

The Prophet Amos

Messages and study aids by Timothy Darling

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Introduction

I have long derived a great deal of pleasure in opening among God's people passages of Scripture that are less known than average. I have found the *Book of the Twelve* (also called *The Minor Prophets*) to fit this bill entirely too well. Many find the messages of the prophets, full of doom and gloom. While I will not deny the prophets lived in dark times their messages are no less important. They also are not without hope, their own brand of brightness. Amos is a rich trove of reflection on the principles of Moses's Law and the ways in which it had fallen into disuse in the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the time of King Jeroboam II. Preaching from Amos is a jaunt through wonderful poetic and rhetorical images.

When I prepare a message, I try to reflect on messages preached by those who came before. I would be arrogant to think that I had the first and last word on a passage, or even the best way to deliver its truths. I think a preacher's work should last more than a morning. Though I have an above average library of sermons, it is distressing to see how little of the Bible is expounded there. Of course, these days, using the internet, a person can access many expository messages. If the web surfer is like me though, I find the abundance overwhelming, and the reliability spotty.

These messages were preached in 2012 and 2014 at Norma Mennonite Church in Norma, NJ. They are presented largely as they were preached, with only minor editing to make them more accessible to those who were not in the moment when they were delivered.

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Amos - after Elisha / before Isaiah

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If you think God is going to get them

Amos 1-2

By way of review, consider two Old Testament kings: one in Judah in the south named Uzziah, the other in the Northern Kingdom of Israel named Jeroboam.

Uzziah was a good king for a long time. He set up a standing military system that was innovative and well provisioned. He built up the infrastructure of the nation. He restored some of Solomon's ancient holdings and expanded international trade. He provided for the agriculture of the land. Then he got proud and tried to burn incense on the alter in the Temple, a thing only priests were meant to do. He was struck with leprosy and his son was given his throne.

Jeroboam II was used by God, but not because he was good, he was not. In fact he was evil and dedicated to idol worship, but God used him to expand the borders of Israel in the north and to bring much needed economic relief to the people:

The LORD had seen how bitterly everyone in Israel, whether slave or free, was suffering; there was no one to help them. And since the LORD had not said he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, he saved

them by the hand of Jeroboam son of Jehoash. (2 Kings 14:26-27)

From these two kings we learn valuable lessons:

- It doesn't matter how good you've been, if you turn to evil, God will hold you accountable
- It doesn't matter how bad you are, God will hold you accountable for your evil, but He may still use you whether you cooperate or not

So before the backdrop of a good king gone bad, who was very successful as a king but failed to lead the people into godliness;

and a bad king used for a temporary good, but who refused to turn toward god;

we see Amos.

We know little about him yet. He is a shepherd from Tekoa. He just shows up and he delivers a message:

He said: "The LORD roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds dry up, and the top of Carmel withers." (Amos 1:2)

The first image we get of God is a Roaring Lion

This is not encouraging.

The power of his blast coming from the Temple Mount, Zion in Jerusalem is not just heard, but

withers Carmel 65 miles to the Northwest. Notice though, how Amos subtly includes himself in the devastation. He is a shepherd and the pastures he needs to make a living are also blighted.

God means to be heard.

And what does He say?

We'll come to that.

I want you to picture yourself in the middle of a circle. Surrounding you are all the people who don't like you, the people who have hurt you. These are people you may not have strong feelings about or you may, but they definitely come across as negative toward you.

Got that image?

This is Israel. For many generations they have been surrounded by enemies. They have been attacked, harassed and occupied. Until recently when Jeroboam came to power and, though he was evil, God used him to push back the borders that had been gradually made smaller and smaller. Now they've been able to take back some of their traditional territory and their economy has enjoyed a surge ...

To a degree ...

So here they are in the center of a circle, and a roaring voice comes out of Jerusalem to deliver a message.

This is what the LORD says: "For three sins of Damascus, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. Because she threshed Gilead with sledges having iron teeth, I will send fire on the house of Hazael that will consume the fortresses of Ben-Hadad. 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. (Amos 1:3-5)

Gilead is a little Israelite city just across the Jordan. Apparently, the Arameans had done a brutal thing.

Imagine a big piece of plywood with grinding stones attached to the bottom, pulled by a horse. People used to scatter grain on the threshing floor and then have the horse drag the sled over the grain to break it down and get the kernels out of the hulls.

Now imagine not grain but people laying on the floor. Imagine not grinding stones but iron teeth on the bottom of the sled. It was a bloody, brutal, and cruel torture to inflict on any human, even an enemy.

But God is going to judge them. He is going to burn the palaces of the king. That sounds extreme, but try to think of it from the perspective of a people who had been beaten down by the

armies of Damascus. It must have felt like justice.

There is the matter of the "four" sins. God only mentions one. Hmmmm.

Then look what He says:

This is what the LORD says: "For three sins of Gaza, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. Because she took captive whole communities and sold them to Edom, I will send fire on the walls of Gaza that will consume her fortresses. I will destroy the king of Ashdod and the one who holds the scepter in Ashkelon. I will turn my hand against Ekron, till the last of the Philistines are dead," says the Sovereign LORD. (Amos 1:6-8)

The magnitude of this atrocity is clear. Consider if an army swept into Norma with chains, locks, whips and trucks. Imagine they loaded every person, man woman and child into the trucks and then took us to a far away place and sold us as slaves. The idea here was to leave the houses and buildings as much intact as possible, that way the Philistines who did this thing could just move in and take it over. They sold the people into slavery in a nation just south of the Dead Sea.

For this God is going to judge the nation of Philistia and four of her traditional capital cities:

Gaza, Ekron, Ashkelon and Ashdod. It seems quite violent, but to the Israelite nation it must have felt like Justice.

As Amos preaches this message, there in Israel, you can see the crowd gathering. They hear of the judgement being leveled on their enemies and you can almost hear the cheer going up.

Then Amos turns his attention

This is what the LORD says: "For three sins of Tyre, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. Because she sold whole communities of captives to Edom, disregarding a treaty of brotherhood, I will send fire on the walls of Tyre that will consume her fortresses." (Amos 1:9-10)

To the northwest of Israel was a small but powerful city state. Later they would actually hold their own against Alexander the Great for awhile. But it looks an awful lot like they threw in with Philistia to their south and participated in the sacking and selling of Israelite communities into slavery in Edom to the far south. One thing that suggests that this was an alliance between Tyre and Philistia is that both the sin and the punishment are exactly the same.

Then Amos moves on:

This is what the LORD says: "For three sins of Edom, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. Because he pursued his brother with a

sword and slaughtered the women of the land, because his anger raged continually and his fury flamed unchecked, I will send fire on Teman that will consume the fortresses of Bozrah." (Amos 1:11-12)

There is still that troubling problem: for three sins, even for four ... but then Amos only mentions one sin. In Edom's case we might think we know what the sin is. The nation of Edom was buying these slaves sent down from Tyre and Philistia, and that's bad, but that's not the sin Amos highlights. Instead it's the war crime of killing civilian women in a relentless rage.

For purposes of this map, we can see Edom stretches to the south of Judah and the Dead Sea. The cities of Teman and Bozrah are down a little from what we can see on this map. God is destroying the fortresses of this land for the sins they committed against Israel.

Notice so far that for the most part the punishments God is inflicting have to do with leaders and fortresses. He is calling to account the people who make the decisions and the military fortifications of the cities.

But Amos continues with a nation directly to the east:

This is what the LORD says: "For three sins of Ammon, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. Because he ripped open the

pregnant women of Gilead in order to extend his borders, I will set fire to the walls of Rabbah that will consume her fortresses amid war cries on the day of battle, amid violent winds on a stormy day. Their king will go into exile, he and his officials together," says the LORD. (Amos 1:13-15)

Now we are getting to another kind of gruesome. The imagination shies from even trying to picture what they did. It doesn't even matter where you stand on issues of life and choice, this kind of savagery defies description. We begin seeing why God used King Jeroboam to restore the borders of the land. This way of losing territory is unthinkable. Some think Rabbah is the capital city of Ammon. If so, then the pattern of attacking the leadership continues.

