

Amos

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The Bible is filled from beginning to end with divine truths about every subject imaginable, but there may be no more consistently relevant passage than when Solomon says in Ecclesiastes 1, “There is nothing new under the sun.” Even though we have much more of human history behind us than Solomon did, his observation still holds true today. We may think we’re forging ahead into uncharted territory, but we’re really walking the same beaten path our fathers did.

Nowhere is this more clear than in the prophecies of the book of Amos. He wrote nearly 2800 years ago, at the height of the power of the northern kingdom of Israel, but as we study his description of that time, we cannot hope but be struck by its similarities to our own time. Like us, Israel was in the middle of a period of unparalleled prosperity. However, like us, that prosperity only served to mask a number of serious spiritual problems.

Although Israel was richer than it had ever been before, that wealth was concentrated in only a few hands, and the rich used their power and a perverted system of justice to oppress the poor and further enrich themselves. Israel knew the way of the Lord, but it had chosen to forsake that path in favor of a multitude of different gods. Even when they thought to praise the God of Israel, their worship was based on a system of outward ritual that failed in two ways. Not only did it fail to involve their hearts, but even the outward form wasn’t the form that God had prescribed. When their sin led them into disaster, they ignored the obvious lesson. When God sent messengers to turn them from their sin, they were insulted by the message and chose to believe that the messenger, not they themselves, was in the wrong.

We don’t have to look very deeply to see our nation in these things as well. Because these problems are so relevant to us, God’s prophetic warning is also relevant to us. Let’s see what He has to say in the book of Amos.

Amos’ Biography and Israel’s Evil

If we wish to understand what’s going on here, we need first of all to look at **AMOS’ BIOGRAPHY**. We find the first bit of biographical information in the very first verse of the book, Amos 1:1. This tells us two things. First of all, just like Hosea, Amos gave his prophecies in Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II, and much of what we know about the nation during that time comes from what he says. Second, Amos himself was not a man of lofty rank. Instead, he came from the shepherds of Tekoa, a region in Judah about ten miles south of Jerusalem.

Amos explains why this was important in Amos 7:14-15. Just like many denominations have a professional clergy class today, Israel and Judah had a professional prophet class, and membership in this class was often handed down from father to son. They were supported by the king, so the king was the one who controlled them. In exchange for their meal ticket, they were expected to foretell nice things about the king and his nation. Amos was never a part of that whole prophetic structure. He was just a lowly agricultural worker whom God called, and he did not have nice things to say.

In fact, the book of Amos is one of the harshest condemnations we have of **ISRAEL’S EVIL**. The opening salvo of this condemnation appears in Amos 2:6-8. This passage actually comes at the end of an introduction in which God condemns a number of the nations around Israel for their wickedness, using this same “for three transgressions and for four” formula. The Israelites would certainly have agreed that those other nations were wicked and deserved to be punished, but God uses that to set them up and let them know that they were wicked and going to be punished too.

One of the striking features of Amos’ condemnation is its focus on economic injustice. The Israelites weren’t just wicked for committing immorality and idolatry. Instead, they were wicked for oppressing the poor and getting rich off of the helpless. The Law had commanded them to judge fairly, but they were easily bribed by the wealthy. The Law commanded them not to take their neighbor’s garments as security for a loan, but they took those garments anyway and used them for blankets as they fornicating beside the altars of heathen gods. They were thoroughly greedy and evil.

Friends, we need to recognize that harshness, greed, and injustice is just as evil in the eyes of God today as it was then. We live in a very capitalistic society, and many of our fellow citizens believe that it’s perfectly OK to cheat the poor, defraud the poor, and turn the poor out of their homes as long as it’s done legally. Brethren, just because something is legal doesn’t make it right. Just because we find ourselves in a position of advantage over someone else doesn’t mean that we should take advantage. God wants us to earn a living, He wants our businesses to turn a profit, but He also wants us to remember that money isn’t the most important thing. Loving our neighbor is most important. If we have to treat others badly to collect our share, we’re better off being poor. Let’s honor God at the office too.

Amos continues in this same vein in Amos 4:1-3. To me, at least, this is one of the funnier passages in Scripture. Amos here isn’t just targeting the oppressive businessmen of Israel. He’s targeting their wives. He’s saying to them, “Y’all are a bunch of fat cows!” They’re the ones who are at home encouraging their husbands to go off and commit all kinds of legalized evil so that they can have all the luxuries they want. God obviously considers them just as guilty.

This tells us, then, that we need not just to consider what we do for a living, but what others in our households do for a living. Many of us have spouses who work. In their work, what do they do? Do they honorably carry out an honorable job, or are they involved in things that we'd rather not think about? If our family members are involved in evil at work, and we turn a blind eye to it and share in the benefits of the paycheck, we're just as guilty as they are. If we want to please God, we must be righteous ourselves, and we must not benefit from the unrighteousness of others.

