereign Lord (4:1-5).

“Therefore this is what I will do to you, Israel, and because I will do this to you, Israel, prepare to meet your God.” 13 He who forms the mountains, who creates the wind, and who reveals his thoughts to humankind, who turns dawn to darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth— the Lord God Almighty is his name (4:12-13).

Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord! Why do you long for the day of the Lord? That day will be darkness, not light. 19 It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear, as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him. 20 Will not the day of the Lord be darkness, not light—pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness? 21 “I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me (5:18-21).

Woe to you who are complacent in Zion, and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria. . .Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile; your feasting and lounging will end (6:1, 7).

INTRODUCTION

Today’s message is the second 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 whom God sent to the Northern Kingdom of Israel to be a prophet of justice.

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. 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. WOE TO THE COMPLACENT (3:1-8; 6:1-8; 4:1)

On March 10, 1994 a German tourist checked into a hotel near the Miami International Airport. He got into bed and smelled a foul odor but because he was so comfortable under the covers he didn't feel like doing anything about it. The next morning, a woman from housekeeping came in and discovered what was causing the foul odor - there was a corpse under the bed!

In the 8th century B.C. the nation of Israel was quite comfortable. But all around was the stench of death, spiritual death. God sent the prophet Amos to the Kingdom of Israel to rouse them from their complacency and to call them to repentance. At the beginning of Chapter 6 Amos says, "Woe to you who are at ease in Zion, and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria" (6:1). In other words, woe to the complacent.

Israel was complacent because of their ancestry. In Chapter 3 Amos says, "Hear this word the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel – against the whole family I brought up out of Egypt: 'You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth'" (3:1-2a). Israel had a special relationship with God because of a covenant that God had made with their ancestor Abraham. The word that is translated as "chosen" represents the deepest kind of intimacy and is used elsewhere in Scripture to describe the bond of marriage. But the Israelites had grown complacent about their responsibilities within the covenant. They thought that because of their ancestry God would always watch over them and bless them no matter what they did.

But because God had blessed them so much, he expected more from them. The responsibilities were greater and so were the consequences for disobedience. In the Book of Deuteronomy there is a list of judgments that were to fall upon anyone who broke the covenant with God. What Amos is saying to Israel is, "You have broken the covenant and you will be judged." So the whole verse says, "You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins" (Amos 3:2 NIV). What follows after verse 2 is a series of rhetorical questions that constitute a literary device for stressing the certainty of what the prophet has declared.

As Christians, we have a special relationship with God through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. But we must not take this for granted. The Apostle Paul gives this charge,

“Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test?” (2 Cor 13:5 NIV).

Israel was complacent because of their ancestry and because of national pride. Jeroboam II was King of Israel at this time and he stayed in power for many years. He achieved a series of military victories against his neighbors (largely because the neighbors around Israel were weak). This contributed to a strong national pride and the Israelites began to think of themselves as the first among all the nations. Now Amos agrees that Israel is first but by that he means that Israel will be the first to fall and go into exile (6:7). And he tells them that God abhors the pride of Jacob (6:8).

Jeroboam II also presided over a period of great economic growth. But Amos was not impressed by the growth of the economy, especially when so many were left out of its benefits. In Chapter 4, Amos addresses the wealthy women of Israel, “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, ‘Bring us some drinks!’” (4:1). Can you imagine if a preacher today referred to the well-to-do women of the church as, “You cows of Bashan!”? How long do you think that preacher would last? But Amos drives home the point: both the wealthy women and the wealthy men acted as if they were the only ones who mattered in society. The poor were cast aside.

It is a common malady among Christians living in prosperous nations to grow complacent. This is especially so for American Christians. The George Barna Research Group did a survey of Americans on faith and wealth. They found that the majority of Americans whose incomes are less than \$60,000 per year believe that faith in God is important. Only 45% of Americans whose incomes are greater than \$60,000 believe that faith in God is important and the number drops off sharply for those whose incomes are greater than \$100,000. So it would seem that the greater our prosperity, the less likely we are to think we need God.