I can imagine a particularly satisfied cheer as the people listening to Amos' message hear these judgements on the people Edom and Ammon who did not spare their wives and unborn children.

Amos then moves south:

This is what the LORD says: "For three sins of Moab, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. Because he burned to lime the bones of Edom's king, I will send fire on Moab that will consume the fortresses of Kerioth. Moab will go down in great tumult amid war cries

and the blast of the trumpet. I will destroy her ruler and kill all her officials with him," says the LORD. (Amos 2:1-3)

For the first time we see a crime not against Israel, but against somebody else. Somebody unexpected: Edom, one of Israel's enemies. This must have gotten a muted pause from the audience. Who cares what happens to those terrible people down there? In fact, the "sin" was against their king, who was responsible for so much of our suffering. According to Amos they rendered this man's bones as if they were a mineral additive to their gardens or a base for caulking. Ok, we don't like Moab. They are traditional enemies of our people, so we'll go along with that.

But for the first time Amos is preaching his message and the people are not wholeheartedly cheering.

But then he gets them back:

This is what 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, the gods their ancestors followed, I will send fire on Judah that will consume the fortresses of Jerusalem." (Amos 2:4-5)

Now we've got a mixed crowd. As Amos pronounces judgement on Judah, some are cheering. This is one of the borders Jeroboam pushed back that had been stolen from them. However, at the same time, where are the crimes against Israel? The only things God is judging Judah for are crimes against Him.

- Rejecting the law
- Pursuing false gods

Now we're striking close to home. For generations Israel has ignored God's law and have pursued other gods. Why should this judgement give them pleasure.

For once, when Amos says "for three sins..., even for four," he mentions two sins. He seems to be on a roll, but the crowd is getting uncertain. And then it happens.

Amos has been circling Israel, hitting all her enemies. But it has been incomplete. At first he was judging them for crimes against Israel, then it turned to judging them for crimes against their enemies and finally for sins against God.

For the moment, let's focus on what God was saying in the way he said it. He circled all around Israel drawing attention to the terrible things others had done.

- Damascus
- Gaza
- Tyre

- Edom
- Ammon
- Moab
- Judah

What some of these nations had done was beyond reprehensible, beyond offensive. They had committed some of the worst atrocities. And God pronounced judgement on them one by one.

Always there has been this nagging shoe waiting to drop. This pattern: for three sins ..., even for four, is a well known poetic pattern. For example, Solomon made effective use of it. When someone says this, then it is followed by a series of four. But because of the pattern the first three are important but the fourth is emphasized. And every time Amos has started with the pattern and then left it hanging.

No more

If you've been reading along you see it coming.

This is what the LORD says: "For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. They sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. 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. They lie down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge. In

the house of their god they drink wine taken as fines. "Yet I destroyed the Amorites before them, though they were tall as the cedars and strong as the oaks. I destroyed their fruit above and their roots below. I brought you up out of Egypt and led you forty years in the wilderness to give you the land of the Amorites. "I also raised up prophets from among your children and Nazirites from among your youths. Is this not true, people of Israel?" declares the LORD. "But you made the Nazirites drink wine and commanded the prophets not to prophesy. "Now then, I will crush you as a cart crushes when loaded with grain. The swift will not escape, the strong will not muster their strength, and the warrior will not save his life. The archer will not stand his ground, the fleet-footed soldier will not get away, and the horseman will not save his life. Even the bravest warriors will flee naked on that day," declares the LORD. (Amos 2:6-16)

Suffice it to say God is angry with Israel. When we examine their sins we see three main themes:

- abuse of the poor
- sexual perversion
- idol worship

These three themes are a contrast to the sins themselves because even though Amos said he

was counting off four sins, it is unclear from the language whether he is naming three, four, or five sins.

In other words, it doesn't matter, because they have all run into each other. It is illustrated right in the middle of the list. They've robbed the poor of their only means of warmth and spread the cloaks out in a pagan temple next to an altar where they've proceeded to get drunk and indulge in sexual sin. Again, because of the way it's worded, we can't tell if it is a pagan ritual, abuse of a slave or just plain drunken sexual orgies.

Israel is in a terrible place, they have offended God on every front. Amos does not even go into what God is going to do about it as he did with the other seven judgements. Instead he takes the rest of the book to do that.

Look why. He blessed Israel with delivery from Egypt and with a deep national spirituality. But they have treated God's blessings with neglect and contempt. As a result, they will suffer God's judgement.

Then he focused his attention on Israel saying their sin was greater than all of them. If this has a familiar ring to it, it should:

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to

your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. (Matthew 7:3-5)

Jesus is speaking of judgement. We should be careful in judgement of others knowing that we too deserve to be judged. We need to pay attention to our own sins first.

And now we're back to that imaginative exercise from the beginning of the message. You know all those people who have hurt you, those who dislike you and even hate you? You know all those people who are problems in your life?

Are you like Israel?

Are you holding things against them while all the while you are harboring sin of your own?

Notice that Israel's sin was not like the sin of other nations. Theirs were mostly war crimes and some of them were concerned with hypocrisy. For Israel, their sin was purely connected to the Law of God.

- How do you treat the disadvantaged?
- How do you treat your sexuality and that of others?
- How do you practice self control and integrity?

- How does a true and legitimate faith fit into your life?

We may be fond of saying that these days we are not subject to Moses' law in the same way that the Israelites were. But the law is there to teach us, to help us understand the holiness of God. So we step back from the law a bit and ask, what are the underlying values of God? What are the bases of virtue He demands?

- Treat the poor with respect
- Treat the sexuality of others and even yourself with respect
- Keep control of your own body
- Reject pagan practices and draw near to God instead

Even if these were the only four moral mandates on our lives, they would be enough to turn the world into a different place. They would be enough to keep the church in a challenge for life.

Sometimes, not usually, but sometimes the method is the message. The words of this passage tell us certainly that God is displeased with military atrocities. They also tell us He is deeply displeased with

- oppression of the poor
- sexual perversity
- drunkenness
- and worship of false Gods

But the method by which He communicates these truths tell us something even more important:

That no matter how bad, how terrible, how sinful, how utterly repulsively evil somebody else might be

no matter how much you think God will address somebody else's sin

Some of the things we may do, though they seem smaller, more private, more limited in scope, less violent,

in the eyes of God are more evil still. And we must

We must

We must look less to the sin of others and more to ourselves and repent.

2 leg bones and a piece of an ear

Amos 3

Let me just admit up front, we are uncomfortable with Amos's image of God. God is love. God is merciful. God is kind. Every good and perfect gift comes from above. God is the God of all comfort. God suffers to save His people. These are the images we cling to. These images give us peace.

But I think Amos's unsettling image of God is the deepest reason people don't read the prophets more than they do. That's not the way we say it of course. What we say is, "the prophets are all doom and gloom. They are all about judgement and destruction." We make it sound like it's the prophets who originate the images. But the real fact is that the prophets present many, many pictures of God as Judge. It is not the prophets who are negative and dark and threatening. It is God.

God is hard to understand. He is loving, but He is also Judge. He is merciful, but He also punishes. Amos acts like this is nothing to be surprised about.

Hear this word, people of Israel, the word the LORD has spoken against you--against the whole family I brought up out of Egypt: "You only have I chosen of all the families of the

earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins."

Do two walk together

unless they have agreed to do so?

Does a lion roar in the thicket

when it has no prey?

Does it growl in its den

when it has caught nothing?

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?

When a trumpet sounds in a city,

do not the people tremble?

When disaster comes to a city,

has not the LORD caused it?

Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets.

The lion has roared-- who will not fear?

The Sovereign LORD has spoken-- who can but prophesy?

Proclaim to the fortresses of Ashdod and to the fortresses of Egypt: "Assemble yourselves on the mountains of Samaria; see the great unrest within her and the oppression among her people." "They do not know how to do right," declares the LORD,

"who store up in their fortresses what they have plundered and looted."

Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: "An enemy will overrun your land, pull down your strongholds and plunder your fortresses."

This is what the LORD says: "As a shepherd saves from the lion's mouth only two leg bones or a piece of an ear, so will the Israelites be saved, those who sit in Samaria on the edge of their beds and in Damascus on their couches." "Hear this and testify against the house of Jacob," declares the Lord, the LORD God Almighty. "On the day I punish Israel for her sins, I will destroy the altars of Bethel; the horns of the altar will be cut off and fall to the ground. I will tear down the winter house along with the summer house; the houses adorned with ivory will be destroyed and the mansions will be demolished," declares the LORD. (Amos 3:1-15)

This first section calls us to use our brains. It says, "What is the most natural thing you can think of?" There are some things when we see them, we know the cause, we don't even consider an alternative.

Do two walk together
unless they have agreed to do so?

Think about this. If we see two people walking together on the sidewalk, do we wonder: "Now how did they come to be walking together?" No. We don't ask that question. We assume at some point they either decided to go someplace together or they ran into each other on the street and at that point they fell in together and their paths converged. Whether it was a spoken agreement or an unspoken agreement, they have agreed to walk together. We don't even go through this logical chain because it is self evident. This is a two-year old's answer, and if the two-year-old asked us we'd come up with something more complicated:

They're friends

Or they're out shopping

Or something that would get to a deeper root of how they know each other. We would breeze right past the idea that they decided to be together. They are together. It's not a question of what they decided. The decision is evident in the current situation.

All of the images in this sequence are meant to cause us the same kind of reaction. "Of course, what else could it be?"

If we see a trap sprung, it means we caught what we were after. And if we don't put bait in the trap, we don't expect to catch anything. If an alarm sounds, people become alarmed. These are not

surprising developments. It's natural and very direct cause and effect.

Some of the images are not so common to us. We might not know what makes a lion roar. We don't have lions here. At least not in our minds. But guaranteed, if you are out on a hike in the mountains, and you hear the roar of a mountain lion, you'll be nervous. You'll wonder what she's after, and you'll hope it isn't you.

In the same way, we're not overly aware of how a lion behaves in his den or what makes him growl, but we can take it that Amos knows because he has put it in this list and expects everyone to respond with a casual, "Of course!"

This last item in the list though gives us pause. It would not have given Amos' audience pause at all. They would have said that fortune whether good or bad is in God's hands. And that's the image we don't like. We would rather associate trouble with the Devil or with people or even with chance. But we'll come back to this.

Amos repeats his image from the first section of the book. In this passage, the image unfolds in three parts:

- A lion
- A shepherd
- The lion's prey

The shepherd is the easiest of the images to cope with. Amos gives it to us in the first line of the book.

The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa

Amos is a shepherd and he sees himself as going out to find the sheep who are in danger. He sees his own situation as being devastated not just by the sin of Israel, that's not so immediate for him, but also by the sin of Judah. We'll see more about that later. But when the lion roars, his own pastures are parched by the thundering voice of God. As a shepherd he sees his own job as being hopeless.

"As a shepherd saves from the lion's mouth only two leg bones or a piece of an ear, so will the Israelites be saved ..."

Amos does not have high hopes of a strong response from his listeners. If he gets just a few to listen and respond, he'll think that's about all he can expect. Those few will be the leg bones and the piece of an ear. They will be the barest remnant of God's people.

And that brings us to another image. The image of the prey, the thing the lion is attacking, the victim. This is Israel.

All through this book, the nation of Israel is under attack. They are being ravaged. The language is unambiguous. How and why they are being

attacked is the topic of the whole book. It is a matter of sin and the righteous judgement of God.

But Amos wants us to make no mistake, especially in this chapter, it is God who is on the attack. He is the Lion. The sound of His roar inspires fear and sends the prophet on his mission.

- When he roars, the prey is in the thicket
- When he growls, the prey is in the den
- When he devours, the prey is finished

And all He leaves behind are a couple leg bones and a piece of an ear

- Only a few. Only a remnant.

And the warning to Israel is: The Lion is roaring!

It isn't over yet, but when it is over, when the Lion gets through with you ... well, you'll wish you were a leg bone or an ear.

We'll talk about Israel's sin and the Lord's judgement later, but for now, I just want to dwell on the aftermath of the slaughter Israel is being warned of. Keep in mind it is only a warning. It is not a done deal. We'll talk about that some more too.

God is just

If God was not just He could not be merciful. You can't say something is forgiven if it was never

shown to be wrong. God's love compels Him to extend mercy, but only because God's justice establishes guilt. When God sees humanity and all the sin and guilt we heap upon ourselves, He has a natural response. That sin must be purged.

For purging sin, God has options open to Him just as we have options open to us, just as nation of Israel had options.

- God can meet the sin head on with immediate and earthly justice
- God has and does provide forgiveness so another option is that he invites repentance and extends restoration
- God can delay His anger and deal with it later, even in eternity, giving extra time for a turn around

All of these are expressions of God's justice, and God uses all these options individually and in combination, but He chooses when and where and what is appropriate to each situation. Only He knows the history, and only He knows the hearts.

For example: Until the time of Amos, God, so far, with Israel, has delayed His anger. During the days of King Jeroboam it was said: God had not said he would destroy Israel, so He saved them instead. Now they have been saved, and He is

extending His warning. But even then it is a warning, not an immediate action.

But here is the meaning behind the warning. You don't want to get caught up in God's judgement. You want to get out of it if you can. Because when this lion gets done eating, there's only a couple leg bones and an piece of an ear left.

But once again, this should be no surprise to us, especially in hindsight. It is a standard warning of God's.

- He judged everyone on earth and started over with Noah and His family.
- He told Moses a couple times: "I'm going to judge this hard-hearted bunch and start over again with you."
- Even the northern kingdom of Israel was formed under the direction of God when Judah was being ruled by a silly and short-sighted ruler. It was like God was willing to start over with just a few.

When God judges sinful people, those who are faithful are all that is left and He moves forward with those few. Jesus said:

"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. (Matthew 7:13-14)

Later in His ministry he was preaching to His followers, and the Bible records this result:

From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6:66-69)

Jesus warns that following His path, the path of God, is not going to be popular. It is not going to be easy. But it does lead away from God's judgement and into life.

All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.
(Matthew 10:22)

The book of Revelation is an account of the Judgement of God and the salvation of the few who will be saved from it and through it. We go from a whole planet and a whole history of people who stand before God's seat and it all get's narrowed down to those written in His book. Paul describes each life as a microcosm of the Judgement of God:

If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the

quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved--even though only as one escaping through the flames. (1 Corinthians 3:12-15)

This sinful world is pegged for God's judgement. That is not a doomsday prophecy, it is not a special indictment. It is a scriptural fact. Most of the world will reject God and will go through this life doing as comes naturally, sinning merrily, and enjoying the status quo. Following God is a radical choice. It is a choice to stand against the culture and be noticed and singled out and even hated for following Jesus. You will seem to stand in judgement on the world because of your choice and people will resent that as much as they resented Noah for the choice he made.

I will not say that every disaster that falls on humanity is the judgement of God. Jesus denied that generalization. But the Bible also says God may use that from time to time. According to Amos he will deliver a warning first. The roar of the hunting lion will ring out and the person who understands it will speak. He will not be able to help himself.

But more generally speaking, the whole fallen earth, for all of history will be judged by God and only a few, Jesus says, will come through the ordeal.

Only a couple leg bones and a piece of an ear

The roar is a warning, and a warning is given for a reason. When the alarm sounds it is not only to make the people tremble, it is to stir them to action. We might think the prospect of God's judgement is frightful. We should think that.

- We can be frightened by it
- We can even resent it

But this is not the point. The point is to ask: what will you do about it? How will you respond to the warning? What will be your choice?

Will you continue in the mode of the world, in the mode of ancient Israel, in the mode of the larger group of Jesus followers, in the mode of Noah's neighbors. Will you continue to follow the natural path of the world as if nothing matters?

Or will you listen to the voice of God roaring across the land calling you to make a choice, to follow Him no matter what the reaction of the world around you?

- If you love Jesus, they'll not like you
- If you walk the right way, you'll be out of step
- Do the right thing, you'll be misunderstood
- Give the right advice, you'll be called judgmental
- You'll be over looked
- left out
- laughed at
- reconsidered

When the Lion roars, will you listen? Will you heed the warning? Will you respond when everyone else is trying to ignore Him?

You'll feel like a left over

And ultimately, from the world's perspective, that's what you'll be: a couple leg bones and a piece of an ear.

Your efforts of telling the gospel, of drawing people into the kingdom will often be met with skepticism, apathy, delay. Few will find their way. Not many will be saved. Most will stand dangerously on the precipice, waiting to be devoured in the judgement of God. The few that believe will be like a couple leg bones and a piece of an ear.

But these are retrieved by the pursuing shepherd, One who cares for His sheep and desperately wants to rescue them. from a God whose judgement has been ignored by everyone else.

It is much better than it sounds. And it beats the alternative.

He who made the Pleiades and Orion

Amos 5:7-10

Some things should make you feel small. Looking at the ocean, particularly from a peninsula, an island or a boat out of sight of land. The vast stretches of water that seemingly have no end. Looking at a clear night sky, and knowing that, even if we had the knowhow, the nearest star is so far that a human could not live long enough to reach it at the fastest speeds ever traveled. The Grand Canyon, deceptive in its scale, knowing that this ostensive hole in the ground has been the source of people getting hopelessly lost and dying before they could be found and rescued. Mountains in ranges that are so vast that you cannot tell from inside that this is not the way the whole world looks. A whale: the biggest animal in the world and yet, hard to find.

Why are things the way they are? We can come up with explanations of how some of it could happen, but it does not explain why things were designed to behave that way.

There are those who turn justice into
bitterness

and cast righteousness to the ground.
He who made the Pleiades and Orion,
who turns midnight into dawn
and darkens day into night,

who calls for the waters of the sea
and pours them out over the face of the land-

-

the LORD is his name.

He flashes destruction on the stronghold
and brings the fortified city to ruin.

There are those who hate the one who
reproves in court

and detest the one who tells the truth.

(Amos 5:7-10 TNIV)

Some people just don't want to do what's right, and they don't like it when other people do. Often these are people who stand to gain when others lose. You might have been in this situation, when something bad has happened to somebody you know and love, maybe even to you. The legal system does its slow grind only to come to the other end and the person who did a bad thing gets sat in the corner for a time out instead of the more serious consequence they deserve. In cases like this "justice" is bitter.

In our society, we have become increasingly aware of privilege, people who benefit at the expense of others. We don't like to think of it this way. Nobody in the world created the cultures we live in, but everyone is responsible to make sure the part we play in our cultures is just.

Amos is pointing out that an unjust culture will breed folks who begin feeling entitled. That entitlement sometimes taints the person's

perspective into thinking that the rules don't apply to him, that he is an exception. These folks will spin the truth to their own advantage. They will resent it when others paint a more accurate, truthful picture of the situation, that leaves them at a disadvantage.

Amos is speaking to these people. He is warning them. Look at the shape his warning takes.

He who made the Pleiades and Orion

You probably know what these two words are referring to. In our society, we have less of an affinity for the night sky than some in the past and in other places. These are constellations, some of the most recognizable in the sky. Orion is a constellation that some see as being shaped like a hunter or a warrior. It is generally recognized by about 7 stars, though the full constellation is more. The seven stars form the shoulders, the legs and the belt of the hunter. The constellation is very large and recognizable.

Well above the right shoulder of Orion, in the Constellation Taurus is the Pleiades. This is a small open cluster of 7 bright blue stars, not big enough to be considered a constellation, but representing in ancient mythology seven sisters. It is sometimes compared to a jeweled necklace and is considered one of the most beautiful sights in the sky visible to the naked eye.

These days, most of our evening diversion is found indoors. Electric light has drawn us inside and has obscured some of the sights of the evening sky, but people who spend evenings outside and who are attracted by the stars recognize these sites for what they are.

The ancient Jewish people did not have a very well developed astronomy. For the most part, they were not a nomadic or sea-going people so navigation was not as essential for them. In addition, God had warned them against turning the heavenly bodies into objects of worship as the surrounding nations had done, so they were less inclined to allow themselves to become strongly interested in the astronomy of other nations. But these two star formations are so remarkable, and so visible that they were aware of them. They were aware of the stars as seasonal signals. Watching the cycle of the Pliades alerted them to the autumn olive harvest and the Feast of Tabernacles, a festival commemorating the 40 years in the Wilderness. According to Genesis 1 this kind of signaling is what the stars were given to us for.

But they were also symbols of God's power. Amos is echoing Job in his description of God:

God alone stretched out the sky, stepped on the sea, and set the stars in place-- the Big Dipper and Orion, the Pleiades and the stars in the southern sky. Of all the miracles God

works, we cannot understand a one. (Job 9:8-10 CEV)

Later Job compares God's power to human power:

Can you tie the Pleiades together or loosen the bonds that hold Orion? Can you guide the stars season by season and direct the Big and the Little Dipper? (Job 38:31-32 GNB)

Amos is saying: Look to the sky. Look at how God created the grand display of the canopy of night. Look at the great cycle of the stars, how He put each one in place and regulates their positions. Look at how he paints the darkness with sunlight in the morning and casts the sun in shadow at evening. Only God can do this.

The ocean and the rain

Amos also draws our attention to another physics problem. He shows how God draws water from the oceans into the sky creating clouds, and then expands the clouds to overflowing and releases rain on the earth. In other words, he takes water that is naturally salty and poisonous for plants, and distills it into fresh rain that gives life to everything on earth.

In our enlightened times we see all these things differently. The motions of the stars are products of angular momentum, the falling of inanimate objects controlled by their speed, placing them in

orbit around other bodies. The evaporation of water is a product of the effect of heat on surface water molecules, breaking them down into their component elements and turning them into a vapor separated from heavier atoms.

Science describes these things to us, but we should never forget that science is primarily descriptive. It tells us “how” things work, but does not and cannot tell us “why” they work that way (though scientists don’t get tired of thinking enough “how” will translate into a “why”).

Amos is doing that. The “how” captivates our senses, the “why” captivates our hearts. The “how” can be seen. The “why” must be believed.

- Amos says the “how” is a product of the “why”.
- This is “how” the earth behaves. Why? It behaves that way because God made it behave that way.
- He gave us the cycle of the stars to create the rhythm of the seasons
- He gave us the cycle of evaporation to create life-giving rain
- The LORD is His name.

To all appearances, the cycle of the stars, the mechanism of evaporation and condensation, were created for the benefit of human kind, to make life on earth possible and predictable. God

did this as a concession to the needs of limited human beings who need food and water to live.

It all finds its source as far back as things can go to the One who is self-existent, uncreated.

I AM WHAT I AM

YHWH is His Name

The One Who Is

As Amos echoes Job: God put the stars in place

Can you?

Amos continues with a theory of history

The powerful fall at the hand of God

- Assyria in the time of Nimrod rose and fell
- Babylon in the time of Hammurabi rose and fell
- Egypt as an empire under the Pharaohs rose and fell
- Israel as a unified nation rose and fell
- Every stone fortress ever raised eventually eroded and fell
- Every individual powerful king who ever rose also fell

The fall of the mighty, the destruction of their fortresses is at the hand of God.

