

# **A LOOK AT A BOOK: Amos**

## **July 20, 2014**

### **The Message of Amos: Does God Care?**

Does God care specifically about your life and mine? What do you think? Does God care when someone takes advantage of you sexually? Or when you suffer the effects of someone else's pride? Or when someone else's self-indulgence leaves you neglected and ignored? Or when others do not care about you? Does he care when religious leaders lead you astray?

Then again, I wonder if you really want God to care. In all of the examples I just gave, the question pertains to whether God cares, as it were, in your favor. But do you really want God to care if you obstruct justice? Or if you take advantage of another person? Or when you ignore or abuse the poor? Do you want him to care if you cheat in business, or on your taxes, or in your marriage? Does he care about such situations? Does he care when you continually do what you know is wrong and contrary to the teaching of the Bible and the instruction of your own conscience?

What does it mean if he does care?

### **Introducing Amos**

Amos is considered a minor prophet not because his prophecy is unimportant but because his book is shorter than the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, whom we call the major prophets. In fact, Amos was an important prophet, and one of the very first "writing prophets," the prophets of the Old Testament who wrote down their prophecies so that we now possess books by their names (unlike the "historical prophets" – Elijah, Elisha, and so forth). We know that he prophesied somewhere around 760-750 B.C., about the same time the Greeks were settling Spain. Amos was a contemporary of Hosea, Isaiah, and probably Jonah.

We don't know much about any of the minor prophets, such as where they were from or what they did besides prophesy. They simply were not that interested in talking about themselves. Yet Amos does give us a little information about himself. His book begins, "The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa – what he saw concerning Israel two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of Israel" (1:1). In other

words, we know that he was from Tekoa, which was located in the south, below Jerusalem and toward the Dead Sea. We know that he was a sheep and fruit farmer (see also 7:14). We know that he was neither the son of a prophet nor a professional prophet himself (7:14). Whether he was rich and prosperous or poor and struggling we cannot say. But for a brief time, God called him to serve as a prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel. Since he was from Judah, he would have been a foreigner in Israel. To his prophetic calling, then, he brought a sharp businessman's eye and an outsider's honesty.

God often calls surprising people to serve him in surprising ways. Just think back through the stories in the Old Testament. The pagan Abraham became the father of the faithful. The eighty-year-old and stuttering Moses became the great lawgiver and liberator of Israel. The young shepherd boy David became Israel's greatest king. On and on we could go. And Amos, a farmer and a fig picker, was called by God to be a prophet to a nation that appeared to be prosperous and successful. Who would have planned such things?

So Amos the farmer was given a thunderous word from God "Two years before the earthquake," the very first verse tells us. We don't know much about this earthquake, but we do know that a great land rift runs from Africa, through Palestine near the Dead Sea, and up into Asia, and that that part of the world can have horrific earthquakes. The ancient Jewish historian Josephus reports that an earthquake occurred in 31 B.C. in which thirty thousand people died. Evidently, the earthquake Amos mentioned was significant enough that it was remembered long afterward. The prophet Zechariah referred to it hundreds of years later, even mentioning King Uzziah by name (Zechariah 14:5). We may well surmise that God used this earthquake to drive home to Israel Amos's message of their dependence upon God as well as their need to turn to him in repentance.

Amos gave his prophecy during one of the most prosperous periods in Israel's history since Solomon's day. So Amos's sharply critical prophecy would have had both the unexpected suddenness of an earthquake and the sobering ferocity of a lion's roar.

As we now turn to the book of Amos, we find that God cares. God cares a lot! And he let the Israelites (and us) know that beyond a shadow of a doubt. To see that, we will consider first *the Judge and the judged* in 1:1-3:8. Second, we will consider *the focus of God's judgment* in 3:9-6:14. And third, we will consider *the character and cause of God's judgment* in chapters 7-9.

## **The Judge and the Judged**

In the first few chapters, we learn that God will speak judgment against the nations and against his people.

### ***The Judge (1:1-2; 3:3-8)***

Understanding the book of Amos requires knowing who its main character is, and it isn't Amos. It's the Lord God: "The Lord roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds dry up, and the top of Carmel withers" (1:2). This judge has more than a mere passing interest in human affairs. He roars about them!