A Greek guide took a group of tourists to the edge of a live volcano. One man from Texas looked down into the crater and said, “It looks like hell.” And without skipping a beat the guide said, “Oh, you Americans! You’ve been everywhere!” Now we must be careful lest that statement take on a greater truth than we would like. The Lord says, “Woe to you who are complacent” (6:1).

2. WITNESS TO FALSE WORSHIP (3:9, 14; 4:4,5; 5:21-23, 25, 26)

There is an interesting scene at the end of Chapter 3: “Proclaim to the fortresses of Ashdod and to the fortresses of Egypt: ‘Assemble yourselves on the mountains of Samaria...testify against the house of Jacob,’ declares the Lord” (Amos 3:9,13). This

scene has the appearance of a trial where the Lord is the prosecutor and Israel (“mountains of Samaria”; “house of Jacob”) is the accused.

The Lord calls two unlikely witnesses for the prosecution, Egypt and Philistia. These two, in effect, turn state’s evidence against Israel. To turn state's evidence is when an accused or convicted criminal testifies as a witness for the state against his or her accomplices. Egypt and Philistia did not truly worship the Lord but they knew that their partner in crime, Israel, also did not truly worship the Lord. They were witnesses to the false worship of Israel.

Israel’s worship was false in at least four ways:

- Worship was separated from justice – We looked at this problem last week. The Israelites did not see the connection between the worship of God and how they were to treat other people (2:8). This continues to be a struggle for us today.
- Worship was used for political purposes – The first Jeroboam had led ten of the twelve tribes of Israel to revolt against the house of David. They then crowned Jeroboam the first king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel (approx. 926-909 B.C.). He knew that Jerusalem was the center of worship for the people of God. Sooner or later his people would want to go to Jerusalem for one of the three major festivals such as Passover. If that happened then the revolt would begin to crumble and Jeroboam would have lost. So to keep his people from going to Jerusalem he built new temples in Bethel¹ and Dan (1 Kings 12:25-33), intentionally making Israelite worship different from that in Jerusalem. Thus he used worship for his own political ends and the two kingdoms remained divided. And this is why Amos tells them that the Lord has said, “I will punish the altars of Bethel” (3:14).
- Worship was serious in form but cold in spirit – The Lord says, “Go to Bethel and sin.” (4:4). This was not a command to sin but an observation that when the people went to their place of worship (Bethel) they went through the motions of religious worship without actually worshiping the Lord. They would carry out the religious rituals, even boast that they had done so, but their hearts were not in it. So the Lord says, "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies” (5:21 NIV).

¹ In Amos’s day Bethel was an idolatrous place. But Bethel started out as a good place. It was where Jacob first realized that God had a plan and purpose for his life and so he named the place “House of God” (*Beth El* in Hebrew). See Genesis 28:10-22.

Eight centuries later, when what was left of the people of the Northern Kingdom had become a mixed race known as the Samaritans, one such Samaritan was having a discussion with Jesus of Nazareth about worship:

[She said,] “Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus declared, “Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ... [For] a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks (John 4:20-23).

The issue is not where we worship but whether our worship flows from the heart and is faithful to the truth as revealed in God’s Word. We need to worship in Spirit and in truth.

- Worship had twisted into idolatry – The most damning testimony against Israel was that they worshiped idols, the same idols worshiped by Egypt and Philistia. Jeroboam had built temples in Dan and Bethel with golden calves. Ever wonder how intelligent people could believe that a hunk of metal was a god? The short answer is they didn’t; they knew perfectly well it was just a hunk of metal. But the golden calf was a powerful symbol in the Mediterranean world. It represented fertility. And while there were many gods of fertility for this area (including Ashtoreth or Astarte; see 1 Kings 11:5) the best known was Baal.

Sometimes the Israelites worshiped Baal in addition to worshiping the Lord and saw it as a way to improve social and commercial relations with their neighbors. But more often than not, especially in the Northern Kingdom, the Israelites regarded Baal as just another name for the Lord (Yahweh) arguing, in effect, “In the end, don’t we all worship the same God!”

The worship of Baal involved sex with temple prostitutes. It was extremely popular with the Israelite men and older boys. You may recall that last week I pointed out that Amos talked about a father and son having sex with the same girl. He may have been referring to temple prostitution. The rationale for such behavior was the belief that by recreating the fertility act this would positively influence Baal so that the worshipers would be blessed with an abundance of crops.

But there was another side of Baal worship even more reprehensible. When

storms or drought destroyed their vegetation, efforts to appease Baal included human sacrifice, usually the firstborn child of the one offering the sacrifice.

The thing that really galled Amos was that in spite of all this damning evidence, Israel still claimed to be faithful to the Lord. They showed no evidence of remorse or any desire to repent of their evil practices.

3. THE REAL DAY OF THE LORD (5:18-20; 24)

In fact, the Israelites believed that a day was coming when God would destroy all of Israel's enemies and usher in a new golden age where the Israelites would be blessed beyond imagination. They called this the "Day of the Lord." But Amos speaks about the real Day of the Lord. He says, "Woe to you who long for the day of the LORD! Why do you long for the day of the LORD? That day will be darkness, not light" (5:18 NIV). The Israelites thought the Day of the Lord would be a reckoning for their enemies. Amos tells them it will be a day of reckoning for them.

I was driving down a country road and I came across a barn that had painted on its side in large letters, "Prepare to meet thy God" – a verse taken from Amos 4:12. Perhaps you have seen something similar. Now what do you think of when you see a message like that? It is rather ominous. It makes you wonder what is going to be around the next bend. But when I got around the next bend all I could see was a large billboard for Coca-Cola. According to National Geographic, the Coca-Cola emblem is the most widely recognized symbol in the world. But that doesn't make it God.

Amos tells us who God is, "For lo, the one who forms the mountains, creates the wind, reveals his thoughts to mortals, makes the morning darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth – the LORD, the God of hosts, is his name!" (4:13 NRSV). Amos wants us to be prepared to meet this real God.

4. A RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

The Book of Amos is about right relationships. The first two chapters focus on social righteousness and the need to have right relationships with each other. Chapters 3 thru 6 (which we are examining today) emphasize spiritual righteousness and our need to be in a right relationship with God.

Do you pretend you need God or do you know you need God? Is it the real deal or just a show?

On the Day of Atonement a rabbi, wanting to express humility and contrition, beat his breast and said in a loud voice, "I am nothing!" Moved by the rabbi's example, the cantor

beat his breast and said, "I am nothing!" In the back of the synagogue, the janitor, grieved by his own sinfulness, beat his breast and shouted, "I am nothing!" Whereupon, the rabbi turned to the cantor and said, "Look who thinks he's nothing!"

5. GOOD NEWS IN THE MIDST OF BAD: MERCY (5:4, 6, 14, 15)

The good news in the midst of bad: is that there is mercy. The Lord says, "Seek me and live" (5:4). Then to indicate the great measure of such a promise, God repeats it not once but twice (6, 14), "Seek me and live. . . Seek me and live."

If we seek the Lord with our whole heart he will have abundant mercy. The Lord tells the prophet Jeremiah concerning those who turn to him, "I will remember their sins no more" (Jer 31:34). Wouldn't it be great if God forgot every bad thing we ever did or thought? In a manner of speaking, this is what happens when we turn to the Lord and place our trust in his Son, Jesus Christ. The Psalmist declared, "I love the LORD, for he heard ... my cry for mercy (Psalms 116:1 NIV).

CONCLUSION

Toward the end of the Civil War, when it was clear that the Confederate Army would be defeated, President Lincoln was asked how he was going to treat the Southern rebels. The people who asked this question, implied that they wanted some horrific revenge to be inflicted on the South. Lincoln gave an unexpected reply. He said, "I will treat them as if they had never gone away."

If you **Admit** your need for a Savior, **Believe** that Christ died for your sins and was raised from the dead, and **Commit** yourself to him, seeking him with your whole heart, God will treat you as if you had never gone away.