Israel, God, and What God Wants.

After that stinging rebuke, Amos turns to the dysfunctional relationship between **ISRAEL AND GOD**. God has made it clear that Israel must repent, but instead, Israel responds in three worthless ways. We see the first in Amos 4:6, 9-10. There are few passages in Scripture that more clearly portray God's frustration. Israel has been wicked, He's sent disaster after disaster to punish them for their wickedness and warn them away from further sin, but they stubbornly continue doing what got them in trouble in the first place. They refuse to return to God.

Like them, we often need to listen to the disasters in our lives. Sometimes, we suffer through no fault of our own, but more usually, if we have a problem, it's because we've been foolish, evil, or both. We eat too much, we don't exercise enough, and now, lo and behold, we've got heart trouble. Those two things couldn't be related, could they? We don't spend enough time with the kids, and now, astoundingly, the kids are running wild. We buy everything that catches our eye, and the next credit card bill is the size of the national debt. That's when we need to start paying attention. That's when we need to see that we're our own biggest problem. If we get ourselves in order, the problem will disappear.

Many Israelites were also enthralled with the idea of the day of the Lord, as we see in Amos 5:18-20. Ironically, these same people were among those whom the day of the Lord was going to punish. They didn't realize it, but they were pleading for their own destruction. How many people in our country are making the same mistake? How many millions cry out every Sunday for the Lord to return, blissfully unaware that His return would mean eternal torment for them? How many of us are in the same boat? The day of judgment isn't going to be a big party, friends. It's going to be a very serious occasion, and we need to think about ourselves soberly and honestly to make sure that we're prepared.

Finally, some Israelites responded to God's call to repent with the time-honored tactic of shooting the messenger. Amaziah the priest is the poster boy for this, as we see in Amos 7:10-13. Amos had warned that Jeroboam's house was going to be destroyed, and that Israel was going to pass into captivity. Instead of being frightened by this, Amaziah got mad. He tattled on Amos to the king, and then he went to tell the pesky prophet off himself. He assumed that Amos was one of those professional prophets who was on the royal payroll, and he told Amos that because he had gone so badly off message, he was now fired. Of course, even as Amos is being hustled out of Bethel, God makes sure to get the last word in. After this, God promises that Amaziah's wife is going to become a prostitute and his children will all be killed.

Clearly, God is not a big fan of messenger-shooters, and we need to recognize this today. All of us have all kinds of people in our lives telling us all kinds of things. Most of those people can be safely ignored. However, there are times when others come to us bearing the word of the Lord, perhaps even warning us that we're involved in some sin. When that happens, our natural reaction is to angrily reject the unpleasant counsel. However, that angry reaction may well also be a dangerous reaction. When someone comes and talks to us, we need to be careful to analyze our behavior, to make sure that we haven't in fact offended God, and if we see that we have offended, we need to repent. Otherwise, we may well be inviting a fate as grisly as Amaziah's. After all, God only gives so many warnings.

After describing these evil reactions to the word of the Lord, Amos explains **WHAT GOD WANTS**. We see an example of what God wants to see in Amos' own conduct in Amos 7:1-3. Instead of ignoring God's warnings, failing to recognize their applicability, or rejecting them altogether, Amos cries out for mercy. When he does this, even though he is only one righteous man, God hears him and agrees to his prayer. Likewise, we need to recognize the importance of throwing ourselves on the mercy of the Lord. If we ignore God, He's not going to give up punishing us. If we insist that we're just fine the way we are, we're not going to convince Him. If we openly pit ourselves against Him, we're not going to succeed in our defiance. That's not the way to get through to God. Instead, if we want to preserve ourselves, we have to get Him working for us instead of against us. We have to appeal to His compassion, His mercy, and His power to save. Just as is true in our dealings with other people, we can get a whole lot more by asking than by fighting.

Ultimately, though, what God wants out of us is righteousness from the heart. We see one of His most telling pronouncements against Israel in Amos 5:21-24. Israel was an idolatrous nation, but as always, their idolatry wasn't exclusive. When they worshiped the golden calves in Bethel and Dan, they also worshiped Jehovah right alongside them. However, their worship directed to God had two problems. First, it wasn't an authorized worship. Second, they lived lives that were repugnant to Him. They had a lot to change, but they needed to start by being righteous.

Today, we also need to recognize that just going through the rituals of our worship is not enough to please God. It's easy for us to go through the five acts of worship every Sunday morning, yet be as wicked in God's sight as we can be. Obeying God's commands in worship is important, but living righteously and justly is every bit as important.