The word "roar" describes both the manner in which God's Word came – abruptly and ferociously – and its sobering content. In chapter 3, the image of a roaring lion is used in parallel with the sovereign Lord:

The lion has roared –  
who will not fear?

The Sovereign Lord has spoken –  
who can but prophesy? (3:8; cf. 3:4, 12; 5:19)

Once you have seen a lion's speed, power, and prowess, and then you recall that a roar often signifies a lion's hunger, you pay attention to their bellows. In Amos's day, lions roamed about Judah and Israel. It was a ferocious image for a prophet to use.

Notice also, Amos presents the Lord as roaring "from Zion" and "Jerusalem" (1:2). That would have grabbed the attention of his Israelite readers! Jerusalem was the religious center that the northern kingdom's founding rebel – King Jeroboam I – had rejected.

*The Judge speaks.* Yes, and God would do more than stir. He would speak. Amos lists a string of rhetorical questions at the beginning of chapter 3, all of which serve to accentuate the necessary connection between a cause and an effect: "Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so? Does a lion roar in the thicket when he has no prey?" (3:3-4). "When disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it?" (3:6b). The implied answer is, Yes, disaster comes *because* the Lord causes it!

Then this interesting verse follows: "Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets" (3:7). And the verse we

have already read comes next: “The lion has roared – who will not fear? The Sovereign Lord has spoken – who can but prophesy?” (3:8). God is sovereign; he even causes disasters. And this sovereign God speaks! He is a God of words.

Amos felt compelled to prophesy. We should feel compelled to listen.

When God speaks through his prophet Amos, he speaks about judgment. Back in one of Amos’s opening verses, we read, “I will not turn back my wrath” (1:3b). Amos comes bearing a message of judgment – never a popular message, but always an important one.

### ***The judged (1:3-32)***

If God is the Judge, who are the judged?

*The nations.* First, we see that the Lord judges the nations. The pagan nations may not have realized that the Lord was their God, but their ignorance did not diminish their accountability. No one is excluded from God’s judgment. All of us will give account to him.

Amos begins by casting his prophecies of judgment against Israel’s neighbors: Damascus (the Arameans) to their northeast, Gaza (the Philistines) to the southwest, Tyre (the Phoenicians) to the northwest, Edom to the southeast, and Ammon and Moab to the east. The nations all around them are indicted: “For three sins of Damascus, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath” (1:3). That phrase – “For three sins...even for four” – is repeated for different nations throughout the chapter.

If the northern Israelites were put off by Amos’s southern accent, you can be sure they liked what he said about their enemies. “This is a preacher we can listen to! He tells us what’s wrong with everybody else!” I can imagine a crowd gathering around Amos and enjoying what they were hearing: the sins of their neighbors expose. Incidentally, one of the fastest ways to build a friendship with someone is to complain together about the same people.

Notice, too, the Lord’s concern for cruelty against human beings. It is not so much the political possession of this or that territory that concerns him, but the cruelty with which people are treated by whoever the governing authority is.

God cares.

So, as we said, the crowd was probably enjoying what Amos was saying at this point. But then he turned to what people call “meddlin’.”

*God’s people.* Amos promised that God would not only judge the nations, he would also judge his own people. Perhaps the Israelites thought they were exempt from God’s judgment because they were his special people. But such thinking could not have been more mistaken.

Amos does not begin by launching into an attack on Israel’s sins, but Judah’s: “This is what the Lord says: ‘For three sins of Judah, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath’” (2:4a). Notice, God’s condemnation of Judah makes her sound like just another nation! Yet that condemnation is explicitly religious: “they have rejected the law of the Lord and have not kept his decrees...they have been led astray by false gods” (2:4b).

Then, finally, Amos turned to them and announced their sins and the judgment that was about to befall them. The indictment was sweeping. They had committed sins of economic and religious oppression. The righteous, the needy, and the poor had been abused. Despite God’s grace to them in the Exodus, they had rejected his commands. Their idolatrous worship had taken a grotesquely immoral form: “Father and son use the same girl and so profane my holy name. They lie down beside very altar on garments taken in pledge” (2:7b-8).

In response to Israel’s gross immoralities, God’s promise was most severe: “I will crush you” (2:13).

The Israelites thought their background meant they were immune from God’s judgment. They did not realize that great privilege meant great accountability: “You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins” (3:2).