In our day we could continue the litany

- The Assyrian empire rose and fell again

- The Babylonian empire rose and fell again
- The Greek empire rose and fell
- The Roman empire rose and fell
- The Byzantine empire rose and fell
- The Holy Roman empire rose and fell
- The Ottoman empire rose and fell
 - The Napoleonic empire
 - The British empire
 - The Japanese empire
 - The Nazi empire
 - The Communist empire
 - All rose and fell
- The might of America has risen and eventually it will fall

And when it does, according to Amos's theory of history, it will be at the hand of God. Historians sometimes try to expand beyond the purview of observing and describing how things have happened and when and try to describe why. But according to Amos the why is in the hand of God. The mighty and their strongholds are brought down by The LORD.

Remove the brackets and see who Amos is talking about:

There are those who turn justice into
bitterness
and cast righteousness to the ground.
There are those who hate the one who
reproves in court
and detest the one who tells the truth.

It is a statement about power. The people

- who think they can manipulate justice
- who think they can turn privilege to their own advantage
- who think they can profit at the expense of others
- They should remember who it is that stretches out the night time heavens
- who it is that turns the stars in their courses
- who it is that takes poison salt sea water and makes it into nourishing rain
- who it is that brings the mighty empires of the world to ruin

The LORD is His name

- and He is on the side of justice
- He is on the side of righteousness
- He is on the side of righting wrongs
- He is on the side of truth

So in the words of the old saw, I've got some good news and I've got some bad news. In this case, they are both the same news.

- This great power of the stars
- This great power of the seas and the rain
- This great power of the kingdoms of the ages

Is arrayed against some and for others

Whether that is good news or bad news depends on which side you are on.

First the bad news

So remember when you are on the side of evil:

- Every time you justify not helping the poor by rationalizing what you think that person will do with the money
- Every time you buy products that are artificially low priced through foreign trade that takes advantage of poor and powerless workers
- Every time you consume pornography, and participate in an industry that thrives on the basest impulses inside you, in human trafficking and exploitation
- Every time you use another person, and steal their respect, taking their esteem for yourself
- Every time you take a stand on the side of a political agenda that is opposed to the explicit virtue of scripture

You are identifying yourself with the side of injustice, unrighteousness, untruth, and a fallen human culture. If you align yourself in this way,

- the God of the Universe
- the self-existent One
- the One who can light the combustion of a billion stars, control their flights along a path longer than the human mind can imagine, spin them like tops and arrange them like candles in a room
- the One who can snuff a star like extinguishing a wick

- the One who can break down the atoms of the oceans separating the beneficial from the harmful, then wisp it into clouds that bring life to vegetables and flowers on the other side of the world
- the One who breaks the backs of kingdoms and empires across the leagues of the earth and the durations of centuries

He is aligning Himself against you.

You need to be aware of this. A life of sin is a dangerous thing. It may bring temporary pleasure, a certain level of worldly success, even a type of satisfaction. Solomon understood this:

There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death. (Proverbs 14:12 ESV)

When we embrace sin as our normal mode of life, we are declaring ourselves against God Himself.

He is in a pitched, cosmic battle of good against evil. He will win. He is the All Mighty. In addition, He has the right of created ownership. All things are His. He created them by speaking words from His own infinite mind. Working against what He says and loves is rebellion and is a certain recipe for eternal loss. Regardless of how it feels today, in the end, there is only loss.

But there is also good news

Like it or not, evil is prevalent in the world. We are called to stand against evil, but we are warned that we will not defeat evil. The best we can do is to hold our own with the help of God.

The help He gives is most important, because it is the only thing that can withstand Satan and all his forces of darkness.

Sometimes in this wicked world, if you have aligned yourself on the side of:

- justice
- righteousness
- righting wrongs
- truth

you will feel alone, discouraged, sometimes even defeated. Because so many people want to do what is wrong, and so few want to do what is right by God's definition, we find ourselves in a minority. You may find yourself on the hurting end of many situations.

But the good news is that God has lined up along side of you.

- the God of the Universe
- the self-existent One
- the One who can light the combustion of a billion stars, control their flights along a path longer than the human mind can imagine, spin them like tops and arrange them like candles in a room

- the One who can snuff a star like extinguishing a wick
- the One who can break down the atoms of the oceans and separate the beneficial from the harmful and wisp it into clouds that bring life to vegetables and flowers on the other side of the world
- the One who breaks the backs of kingdoms and empires across the leagues of the earth and the durations of centuries

He is aligning Himself beside you. There is no force on earth that can defeat Him:

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31 TNIV)

This is the motivation we need to:

- Keep doing good
- To reject discouragement
- To avoid revenge
- To increase our patience

Think about it as the Apollo 15 astronaut Jim Irwin describes it:

If God controls the universe with such infinite precision, controlling all the motion of the planets and the stars, this is the working out of a perfect plan for outer space. I believe that He has the perfect plan for the inner space of man, the spirit of man. This plan was manifest when He sent His son Jesus

Christ to die for us, to forgive our sins, and to show us He has a plan for our lives (Jim Irwin. *Destination Moon*).

There is a natural self-preservation and provision for success in aligning with God. The fact that His very character defines what is right and wrong assures us that we are in the right when we do so.

The doom and gloom, the judgement in the prophets is a two sided coin. It can be dark and negative, especially if you are involved in the types of attitudes and behavior that is being judged. However, most of the judgement is extended toward people who are abusing other people. If you are one of the people against whom wickedness, the judged attitudes and behavior, is directed, you can know that God is on your side. Those who abuse you will be judged by Him.

But if you are living in ways contrary to God's ways, if you are indulging sin and tolerating your own injustice, you should look to the sky. See the clouds as they bring fresh distilled water on the whole earth. Watch as the stars mark their perennial path across the furthest reaches of space and know this. You are not beyond God's reach. The power that does all this is in the hands of the Judge of all the Earth.

Increase your faith

It doesn't matter which side of the coin you are looking at, it helps to increase your faith. I am convinced one of the reasons materialistic naturalism does so well is the thoroughness with which the philosophy attempts to take God out of the equation. If God did not create the universe. If He is not in control of it, we need not fear a power so great. But all of life, from the biggest galaxy to the smallest raindrop are expressions of His power. Whether it has to do with food, water or politics it is in God's hands. He makes it happen or not.

God is to be feared. Loved, revered, thanked, worshiped, yes, but we must also remember the awesome power He wields. By accepting the limits of modern human knowledge and recapturing the truth God tells us in His word ... That in His vast mind lies the underlying "why" of creation, we come to respect Him in a greater way. If we can believe that He did all that, then nothing will challenge our ability to believe whatever He says He can and will do. We can trust that He will judge the wicked, and that He will defend the righteous.

Honor God, respect the poor

The absence of thanks in Amos

What are the stated sins of Israel in Amos's day?

One important fact about Amos is that most of the book is taken up with God's judgement of Israel. Much is said about failing crops and creeping economic disaster. He speaks of destroying fortresses.

He speaks of these problems in two ways:

- He has sent some of these "plagues" in the past to induce them to turn back to God, but they didn't
- He will send them even worse in the future, not as a motivator but as a punishment, and calls them to return to Him before it is too late

The two-fold meaning of the suffering of the nation is illustrated well in chapter 4 where God speaks of these disasters in both ways: past and future.

We've already seen some:

- indulging in illicit slave trade
- abusing the poor
- perverting justice in the courts
- sexual perversity
- pagan practices
- robbing the poor of their rightful property
- pagan drunkenness (Amos 2:6-8).

But there is more

"Go to Bethel and sin; go to Gilgal and sin yet more. Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three years. 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. (Amos 4:4-5)

During the days of Joshua, the leaders of the tribes of the Israelites who crossed the Jordan picked up a stone each and brought them to the other side and there the 12 stones were erected into a mound that was to serve as a memorial of the crossing into the Promised Land. By the time we read the book of Judges though, we see that some pagan practices have also grown up in the area, so the place had come to be an important pagan site. Bethel was where Jeroboam I set up his southern shrine to a golden calf and was also a traditional pagan worship site.

So Amos is speaking very sarcastically here. He is inviting the people to continue their pagan worship. What is more, he is daring them to pervert the worship of God. He is making fun of practices they already indulge in, neglecting their tithes for years, bringing corrupt thank offerings and boasting about their spirituality. So, the list of sin continues.

In fact, the list is not as long as we might expect, though it is too long for anyone to be comfortable about it. The book of Amos talks more about what God is going to do than about what Israel did. But what they did was bad enough and their sins are sprinkled throughout the book. They:

- Indulge in pagan worship
- Corrupt their worship to God
- Indulge in spiritual practices without humility
- encourage corrupt courts
- overtax the poor
- abuse the innocent
- take bribes
- deprive the poor of justice in the courts (Amos 5)
- are rich, decadent, and complacent and do not grieve over the ruin of others
- take credit for the work of God (Amos 6)
- Show contempt for God's law
- Cheat in the marketplace (Amos 8)

Amos, of course, says it much more colorfully than I do. But, generally, there are three classes of sin here:

- Spiritual waywardness
- Political and legal corruption
- Marketplace exploitation

All of these had the net effect of building the rich up higher and higher and driving the poor further down.

We see in Amos a great divide between the powerful rich and the oppressed poor. The rich are politically connected. We see that because they have so much influence in the courts. They use the system as if it were their own business venture, crushing anyone they desire to gain more for themselves even going so far as to influence the tax structure to their own benefit burdening the poor with more than they could afford. They stacked the deck against the poor in court so they could squeeze even more out of them.

On top of that they cheat in their business ventures, price-gouging and short-changing. They were known to have two sets of weights, sometimes shaped differently in their bag so they could tell when they reached in to grab one which one they had. For example, the smooth one might be slightly heavy and the shaped one slightly light. So if they're measuring something to buy, they use the heavy weights. If they're weighing it to sell, they use the light one. If they're weighing silver they are being paid, they also use the heavy one.

They built mansions of dressed stone, the best there was to be had. They gathered luxuries to themselves, had the best food and drink, comfortable furniture, pursued more and more. And this would not be so bad if they were not

doing it explicitly on the backs of the poor. If they were not ignoring the plight of others.

Imagine for a moment a person wanting a new pair of shoes. It doesn't matter if they're Prada slingbacks or \$30 skippies, but they don't have the money on hand. So, they look around and find somebody that owes them money. The Bible is clear that a debtor was at the mercy of their lender. So, this shopper goes to this debtor and says, "Pay up!"

"But I don't have it today," he answers. "Can it wait till payday?"

"No," says the shopper. "If you can't pay now, I'll sell you as a bondsman till the debt is paid."

So the shopper sells the debtor to somebody who will pay the shopper the debtors wages. When the debt is paid, and the slave purchase price is worked off, and the upkeep expenses are worked off, the debtor can go free, but in the mean time, he is a slave, working at whatever rate the owner sets. You can see how this system, even though economically sound, is open to all kinds of moral abuse too.

But the shopper has the money. He buys his skippies, she buys her pumps and everyone is happy.

Well, not quite everyone.

This is the situation being described when Amos says, "you sell the poor for a pair of sandals."

The unevenness between rich and poor

The gap had grown so large that nowhere was safe. One of the key elements of the whole book, I think, is in chapter 3, a little statement made almost in passing:

"They do not know how to do right," declares the LORD, "who store up in their fortresses what they have plundered and looted."
(Amos 3:10)

Remember, one of the apparent causes of the economic decline in Israel was the shrinking border, the encroachment of neighboring nations on Israelite territory. Amos points out that it isn't that simple though. There is an enemy within too. It is the aristocracy of the nation who hoard the wealth of others for their own treasuries. When Israel attacked other nations, the powerful took the spoils of the wars and stored them rather than sharing them. This was a distinct violation of the customs of war. Other kings, David, even Saul shared with everyone, including those whose parts were less sensational. But though God had given them victory in order to bring relief to the people, they never experienced that relief, because it was withheld, stored up by the powerful.

Where were the poor to turn? They couldn't demand their share or they opened themselves up to further abuse. They couldn't go to the courts because the judges were in the pockets of the rich people. They couldn't go to a priest because, well, the temple was pagan and corrupt too.

This nation that was a large segment of God's Chosen had become so self-centered, and so greedy, and so power hungry that they had no care for the suffering they were causing. They were so oblivious to their own arrogance they couldn't see what was right in front of their eyes.

God had rescued them from their enemies and from economic collapse

- And the rich hoarded the blessings and took credit for the victory
- And they abused the poor
- And they corrupted the courts
- And they pursued their pagan gods

And Amos makes only one reference to thanksgiving to God in the whole book, a sarcastic reference to a corrupt sacrifice:

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. (Amos 4:5)

Yeast was a symbol of the creeping pervasiveness of sin. This is why their bread for their thank offerings was supposed to be unleavened. But they thought nothing of bringing a tainted thank offering to God and then bragging about it afterward.

Is it any wonder that God is calling for repentance?

But that is the point. God wants acknowledgment. The people had been helped by God against Ammon their enemy. It was prophesied by Jonah and God used the king to save them. He even addresses Ammon's war atrocities. Yet later in the book Amos tells how they are bragging that they accomplished their defeat of Ammon all on their own.

- God wants acknowledgment.
- He wants obedience
- He wants thanks where thanks are due

The people of Israel were not beyond God's reach. He is not delivering this prophesy as a done deal. Amos is telling them, even your worship of God is tainted if it is not accompanied by obedience:

Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream! (Amos 5:23-24)

This idea that is now so associated with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that people think he originated it; this is God saying, "I have given you commands, obey them".

- Worship is meaningful when it is accompanied by obedience
- The blessings of God are meaningful when they are accompanied by acknowledgment that He is the one who gave them
- Gifts to God are meaningful when they are accompanied by appropriate thanks

This is the problem with thanksgiving as a national holiday, as I see it.

Celebrities get on national television and say what they are "thankful" for, but they never say to whom they are thankful. Their gratitude is a vague feeling extended toward other people at best and nowhere at all at worst. As emotional leaders in our country, the people who bring entertainment and art (even if it is of only dubious quality) into our homes tell us how we are supposed to feel, but they do not direct those feelings and the people of our nation follow suit.

As a culture we have tainted the rightful thanks we should be bringing to God and made it a general, undirected sentiment.

Thanksgiving becomes a celebration of plenty, a harvest party. And that's great, but there is no acknowledgment of the One who makes seeds

germinate, makes rain fall, makes the sun shine, and makes plants to grow. In fact, at the end of the parade is Santa, the star of the show.

The message? We have plenty and we should celebrate that by beginning a bout of materialism. It is no mistake that the biggest "Thanksgiving" celebration in the country is hosted by a department store.

The extraction of Jesus from Christmas is as natural as the extraction of God from Thanksgiving.

No, no, a thousand times no.

- Begin by acknowledging God by obeying Him in compassion and generosity
- Continue by acknowledging God with worship for who He is
- Top it off with Thanks to God for every blessing He has placed in your life

Obedience to God is what is done with His blessings. They are not His gifts to us to glut ourselves on and selfishly hoard them for our own satisfaction. Just like the powerful of Israel, we are to receive the blessings of God and extend at least part of them further out to those in need. Only in the wake of obedience does thanksgiving make sense. Only in the context of our own generosity, does God's generosity have meaning for us.

Because where selfishness is fed, gratitude will starve.

And after you have shared, allow me to encourage you over the next week to adjust how you say it:

- Don't say, "I am thankful for ..."
- Say instead, "I thank God for ..."

Maybe you already do, and maybe for the most part it has been a matter of natural choice for you to say it either way, because, after all, you know what you mean.

But acknowledgment is a vocal recognition of someone for something they have done. Give God the recognition He deserves with joy, grace, and gratitude.

The nation can go the way nations go

- Never has a nation been wholly godly and dedicated to Him and we cannot expect ours to be
- We, the Church, are God's people
- We are His kingdom

The American Dream may be a selfish rush to materialistic extravagance without regard for the expense

The American nation will go the way of nations, while we subversively and collaterally go the way of the Divine Kingdom, and the Kingdom Dream is different

- It is kind
- It is obedient
- it is compassionate and generous
- It is gracious

And it is thankful to God as the giver of the blessings in our lives

What does God want from me?

This question could be asked by the folks of Israel as Amos confronts them again and again with God's reasons for sending trouble to them, whether it's in the past as a warning or in the future as a punishment. It's a question many people have when they face trouble.

In chapter 4 God expresses a regret, not a regret on His part, but on the part of the nation of Israel. Five times in verses 6, 8, 9, 10 and 11 he talks about the trouble He's sent and then chants the regret like the refrain of a sad song:

yet you have not returned to me," declares
the LORD

In the case of Israel and all who are wrapped up in sin this is what He wants. Israel's sin was rooted in pagan worship, corruption of the legal system, and abuse of the poor. So God sent trouble their way, in keeping with the Law of Moses and it did no good

yet you have not returned to me," declares
the LORD

He follows that lament with another idea that He also repeats in Chapter 5. In verse 4 He says:

Seek me and live

In verse 6, He chants it again

Seek the LORD and live

In verse 14, He chants it another way

Seek good, not evil that you may live

Amos loves repetitive patterns. We saw that at the beginning of the book when He was repeating the pattern of how God was going to deal with all the nations. Here we see it again. Amos starts with explaining the sin being addressed

he continues with what God is going to do

and now he's doing rounds on what God wants from them

- He wants the sinful people to return to Him
- He wants the sinful people to seek Him

... That they may live. This latest refrain holds out the hope of rescue if they will seek Him.

One of the little understood truths about the prophets is that they are not exactly about predicting the future. They are more about describing the present and predicting consequences. They do so with supernatural insight, given to them by God so they can say with clear accuracy what will happen along a particular line of progress.

They do not say, necessarily, what God's preferred future is, they just describe what is coming. That is what Amos is doing in this book. All the trouble he is predicting for Israel is not

God's preferred future. It is what will come of their sin

if they don't return to Him

if they don't seek Him

and live

That's the other possibility. Amos understates it and who knows why that is. Maybe he doesn't want to make it seem too easy. Maybe he doesn't want to obscure the severity of their sin. Maybe he wants to make sure they get the point of the problem. He definitely expresses the downside of the direction they're headed more than the life that could be theirs.

But like most of the prophets he does not leave out the alternative. His prophecies of doom are not the final word. There is another possibility.

Return to the LORD

Seek Him

and live

And this works on either a national level or a personal level. Either the whole nation can repent, or an individual can repent and be rescued, you remember, like a couple leg bones and a piece of an ear, while those who refuse to seek God go down.

This is God's message to everyone in sin. We must be careful. It is easy to focus on the

national possibilities and forget the personal. But our sin is dragging us down as certainly as the broad scale sin of the nation is dragging it down.

It is always best to focus on the personal. We get the log out of our own eye. We set an example. We let our own light shine and others may see the goodness of God in our lives and glorify Him. Change the one we can change.

What needs to be changed in your life?

How do you seek good and not evil?

What sin needs to be abandoned

- Is it materialism, pursuing things as if they were a god?
- Is it dishonesty, saying things that aren't true, neglecting to say things that are true, or allowing others to be misled?
- Is it drunkenness, overindulging in something to the point that you lose control over yourself?
- Is it irresponsibility, not doing what you should be doing to take care of yourself and your family and instead indulging in laziness or distraction?
- Is it taking things that don't belong to you, whether occasional shoplifting, taking money that belongs to somebody else in your house, or taking credit for doing things you didn't do?
- Is it sexual sin, fantasizing about or interacting with others in a way that is

inappropriate? This includes using pornographic pictures or video; lusting after, flirting with, or emotionally investing in somebody not your spouse; or being physically sexually involved with a person you aren't married to.

- Is it identifying too closely with the sin of the crowd, trying to blend and so avoid the stigma of being a Christian?
- Is it being unloving, treating someone with unkindness, unforgiveness, harshness ... even hatred or apathy?

You see, it is better to focus on the personal. it's easier to wish for and pray for world peace and to mourn the violence in the middle east than it is to invest in our own homes, build our own bridges, and mend our own torn relationships.

If you've had trouble in your life and you are refusing to get these things right. His message is the same:

You have not returned to me, declares the LORD

If you're harboring these or other sins in your life God's message to you is the same as the one he sent Amos to deliver:

Seek good and not evil, Seek the LORD and live

If you want to know what God wants from you, that's it:

Seek Him; return to Him

And live

For Israel God was willing to go to great lengths.
Look at Amos's story in chapter 7

Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent a message to Jeroboam king of Israel: "Amos is raising a conspiracy against you in the very heart of Israel. The land cannot bear all his words. For this is what Amos is saying: "Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land."

Then Amaziah said to Amos, "Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there. Don't prophesy anymore at Bethel, because this is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom."

Amos answered Amaziah, "I was neither a prophet nor the disciple of a prophet, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. But the LORD took me from tending the flock and said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.' (Amos 7:10-15)

The people did not want Amos there. Amos, it looks like, did not want to be there either. Given his choice he might have been home with his sheep and his trees. He had no special

credentials to be where he was, doing what he was doing, and saying what he was saying. Amos was bringing trouble on himself by going. In fact, he is being threatened by a pagan priest with conspiring against the king right in the shrine of a golden calf, the root of the sin of the nation.

I don't know what sin you're harboring. Certainly some of you are harboring sin, some of you to the great detriment of your soul. I am not being judgmental in saying this, I am only living with the odds. If Jesus had 12 close followers and one of them was as far gone as Judas was, then certainly we cannot have three times that many, with only me to disciple you and not be in at least as bad a shape as Jesus group was, most likely worse.

But I might be as unlikely to wind up in New Jersey as anyone. Yet here I am, and part of my job is to warn you

- Return to the LORD
- Seek good and not evil
- Seek the LORD and live

This is the hope held out in Amos's message. Although he has spent a lot of time on Israel's sin, the trouble God sent their way, and the possible trouble they will face if they don't change direction, there is hope on the final page.

"In that day I will restore David's fallen shelter-- I will repair its broken walls and restore its ruins-- and will rebuild it as it used to be, so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name," declares the LORD, who will do these things.

"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when the reaper will be overtaken by the one who plows and the planter by the one treading grapes. New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills, and I will bring my people Israel back from exile. "They will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them. They will plant vineyards and drink their wine; they will make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant Israel in their own land, never again to be uprooted from the land I have given them," says the LORD your God. (Amos 9:11-15)

Enjoy this description like a piece of art. Put yourself in it.

Imagine an ancient city, already ancient in Amos' day, the city of Jerusalem, palace of the king, with stones tumbled down and spread. The walls in disarray, the whole structure exposed to the elements and to enemies.

God will rebuild it.

Imagine a farmer trying to get the harvest in, walking the rows, cutting the grain, with a ploughman at his heels, ready to get the next crop planted because the weather is so good and the soil is so fertile.

Imagine a guy planting seed and the plants growing and bearing fruit so fast, that another guy is on his heels harvesting the crop and getting it ready for market.

Imagine a mountain with a river flowing through the trees and rocks from the summit to the foot of the hill. But the river is not flowing with water, but imagine the vineyards on the mountain are so rich the river flows with new, sweet wine, rushing and deep.

These are poetic images of prosperity and blessing. They are images of the great abundance God wants to pour out on His people. This is His preferred future, not that destruction he's been warning them of. From the way this is expressed, we get the impression God intends to get to this place. He will sweep the evil out of the way and rescue the faithful and this will be their reality.

As with most prophecy, we can see this fulfilled in layers. The nation did go into exile. Some of the nation (not all) did return and rebuild. What they lost was restored.

On another layer, the fallen, ruined House of David was restored and re-established, not in a kingdom renewed when the exile was over, but in the Messiah who came, Jesus, the son of David, the rightful heir to the house of David.

On still another layer, though their first return to the land was not permanent, Israel has returned again. This return like the last is up to Israel. If they seek God, they will live, and this return could be permanent, leading us into the last days. We are given multiple pictures in the Bible of the end of time, including a massive part played by God's people in their homeland. Is this it? Who knows? If they do not seek God, then He may have other things planned. That is the future, and it is in God's hands.

As I said, it's better to see these things more personally. Perhaps the most important reason, in God's economy, for me to be in New Jersey is to deliver this message to one or two of you. To help you see the crossroads of your present, one road called sin leading to destruction and ruin. The other road called repentance, leading to a life of righteous pursuits, blessing and strength, and God Himself. Just as Amos had hope of reaching only a few, maybe there are a few here that God has me here to reach. Stranger things have happened.

Imagine examining your life and seeing the sin. If you're like me, that's not the hard part. Imagine

what it would be like to abandon the evil, to value the good, to seek God and escape His retribution, to reap the rewards He holds out to the faithful.

Imagine returning to what you've lost, what has been ruined in your life, and finding new strength and new wisdom to rebuild it. To stand in the places that used to bring you shame and pain. Standing on the broken ruins of your past and raising up strong new days. Imagine being a person who is so dedicated to God that this is your new permanent state of affairs, your new normal. Imagine having a powerful inner resource to draw on, to be able to look life in the eye and know that you can handle it, because God is within you, backing your moves as you seek Him for direction in what they should be. Will you never waiver? Never doubt? Probably, but when your default position is faith, you always have a place to return to.

Imagine this never ends.

Eternity does not begin the day you die. It begins now, today. To apprehend a future that is full, and abundant, and strong, a future in which no matter what you face, you have the inner resources to cope because your inner resource is the living righteousness and involvement of God. To establish a personal stance that is blessed, firm, unshakeable, unmoveable. To

ensure an eternity restored to God's original intention - with Him, in His presence:

You must begin today.

- Return to the LORD
- Seek good and not evil
- Seek the LORD and live.

And let God bring the old to an end and make all things new.

Amos harmonizing with 2 Kings 14:23-29

Study questions

Read Amos and 2 Kings 14:23-29. Use the Scriptures to answer the following questions before proceeding to the analysis provided:

According to Amos 1:1 what was the specific political timing of Amos' ministry?

According to 2 Kings 14, what was the general tone of Jeroboam's reign?

- Politically?
- Economically?
- Militarily?
- Morally?

Perhaps surprisingly, who was another prophet that worked during the same time as Amos?

What was God's attitude about Jeroboam's reign? What was positive? What was negative?

Why did God use Jeroboam to bring about military conquest?

What specific sins does 2 Kings 14 associate with Jeroboam's reign?

What specific sins does Amos associate with Jeroboam's reign (Amos 2:6-8; 4:1; 5:10-13; 8:4-6)?

What do you gather from Amos' statements about the cities captured in Jeroboam's wars (2 Kings 14:25; Amos 6:13-14)?

What should give Israel hope (Amos 7:1-9; 5:6-8, 14-15, 23-24; 9:8-15)?

What spiritual lessons can we take away from Amos?

Analysis

Amos helps us fill in some details about a king who has a rather brief and conflicting description in 2 Kings 14. With the light of Amos we can tell a couple of things about the circumstances in the first half of Jeroboam's reign:

Israel was on a downward moral slide that was having economic repercussions, bringing about suffering on the part of the people. According to 2 Kings the lynch-pins of the moral problem were the traditional pagan shrines at Dan and Beth El established centuries earlier but supported by King Jeroboam.

God wanted to judge Israel, but felt that they needed more warning before judgement was justified

In the mean time He orchestrated the fall of several neighboring cities according to the word of the prophet Jonah.

Jeroboam was the instrument God used to bring about the fall of these cities in order to provide relief for the suffering of the common people of the land.

Amos, however, adds light to the aftermath of the conquest. There is more sin involved than just the idolatry mentioned in 2 Kings:

This is what the LORD says: "For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not turn back my

wrath. They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed. Father and son use the same girl and so profane my holy name. They lie down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge. In the house of their god they drink wine taken as fines. (Amos 2:6-8 NIV)

This is the introductory summary of their sin, which is not greatly enlarged upon in the book. However, it is somewhat more specifically laid at the doorstep of the aristocracy:

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!" (Amos 4:1 NIV)

you hate the one who reproves in court and despise him who tells the truth. You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine. For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts. Therefore the prudent man keeps quiet in

such times, for the times are evil. (Amos 5:10-13 NIV)

Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, saying, "When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?"—skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat. (Amos 8:4-6 NIV)

Besides hedonistic, perverted pagan practices, clearly Jeroboam's administration was overrun with exploitation of the poor and corruption of the market and of the justice system. The exploitation of the poor was exacerbated by the flagrant, luxurious and decadent lifestyle of the elite. Apparently the campaigns orchestrated by God to relieve the suffering of the people were re-purposed to adding to the extravagance of the rich.

So, God pronounces judgement through Amos.

The main body of Amos' message of judgement is vague. It simply pronounces disaster. Some of Amos' job is to interpret the trouble the nation has already seen. The second part of Amos 4 describes some of the trouble, plagues, blights, war, drought and famine. These troubles were

sent as warnings to the people that their sin was going to ruin them, but they did not heed.

So, throughout the book Amos peppers overt warnings that new troubles that come should be associated with God's judgement. In colorful and explicit language Amos describes the decline of the population and the ruin of the superstructure of the nation. He describes God's known power and history for decreeing just this kind of punishment.

This is the decree that God delayed with the powerful reign of Jeroboam. Since the warning had not been adequately sounded, Jeroboam's administration marks a reprieve. Even though it sounds as if things are not all that good, they are only going to get worse.

Amos' book marks three reasons for hope:

- the intercessory prayers of the prophet negotiate the timing and kind of judgement God will bring (7:1-9)
- repentance can bring a reversal of the judgement (5:6-8; 14-15, 23-24)
- even if the judgement happens, God ultimately has plans to restore the nation (9:8-15)

In addition to the pronouncements of the book, Amos tells a brief story in chapter 7 that illuminates the character of the king and the

pagan community to whom Amos ministered. He also gives us an insight into his own character.

He is not from the northern kingdom, but from the south where he was a farmer

He was called by God specifically to go to the north

He boldly prophesied near the pagan shrine of the golden calf at Beth El and confronted the priest of the shrine

The priest took Amos' words to the king and came back to threaten him and send him home, but Amos did not go

During the confrontation, the king's involvement in the idolatry of the golden calf shrine is made clear

In all, the assessment of 2 Kings 14:24, that Jeroboam did evil is confirmed and expanded upon by Amos' prophecy. At the same time, the spiritual framework of Amos' world is given in 2 Kings, showing that the atmosphere of exploitation in Israel is fueled by an abuse of God's specific provision to relieve suffering.

The lessons we learn from taking these two texts in harmony are:

- The provision of God is not necessarily simplistic in nature. He may provide deliverance for people during sinful times for his own reasons.

- We should not take credit for God's actions.
- God is patient with our sin. He may let it go on for a long time, until He gives us all the warning He sees as necessary.
- God provides hope even in the midst of punishment and sin

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