### **The Focus of God’s Judgment (3:9-6:14)**

Amos taught that God’s judgment focuses in on his people, particularly their leaders, and especially their religion.

#### ***His people (3:9-15; 6:8-14)***

First, in the middle chapters of the book Amos continued to develop the idea that God would judge his people. God, frankly, seems angry in these chapters. He demands to be heard. He becomes his own people’s foe. And he summons witnesses – surprising witnesses – to indict his own people.

## Amos 3:9-10

Ashdod? Egypt? These were the enemies of Israel! Yet God was calling *them* to assemble and be witnesses against the wrongs of his own people. God then tells these enemies to testify to what God will do to his people.

## Amos 3:13-15

Their altars were false. Their opulent homes testified to their self-indulgence. Indeed, there are many indications throughout Amos's little book that the people were characterized by indulging themselves. They seemed to think they deserved everything. They had become proud. "Did we not take Karnaim by our own strength?" (6:13).

How bizarre Amos's words must have sounded on the streets of what looked like a secure nation! The Egyptian and Assyrian Empires had been in decline for several decades. Israel was at the zenith of its power and prosperity. Then along came Amos charging Israel with abusing the privileges of their special covenant with God. How odd! Everything was going so well. Too often, present blessings consumed selfishly give way to future trials.

God would humble his people. He would prevent them from being awed at themselves and cause them to be awed by him. So he would decimate them, and devastate them: "I will stir up a nation against you, O house of Israel," the Lord promises, forecasting the invasion of Assyria several decades later (6:14). God would judge his people.

### ***Their leaders (4:1-3; 6:1-7)***

God promised particularly to judge the leaders of Israel. And he did not only mean male leaders.

## Amos 4:1-2

Amos called the leading women of Samaria (another name for Israel) "cows" not to comment on their appearance, but because of their lazy, luxurious, self-indulgent lives. These women had sinned against the poor and needy, and God cared about the people toward whom these women were mindless. In his holiness, therefore, God would judge them. No one else had effectively turned these women

(or the whole nation) back to God, so God would turn them back – like fish caught by fishhooks.

Israel's notable men also received God's condemnation because they had been using the people for their own ends. They too were wrongly complacent, or as the old translations put it, "at ease in Zion." So the Lord blasted them.

Amos 6:1-7

These leaders of Israel were at ease because of their money, which shows how blind they were to the truth. Money has never brought one moment of lasting security. Notice also how Amos denounces them for being compassionless: "you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph" (6:6), that is, over the ruin of God's people. They were lounging! They didn't care what happened to others.

***Their religion (4:4-5:27)***

Amos taught that God's judgment focused in on his own people, particularly their leaders. Yet he also taught that God's judgment focused especially on the nation's religion.

Israel's brand of religion allowed them to sin and to maintain a sense of God's favor at the same time. They loved their sin and they loved their religion. So they constructed a religion that let them have both. They made idols for themselves that could not speak, and in the silence of these idols, they heard consent.

Clearly, Israel's religion was a sham. Yet how many people today follow the same path! Church congregations that welcome sin are congregations that banish Christ. There is no such thing as a saving faith that does not produce works.

God warned the Israelites by famine and plague, but they would not listen.

Amos 4:6-11

The Israelites were characterized by a deliberate unrepentance. Fueled by a wrongful pride, they ignored God's warnings. They didn't think they needed to pay any attention to them.

Trials are meant to turn the faces of rebellious people toward God. In stupidity and selfishness, we refuse to learn. In mercy, he sends more trials.

So God summoned Israel to appear before him: “Therefore this is what I will do to you, Israel, and because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel” (4:12). Then he reminded them who it was that summoned them: “He who forms the mountains, creates the wind, and reveals his thoughts to man, he who turns dawn to darkness, and treads the high places of the earth – the Lord God Almighty is his name” (4:13). Terrible judgment awaited them, but they could still repent.

Amos 5:4-6

Israel’s homemade gods – bull statues in Dan and Bethel – would not save them, especially from God’s wrath at their blatant, grievous sins.

Amos 5:10-13

One of the most obvious ways we can see that these days of prosperity in Israel were marked by sinfulness was in how the people abused the poor. The poor were valued less than silver, less even than a pair of sandals (2:6; 8:6). Their heads were trampled on (2:7). They were oppressed and crushed. They were forced to give what little money they had to make the rich fatter! The poor were treated merely as difficulties to be overcome or, at least, ignored.

While abusing the poor, the Israelites also denied justice. In fact, they actively worked to obstruct it. A few more dollars in the pocket was worth more to them than justice. Righteousness did not matter so much as money. No wonder Amos says, “the times are evil” (5:13). What a tragic summary of days supposedly filled with peace and prosperity! But so it was, from God’s perspective.

The evaluations of Wall Street and the evaluations of heaven are not always the same.

A failure to show concern for the poor shows a misunderstanding of our own fragile situation – our own pressing need for God’s merciful attention to us in our sin. A religion that allows its adherents to take advantage of the poor, oppress the righteous, obstruct justice, and ignore God’s warnings is a false religion.

If any Israelites thought their false religion would help them, they were about to find out otherwise. The real God was about to show up, not the false god they had constructed in their minds and who always approved of them.

Amos 5:18-24, 27

## **The Character and Cause of God's Judgment**

God will judge sin with mercy, with justice, and with certainty.

### ***The character of God's judgment (chapter 7 and 9)***

*With mercy.* Being notified of God's coming judgment is alarming, yet God's warning came accompanied with assurances of and opportunities for mercy.

In the last few verses of the book, God promises that the long night of his judgment will end.

Amos 9:11-15

Prosperity will return with God's mercy. Indeed, it never comes otherwise in this fallen world.

*With justice.* God's judgment will come accompanied by mercy, but it will also be characterized by justice. He will measure out his justice with precision.

Amos 7:7-9

*With certainty.*

Amos 7:10-17

It seems that Amos had begun preaching at Bethel, the northern kingdom's most important shrine. Amaziah, a priest at the royal shrine and a high official, forbade Amos from prophesying and sent a message to the king misrepresenting Amos's words (our critics are rarely the most accurate sources for what we say). Yet Amaziah could not stop God or his word by banishing Amos back to Judah. We don't know much about this interaction, but Amaziah's words are ironic: "Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there" (7:12). Amaziah, this priest-for-hire, assumed that he was talking to another priest-for-hire just like him, but for perhaps the first time in his life, he was speaking to the real thing: a prophet sent by God who didn't care a whit about the money.

### **The Cause of God's Judgment (chapter 8)**

Chapter 8 provides the final reminder of the cause of God's judgment: God would judge because of sin. The chapter should also remind us of how much God cares about people.

The Lord presents Israel's sin as a basket of summer fruit – ripe for the harvest. The picture is perhaps the grimmest picture in this grim book.

Amos 8:1-10

Since they ignored God's Word, God would take his Word from them. In some of the most chilling words in the book, we read

Amos 8:11-12

In Israel's history, this prophecy would come true as prophets like Amos and Hosea died or at least ceased to prophesy and God sent none to replace them. Instead of hearing the cries of God's prophets, the people of Israel would, several decades later, hear the battle cry of Assyrian invaders.

Mark Dever once taught an all-day seminar on Puritanism in London. He said he guesses the attendees had nothing better to do on Saturday than to sit through a six-hour history lesson in a church basement. At one point he asked whether any of them had ever observed the iron ring beside a pulpit. A few of them nodded, but nobody seemed to know what they were. He told them that such rings would have been the gifts from church congregations to preachers in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and that the rings held hourglasses. Preachers would have one or two turns of the hourglass allotted to them for preaching.

When he said this, one woman audibly gasped, and then asked, "What time did that leave for worship?"

Dever says that at that moment he could feel the whole Reformation crashing down around him. He let a couple of moments of silence pass in order to compose himself, and then he said to her, "Please understand that when these gifts were given, some of the people in the churches would have been old enough to remember the smell of the burning flesh of people who had died trying to translate God's Word into the common language. These churches were hungry for God's Word. They realized that their greatest blessing in life was hearing, embracing, and living out God's Word."

Do you recognize the blessing we have in hearing God's Word? Losing it would be the worst judgment imaginable. Treasure every opportunity you have to hear God's Word.

## **Conclusion**

In Jesus Christ, a holy God came and took on flesh. He lived a perfect life in order to offer himself as a sinless sacrifice. On the cross of his crucifixion, he then took on himself the punishment of God for the sins of all of those who would turn and trust in him. Then God raised him in victory over death; and now he invites us to repent of our sins and believe in him.

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Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament*