

ADULT MEMBER

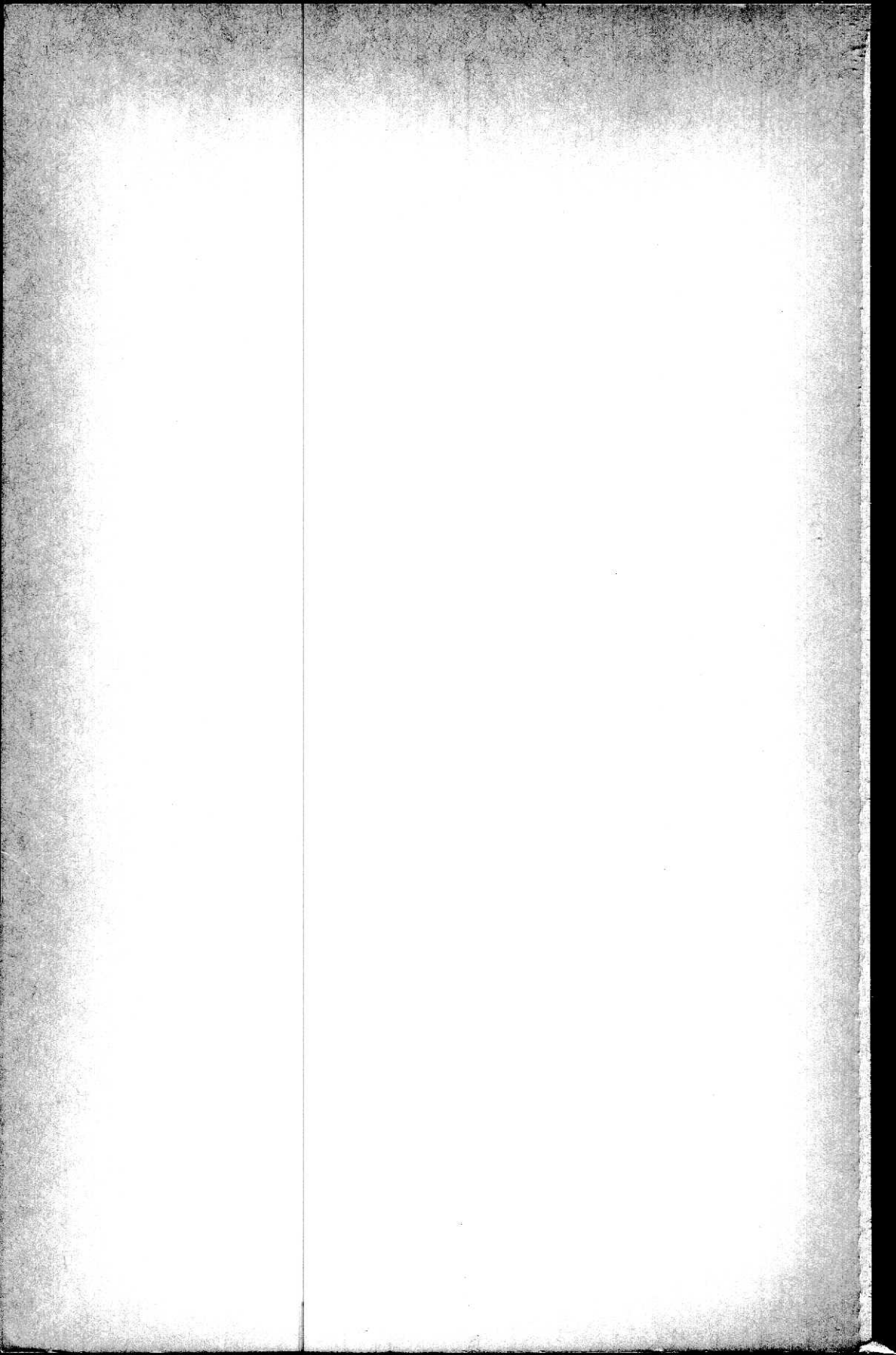


AMOS

Repentance or Ruin

by Kenneth Mathews





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AMOS: **Repentance or Ruin**

by
Kenneth Mathews

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How to Become a Christian

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Signs Along the Way

You cannot travel a public road today without seeing various road signs. Signs guide and protect travelers. The Bible gives us signs as well. Following these signs leads to a personal relationship with God.

The first sign is a "Dead End" sign. The path of sin (willful disobedience to God) is a dead-end street. "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23). Jesus died on a cross to provide a way for our disobedience to God to be forgiven.

The second road sign is a "Stop" sign. Who is to stop? All are to stop and realize that they are guilty of sin. There are no exceptions to this sign, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Our best efforts at being good fall short of what God wants from us. Every person must make a willful decision to turn away from sin and turn to God in faith.

The third road sign is a "One Way" sign. You may ask, "How can I be saved?" There is only one way: through personal faith in Jesus Christ. The Bible says "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you shall be saved" (Romans 10:9).

The last sign is the "Yield" sign. The Bible tells us we should let Jesus be the leader of our lives. Jesus will become a constant companion to guide you through the highways of life if you allow Him to guide your steps.

God, through His Holy Spirit, may be telling you of your need for Jesus. Ask Jesus to come into your life and be your personal Savior. Then tell a pastor or another Christian friend of your decision and follow Christ in baptism and church membership.

Make Winter Bible Study a Family Affair

Are you among those Christian parents who long for ways to involve the whole family in Bible discussions? Are your children in WBS studies? If so, you may use these "discussion starter" questions to help make WBS a family affair. With young children, three minutes may be a good discussion time. With older children you may let their interest govern the length of discussion. For this sort of family exercise, too little is probably better than too much.

DISCUSSION STARTERS to use after Session 1

Questions for Younger Preschoolers (Birth-2):

Session Title: Thanking God for the Bible

Your child heard that the Bible tells us about God. Say a thank-you prayer with your child thanking God for the Bible.

Questions for Older Preschoolers (3-5):

Session Title: God Helps Me

Your child learned that God gave Moses some rules to live by. Ask your child to think of some rules you have at your house.

Questions for Children (6-11):

How did Amos earn his living? How does your pastor and/or church staff earn their living? Why are you as important to God as anyone else in the world?

Questions for Youth (12-17):

Youth studied the messages of judgment in Amos. Ask: Do you think God brings judgment on nations today? How do you think God makes people aware of His coming judgment today?

Chapter 1

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Israel's Neighbors Condemned

Amos 1:1-2:5

In the spring of 1978 I stood at the outskirts of tiny Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus, and reflected on what I had seen that day. I turned my mind's eye to the southeast where some four miles away stood the ruins of the magnificent Herodium, a palace-fortress built by Herod the Great. Earlier in the day, I had scaled its massive towers and imagined how pleasant its gardens and pool were in that dry region.

As the sun began its descent, I thought how each site symbolized the striking difference between the kingdoms of Jesus and of Herod, both called "King of the Jews." Quiet Bethlehem portrayed the humble life of Jesus who offered an eternal kingdom built on love. The Herodium, the place of Herod's burial, represented the pomp and ceremony of this world's kingdoms. Herod's reign had brought economic prosperity and splendor to Jerusalem, but it also had brought wars, murder, and death. He patterned his realm after beautiful Rome, including its cruelty!

History testifies that nations that build on the bones of innocent people collapse under the weight of their own corruption. While most people today would point to political or economic factors for the fall of a nation, the Bible explains that a society stands or falls on moral grounds.

The Hebrew prophets recognized this more clearly than any group in human history. Among the first who

The Book of Amos speaks of the same God and the same basic needs we have today. Let the study of this book make a difference in your life.

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preached this message was Amos, a herdsman and farmer from Judah. During the early eighth century B.C., Judah's northern neighbor, Israel, enjoyed peaceful borders, expanding trade, and social stability. Yet, in spite of the signs of booming times, Amos predicted that the state of Israel would fall.

Does it surprise you to realize that Amos was a layman? Jot in the margin the names of two or three laypersons you know that God has used or is using in significant ways. Write one way that God is using or could use you.

The people, particularly the leaders, had committed arrogant sins through abusive power, immoral living, and oppressive greed. Weakened by moral decay and internal strife, the fabric of the country gradually tore. Within 40 years of Amos's forecast, the invading Assyrians (located in modern Iraq)

swallowed up the nation. This was the beginning of the so-called "lost ten tribes" of Israel.

Yet, a glimmer of hope remained for the faithful. The prophet also painted a bright future for Israel in which the nation would rise again to experience God's blessings. Although his message primarily cast a cloud of despair, those who entrusted themselves to the Lord could take comfort in hearing God's promised blessings.

What does Amos's message say to us today? Military hardware, rising productivity, and advances in technology do not necessarily chart a safe course for a people. Although America is the world's most secure nation, it too can fall asleep and neglect its accountability before God.

The challenge for us as Christians is to influence our nation for godliness. We can meet this challenge by maintaining a personal intimacy with Christ and by building strong families and churches. We also can stand for the biblical values that have undergirded Western civilization, such as social justice, the sacredness of life, and moral decency.

As individuals, the Book of Amos confronts us with this central message: God is not indifferent to our sins.

Neither personal achievements nor financial prosperity shields a person from the destructive consequences of sinful behavior. However, hope and mercy prevail for those who turn from their sins and accept Christ as Savior.

The opening collection of prophecies reflects the key principle behind Amos's message: God judges nations on the basis of justice and morality.

As you consider the moral and spiritual state of your nation, what can you do to be part of the solution rather than the problem? Write at least one response in the margin.

Amos and His Times (1:1)

But first things first! Who was Amos to speak so harshly, anyway? The "words of Amos" were God's "roarings" among the nations (1:1-2). His messages came from visions given him by God (7:1,4,7; 8:1; 9:1).

Our knowledge of the prophet is limited to the short biographical statements of the book. No mention is made of his family heritage. He was from "the shepherders among Tekoa." By his own testimony, his occupation was a shepherd and dresser of sycamore figs (7:14).

Whether Amos was a simple peasant or the owner of flocks and orchards is unclear. In either case, the prophet had a remarkable knowledge of Israel's religious traditions and was well versed in international events. His home was Tekoa of Judah, a fortified garrison located about 12 miles south of Jerusalem. There he could have learned of troop movements and international news.

Do you keep up with international affairs? Should you? Why or why not?

Amos began his preaching "two years before the earthquake" (1:1). This earthquake apparently was the beginning fulfillment of Amos's prophecies (see 8:8; 9:1,5). Evidence of such an earthquake was discovered at the Israelite city Hazor and dated at about 760 B.C. This, with other general information, establishes Amos's preaching at about the same time.

Amos lived during the “days of Uzziah” and the “days of Jeroboam.” It was the most productive period in Israel’s history since the golden era of David and Solomon (1011—931 B.C.). Civil war had broken the nation into two rival states, Israel and Judah (931 B.C.). But during Amos’s day, the territories of Judah and of Israel together were equal to the realm of David and Solomon.

King Uzziah’s able leadership secured for Judah trade, new defenses, and military successes. Yet, the king’s sin overshadowed his achievements. Prosperous but proud, he ended his rule in disgraceful shame as a leper (2 Chron. 26).

At the same time, the northern tribes expanded their territory in the region, growing in political and commercial influence. During his lengthy reign of 41 years, Jeroboam II defeated Syria and recaptured lost territories (2 Kings 14:23-27).

He continued the idolatry of the northern tribes for which he was harshly condemned in 2 Kings 14:24. Israel had practiced calf worship since the days of Jeroboam I (931 B.C.), who erected golden calves at Dan and Bethel (1 Kings 12:26-33). The capital city of Samaria also boasted a calf shrine (Hos. 8:5-6).

The prosperity of the era created a sense of false security. Amos’s announcement of imminent disaster by invading armies would have appeared foolish. Yet, the prophet’s message showed that there was no defense for the wicked against God.

Some believe God is irrelevant. They restrict God’s activity to houses of worship. Amos showed that God is fully aware of events in the world and in each individual’s life.

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The Lord “Roars” (1:2)

The preamble to the prophet’s condemnation against the nations was the terrifying announcement, “The LORD roars.” The “roaring” of God indicated a new revelation but also one which anticipated a coming disaster.

God delivered His royal decrees “from Zion” and “from Jerusalem.” The Lord had established the throne of David on Mount Zion of Jerusalem where the king

had placed the sacred ark of the covenant (2 Sam. 6:17). By Amos's day, the term *Zion* included Jerusalem's temple which symbolized God's presence.

Besides the earthquake, Amos indicated that the "roar" of God resulted in the drought of "pasture grounds" and "the summit of Carmel." Mount Carmel, located south of modern Haifa, was known for its luscious beauty. This drought was due to the heavy hand of God's judgment, and it meant that the horrible "day of the LORD" was under way (5:16-20).

This announcement of coming disaster showed that the God of Israel is not removed from the affairs of the world. God expressed His judgment through both nature and international events. The instrument of His fury against the nations was the fierce Assyrians who conquered the ancient Near East.

But is the message of Amos locked away in the past? Can God today redraw the map of nations so quickly? We have witnessed in our own decade how war and famine produced such changes. Map makers have scrambled to revise the face of the globe to keep pace with the changing political world. Since 1990 maps have been corrected at two-year intervals instead of the customary five years.¹

Christians have much to say about the direction of current events, because the Bible indicates that God uses history to reveal Himself and His kingdom. History has shown the inauguration of the kingdom through Jesus of Nazareth, and history will culminate in the return of Christ. For this reason, the apostles appealed to the Hebrew prophets when they preached the gospel (see Acts 2:16-21).

The prophets' view of history reminds us that the whole story is not told in our daily newspapers. There is a divine viewpoint concerning present events. God is "filling up" His promises by bringing to Himself the

Do you think God expresses His judgment today through nature and international events? Explain your answer.

peoples of all nations through the gospel.

TRANSGRESSIONS OF THE NATIONS (1:3—2:5)

Geographically, the beginning prophecies name seven nations that surrounded Israel's borders. Six of these were pagan peoples whose crimes concerned international affairs (1:3-2:3). The seventh was against Amos's fellow countrymen of Judah. His charge against them was their religious sins. They had transgressed God's covenant laws (2:4-5).

We can imagine that by condemning the pagan nations first, Amos would have initially gained a favorable hearing. His audience of northern Israel would have heard with delight what awaited their foes. Yet, their glee would soon turn to anger when the prophet applied his troubling message to the Israelites themselves (2:6-16).

After establishing the authority of Amos's message (1:1-2), the prophet announced God's condemnations. While the message of condemnation may dishearten some Christians, it is better heard as a call for us to join the prophet by proclaiming salvation to those who place their faith in the living Lord Jesus.

Each of the seven prophecies against the nations follow a pattern of four parts:

- (1) The source: "Thus says the LORD"
- (2) The name of the nation and the reason for punishment:

"For three transgressions of . . . because . . ."

- (3) The nature of the judgment: "I will send fire"
- (4) A final word of authority, "Says the LORD."²

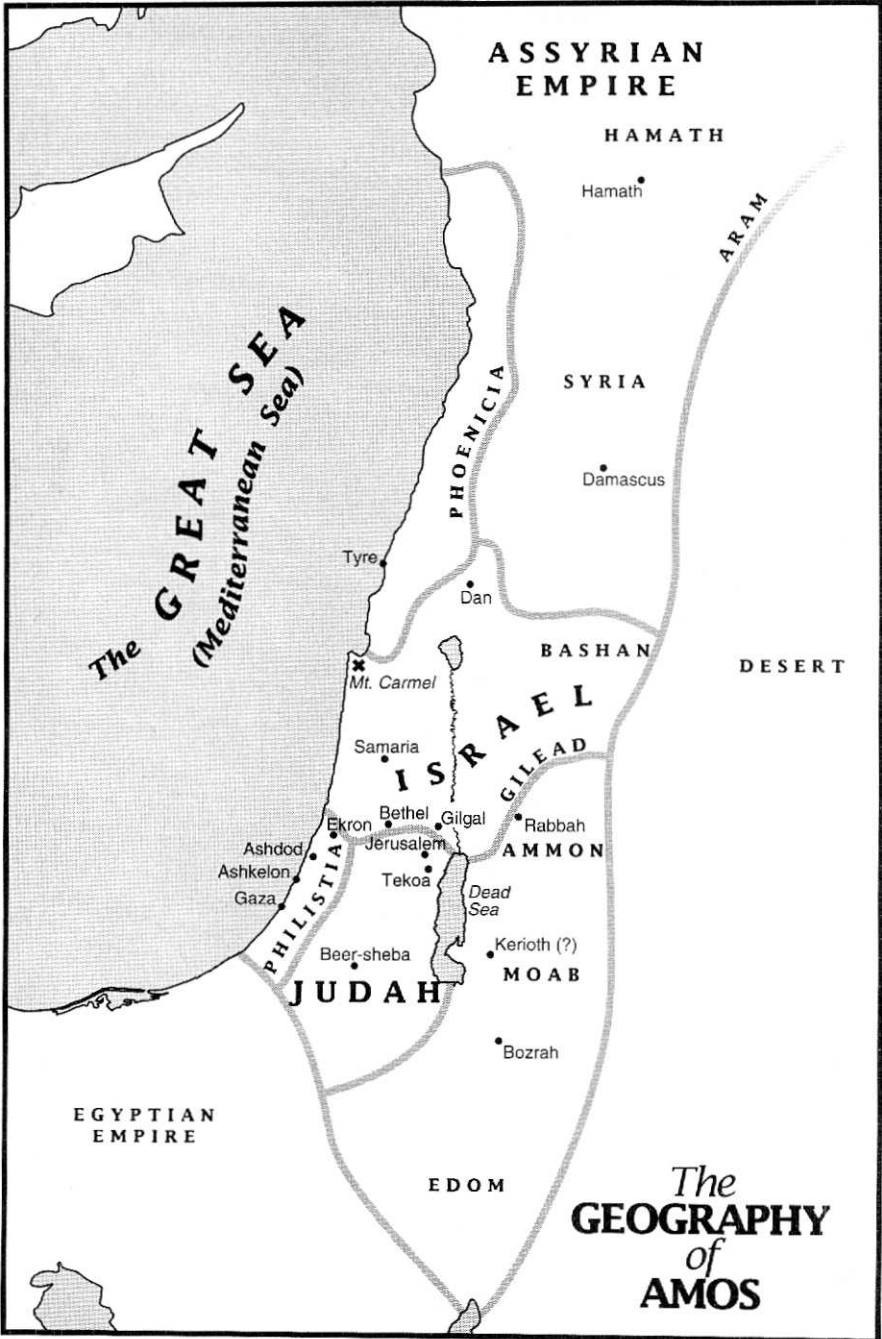
This regularity in the announcement of each judgment indicates that God took calculated steps against the wicked. His actions were not impulsive.

Transgressions of Damascus (1:3-5)

The first prophecy against the nations concerned the city-state "Damascus" (capital of modern Syria). Damascus, lying northeast of Israel, was the primary

God keeps an account of nations' and individuals' behavior. This is frightening for the person who ignores God, but comforting for the person who repents of sin and turns to the Lord.

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Map of Amos's World

God judges wickedness. He does not always express His justice in a way we can predict. He carries out His judgment on the guilty in His own way and in His own time.

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city of the Aramean kingdoms (see 1:5, “people of Aram”). Aram is the Hebrew word for the Aramean peoples and is traditionally translated “Syria” in English Bibles (KJV).

The phrase “For three transgressions . . . and for four” is a figurative expression indicating the fullness of each nation’s sinfulness. It implies that “three” sins were bad enough but a “fourth” surely required punishment. “I will not revoke” also appears in each prophecy. God showed that He acted with purpose and resolve, not whimsically.

Amos then stated the moral failure of Syria: “because they have threshed Gilead.” The charge was cruel enslavement of the inhabitants of Gilead, a possession of Israel. Gilead lay east of the Jordan River and bordered Syria. Since the area was known for its fields of grain, Amos described Syria’s humiliation of Gilead as “threshing” the population.

Next, God declared, “So I will send a fire,” referring to military battle. He also threatened to “break the gate bar.” This meant breaking down Damascus’s defenses—its walls. The burning of fallen cities was a practice common in the ancient Near East. Specifically, God’s wrath was against the ruling dynasty of Syria, the “house of Hazael” and his son, “Ben-hadad.” This ruling family severely oppressed the northern tribes and became symbolic of Syria’s aggressive policies against Israel (2 Kings 8:7-15; 13:3,7). Now, however, God would judge Syria for its evil deeds.

The prophecy concluded by predicting that Syria’s survivors would suffer exile. Among those deported, Amos named specifically the “valley of Aven” and “Beth-eden” (1:5). “Aven” may refer to Baalbek (Baal of the Valley), a city known for its worship of the sun god. Or, since *Aven* means wickedness, it may be a pun (valley of wickedness), reproaching the Syrians. The location of Beth-eden is uncertain.

The destination of the Syrian exiles was “Kir,” a city associated with Southern Mesopotamia. Kir was the

same city from which God had brought the Syrians originally (9:7). Both the nation's birth and its death were in God's hands.

When did this exile occur? Amos's prophecy anticipated the campaigns of Assyria's king Tiglath-pileser (2 Kings 16:7), also known as "Pul" (2 Kings 15:19). His armies captured Damascus (732 B.C.) and made it his western headquarters.

Transgressions of Philistia (1:6-8)

Amos's attention turned next toward Philistia, which was located southwest of Israel along the Mediterranean Sea. Philistia had five prominent city-states that formed a powerful coalition: Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, and Gath.

In his proclamation, the prophet condemned four of the five cities, omitting Gath, which was farther inland. He began with the southernmost city "Gaza" and, moving northward along the coastal plain, noted each succeeding city.

Amos focused on Gaza as representative of the whole nation. Its crime was slave trade for profit. Gaza "deported an entire population" to Edom. Taking captives in war was common in ancient times, but the Philistines ruthlessly enslaved and sold whole communities out of pure greed.

The prophet did not name the victims of this crime, but he may have had Judah in mind (see 2 Chron. 28:17-18; Joel 3:4-6). Philistia's brutality had been directed toward many different peoples.

Slave trade has been called the "cruellest commerce."³ Its practice has reached around the world from antiquity to modern times. African slave trade began in North America when European merchants needed labor for their agricultural enterprises. Although members of the church were among the guilty, the Christian voice forcefully led the fight against slavery in England and North America.

What other forms of slavery or oppression are being practiced today? List some in the margin.

A sterling example was William Wilberforce of England's House of Commons, whose ardent opposition to slavery stemmed in part from his conversion to evangelical Christianity in 1784. The example of Wilberforce's fight for human worth encourages us to do the same whenever and wherever God enables us.

Finally, Amos declared that not even a "remnant" of the Philistines would survive God's sweeping judgment (1:8). History has shown that, though some cities survived, the proud Philistines as a people passed into oblivion.

Transgressions of Tyre (1:9-10)

Next, Amos unleashed God's condemnation against Tyre, located in Phoenicia northwest of Israel on the Mediterranean coast. This city-state practiced the same horrible slave trade for which the Philistines were so sternly denounced.

Phoenician sailors were the most skillful in the ancient Near East, and their travels gained for them immense wealth and power. Ezekiel pointed to the king of Tyre as an example of sinful pride among the Gentiles (Ezek. 28:2-10).

Amos charged that Tyre had violated "the covenant of brotherhood" by trading slaves with Edom. This "covenant" may refer to Tyre's breach of political treaties with Israel, or it could refer to Israel's family relationship with Edom. The ancestors of Israel and Edom were the twin brothers Jacob and Esau (Gen. 25:21-26). By selling Israelites to Edom, Tyre contributed to Edom's violation of the ancient agreement that the twins had entered (Gen. 25:27-34; 33:9).

The cruelty of the Phoenicians cannot be passed off as the moral immaturity of a primitive society, because the same evils are practiced today. Investigators reported that Iraqi documents, captured by the Kurds, showed that a systematic campaign was carried out in 1988 to eliminate Kurdish villages.⁴ Such brutality does not go unanswered by God.

Transgressions of Edom (1:11-12)

The Edomites lived in the region of Mount Seir, south-east of Judah. As mentioned, the Israelites and Edomites were of the same parentage.

In spite of their family relationship, they had a long history of hostilities. For example, in King Amaziah's day (796-767 B.C.), Judah captured 10,000 Edomites alive and forced them over cliffs to their death (2 Chron. 25:12). During Amos's time, Judah controlled the seaport of Elath in Edomite territory (2 Kings 14:22).

God accused Edom of bloodshed against "his brother with the sword." The phrase "his brother" can be understood as the jargon of international treaties, but here it probably referred to the family ties between Edom and Judah.

Amos described in vivid language the relentless savagery of Edom: "pursued," "tore," and "maintained his fury forever." "Pursued" expressed Edom's dogged determination to slaughter its kinsmen. "Tore" was used of animals who rip their prey, and "maintained" referred to keeping something in mind. They suppressed any feelings of mercy, persecuted without rest, and persisted in their rage.

Wars that involve ethnic rivalries are prevalent in modern times too. We recall the atrocities committed in Bosnia-Herzegovina as well as ethnic wars in Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Liberia, Tibet, and Rwanda. God avenges sadistic crimes against humanity. Any nation that directly or indirectly tolerates such crimes within its borders stands in peril.

As in the preceding condemnations, this prophecy ends with God's punishment directed against specific strongholds, "Teman" and "Bozrah." Like the other countries of Amos's prophecies, the great empires of the ancient Near East overthrew the Edomites.

Sometimes when we are mistreated, the guilty party seems to escape penalty. But ultimately God will judge every evil deed. Only those who are trusting in the righteousness of Christ by faith will escape condemnation.

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What ethnic rivalry is going on in your community today? What steps could you and your church take to help eliminate this rivalry?

God does not have favorites. He is not influenced by a person's race, gender, knowledge, or income. Each of us is accountable to the all-knowing God.

.....

Transgressions of Ammon (1:13-15)

As with the Syrians, Amos accused the Ammonites of war crimes against Israelite "Gilead." Their atrocity was the ruthless murder of pregnant women (see 2 Kings 8:12; 15:16).

God's vengeance was the destruction of "Rabbah" (modern Amman) by invading armies. Amos compared the battle to a "storm." Some people have interpreted the "storm" as the coming of God in judgment on the "day of the LORD" when He would destroy His foes.

The result was the exile of Rabbah's king and princes. God condemned the leaders of the nation whose greed ultimately led to the destruction of their land and heritage. The people suffered because of the leaders' evil policies. This is an example of how ungodly leaders threaten the life of a nation (Prov. 29:2).

Transgressions of Moab (2:1-3)

The last pagan state in this catalog of wicked nations was Moab. The language of God's judgment echoed the same condemnation against Ammon (1:14-15).

Ammonite and Moabite histories intertwined due to their close geography and common family lineage. Ammon bordered Moab on the north. Their ancestors were half brothers, born to Lot, the nephew of Abraham (Gen. 19:30-38).

Moab's iniquity was its mistreatment of Edom. Amos charged the Moabites with burning the "bones of the king of Edom to lime" (calcium oxide). Such a monstrous deed was an intolerable act, demeaning the value of human life. By debasing the corpse of its foes' king, Moab expressed complete domination of its enemy. God promised to slay Moab's "judge" (king) and its "princes with him" (2:3), indicating the ruling house of Moab.

Our passage does not specify the event Amos condemned. Perhaps it involved the war against Judah's Jehoshaphat (873-848 B.C.) when a coalition of Moabites, Edomites, and Ammonites raided his frontier. This historical incident may have especially impressed

Amos because the battle occurred near his residence of Tekoa (2 Chron. 20:20).

Transgressions of Judah (2:4-5)

In concluding his prophecies against Israel's neighbors, Amos turned to his own country, Judah. God's accusation against Judah differed from the previous condemnations against the pagan nations. God sentenced Judah, not for international violations, but for the people's disobedience of God's commands.

First, Judah broke the "law" and "statutes." The people had not lived by the law Moses received at Sinai, including the Ten Commandments. The younger contemporaries of Amos, Isaiah and Micah, gave burning messages on the sins of Judah, including immorality, social injustice, and idolatry.

Moreover, Judah adhered to the "lies" in which their "fathers walked" (2:4). Whether Amos had particular transgressions in mind is not clear. Lies may have meant the deceit that Judah's false prophets and leaders promoted in social and religious matters. Some Bible students understand the Hebrew word for "lies" as meaning "false gods" (NIV), indicating the worship of idols. Idolatry was the most serious violation of God's commandments. By "fathers," Amos may have meant the golden calf incident in the Sinai wilderness where idolatry first occurred among God's people (Ex. 32).

Like the previous prophecies, the Lord denounced the chief city of the nation. Jerusalem, once proud and secure, became a vassal of Assyria. King Ahaz (735-715 B.C.) was the puppet of the Assyrians (2 Kings 16:5-18). Yet, by divine mercy, Jerusalem survived the Assyrian threat. Later God used the Babylonian armies to punish Judah for its sins (586 B.C.).

Of all the prophecies in Amos 1, the condemnation against Judah is the most alarming for us today. As a nation nurtured by the Judeo-Christian tradition, we have a greater responsibility, along with our greater

Do you agree that the people of the USA have a greater responsibility for our actions? Jot the reason for your answer in the margin.

privilege, for our actions. We cannot equate our nation with Judah because Judah had a special covenant relationship with God. Yet, we can learn from Judah's fall that God makes no exceptions to His standards of justice and morality. No nation, no church, no person is beyond God's righteous arm.

God judges wickedness and avenges wrongs. God not only cares but He also is just in His dealings with the world. The Lord does not always express His justice in the way we can predict. He carries out His vengeance upon the guilty in His own way and in His own time.

God is not prejudiced in His judgment. Unlike most people we know, God does not have favorites whose mistakes He ignores (Rom. 2:11). He is not biased by a person's race, gender, knowledge, or income. Regardless of our personal backgrounds, we are accountable for our conduct before the all-knowing God (1 Pet. 1:17).

On the other hand, this also means that God loves all people, not just certain ones. God will deliver from sin any person who places faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 10:34-35).

¹"All over the Map," *The Economist* 324 (July 11, 1992), 83.

²G. V. Smith, *Amos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 34.

³Colin Palmer, "The Cruellest Commerce. The African Slave Trade," *National Geographic*, Sept. 1992: 62.

⁴Kanan Makiya, "The Anfal: Uncovering an Iraqi Campaign to Exterminate the Kurds," *Harper's Magazine*, May 1992: 53-62.

Chapter 2

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Israel Condemned

Amos 2:6-16

Nathan Porter of the Home Mission Board tells of a woman who came to the Dixonville Baptist Center in need of a pair of shoes. After volunteer worker Lane Parrish could not find the appropriate size, she realized that her own shoes would fit the woman. Lane took off her shoes, gave them to the needy person, and then in her stocking feet drove the woman home.¹

What is our attitude toward the poor? Are we willing to give the shoes from our feet and the shirts off our backs? Amos charged Israel with doing the very opposite. The powerful sold out the poor for a mere pair of loafers (2:6)!

Amos's message to this point had spoken of God's anger against the nations for acts of inhumanity (1:3-2:3) and against Judah for covenant disloyalty (2:4-5). Now the prophet tied the hangman's noose around the guilty neck of Israel, whose villainy was social injustice (2:6-16). The Northern Kingdom achieved power through its expanding trade and military strength, but the social elite failed to temper their gains by exercising mercy.

Any economic system, whether socialism or capitalism, that operates without moral restraints becomes an evil tyranny. God does not permit powerful people to run rampant over the defenseless. A Jewish

Do you agree that economic systems without moral restraints become an evil tyranny? Can you cite a contemporary example?

sage said, "Poverty was created to give the rich an opportunity for charity."² Biblical religion does not separate loving God from exercising justice and mercy toward others (Matt. 22:36-40).

This message by Amos warns us that spirituality involves more than the disciplines of prayer and worship. It includes acts of compassion, support for social fairness, and respect for all human life.

TRANSGRESSIONS OF ISRAEL (2:6-12)

Israel's iniquities were the most contemptible of all the nations because the authorities committed crimes against their own people. As in the previous prophecies, Amos used the same literary pattern of condemnation: "For three transgressions of Israel, and for four." This prophecy devotes much more attention to the sins of the nation.

The prophet accused the people of economic oppression, though his message did not directly address the wealthy. He spoke to all the people. To conclude that Amos denounced wealth for its own sake would be wrong. He condemned the misuse of wealth.

Amos was not a peasant revolutionary who called for a class war. He unmasked the immorality of the guilty, who in most cases were the powerful upper class; and he proclaimed the retribution of God.

Enslaving the Poor (2:6)

The Bible gives special attention to abuses against poor people. The prophets often spoke of the "poor" along with widows, orphans, and aliens. To exploit the poor is to disobey God.

During Jeroboam's reign, a wealthy aristocracy emerged that took advantage of the poor through debt enslavement. For creditors to enslave debtors as compensation for debts was commonplace in the ancient world. Israel's tradition provided for this kind of debt payment, but God's law made provisions for the needy.

Provision for underprivileged people is seen in the

Spirituality involves more than the disciplines of prayer and worship!

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law that prohibited creditors from collecting interest on loans made by fellow Hebrews. This law relieved the extra burdens that interest payments would create (Lev. 25:36-37). Also, a portion of the seasonal harvest was to be left for the destitute (Lev. 19:9-10), and every seventh year all debts were to be canceled (Deut. 15:1-2). In addition, after six years of service, masters were to release any people who had sold themselves into slavery (Deut. 15:12). Thus the law provided an escape from the bonds of economic poverty and created a social system that did not have a permanent underclass.

Amos charged the people who were especially well off with getting rich by taking advantage of needy people, whom he also identified as the "righteous" (2:6). This association of the righteous and the poor does not mean that Amos believed all poor people were righteous in the biblical sense. Poverty also can be the result of shiftless laziness or lustful living (Prov. 10:4; 21:17).

In 2:6, the word translated *righteous* can have the meaning of innocent as in a legal hearing when a person is declared blameless. Here, it probably refers to those who were mistreated by landlords through the judicial system. The powerful elite sold human beings into debt slavery for "a pair of sandals," a mere trifle. Mercy was sacrificed on the altar of greed.

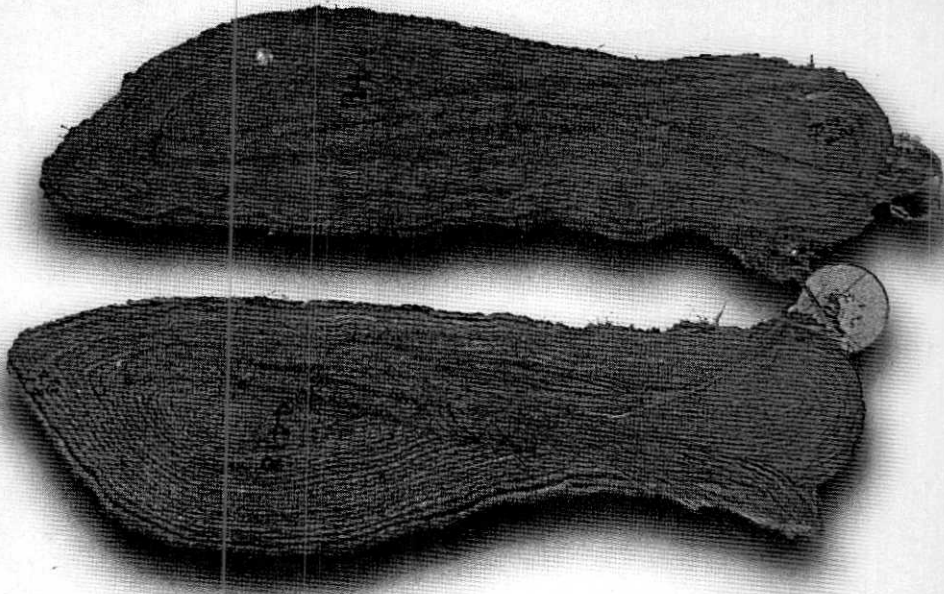
Today, any social or political agenda that deprives the voiceless in our community, such as the unborn or the foreigner, is contrary to our Lord's spirit. He always is sympathetic toward the weak. Proverbs says, "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves" (31:8, NIV).

The Bible reveals that God responds to the cries of the needy, assuring them of justice and providing for their needs (Ps. 68:10). The ideal king liberates the poor as he establishes justice (Ps. 72:4), and the Messiah encourages the poor (Isa. 61:1; Luke 4:18). True religion involves caring for the underprivileged (Jas. 1:27; 2:15-16). The person who offends

Greed proves to be destructive.



List in the margin groups in today's society who "cannot speak for themselves."



Ancient pair of sandals; date uncertain

the poor will answer to God, who is their Defender (Prov. 22:22-23).

How we treat others reflects our spiritual condition. Although we may be very religious externally, we can at the same time be bankrupt spiritually. Israel had all the trappings of religion, but not the soul of religion. Religious ceremony and Bible knowledge are not sufficient substitutes for godly behavior. God demands a correspondence between our Christian profession and our conduct toward others.

Greed leads to destruction. Our society today applauds the addiction of "more," whether money or power. Parents, employers, and peers measure us by our stockpile of acquisition or our position in the community. As a result, many of us drive ourselves to higher achievements, but at a heavy cost to health, family, and devotion to God.

Each Christian and each church is obliged to help alleviate conditions of abject poverty. We have ample op-

portunity for helping within our cities. According to the United States Census Bureau, in 1990, 33.6 million or 13.5 percent of the population was officially deemed poor. More than half were under 18 or over 64 years old. The young and the aging are the most vulnerable to neglect and other forms of abuse.

How can we help? We can educate ourselves and others, both locally and nationally, on public policies that impact the poor. For example, the widely-publicized Live Aid rock performance in 1985 raised \$70 million for hunger in Africa; but through congressional legislation, encouraged by Southern Baptists and others, the United States sent food relief of about \$1 billion.³

Also, we can participate through our local Baptist associations and national agencies that provide education and relief. The Church and Community Ministries Department of the Home Mission Board trains individuals and churches in a vast array of ministries for hurting and helpless peoples. These ministries include feeding the hungry, training people to read, and providing residential centers for homeless people.

What can your church do to help neglected, abused, or oppressed people in your community? List ideas in the margin.

Oppressing the Weak (2:7a)

The second count against Israel concerned oppression of the "helpless." This probably included the corruption of the judicial system, but here the description is general and includes any number of ways powerful people used to gain advantage.

The translation of this first part of the verse could mean that the wicked "pant" (desire) for the ruin of the poor (NASB), or that they "trample on the heads" of the poor (NIV). This latter meaning is widely accepted and corresponds well with the sense of 4:1, "crush the needy."

Amos was describing the action of the wicked against the helpless. The rich treated the poor as "the dust of

the earth." This contrasts sharply with God who "raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap" (Ps. 113:7).

The rich turned "aside the humble." The term *turn aside* is associated in Amos with the perversion of justice (5:12). Perhaps the oppressors slowly drained the weak of their resources so as to leave them defenseless. The Scriptures exhorted rulers to defend the weak (Prov. 31:9), but these aristocrats, by abusing the poor, offended their Maker (Prov. 14:31).

How do we regard the underclass and troubled? Are we adversaries or advocates? Christ so identified with people in need that He could say, "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me" (Matt. 25:40). We are challenged by Amos's call for social justice, but we cannot be satisfied simply with acknowledging needs. We are to help meet those needs (1 John 3:17-18).

List in the margin two ways you personally could become involved in meeting needs of the poor and troubled.

Sexual Abuse of the Defenseless

(2:7b)

This third crime involved a son and a father who sexually abused a slave girl or concubine. Some interpreters have related the incident to pagan worship at a Baal shrine (see 2:8). In our passage, the word *girl* is a general term for a young woman who was of marriageable age. Other terms were commonly used to designate a harlot or temple prostitute. Here *girl* probably refers to a woman who was overpowered by the men of a household.

This practice violated God's law that gave special protection to women. A Hebrew woman who was purchased as a wife or a concubine had the same protection as the master's own daughters (Ex. 21:7-11).

People breaking laws prohibiting sexual incest and a father and a son having relations with the same woman

were subject to the death penalty (Lev. 18:6-18; 20:11-12). Because of such sinful acts by the former inhabitants of Canaan, God drove them out of the land (Lev. 18:24-25). The same fate awaited Israel.

Such sexual sins profaned God's "holy name." Amos echoed the earlier warnings of Leviticus where the expression "profaned My holy name" described Israel's violation of God's laws (22:31-33). To profane the name of God is not limited to vulgar speech. In ancient times people's names reflected their person and character. Israel's sin was disrespect for God's holy character and disdain for the prophets who preached His holy word.

Personal purity and marital fidelity are ways to present a positive witness to an increasingly immoral society.

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Exploiting the Needy (2:8)

Another sin of the rich was partying during religious festivals at the expense of the needy. The expressions "altar" and "house of God" in verse 8 indicate a setting of worship—but not necessarily pagan worship. Although sensual Baal worship took place in the northern tribes, Amos's messages focused up to this point on social oppression, not Israel's spiritual unfaithfulness. What the prophet denounced here was the callous treatment of the poor by the affluent.

Specifically, Amos condemned the people's use of "garments taken as pledge" from the poor for religious festivals. Hebrew tradition allowed a creditor to take a debtor's outer garment for collateral (Ex. 22:26-27); but it exempted the poor, such as a widow (Deut. 24:17).

The poor, as well as the traveler and the alien, used the coat as a cover for sleeping. The law required the lender to return the garment by nightfall. Amos rebuked those who kept such pledges for their own use while the borrower had no proper covering. That this was taking place at "every altar" showed that this cruelty was a common practice.

Consult a Bible dictionary for the meanings of coat and cloak. Read Matthew 5:40. What was the spirit of Jesus' statement?

In these celebrations they drank the wine of those who had been "fined." Farmers unable to pay taxes were forced to give up their produce in compensation. Excessive fines levied by the urban elite unfairly burdened the farmer who struggled to live from his meager harvests.

This kind of economic squeeze eventually led to slave indebtedness and a two-class system of aristocracy and peasant, rich and poor. The abuses of the well-to-do became even more despicable because they contributed to the festivities associated with religious worship.

Israel not only was greedy but also obtained riches unlawfully. Ironically, they eventually lost in God's judgment all they had gained.

Presumptuous Sins (2:9-12)

The most grievous sin of all was Israel's brazen disregard for God's historic acts of mercy. First, they neglected what God had done in founding them as a nation (2:9-10). Second, they rebuffed God's appointed leadership (2:11-12).

The first person "I," referring to the Lord, dominates 2:9-12 and shows that Israel's offenses were against God personally. Also, the repeated "I" indicates that God claimed personal responsibility for the birth and the care of Israel.

The Lord reminded the people how He had established them as a nation. God drove out the Amorites from Canaan because of their wickedness, and in their place the Lord settled Israel. Amos compared the Amorites' height with "cedars" and their strength with "oaks," indicating their great strength. Although they were a mighty people, the Lord destroyed them and removed them as one would a tree, even its "fruit above" and "root below."

The central event in the life of Israel was the exodus from Egypt. This deliverance forged the escaping slaves into a formidable people. The language of verse 10 recalls the prologue to the Ten Commandments, "I am the

Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Ex. 20:2). Unfortunately, Amos’s appeal to the past was not to comfort, but to show Israel’s rebellious ingratitude.

Also, God blessed Israel with spiritual leaders, such as “prophets” and “Nazirites” (2:11-12). Nazirites were men and women specially dedicated to the Lord by a sacred vow (Num. 6:2). Nazirite vows included abstaining from wine during a person’s term of service.

But what had been their response to God’s generosity? Not repentance. “But you” in 2:12 dramatically shifted the topic from what God had done for Israel to their thankless and rebellious response. They rejected the goodness of God. They tempted the Nazirites to drink wine in violation of their vows.

How remarkable that the rich assumed that they remained in God’s favor! Their sinful behavior did not correspond to their spiritual heritage.

Furthermore, they ordered the prophets’ preaching stopped. Amos himself experienced this threat (7:10-17). Such organized opposition to the proclamation of God’s Word is a continuing threat in our own times. In Myanmar (Burma), for example, the pro-Buddhist military dispossessed 70,000 Karen-tribe Christians from their homes, leaving them to settle in refugee camps.⁴

Opposition to God can occur even in Christian circles. God calls devout leaders. God blesses His people by providing for them the Scriptures and spiritual leadership. He does not leave His people without guidance. Authentic spiritual leaders whom we should hear are those who obey God’s Word and serve the interests of others. When we refuse to follow moral counsel, as Israel chose to do, we suffer the consequences of our rebellious choices.

Opposing God’s kingdom is folly. There are some people who labor to restrict the preaching of the Christian message. Some nations officially refuse the entry of Christian missionaries and ignore the rights of citizens who are Christians. Israel, too, opposed the prophets of

Israel opposed God’s prophets because of their unpopular message; but silencing them did not take away from the truth of their message.

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God because of their unpopular message, but the truth of their message could not be revoked simply by silencing them.

Whether someone opposes the gospel openly or someone neglects Christ privately, the kingdom will ultimately triumph. Those who entrust themselves to Christ can have confidence that God is not surprised nor intimidated by opposition.

Do you feel there is organized opposition to the gospel in our time? Jot an example below.

ISRAEL'S PUNISHMENT (2:13-16)

After the indictment (2:6-12), Amos announced Israel's approaching destruction. God would raise up a mighty army that would bring Israel's nobility to their knees. To express the certainty of Israel's complete destruction, Amos declared that even the strongest among Israel's armies would not escape the severity of the coming calamity.

"Behold!" introduces the Lord's angry reaction to the sins of Israel. God compared the burden of their sins to a cart overloaded with sheaves. The word translated "weighted down" occurs only here in the Bible, and its meaning is not certain. Some scholars understand the verse to mean the people's sins are a burden to God. Some scholars translate the word as "totter." The *New International Version* reads, "I will crush you," meaning God's judgment will be like an overloaded wagon breaking up the ground or crushing anything it runs over. If this is the sense, then the verse may be another reference to an earthquake.

The comparison of Israel's sins to a wagonload of "sheaves" may refer to the farming business arrangements by which the greedy had prospered at the cost of the small landholder. Thus, God viewed the wealthy people's proud profit as a definite loss!

In 2:14-16, the prophet showed how useless the Northern Kingdom's defenses would be in the coming day of judgment. Amos listed seven groups whose particular abilities and military skills would fail them.

1. The “swift” would lose their natural advantage in combat against the invaders. Isaiah depicted Assyria’s armies coming “swiftly” at the call of God (5:26).

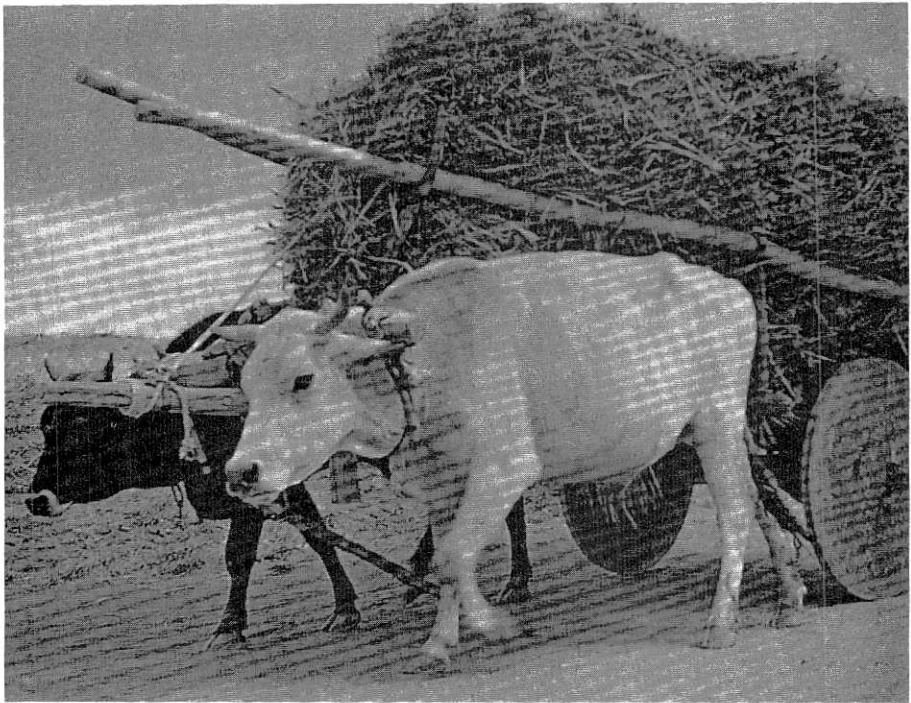
2. The “stalwart” indicated the strong who used physical power to overwhelm an enemy. But in the day of battle, they did not have the strength to survive.

3. “Mighty man” was a common expression for trained warriors of unusual courage. Even the most skilled had no chance at survival.

4. The archer who used the long-range bow at the rear of the battle lines would be unable to stand because of the press of the battle.

5. The quickest runners would flee for their lives, but the heat of the conflict would overtake them.

6. The horsemen would not escape. Isaiah described



“I am weighed down beneath you as a wagon is weighted down when filled with sheaves.”—Amos 2:13. This is illustrated in the above photo from Anatolia of an oxen-drawn cart filled with sheaves of grain.

the Assyrian cavalry as swifter than their enemies (30:16).

7. Finally, even the "bravest" among the troops, presumably the veterans of many battles, would desert naked in shame before the eyes of the world. "Naked" was a humiliating condition for any person in the ancient Near East, especially for those in battle who were stripped of their armor and battle dress.

When would this humiliation occur? Amos did not say, except for the obscure expression "that day." He meant the coming destruction of Samaria by the Assyrians. Like the similar wording "day of the LORD," the phrase that day became a code word among the prophets, indicating God's judgment on the wicked.

No one could have anticipated the Assyrian threat, since it had been a weak nation for at least a half-century. Within a mere 15 years of Amos's preaching Tiglath-pileser came to the Assyrian throne (745-727 B.C.). The savage king led campaigns in 743 B.C. and 734-32 B.C. during which he subdued the small states of Palestine.

In the first campaign, the Israelite king Menahem paid tribute to the Assyrian monarch to preserve his position. To raise the payment, Menahem heavily taxed the wealthy (2 Kings 15:19-20). Among them, no doubt, were the rich whom God had condemned through Amos.

After years of suppression, Israel rebelled when Tiglath was succeeded by his son (727 B.C.). The Assyrians responded to Israel's rebellion by besieging their capital city, Samaria, for three years (725-722 B.C.). This resulted in the destruction of the city (2 Kings 17:5). Assyrian records boasted that 27,290 Israelites were deported. The northern tribes of Israel as an independent state would never rise from the ashes of this tragedy.

Amos concluded his terrifying message by the refrain, "declares the LORD" (2:16). This phrase is very common to the Book of Amos because he emphasized that his

messages were divine in origin. Amos did not claim that his prophecy was the result of his own brilliance or piety. It was the eternal Word of God that Amos delivered.

Human preachers and their pens pass away, but the divine Word continues to speak its wisdom for each generation who will hear. Some ancient scribes appended this remark to their completed manuscripts: "The hand that wrote moulders in a tomb, but what is written abides across the years." For the Book of Amos the truth of this statement has been proved.

Let us pray with St. Francis of Assisi as we consider how God would use us to minister in our troubled times:

"Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;
Where hate rules, let me bring love,
Where malice, forgiveness,
Where disputes, reconciliation,
Where doubt, belief,
Where despair, hope,
Where darkness, Thy light,
Where sorrow, joy!"

¹Nathan Porter, *Poverty and Hunger in the U.S.A.*: August 1992 Update on Hunger Relief Ministries (Atlanta: Home Mission Board, 1992).

²Leo Rosten, *Leo Rosten's Treasury of Jewish Quotations* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), 406.

³*What Are the Southern Baptists Doing About Hunger?* (Nashville: Christian Life Commission, 1992).

⁴David Barrett and Todd Johnson, eds., "Myanmar's Karen Christians Face Increasing Persecution," *A.D. 2000 Global Monitor* Jan 1993: 1

Make Winter Bible Study a Family Affair

Are you among those Christian parents who long for ways to involve the whole family in Bible discussions? Are your children in WBS studies? If so, you may use these "discussion starter" questions to help make WBS a family affair. With young children, three minutes may be a good discussion time. With older children you may let their interest govern the length of discussion. For this sort of family exercise, too little is probably better than too much.

DISCUSSION STARTERS to use after Session 2

Questions for Younger Preschoolers (Birth-2):

Session 2: Thanking God for My Church

Your child learned that we talk and sing about God at church. Help your child say thank you to God for her friends at church.

Questions for Older Preschoolers (3-5):

Session 2: God Cares for Me

Your child learned that God helped Ruth and Naomi find food. Ask your child to think of some ways God helps your family.

Questions for Children (6-11):

Children studied that God calls people to do special work for Him. Ask: What did God call Amos to do? How can we speak for God today? Ask whether the child's group worked on the memory verse, Galatians 6:2: "Carry each others burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." Discuss the meaning of this verse.

Questions for Youth (12-17):

Do you think God should treat Christians in a special way? Why? Does God expect more from a person when that person becomes a Christian? Why?

Chapter 3

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Privileged but Irresponsible

Amos 3:1-15

Do you remember setting out from home on your own? Most of us left home for the first time to go to college, to take a job, to enter the military, or to start married life. I attended college away from home and experienced what it meant to be free from the do's and don'ts of my parents. At last, I was in charge of my going to class or not, going to sleep or not, and attending church or not.

But that was only part of the picture. I quickly felt the full weight of privilege's companion—responsibility. Each choice brought its consequences. So it was for Israel who had enjoyed special privileges as the people of God. They were the heirs of the revelation and miracles of the Lord. As a result, He held them to a higher level of accountability, but they refused to take their responsibility seriously.

Israel's apathy came from their misunderstanding of their privileged place among the nations. Israel's presumptuous lethargy angered God against His people. The people failed to take seriously God's moral law: All sin has its price. Military power and economic progress were no insulation against the fires of the coming destruction. The prosperity they had attained unrighteously would be shortlived.

They had misread the meaning of their prosperity; it was not a sign of God's pleasure. In Israel's case, it was a testimony to their guilt. Persistent sin in a life, in spite of apparent success, eventually results in ruin.

Prosperity can be a testimony to guilt rather than a sign of God's blessings.

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Since Israel had a unique place in God's plan for the world, there was special reason for the people to expect punishment. Jesus expressed this principle of proportional accountability in the parable of the manager in authority (Luke 12:42-48). In the story, the wicked manager who was aware of the master's command suffered greater punishment than the manager who failed because of ignorance. Jesus concluded, "And from everyone who has been given much shall much be required" (Luke 12:48).

Does the principle of proportional accountability apply to our country today? Explain your answer.

Among the nominees for Attorney General by President Clinton in 1993 was a corporate lawyer who had achieved a distinguished career. The nominee withdrew from the Senate confirmation hearings when the American people learned that she had employed illegal immigrants to care for her child. The outcry by the people showed that they expected the chief law-enforcement officer of the land to live up to a high standard of conduct. A relatively small matter cost her the position. With the privilege of office comes greater responsibility, thus the stricter penalty for failure.

Christians are to live according to the highest code of conduct. For straying, the penalty can be costly.

"And from everyone who has been given much shall much be required" (Luke 12:48).

CONSEQUENCES OF PRIVILEGE (3:1-8)

God called for a solemn assembly to hear His charge against Israel: "Hear this word."

Basis for the charge (3:1-2)

Amos's summons ("Hear!") was not merely a call to hear the word of the Lord; it was an exhortation to respond to God's word through repentance.

This summons concerned the "entire family," which showed that all the tribes were included. The term *family* presupposed an intimate relationship between God and Israel. The Hebrew people owed their existence to

the Lord as a child does to parents.

The Lord directly ("I") brought the charge against the Northern Kingdom. He reminded the people of their lofty position. Israel alone was chosen as His special "family," so that it might be a vehicle of grace. The Bible commonly uses the term *covenant* (agreement) to describe this relationship between Israel and the Lord (see Deut. 5:1-3).

Israel misunderstood the purpose of this privileged calling in Amos's day as well as in the times of Jesus (Matt. 3:9). God did not choose the Hebrew people because they deserved it through birthright or accomplishment. God's love motivated His mercy toward Israel's forefathers (Deut. 7:6-8). Even so, the Lord created Israel whereby He might reach the whole community of nations (Gen. 12:1-3).

What is our responsibility today? The Lord has blessed us with amazing resources to reach the unsaved and hurting world. The number of people who die every two days from starvation in our world has been estimated to be equal to the number killed at Hiroshima by the atomic bomb.

We have no excuses for stinginess. Some may say, *I want to help but I don't know how*. Southern Baptists have a mechanism already in place for connecting an individual or a church with the needs of foreign peoples. Our Foreign Mission Board ministers to the needs of the whole person through its ministry of hunger relief. It is not only a ministry in itself, but it is also part of a general strategy for winning the lost to Christ. Through the Foreign Mission Board's Human Needs Ministries office you can learn how to funnel your funds and volunteer talents in supporting food distribution, agriculture, vocational training, and pure water projects.

Also, privilege is perilous for the presumptuous sin-

Today the covenant relationship with God is expressed by partaking of the Lord's Supper. How serious is your participation?

Foreign Mission Board, P. O. Box 6767, Richmond, VA 23230

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ner. If we have heard the gospel and own a Bible, we can count ourselves as being among the most advantaged of the world. If, for example, we were born today among the Komering people of Indonesia, we would be among a population of about one million Muslims with no Christian church and no Bible in the Komering language. Only 12 percent of Komering-Muslims have been influenced in any way by the gospel.¹

Certainty of the Judgment (3:3-6)

Since the people had ignored their responsibility, Amos argued by a series of rhetorical questions that their penalty was sure. The people thought that God would exempt them because of their privileged covenant relationship. On the contrary, because of their covenant, they faced certain judgment.

To demonstrate that judgment was the reasonable consequence of their actions, Amos used four illustrations from everyday life. The first example was of two men "walking together" in the countryside. Such a meeting in the wilderness was not by chance but the results of a scheduled visit.

The second and third illustrations concerned a lion and a bird. Why does a lion roar, unless it has captured prey for the kill? And does a bird get caught in a trap unless the hunter has baited it?

In 3:8, the image of a lion describes God's proclamation of judgment (see 1:2). Amos drew this comparison: As the lion had a reason for roaring, God had a reason for pronouncing judgment—the sins of the people.

Last, turning to urban life, Amos referred to the response of a city under siege. If the people of a city were in panic at the sound of a warning trumpet, they had good cause. Such an alert meant that attackers were nearby. This example of a frightened city prepared Amos's audience for the explicit reference to the calamity that awaited the capital Samaria (3:9-10).

Amos followed up with this question: "If a calamity occurs in a city has not the LORD done it?" (3:6). By

this, the prophet brought the argument to its completion. He explained that when a city experienced calamity, there was a theological interpretation for it as well as a human explanation.

Certainty of the Prophetic Charge (3:7-8)

Amos followed by answering anyone who might challenge His message's validity. He began with a truth with which most would agree: God does not hide His plans but "reveals His secret counsel" to the prophets. The Lord did not keep secret His intent to bring judgment on the people; He did not want to catch them unawares. His longing, on the contrary, was that they might hear and repent. Today, we too have God's warning in the Scriptures. We, like Amos's audience, have no excuse.

Amos built on his argument by showing that the call of God to prophesy could not be refused. When a lion roars, who can refrain from fear? When the Lord speaks, who can keep from prophesying?

DECLARATION OF DESTRUCTION (3:9-15)

After establishing the reasonableness of the verdict, God summoned ("proclaim") a world congress to witness the destruction of Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom. This summoning the nations is best interpreted as a rhetorical statement rather than as an actual convocation, because the whole passage is directed toward Israel.

Summoning the Nations (3:9-10)

The Philistines of Ashdod and the Egyptians were named, but they probably represented all the pagan kingdoms. The residents of Ashdod were among Israel's neighbors whom God had condemned for their own crimes (1:8). Now, Israel too must suffer the same

Do you think there is a "theological interpretation" for calamities such as floods, hurricanes, and earthquakes, and your answer. Defend your answer.

**Do not be
deceived, God
is not mocked;
for whatever a
man sows, this
he will also
reap.—
Galatians 6:7**

.....

shame for its deeds. Sadly, there was no fundamental difference between wicked Israel and the vicious Philistia. The Egyptians had witnessed the birth of Israel as a nation, and now they were called to see rebellious Israel's son.

God directed the nations to witness the Israelites' actions from the mountains of Samaria. The capital city of Samaria was built by Omri in the ninth century (1 Kings 16:24). It was located on a hill about 300 feet above the surrounding terrain, which provided a natural defense. The mountains in this case provided a dramatic viewing area for observing the city's inhabitants.

Israel suffered public ridicule and scrutiny. We also run the risk of public shame when we act unfaithfully toward God and others. We wish, and sometimes conclude, that our sins are secret. We deceive ourselves. Often the destructive effects of personal sins come to public attention.

Such public disgrace injures us, our family, and our friends. More importantly, as Christians our sins bring disrepute on the cause of Christ in the eyes of the unbelieving world.

What did the nations observe? They heard "great tumults" and "oppressions" among the people (3:9). From within the walls of the city came the noises of unrest and oppressive cries. Although under Jeroboam the city had achieved unprecedented national security, the moral decay within ensured its fall. The source of the uproar was the perversion of justice and unethical treatment of the lower social class (4:1).

God then accused Israel of not knowing "how to do what is right." "Right" indicates what is honest and true. The people of Samara did not know how to carry on honest business dealings and to act with integrity toward others. They only knew how to heap up crimes!

The specific charge was their deeds of "violence" and "devastation" (3:10). These terms describe physical violence and social oppression. The guilty were "hoarding up" or bankrolling the wealth which they had gained

through hard-hearted deeds. The Hebrew term for *hoard* is related to "treasury, storehouse." Thus, when God audited their fat bank accounts, they were reckoned as storehouses of accumulated offenses. Unaware, the evil nobles had stockpiled the evidence that would condemn them.

If God were to "audit the bank account" of our country today, what do you think He would find?

End of Greed (3:11-12)

God declared that their gluttony for riches would end. No longer would He tolerate a social system that continually oppressed the helpless. If power would be used for evil purpose, then God would strip the powerful of their position.

How would the Lord reorder Israel's society? He declared that an enemy would destroy the nation. The thoroughness of the judgment was indicated by the simplicity with which God would achieve this. "Even one" army was sufficient to route Samaria; and as history shows us, that was the formidable Assyrian army.

The city's walls, which were its "strength," would be pulled down. Afterward, the city would be looted by their enemy and the vaults of the rich robbed. The enemy would loot their "citadels" where their treasures were secured. The passage uses the term *citadels* four times in 3:9-11 to highlight that the fortress of Samaria was in fact no defense at all against God's judgment.

Amos compared Samaria's destruction to the ravaging of sheep. Samaria will be like "a couple of legs or a piece of an ear" snatched from the mouth of a lion. The message was the enormity of Samaria's coming destruction. As a herdsman himself, Amos may have spoken from personal experience when he had lost animals to ravenous lions. Shepherds retrieved portions from the jaws of ferocious beasts to demonstrate to the owners that the animal was lost as prey, not stolen. In Israel's case, there would be little to find.

When the people would be "snatched," they would be taken "with the corner of a bed and the cover of a

couch" (3:12). This refers to the extravagant furniture of the wealthy (see 6:4). The "corner" and "cover" as portions of furniture correspond to the idea of a sheep's fragments rescued from a lion. Little would be left of the lavish lifestyle of the affluent.

Another possible translation for "cover" is Damascus, the Syrian capital city (KJV, NIV). In this case, Damascus would parallel Samaria, referring to the Israelite citizens living in both cities. Since Israel governed Damascus during this time (2 Kings 14:25), some Hebrew bureaucrats may have taken up quarters there (see 1 Kings 20:34). The end of Damascus was the same as that of Samaria. The Syrian city became the western headquarters of the Assyrian king, Tiglath-pileser (732 B.C.; 2 Kings 16:9-10).

Punishment of the Greedy (3:13-15)

God called a second time ("Hear") to the pagan audience. Initially, He called the international diplomats to witness the sins of Israel (3:9-10), but now the Lord enlisted them to "testify against" the Northern Kingdom. The unbelieving world had its eyes riveted on the moral stature of God's people!

Amos referred to the Lord in our passage with the full title "the Lord GOD, the God of hosts" (3:13). The title "hosts" referred to the armies of the Lord (see 1 Sam. 17:45). "God of hosts" depicted God as a warrior opposed to the Northern Kingdom. It emphasized the power of God to punish Israel.

The Lord declared that He would "punish Israel's transgressions" and "the altars of Bethel." *Punish* is the translation of a term which is commonly rendered "visit." The visitation of the Lord in the Bible described God's activity among His people for either good or ill. Here, the visit was punishment for Israel's "transgressions."

In destroying these bureaucratic powers, God promised to eliminate the religious leaders who had collaborated with the state. The "altars of Bethel" speci-

fied the royal sanctuary of King Jeroboam. Together, state and religion had created an oppressive regime.

The Lord threatened to cut off the “horns of the altar,” referring to the altar for animal sacrifice. Such altars had protruding horns at their upper four corners. The significance of the “horns” is uncertain, but elsewhere *horn* is used to refer to strength and victory (see 1 Kings 22:11; Luke 1:69). Perhaps the horns are mentioned here because holding to the horns of the altar in Solomon’s temple provided sanctuary (1 Kings 1:50-53). The destruction of the altar meant that there would be no asylum for these culprits.

Bethel was a sacred site that had religious roots reaching back to the time of the patriarch Jacob, but the city by the time of Amos had practiced calf worship



Horned Altar (10th Century B.C.) from Megiddo

for more than a century. Thus, the destruction of the "horns" symbolized God's judgment on pagan worship.

Finally, God resolved to "smite" the palatial residences of the rich (3:15). The rich reveled in both winter and summer dwellings. What's more, the luxurious structures were decorated with ivory inlay, appearing like "houses of ivory." Ivory was very costly then, as it is today; and it commonly was used to make jewelry and cosmetic vessels. Ivory was considered an exotic possession that adorned the thrones of kings and the furniture of the nobility.

Archaeologists have recovered from Samaria about 500 items of carved ivory.² Earlier, Ahab had built an "ivory house" at Samaria, meaning that his palace walls and furnishings had ivory inlays (1 Kings 22:39). God declared that He would punish the house of Jacob by obliterating their extravagant houses!

Although Amos thundered the judgment of God, we can hear a positive note. Our loving Lord has a family. God formed a family from among the nations. He provides graciously for those who respond to His call.

As members of God's family today, we experience both the Lord's provision and correction. But even when He chastens us, this correction for "family" differs from God's relentless judgment against the wicked, such as the Israelites. The Lord's discipline is as a father toward a child with the view of maturing us (Heb. 12:5-11). God may take us out to the woodshed occasionally for correction, but as His children we do not live there.

Also, past decisions affect present events. Are we suffering today because of sinful decisions or poor judgment in our past? Let us resolve to repent of those wrong choices and vow today to make godly and healthy decisions for a better tomorrow.

¹David Barrett and Todd Johnson, eds., "The Komering of Indonesia," *AD 2000 Global Monitor* 28 (Feb. 93), 3.

²G. Barkay, "The Iron Age II-III," in *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel* (ed. A. Ben-Tor; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 322.

Chapter 4

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Chastened but Unrepentant

Amos 4:1-13

Won't she ever learn? moans the weary parent. *How often do I have to dock this guy's salary?* ponders a puzzled supervisor. At some time in your life you probably have felt like this parent or employer toward someone who refused to change in spite of your pleas.

I recall as a youngster experiencing this hard lesson on the receiving end. A neighborhood chum and I were roughhousing inside, and my mother repeatedly warned me to stop. We were in the same room where my sister's birdcage stood. Wouldn't you know it? We knocked it over; and birdseed, water, newspaper, and other "things" blanketed the carpet. We didn't have the proverbial woodshed in the backyard; but for my parents, any old room would do!

God had repeatedly chastened His people for their rebellious deeds, but they refused to make any significant change in their conduct. "Yet you have not returned to Me" is the watchword of this chapter's message (4:6).

"DAYS ARE COMING" (4:1-5)

Amos challenged his audience to reckon with the coming days of God's judgment. This is the first of three announcements in Amos where the prophet warned of "coming days" (see 8:11; 9:13). Why was God so determined to punish this people? What were these "days" of judgment?

Condemnation of "Society" Wives (4:1)

Amos's exhortation ("Hear this word") was directed specifically against the wives of the ruling elite. Using a degrading description, he addressed them as the "cows of Bashan," referring to their husky size.

Bashan, located northeast of the Jordan River, was a particularly fertile plain that provided grazing that produced cattle known for their large size. By this name the prophet did not condemn the women for their bloated appearance. Rather, Amos pointed to their obesity as condemning evidence of how the rich had become "fat" by oppressing the needy.

The passage implies that the women of

Israel's upper class were vicious and licentious.

While the poor toiled merely to exist, the pampered women of high society reveled in the riches gained from their husbands' unprincipled activities.

Amos commented on three features of these women. First, he identified them as the women of the capital city, Samaria. This connection showed that they were part of the urban power center. While we do not know exactly how the rich obtained their wealth, heavy taxes and exploitive lines of credit were probable means. When a farmer or herdsman failed to meet these unfair obligations, he could not sustain his family and surrendered ownership of his land. He and his family became economic slaves to the wealthy city folk.

Second, the women of Samaria were charged with oppressing the poor. The term *oppress*, though having a broad meaning, often indicated wrongful gain by extortion; and the parallel word *crush* may have indicated the same. Amos held the women accountable for their part in their husbands' corrupt dealings.

The women of Samaria were held accountable for their part in the oppressive policies of their husbands. Although they did not dirty their hands directly, they contributed to the abuses in their society.

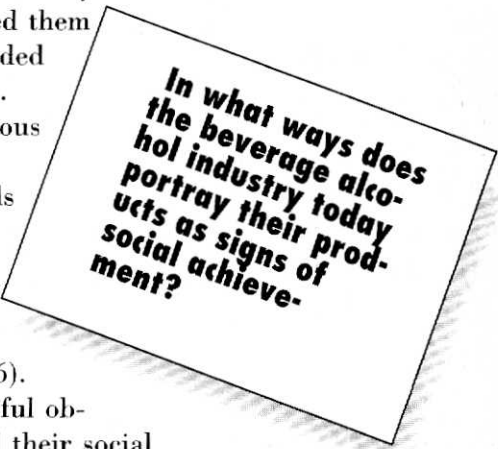
Are wives today responsible to not make financial demands that would drive their husbands to immoral conduct?

Do we contribute to corruption even indirectly? For example, do we pressure others at work or at home to make immoral choices for our convenience or benefit? Is the person who buys pornography not also contributing to the abuse of women and children? The all-knowing God sees our silent part in corruption.

Third, the women practiced a lavish lifestyle of drink and festive merriment. Amos portrayed them as boisterous, bossy wives who demanded drink from their henpecked husbands. Elsewhere Amos described the gluttonous indulgence at such parties (6:4-7). Apparently the women were drunkards whose addiction was applauded as a sign of social achievement.

God did not simply condemn the women who had wealth, for an industrious woman is desirable (Prov. 31:16). The merciless way in which the powerful obtained land and the way they flaunted their social prominence brought condemnation. An infamous example in Samaria's history is Queen Jezebel, whose plot against Naboth resulted in his death and the theft of his vineyard (1 Kings 21). Jezebel's greed ended in death and the mutilation of her body by the vicious curs of Jezreel's city streets (2 Kings 9:30-37). Samaria's society women in Amos's day also faced a dreadful end (4:2-3).

Wise words are applicable: "He who has little and wants less is richer than he who has much and wants more."¹ The drive for riches consumed these people, and it brought their demise. While most of us will never be featured on the television show *The Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, we all run the risk of setting up "more" as our object of worship. Young couples and singles on the fast track jeopardize their future spiritual vitality and physical well-being by paying homage to riches. Older adults who have gained and accumulated wealth can become miserly and insensitive. We either control our impulses for money, or money controls us.



In what ways does the beverage alcohol industry today portray their products as signs of social achievement?

God holds us responsible when we contribute to society's problems rather than to solutions.

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God's Oath (4:2-3)

Because of Samaria's immorality, the prophet announced that the "Lord GOD has sworn by His holiness" to destroy the city and exile its people. Although the prophet spoke against the women of Samaria specifically, the ominous news of exile was intended for all the inhabitants of Israel's cities.

Taking an oath showed God's dogged determination to accomplish this judgment. Since God could not appeal to any authority higher than Himself, He swore "by His holiness." The holiness of the Lord distinguishes Him from humankind as fully upright in His essential character and judgments. For God to overlook the sins of Israel by failing to carry out His punishment would soil His holy character.

How do you respond to the idea of God's holiness?



Amos 4:2 warned that the days were coming for God's judgment through Assyria. Above are relief carvings showing the classes of the Assyrian Army (744-727 B.C.).

God's holiness alarms many of us Christians, because we realize that we do not measure up to God's perfection. Yet, Christians are clothed in the holiness of Christ! Believers in Christ may come into God's presence without fear of condemnation (Rom. 8:1).

It is reassuring to know that God does not negotiate with sin and its evil consequences. We can take comfort that the Lord will achieve the complete salvation that He has begun within us (Phil. 1:6). In Amos's day the holiness of God resulted in the end of reckless violence. It is because of God's commitment to righteousness that goodness and justice will ultimately prevail in our lives and in the world.

Amos next described the cruelty that the women (and all Israel) would experience at the hands of the brutal Assyrians. As captives, the people would be dragged off

For God to overlook people's sins by failing to carry out His punishment would soil His holy character.

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Classes are as follows: Syrian tribute bearers, spearmen, warriors carrying mace heads, royal chariot and guardians, and archers.

to exile by “meat hooks” and “fish hooks.” This had reference to the Assyrian custom of piercing the noses and lips of their captives and attaching ropes to march them in public processions.

The prophet described the city’s broken walls, where the women like cattle would “go out through breaches.” Amos predicted that the women “will be cast to Harmon,” the destination of the captives. This site is unknown, but it must have been in the region “beyond Damascus” within Assyria’s domain. After this severe punishment, Amos’s prophecy foresaw a future day of repentance and restoration for the nation when God would “wall up its breaches” (9:11).

Assyrian inscriptions recovered from the ninth to seventh centuries B.C. record the military exploits of Assyria’s colonial policies. Pictorial representations show the brutality of the vanquished, including the impaling of bodies on stakes, the flaying of human skin, and the piling of body parts (such as heads) for display.

The Assyrian monarch Ashurnasirpal (883-859 B.C.) boasted of such cruel treatment: “I captured many troops alive: I cut off of some their arms and hands; I cut off of others their noses, ears, and extremities. I gouged out the eyes of many troops. I made one pile of the living and one of heads. I hung their heads on trees around the city.”²

Israel’s Empty Religion (4:4-5)

After Amos’s scathing rebuke of Samaria’s ruling women, the prophet turned to an assessment of Israel’s empty religion. These verses present a striking contrast between God’s oath to punish and Israel’s attempt to appease God through ritual offerings. No sacrificial offering could satisfy God’s righteousness as long as the people continued in their self-centered ways! The

prophet Hosea also voiced the Lord’s protest: “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of

What satisfies God’s righteousness? Write your answer in the margin.

God rather than burnt offerings” (Hos. 6:6).

Amos satirized Israel’s misguided religious zeal. He began by mocking the priestly practice of calling the people to worship and instruction (“Enter Bring” 4:4).³ With biting sarcasm, the prophet entreated the people to go to their popular shrines at Bethel and Gilgal and there “multiply transgression” by their repeated religious folly. The offerings they presented would be “your” offerings, not God’s.

The taunt “multiply transgression” ridiculed the excesses to which the elite had gone to appease their deity. They refused the way of genuine repentance and chose religious activism instead. Their religious efforts reaped only more sin and consequently God’s disfavor. The Lord gave them over to the futility of their shallow worship which they so dearly “love” (4:5; see Rom. 1:24). Their religious efforts did not please God.

The prophecy continued its satire of their religious practices by exaggerating God’s demands of them.⁴ The Lord commanded them to perform “sacrifices every morning,” far more than were required for the annual pilgrimages. Sacrifices here probably referred to the voluntary offerings, which included thank, votive, and freewill offerings.

Also, the Lord ordered the pilgrims to bring “tithes every three days,” which far exceeded the annual and triannual tithes required (Deut. 14:22-29).

Particularly, the prophecy satirized their “thank offering” and “freewill offerings.” With their “thank offering,” they brought “leaven” (yeast) cakes. Amos’s choice of language echoed the directives for the thank offering in the law (Lev. 7:13,15).⁵ Mosaic legislation prohibited leavened bread in sacrifices burned upon the altar (Lev. 2:11); but the “thank offering,” which was eaten, included unleavened and leavened cakes (Lev. 7:11-13). Thus Amos mocked their offering of leavened cakes as evidence of their religious zeal.

What would “religious activism” include in today’s world? List your responses in the margin.

Such voluntary offerings were not required for removing sin but were offered freely as expressions of the worshiper's gratitude to and adoration of God. Although the rich performed the extravagant rites of love, their hearts were not genuinely zealous for God.

GET READY (4:6-13)

The Lord followed this harsh condemnation of Israel by explaining how in the past He had sought to regain His wayward people.

Chastening Without Results (4:6-11)

Again and again, the first person ("I") occurs in this passage, showing that God was the responsible agent for Israel's woes. Yet they had brought this divine discipline on themselves by their unrelenting stubbornness in the face of His corrective measures.

Amos listed five disciplinary actions taken by God as evidence of Israel's headstrong ways. After each judgment cited, this refrain occurs: "Yet you have not returned to Me." The word translated *returned* often meant repentance in the sense of turning back to God.

Thus Amos condemned Israel's refusal to repent and to redirect its love toward God.

First, Israel experienced famine, "cleanness of teeth" (4:6). The Mosaic covenant stated that famine would be among the divine curses for disobedience (Deut. 28:17-18).

Second, the cities wilted because of inadequate rainfall for crops (4:7-8). Rain was evidence of God's blessing (Deut. 11:13-14). Drought, like famine, was a divine curse against the unfaithful (Deut. 28:24).

The Bible refers to the rainy season in Palestine by its two transition periods, the "early" rains in October-November and the "latter" rains in March-April.⁶ In Israel's case, God not only prevented rainfall for the

Can you cite examples of God's chastening in your own life? What resulted from this chastening?

growing season but even refused to send the rains in time ("three months") to soften the soil for sowing (4:7). Even when rain did fall, it was random, driving the townspeople mad as they "stagger" from place to place failing to satisfy their thirst.

Third, God had sent agricultural disasters (4:9). Amos's first two visions concerned the judgments of locusts and fire (7:1-6). Here the prophet spoke of plant disease and an infestation of caterpillars.

The description of the plant scourge as "scorching wind and mildew" may be translated "blight and mildew." (see Deut. 28:22 NASB, NIV). Amos used the language of Deuteronomy's curses to show that God had put into effect the punitive measures prescribed by the covenant. Crops beset by caterpillars also showed the angry hand of God against the nation.

Fourth, the Lord had sent a plague aimed against Israel's young men in the "manner of Egypt" (4:10). This was a plague of death by warfare ("the sword") and captivity, as Deuteronomy had forewarned (28:25,64).

The comparison with Egypt by the prophet showed that God had used against Israel the plague of death that He had used against Egypt's firstborn during the Exodus. The Egyptian experience originated the Jewish Passover with its salvation tradition. The lamb's blood on the doorposts averted the hand of death for the firstborn children and livestock of the Hebrew people. Amos proclaimed that God now had used the plague of death to chasten Israel.

So great was the killing that the stacked corpses became a "stench" among the people. This foul odor was another allusion to the Exodus story in which the plagues caused a repulsive odor (Ex. 7-8).

Fifth and last, the Lord humbled Israel as He "overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah." The destruction of these two ancient cities had become proverbial symbols of God's judgment. Because of Abraham's pleas, God rescued his nephew Lot from the fiery destruction.

Likewise, Amos interceded for Israel, and God restrained His anger (7:1-6). Only the Lord's mercy toward Israel delivered the people from the disaster of complete destruction.

Meeting God (4:12-13)

Because Israel stubbornly had refused to repent in the face of the lesser judgments, God would express His full fury against the nation.

Amos announced this coming judgment: "Prepare to meet your God, O Israel." This warned the people to be ready to meet with God as in the days of His revelation at Sinai (Ex. 19:11-17).⁷ There the display of divine power invited Israel to worship. Here the prophet announced the fearful revelation of God's judgment.

The identity of the Lord as "your God" expressed the persistent claim of Amos that the people were God's exclusive possession. The people were accountable to the Lord for their actions because He had created them.

Amos followed this threatening announcement of judgment with an exaltation of Israel's God. This was the first of three hymns in which the prophet celebrated the glory of the Lord (see 5:8-9; 9:5-6). If the people were to "meet" their God, then they must know the character of the One who would judge. The Lord had become like a stranger to these Israelites. Amos showed that the God of their fathers was sovereign. He was not like the pagans' deities who could be manipulated through impressive rituals and prayers.

Who was this God that Israel must encounter? Amos described Him as Creator and Judge. He was the Lord Creator who "forms the mountains" and "creates the wind." Both *forms* and *creates* occur in the Genesis creation account. *Forms* carries the idea of God's working with the world as a potter would shape a vessel. He "formed" the first man, the beasts (Gen. 2:7,19), and

How can a nation prepare to meet God?

Israel as a people (Isa. 43:1).

Creates is the same word used to describe God's creation of the universe and its inhabitants, including humanity. As with *forms*, the prophets used *create* to indicate God's founding of the nation Israel. The significant feature of this term is that it is used only of divine activity, never human efforts. By allusion to the creation events Amos showed that the Lord as invincible Creator was fully able to deal with Israel in judgment.

God was qualified as Judge since He discerns the true motives of a person's actions. He not only judges conduct but also "declares" human "thoughts" that prompt the behavior. The word thoughts is related to the Hebrew word for meditation. God knows our inner person as Jesus could read the thoughts of people (Luke 9:47). Jeremiah declared that the Lord alone can rightly judge the heart of a person (17:9-10).

Israel's God has the power to reverse circumstances: He "makes the dawn into darkness." The term translated *makes* is commonly used in the creation account. At creation the Lord spoke light into existence to dispel the darkness. However, what God has created He also can uncreate.

This theme of reversal was used by other prophets to describe God's judgments (Joel 2:31; Jer. 4:23-26). Isaiah declared that God created the "darkness" as well as the light (Isa. 45:7). Since God had made Israel as a people, He also could dismantle them as a nation.

This hymn further described the Lord as the One who "treads on the high places." This referred to God's power to achieve victory over His foes. Thus the Lord's announcement of judgment was not an empty threat. The Lord had the strength to carry out the sentence against the rebellious Israelites.

Finally, the prophet identified this awesome God as "the LORD God of hosts." The various names of the Lord in the Bible serve as an insight into the character of God. We learn from this name that God is all-powerful. This title for God occurs again in Amos where the

**I, the Lord,
search the
heart, I test the
mind, even to
give to each
man according
to his ways,
according to the
results of his
deeds.—**

Jeremiah 17:10

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Lord was the leader of a punishing army opposing Israel (5:27; see 3:13 discussion).

Israel had failed to remember the uniqueness of God, and they cast Him in their own image. The people had confused the form of religion, that is the external exercise of worship, with the substance of their religious duties. For them it was enough to enjoy the religious festivals and revel in the rich heritage of their nation. But they did not take seriously the purpose that lay behind their religious traditions. They had made a fatal mistake: They substituted formalities for genuine devotion.

We are aware that Amos's audience refused to ready themselves for the coming of the Lord. How do we prepare to meet God? Amos called for the people of Israel to repent of their sins. We can prepare for the coming of the Lord by turning from our sinful ways and embracing the Lord as our Savior. Christians too will appear before the Lord who will weigh our actions (2 Cor. 5:10). What do we need to change in our lives today?

¹Jo Petty, ed., *Wings of Silver* (Norwalk, CT: C. R. Gibson, 1967), 88.

²A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: From Tiglath-pileser I to Ashur-nasir-apli II, Part 2* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1976), 126.

³D. A. Hubbard, *Joel and Amos* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1989), 157.

⁴G. V. Smith, *Amos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 142.

⁵F. I. Andersen and D. N. Freedman, *Amos* (New York: Doubleday/Anchor, 1990), 430.

⁶F. S. Frick, "Rain," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 612.

⁷Hubbard, 161.

Chapter 5

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Call to Repentance

Amos 5:1-27

John Perkins, evangelical minister and civil rights leader, told how his two children experienced rejection as the first black students in an all-white public high school. In an evangelistic outreach through the school's chapel program, many white children became Christians. But no effort was made by these same students to talk to or to befriend the new black children. For two years they lived in isolation from their fellow students. Perkins observed: "But walking down the aisle in a religious meeting, to announce a new life in Christ, apparently could not induce anyone to even step across an aisle at school to greet or get to know a lone black student."¹

Why do children act this way? Because their parents and adult leaders act this way. A hollow form of piety that has no concern for the welfare of our neighbor opposes the very gospel that we claim to embrace.

In Amos 5, the prophet began with a lamentation for the nation followed by two pleas for Israel to repent. As we read this message today, it reminds us that salvation is experienced only by a personal knowledge of God through Jesus Christ. We have life in the Lord Himself, not merely in religious activities. A genuine disciple will practice righteous behavior before God and justice toward others as did our Lord when He lived on earth. That disciple's worship is meaningful, not empty.

FUNERAL SONG FOR ISRAEL (5:1-3)

As in the previous two prophecies (3:1; 4:1), God called for a solemn assembly (5:1). In the former summons, "Hear this word" preceded a list of charges; but here it introduces a funeral song for the nation.

Lamentation for the Dead (5:1)

God considered the "house of Israel" as good as dead. Amos sang a dirge (song of lament) fitting for the occasion of Israel's impending burial. A dirge expressed grief for the dead or a tragedy such as the fall of a city (Book of Lamentations). In ancient Sumerian literature, laments mourned the fall of cities and temples. God predicted this calamity for the Northern Kingdom. He would transform Israel's joyous songs into lamentations (8:10). Amos had begun the regrettable chorus.

Fallen and Deserted Israel (5:2-3)

The prophet described the nation as "virgin Israel" which had "fallen," lying on the ground without help. The Bible sometimes personifies cities as virgin daughters (Isa. 47:1). In 5:3, the mention of city probably referred to Samaria. In antiquity a virgin was highly esteemed by society and brought a greater bridal price. The financial penalty for slandering a virgin's good name was stiff (Deut. 22:19).

Amos depicted a public disgrace. The virgin was lying helpless, perhaps dead, with no one to aid her. Where was her father or bridegroom? Proud, defiant Israel was vulnerable before powerful enemies. No nation would aid them against the Assyrians; and, more importantly, God would not protect them. Only one tenth of Israel's armies would survive the battle.

A CALL TO LIFE (5:4-15)

After Amos's lamentation, the Lord presented an alternative for Israel to consider. He called upon the nation to choose life over death by repenting of sin and seeking the Lord.

Turn to the Lord (5:4-7)

How could Israel survive the impending disaster? "Seek Me!" said the Lord. But the people must understand that authentic worship differed from what most of the people had been considering worship. Attending sanctuary services did not necessarily mean that they practiced true spiritual worship (see John 4:24).

The people of Israel had made a destructive choice when they walked down the pathway of immorality, but the prophet appealed to them to choose anew.

It's never too late to make a good decision. We make decisions every day. Most are good decisions, but every person makes serious mistakes, too. A husband chooses to leave his wife and regrets it for a lifetime. In anger, a person passes on a tidbit of gossip and injures a friend. What do we do when we have made destructive choices? Whenever we have made a poor decision, we can start again by repenting and then doing the right thing. What is the good decision God wants you to make today?

In 5:5 Amos presented a series of prohibitions, forbidding the Israelites to worship in the sanctuaries at "Bethel," "Gilgal," and "Beersheba." In a play on the words *Seek Me*, the prophet urged Israel's people to cease their useless worship: "But do not resort [seek] to Bethel." The sense of Amos's message was: *Worship Me, but not as you do in your sanctuaries.*

Since Bethel was the royal sanctuary of King Jeroboam (7:10), this was a shocking comment on Israel's worship. They had held services of worship for centuries at these sites. Bethel and Beersheba were associated with the patriarchs' worship, and Gilgal had played a prominent role in the conquest and in the prophet Samuel's ministry.

Yet Gilgal would undergo "captivity," and Bethel would become a place of "trouble." The repetition of a



What do you do when you realize you have made a destructive choice? What should you do?

Does this mean we should not go to church to worship God? If not, what does it mean?

common sound in the Hebrew words created a play on words between "Gilgal" and "captivity." This ridiculed the original naming of "Gilgal," which commemorated God's forgiveness (Josh. 5:9). Also, "trouble" (*aven*) echoed the derogatory name "Beth-aven" (House of Trouble), which reversed the sacred meaning of "Bethel," the "House of God."

Amos warned that if the people did not seek the Lord, He would break forth as a fire (5:6). *House of Joseph* occurs often in Amos as a synonym for the northern tribes. The reference to Joseph was a reminder of their spiritual heritage when the tribes of Joseph defeated Bethel (Judg. 1:22-23,35). Ironically, pagan worship at Bethel would result in "Joseph's" defeat.

Last, the Lord further explained the reason the people's worship was rejected. They had transformed "justice" into "wormwood" (meaning bitterness) and tossed aside "righteousness" (5:7). Justice and righteousness are legal terms, indicating the judicial system. The religious hypocrites at Bethel were the very ones who had twisted the decisions of the court. No society can protect the helpless when the courts empower the wicked. Time had come for God, the Defender of the helpless, to declare court out of session!

The antidote to social injustice is citizens who become advocates for the needy. In Birmingham, Alabama, for example, four individuals of the Woman's Missionary Union (WMU) started the Old Firehouse Soup Kitchen in 1984, which feeds more than 200 adults daily. Christian involvement holds the greatest hope that our society has for justice and peace.

Lord, Creator, and Moral Governor (5:8-9)

If Israel were to experience true repentance, the people needed to understand who God is and what God is like. Amos characterized the Lord in a second hymn as the

all-powerful Creator and the all-powerful Sovereign over the affairs of humankind.

Amos's description featured two facets of God's creation: the creation of light and the constellations Pleiades and Orion, and the creation of the seas. Worship of stars was a prominent feature of Mesopotamian religion. The psalmists and the prophets proclaimed that the God of Israel rules the skies (Ps. 104:2; Isa. 40:26). As Creator of the seas, His realm includes the heavens and the earth.

The hymn also depicts God as the Lord of history. The Lord "flashes forth with destruction" against the wicked strongholds that oppose His rule. As God exchanges the night for daylight each new day, He can destroy fortresses that people think are secure.

Israel's God was not like the Canaanite deity Baal, whom the pagans believed they could control by sacrifice and song. Nor was He an astral deity like the gods of the Assyrians. The Lord measures the moral character of His worshipers and has the might to deal forcefully with the guilty. Have we, like Amos's audience, adopted a distorted view of God?

Persecution of the Weak (5:10-13)

After his hymn of tribute to God as moral Governor, Amos returned to the subject of moral crimes committed by the social elitists. Their method was bureaucratic legal maneuvers. Trickery characterized these city rulers. At the gate, where civil matters were judged, they had no regard for the truth. This gave them the edge over the innocent whose integrity they despised. Truth was no barrier to these culprits!

With deception as their aid, they obtained their prosperity by abusing the weak. The exact meaning of the words in 5:11 translated "You impose heavy rent" is difficult to determine, but this translation probably is not too far off the mark.

What are some ways individuals can become involved as advocates for the needy?

Today, some think that government or "big business" is responsible to help the needy; but a compassionate nation will be made up of individuals who render aid.

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More helpful is the parallel line in the verse that indicates that the rich had forced the villager into paying "tribute" from his crops. This technique would have finally forced the rural farmer into bankruptcy. This violated the law that encouraged generosity toward the poor. With their tainted monies, the rich built magnificent homes and vineyards, producing wine for their elaborate banquets.

Consider for a moment: Are you a giver or a taker? It doesn't require training to be a taker. This is the natural bent of human beings, but we must learn to become givers. Amos's generation focused on taking from others. There was no place in their hearts for compassionate giving.

Although the rich in Israel had the trappings of an empire, the luxuries were not theirs to enjoy indefinitely. Amos forecasted a day when their extravagance would cease. The reason for this reversal was God's intervention: "I know your transgressions . . . and your sins." God had found their financial policies morally corrupt. Recalling the condemnation of Samaria's "great houses" (3:15), the prophet portrayed their sins as "great" (5:12).

The specific transgression cited by Amos was bribery. For the powerful to "grease the palms" of court officials was common. When the poor presented their legal case at the gate, no chance was left for a fair hearing. This conflicted with Israel's God who "takes no bribe" and shields the defenseless. Simply put, these pompous leaders could not have known the Lord since they behaved this way.

At this point Amos did not announce God's judgment, as we might have expected. Rather, he commented on how the "prudent person" should live during the judgment. Wisdom dictated that in evil times the righteous will be quiet and wait on the Lord to execute justice (5:13). Human efforts can only do so much to change societal

What are some things the righteous can do to correct social injustices?

wickedness. Obviously Amos did not counsel the righteous to do nothing, for he himself was striking out against social injustice. He conceded, though, that he was preaching to a doomed society that was blind to its disastrous direction. His hopes rested with God and the few people who would repent.

We live in a sinful world. Some say that we are living in a "post-Christian" society. As a result, sometimes we will be the victims of wrongdoing.

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Pursue What Is Good (5:14-15)

The prophet challenged his audience for the third time to find life by seeking good rather than evil (5:4,6,14). If they pursued good and not evil, they would have life. Their empty claim to be in fellowship with God would then be true.

By a series of rapid-fire imperatives, the prophet exhorted the people to do what was upright. The first two were opposites: "hate evil" and "love good." This showed that no room was left for compromise in their decision. The imperative "establish justice in the gate" explained what Israel must do, thereby revoking what the rulers had routinely done (5:7).

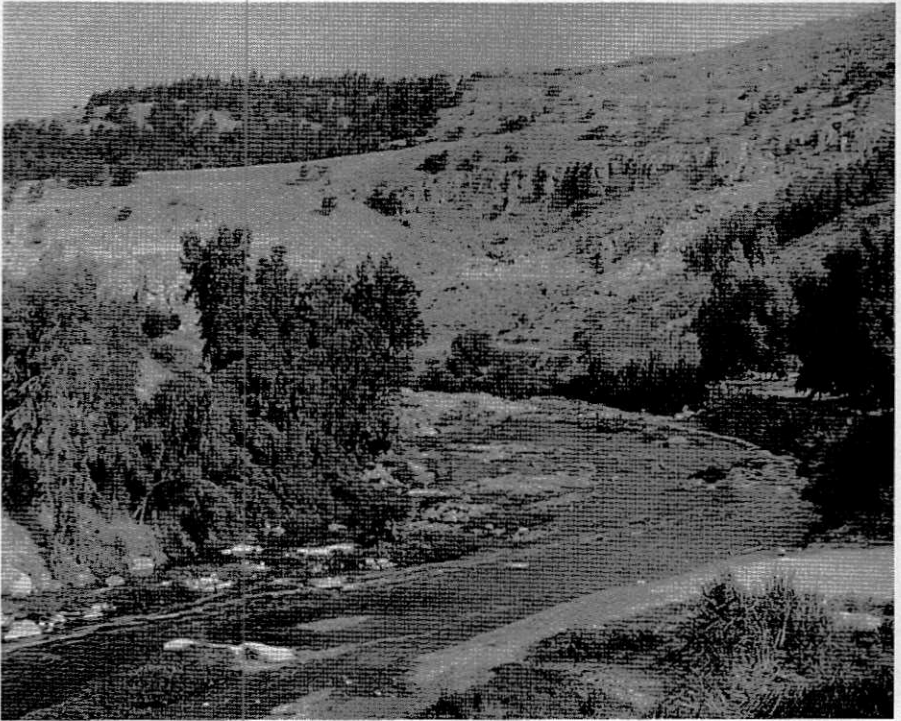
If this dramatic reform would occur, Amos held out hope for the "remnant of Joseph." God was "gracious" and "perhaps" would soften His judgment, preserving a portion of the nation for a better day.

Historically, we know that the 10 northern tribes lost their national identity under Assyrian dominance (722 B.C.), but Jerusalem survived (701 B.C.; 2 Kings 19). Later, Jerusalem's inhabitants experienced their own exile but returned from Babylon (539 B.C.; Ezra 1) and ultimately gave birth to Christ and the church (Rom. 11:5). Amos's hope in the grace of God was not disappointed.

A CALL FOR JUSTICE (5:16-27)

"Let justice roll down like waters" (5:24) was the second call of the prophet (see. 5:4). The call to ethical behavior was the centerpiece of Amos's preaching.

Do you think the church is now "the remnant"? If so, what might Amos's message be for us today?



Amos 5:24: "Let justice roll down like waters." Beersheba river with the Negev in the distance.

"Day of the Lord" (5:16-20)

Since Israel believed that they had faithfully worshiped God, the coming "day of the LORD" was a day of expected reward. To show otherwise, Amos depicted the anguish that the people would experience at the dawning of that "day."

Israel's lamentation would be comprehensive ("all"), involving the city folk and the farmers. Those who wailed in the city because of its downfall bid the farmer and the professional mourners to join in a chorus of misery. The professional mourners were women employed to sing laments at funerals. The lamentation would extend as well to the "vineyards" that provided the wine for Israel's drunken orgies.

Why such wailing? The Lord declared, "I shall pass through the midst of you." The language is similar to God's judgment against the firstborn of Egypt (Ex. 12:12). God claimed responsibility for the calamity that would befall Israel. The Bible interprets history as the outworking of God's purposes. Even today, while we may not be able to discern God's hand at work in history, He is still Lord!

Next, the prophet directly confronted the people's misguided expectations for the "day of the LORD" (5:18-20). The Hebrew prophets envisioned the "day" as God's coming to defeat the enemies of Israel and to exalt the righteous (Joel 3:14-16). Amos's audience evidently counted themselves among the righteous. Yet the prophet challenged their "longing" for the "day" as arrogant pretense. Amos asked rhetorically what good "purpose" this "day of the LORD" could possibly have for them.

The prophet answered by detailing in a message of woe ("Alas!", 5:18) what that day would mean for the wicked Israelites (5:18-27). First, it would be a day of "darkness and not light"—that is, a day of punishment.

Second, this day of judgment was inescapable. Amos compared it with a person who fled from before a lion only to encounter a bear. Even if he managed to escape the clutches of the bear, there was still no refuge in his own house. There, the exhausted man leaned on the wall, unaware that a snake waited to strike him (5:19). Israel's leaders had avoided complete destruction in the past, but not so with the horrible day of the Lord.

Third, by using two rhetorical questions, the prophet stated that the day would result only in tragedy for the wicked Israelites (5:20). It would be a day of "darkness" and "gloom." Sadly, the wayward people were unaware of the true consequences of God's coming. What the Israelites expected for the evil Gentiles would come upon themselves. Jesus warned that many who claim to speak for God but are disobedient will be turned away from the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 7:15-23).

Worship Without Justice (5:21-24)

Again, the Lord denounced the shallow religious activism of the people. God's disgust could not have been stated more strongly. The prophet piled up words expressing God's anger: *I hate, I reject, and do not delight* (5:21). "Delight" was the figurative meaning of smelling sacrificial offerings. Smelling depicted God's pleasure at the pleasant odor derived from smoking sacrifices. In the case of the Israelite offerings, He derived no satisfaction at all.

In particular, the prophecy cited the rejection of "burnt," "grain," and "peace" offerings (5:22). These were voluntary offerings presented by the people for worship. Such sacrifices were intended as a "soothing aroma" to God (Lev. 1:9), but He would "not even

look" at their meaningless sacrifices. Amos described the joyous sanctuary songs as annoying "noise" to God (5:23).

In contrast to this offensive worship, the Lord derived pleasure from authentic offerings. He called for the flowing, soothing waters of "justice" and "righteousness" (5:24). The image of overflowing waters was particularly pleasant to people who lived in the dry climate of Palestine.

Exile of Israel (5:25-27)

After the rebuke of Israel's bogus religion, the message spelled out God's verdict of exile against the nation.

First, God always had required His people to live in obedience to His covenant. The rhetorical question raised by the Lord, "Did you present Me with sacrifices . . . in the wilderness for forty years?" required the answer, no (5:25). Yet the people did offer sacrifices during the wilderness period. Amos meant that sacrifice was not all that God had required of the people. The Lord demanded obedience to His ethical laws.

Second, past and present generations had committed

What do you think God would be disgusted with in our churches today? Make a list in the margin.

the sin of idolatrous worship. Amos thus showed that Israel, both in their past and their present, was not loyal to God, even though they continued to make sacrifices to Him. Stephen's sermon quoted this Scripture to show that the faithlessness of Israel, which began in the wilderness, continued throughout the nation's history (Acts 7:39-43).²

Worship of God obtains no more of God's favor today than in Amos's times if the worshipers continue in their sins.

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A look at different translations of 5:26 will show that its translation is difficult. Some translations name specific deities worshiped by Israel: "Sikkuth your king" and "Kiyyun, your images." If this is correct, then those names referred to the same Akkadian star god, Saturn. Other translations refer generally to idolatry: "shrine of your king" and "pedestal of your idol" (NIV). Although the original language is not perfectly clear to us, all versions agree that the passage speaks of Israel's idolatry.

Finally, the prophet drew the most ominous comparison (5:27). Moses' faithless generation died in the wilderness during a 40-year exile (Num. 14:32-35). Amos's hearers would undergo exile too, "beyond Damascus." This referred to the Assyrian exile that began the era of Gentile rule over Palestine (722 B.C.; 2 Kings 17).

Despite this tragic message, a glimmer of hope remained. The reader may infer a parallel between the wilderness generation and Amos's times. If Israel would suffer exile as did the wilderness generation, would it not also eventually be restored? The generation born in the wilderness entered the promised land. The same would happen for the "remnant of Joseph" (see 5:15; 9:11-15).

¹John Perkins, *Let Justice Roll Down* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1976), 112.
²J. B. Polhill, "Acts," *New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 200-1.

Make Winter Bible Study a Family Affair

Are you among those Christian parents who long for ways to involve the whole family in Bible discussions? Are your children in WBS studies? If so, you may use these "discussion starter" questions to help make WBS a family affair. With young children, three minutes may be a good discussion time. With older children you may let their interest govern the length of discussion. For this sort of family exercise, too little is probably better than too much.

DISCUSSION STARTERS to use after Session 3:

Questions for Younger Preschoolers (Birth-2):

Session Title: Thanking God for My Family

Your child learned that God made families. Help your child thank God for each family member.

Questions for Older Preschoolers (3-5):

Session Title: God Hears Me

Your child learned that Elijah asked God to send rain. Ask your child to tell you some of the things he or she talks about to God.

Questions for Children (6-11):

Children studied God's answer to Amos's prayer to stop locusts from eating the harvest. Ask: What did God do in answer to Amos's prayer? What are somethings we can pray about today?

Questions for Youth (12-17):

What does repentance mean to you? How can people show that repentance has taken place in their hearts? (If your child is not yet a Christian, you may explain that the way of showing repentance and faith is to be faithful and obedient to Christ in daily living. He told us to confess Him before men and to be baptized as outward signs of repentance and faith.)

Chapter 6

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Downfall of the Complacent

Amos 6:1-14

WARNING! How many times during this week have you seen a warning label or sign? How about a newspaper story or TV, or magazine story about some lurking danger? We are bombarded with warnings on the foods we eat, the beverages we drink, and the everyday things we do. Laboratory rats seem forever to be dying from some substance we regularly eat, drink, breathe, and handle. I remember a friend who in the early 1970s refused to eat food warmed in a microwave. "The microwaves cause cancer," he argued. His words were wasted on me. I haven't eaten a meal in years that didn't come through a microwave!

Is it any wonder that we don't take many warnings seriously? In fact, haven't we come to take them in stride as part of America's technological hysteria? Perhaps; but what about warnings from your preacher on Sunday morning or the evangelist on the radio?

The people of Israel heard God's warnings but greeted them with apathy. What does *apathy* mean? The root meaning of the word is "no feeling" or "no passion." That was the way Israel responded to the prophetic message of judgment. Although God had repeatedly warned of destruction, the wealthy in the capital city of Samaria felt safe and secure.

The people of Israel forgot that their achievements were the result of God's grace, not their own efforts. Any nation or person who entrusts the future to human

Could repeated warnings from God's Word be falling on deaf ears of bored people who sit smugly in pews week after week?

.....

endurance will be disappointed in the day of judgment.

WOE TO THE PROUD (6:1-7)

Amos declared a second message of “woe” (anguish) against the self-indulgent elite (see 5:18; “Alas”).

Arrogant Leaders (6:1-3)

Amos addressed his message to both the Northern and the Southern Kingdoms (6:1). He described them in terms of their wealth and their prestige. In doing so, Amos condemned and ridiculed their celebrity status.

First, they were “at ease in Zion.” Reference to “Zion,” a synonym for Jerusalem, showed that Amos’s message applied to his homeland of Judah as well as to Israel. Samaria and

Jerusalem shared the same sins of corruption and complacency. The term *ease* means security, but theirs was a security founded on arrogant self-sufficiency. People who enjoyed such ease had no sympathy for the unfortunate.

Complacency leads to harsh consequences. When we ignore our responsibilities, the results usually are unpleasant. The student who refuses to read a textbook assignment fails the exam. The person who “couldn’t care less” about filing tax returns will regret it soon enough.

How much more tragic when we are apathetic about spiritual realities! The consequences of spiritual and moral neglect are far more damaging because they impact not only life in the here-and-now but also in eternity. Yet many people live as though they will not have to give an accounting for their indifference toward God and needy people. Are we like the fool who increased in material things but neglected his soul (Luke 12:20)? The Israelites sat idly by while judgment marched their way.

Second, they “feel secure in the mountain of Samaria.” As with Jerusalem’s authorities, Samaria’s rulers felt secure atop their mountain fortress. The cap-

Do you think Christians in this country are “at ease in Zion”? Explain your answer?

You fool! This very night your soul is required of you.—Luke 12:20

.....

ital cities of Samaria and Jerusalem were the largest fortifications in the land. Assyrian armies took three years to breach the walls of Samaria, but breach them they did.

Third, they were “distinguished men” of international reputation. During Amos’s lifetime, Samaria reached its greatest political influence in the region. King Jeroboam extended his borders, including the capture of Syria’s capital, Damascus (2 Kings 14:28). Tribute from conquered territories enriched Israel’s rulers, giving them remarkable financial power.

Fourth, these were the leaders of the nation to whom “the house of Israel” came for decisions in civil policies. Samaria had been the economic center of the Northern Kingdom for more than 100 years. Excavations of the city reveal that during Jeroboam’s reign the city expanded with new buildings. Also, population studies have shown that the Northern Kingdom increased dramatically in the ninth and eighth centuries B.C. Amos addressed the most powerful men in Samaria’s history.

After depicting Israel’s false sense of security (6:1), the prophet exposed their true condition (6:2-3). He urged them to consider what had happened to Calneh, Hamath, and Gath—cities that fell into enemy hands. Calneh and Hamath were Syrian cities, located to the northeast, while Gath was a Philistine citadel near Judah. Calneh was put under tribute by the Assyrians in the ninth century B.C. During Amos’s day, Israel’s Jeroboam dominated Hamath, and Judah controlled Gath. Eventually all three cities belonged to Assyria’s empire.

If such strongholds had fallen, what made the Israelites think they would escape this fate? Were Samaria and Jerusalem stronger? Or, were they less appealing to a conquering army? No; if anything, the Assyrians would prize Samaria the more.

Describe in the margin the kind of leader that would make your nation secure.

Did Israel's nobles control their own destiny? Amos scoffed at such self-assurance. Could they "put off" judgment or "bring near" judgment at their own whim (6:3)? No, they were self-deceived. They were in no position to be so smug; God was planning their demise.

Apathetic Rich (6:4-7)

Amos continued the message of "woe" by attacking the social extravagance of the rich. First, they "recline on beds of ivory" and "sprawl on their couches." On festive occasions, the upper classes lounged while eating their meals. "Sprawl" implied that they were behaving immodestly on their couches as they gorged themselves with party food and drink.¹

"Beds of ivory" means that the beds' construction included expensive ivory inlays. Such frills denote the excessive luxury that the rich enjoyed. From excavations at Samaria, archaeologists recovered numerous examples of ivory plaques with decorative insets of gold and precious stones. Their design showed Phoenician and Egyptian influence.² Samaria played a significant role in international trade before and during Amos's time. No doubt, these pompous leaders considered themselves part of the international "jet set."

Second, they ate the finest foods—"lambs" and "calves" (6:4). These animals were taken directly from the stalls of the fattened flocks and herds. They provided the delicacy of tender meat. In ancient times, as today in the Middle East, meat was not a regular part of the common person's diet.

Third, Amos condemned their excessive leisure activities, singing, and playing musical instruments. In itself, to enjoy festive music and celebration is not wrong. Their sin was ignoring the "ruin of Joseph" (6:6) while they reveled in their debauchery.

The prophet described their banquet setting of dining and merriment. They played the "harp" and composed

List some modern counterparts to "ivory," "lambs," and "bowls" that demonstrate social extravagance today.

songs “like David.” Another understanding of the passage is that they invented musical instruments (NIV).

The reference to David reflected his reputation as a great musician, “the sweet psalmist of Israel” (2 Sam. 23:1). Also, Amos implied that these leaders considered themselves kings equal to David. As David achieved territorial expansion and national prosperity, these Samaritan leaders believed they were ruling as in the golden era of Israel’s greatest monarch.

Last, their festive occasions included drinking wine from “sacrificial bowls” and using exotic perfumes (6:6). Amos portrayed the extravagance of their lifestyles by referring to their special vessels for drink and the fascinating aromas designed to enhance their pleasures.

The Hebrew term for bowls referred to the utensils used in the offering of sacrifice at the sanctuary altar (Ex. 27:3). Thus, *The New American Standard Bible* has translated the term “sacrificial bowls.”

Alternatively, it may be understood as “bowlful” (NIV), indicating that they drank excessively by the “bowl” rather than the traditional cup (see 2:8; 4:1). Since the parallel line has the “finest of oils” (6:6), to interpret bowls as *special vessels* seems best, perhaps bowls from the temple.

If so, the height of audacity for these people was to utilize sacred bowls for their celebrations. The Book of Daniel tells of King Belshazzar’s disdain for the sanctity of Israel’s God when he used the holy vessels of the temple for his gala (Dan. 5). That very night the city of Babylon fell to the Persians.

The pitiful irony of Israel’s actions is that the people had “not grieved” (repented) over their looming “ruin” (6:6). In the face of coming calamity, their celebrations were a farce. Instead of adorning themselves with sackcloth and ashes in mourning, they wrapped themselves in the fragrances of lavish fashion.

[Speak] to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord.—Ephesians 5:19

.....

In what ways are sacred things misused today?

Are we among those who act coldly toward the gospel or the difficulties of others?

.....

“Therefore,” they would “go into exile at the head of the exiles.” This presents a strong play on words that emphasizes God’s judgment on the rulers. The term for *head* commonly meant “leader.” A Hebrew word related to *head* earlier occurred twice in this chapter where it was translated *foremost* and *finest*: “foremost nations” (6:1) and “finest of oils” (6:6). Thus, God would put these privileged, puffed-up head honchos at the “head” of the parade—marching all the way into exile.

Today’s Christians struggle against the sin of indifference toward the world of need. Churches in the United States enjoy an unparalleled wealth among its members. Our energies are shamefully self-serving; 99 percent of our resources are spent on ourselves in already-existing Christian communities. Less than 1 percent is spent on the 1.2 billion people in the world who have never heard the gospel at all.³ God cannot be pleased with such self-indulgence.

Let us pray that we as the church will give new attention to people who have not heard the gospel.

What percent of your church’s annual income goes to missions through the Cooperative Program or through seasonal mission offerings?

DESTRUCTION OF THE PROUD (6:8-14)

God took a solemn oath to punish the people of Israel for their sinful indifference to His warnings. We possess two historical accounts of Samaria’s destruction. The biblical record in 2 Kings 17 tells how the Assyrians under King Shalmaneser besieged the city for three years (725-722 B.C.). Assyrian chronicles add to our knowledge. Sargon, the successor to Shalmaneser in 722 B.C., actually concluded the siege. He boasted to have deported 27,290 inhabitants of the region to Assyrian provinces. In turn, he transported other peoples into Samaria as new settlers (see 2 Kings 17:24).

God’s Oath of Punishment (6:8-11)

The severity of God’s fury was so great and judgment

**How shall we
escape if we
neglect so
great a salva-
tion?—
Hebrews 2:3**

.....

so certain that He entered into a formal oath to show His determination to carry it out. Since no authority was greater than the Lord, He swore “by Himself” to carry out the pledge. This meant that He appealed to His own holy character as a guarantee that He would carry out this promise of judgment.⁴

To heighten the effect of the oath, the prophecy identified God as the awesome “LORD God of hosts.” Initially, He had sworn to prosper Israel in the land, and the nation prospered from this oath of protection. Now He vowed to expel Israel from the land of promise because of their wickedness.

The content of the vow followed: “I will deliver up the city” (6:8). The reason for the vow was “the arrogance of Jacob.” Their pride testified against them, proving their sinfulness. God expressed His fierceness against their snobbery by the heated words *I loathe* and *I detest*. These same Hebrew terms described the wicked attitude of Samaria’s rulers toward men of integrity whom they despised (“hate,” “abhor,” 5:10). The tables were turned on them by God Himself!

God hates pride. Our culture tells us that tolerance toward others is the highest morality. Isn’t God supposed to be the most tolerant of all? Yes, God is patient with people, but He is not lenient with sin. “I loathe the arrogance of Jacob” (6:8) expresses as clearly as anything in Scripture what God thinks about pride. Pride is for many of us a most troublesome danger.

Pride is an attitude that has at its root the desire for self-government. It shows itself in our many little mutinies against God’s moral law. The proud person thinks too much of self and too little of others. With God’s help, let us vow to turn a deaf ear to the voice of pride.

God’s divine oath also promised to destroy “all” that Samaria “contains” (6:8). To show the terrifying thoroughness of the coming judgment, the prophet first de-

List some things that God hates but today’s society tolerates. What does this imply for Christians?

scribed the death of the populace (6:9-10) and, second, the extent of the city's destruction (6:11).

An imaginary scene in 6:9-10 shows what would happen to the few survivors of the invasion. This illustration shows the horrors of ancient warfare in which plague typically ran rampant in a besieged city.

Ten men, apparently of the same family, huddled inside a house for security. Since the house accommodated all 10, it must have been large. Thus, Amos may have intended to depict a family of the wicked nobility.

Although these 10 had lived through the war, they nevertheless would perish, probably from an outbreak of disease as a consequence of the siege. When a relative ("uncle") and his helper ("undertaker") collected the bodies for cremation, one of them asked the other who was inside the house if there were any more corpses. From inside, the person answered, "No one." Then the first man hastily ordered, "Keep quiet!" and warned against mentioning God's name (6:10).

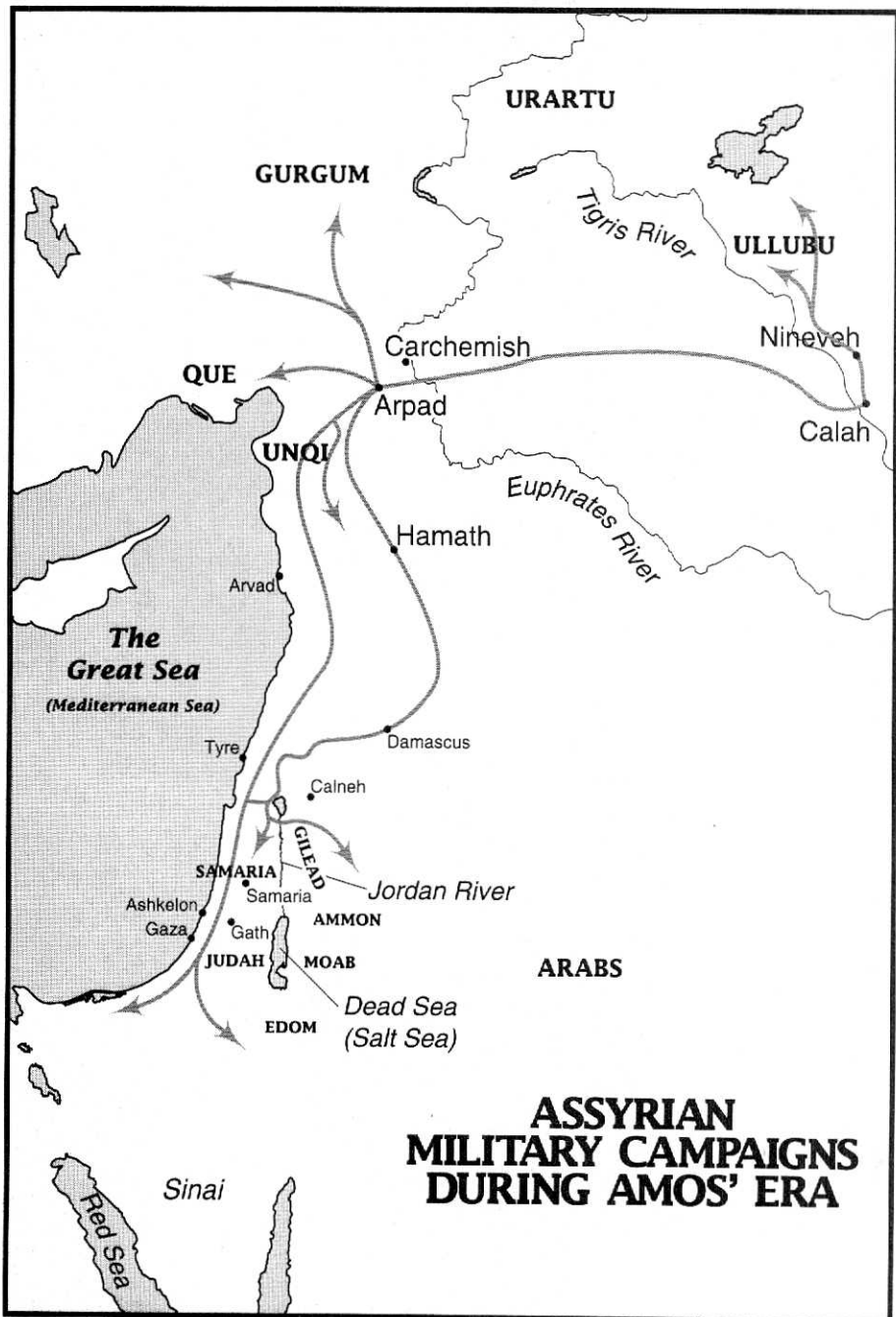
Who was this "undertaker"? The term *undertaker* translates a Hebrew term that means "one who burns," indicating cremation of the body. Cremation was not a common burial practice in Israel, though there were exceptions (see 1 Sam. 31:12). The presence of plague required this extreme measure.

Also, why did the man advise against calling on "the name of the LORD"? It was not due to superstitious fear that God would take note of them and finish them off too. More likely, the presence of dead bodies prompted special reverence for the holy name of God, because anyone in the vicinity of a carcass was ceremonially unclean (Num. 19:14). Perhaps the aftermath of the war brought a renewed reverence for God's presence.

The prophet explained that God's oath included the ruin of Samaria's residences (6:11). Samaria's reputation for impressive homes had greatly displeased God (3:15). The destruction of both "great house" and "small house" indicated the far-reaching devastation that awaited the city.

Not all the horrors of war take place on the battlefield.





ASSYRIAN MILITARY CAMPAIGNS DURING AMOS' ERA

Assyrian military campaigns during Amos's era.

Samaria was not completely destroyed, however. Sargon rebuilt the city and made it the capital of his new Assyrian province of Samaria, naming the region after its chief city. The people who remained were put under tribute to the king.

God's Plan for Punishment (6:12-14)

With two rhetorical questions the prophet exposed the absurdity of Israel's shortsighted thinking. Would a horse run across rocky cliffs instead of smooth terrain? No, even a brute animal avoids danger. But the people's reasoning was less than the animals! Their stubborn pride had blinded their minds.

Also, does a sensible farmer plow rock with the hope of producing a crop? Obviously not. Amos's illustration would be even more ridiculous if we read this possible translation of 6:12: "Does one plow the sea with oxen?" How stupid! Israel's hope of survival was as futile as a farmer plowing a field of stones or plowing the sea.

The Israelites' behavior also was morally absurd. They "turned justice into poison" and "righteousness into wormwood." The meaning of *turn* in this passage is "change" or "transform." They perverted the judicial system for their advantage. Did they think that they could twist justice without paying a price? Any attempt at subverting God's Word was as silly as horses running across rocky cliffs.

The decisions rendered by the court resulted in the taste of deadly "poison" and bitter "wormwood." God desired the sweet, refreshing waters of "justice" and "righteousness" (5:24).

The people rejoiced in their military victories over the cities "Lo-debar" and "Karnaim" (6:13), but this was equally absurd in the prophet's eyes. They failed to credit God for their accomplishments. God would change their achievements into hollow victories by giving these cities to their enemies.

To show this, Amos mocked their conquests by playing up the secondary meanings of the cities' names. *Lo-*

debar means “nothing,” and *Karnaim* means “two horns.” By winning “Lo-debar,” they achieved “nothing.” Why? Because God would take it from them and give it to another. Also, *horn* symbolized strength, and the Israelites boasted in their “strength” (6:13). Thus, Amos jeered at their gloating by predicting that their puny “strength” could not hold on to “Karnaim.”

The locations of these sites are uncertain, but they may be Debir (Josh. 13:26) and Ashteroth Karnaim (Gen. 14:5; Josh. 9:10), which were situated across the Jordan River to the northeast. This region was controlled by Israel’s King Jeroboam at that time; but it soon fell into the hands of the Assyrians.

The Lord ended this message with the clear announcement of judgment by invasion: “I will raise up a nation against you.” God is “the LORD God of hosts,” a mighty warrior who would overwhelm their armies. The Lord Himself incited the Assyrians to march west. Bit by bit they subdued the whole region until finally enslaving Samaria’s population (722 B.C.).

This nation would “afflict” Israel in the same manner the Egyptians had “oppressed” the people in bondage. All Israel and Judah would fall into the hands of the invaders, “from the entrance of Hamath to the brook of the Arabah” (6:14). Hamath was the extreme northern border of Jeroboam’s kingdom, and the Arabah was the southernmost area of Judah.⁵

Do you have trouble picturing God as a “mighty warrior”? How does this fit the concept of a God of love?

¹G. V. Smith, *Amos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 204.

²N. Avigad, “Samaria,” *Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* (eds. M. Avi-Yonah and E. Stern; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 1044-46.

³*World A: A World Apart* (Richmond: Foreign Mission Board, Sept. 1991).

⁴W. T. Smith and W. J. Harrelson, “Holiness,” *Dictionary of the Bible* (rev. ed.; eds. F. C. Grant and H. H. Rowley; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963), 387.

Chapter 7

Visions of Doom

Amos 7:1-9

Can a person's life change the course of a nation? In 1789 a peasant revolt threw France into social turmoil. The people ruthlessly purged the aristocratic class, and endless bloodshed through war and terror followed. Across the channel, a sweeping spiritual renewal had shaken England. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism (1703-91), had a gospel for the common people. His emphasis on caring for the poor helped prevent the kind of terrible barbarity that France experienced.

Who are the
prophetic voices
calling our country
to repentance?

The Bible tells how the prayers of Moses and Elijah changed the fortunes of the nation. Amos interceded for Israel when God revealed in visions the coming tragedy of divine judgment. The Lord graciously relented, not once but twice, in response to the prophet's prayers. Unlike 18th-century England, the people did not repent; and God's condemnation finally could not be averted.

The last section of the book invites us to overhear the private conversations between God and His spokesman (7:1—9:15). In a series of five visions, God revealed to the prophet His intention to destroy Israel (7:1-9) and the certainty of that punishment (8:1—9:10). The sermons we have studied in chapters 1—6 probably arose from these startling visions. The whole book is attributed to what Amos "envisioned in visions" (1:1).

VISION OF THE SWARMING LOCUSTS (7:1-3)

The introductory phrase, "Thus the Lord GOD showed me," begins Amos's account of four of the five visions (7:1,4,7; 8:1). The fifth vision is introduced with, "I saw the Lord" (9:1). The autobiographical nature ("me") of these visions distinguishes chapters 7—9 from the sermons of chapters 1—6.

We don't know exactly how God revealed the divine word to the prophets, although we have some firsthand accounts (Isa. 6:1; Jer. 1:9; 36:2). The prophets were "moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21), and their writings were "God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16, NIV).

Revelation came in various ways to the prophets (Heb. 1:1), including visions. Amos received a visual portrait of future events that conveyed to him an unmistakable message for the nations.

His first vision was of an emerging swarm of locusts (7:1). A locust is one of the developing phases of the grasshopper. It is not dangerous to crops until the population of the locusts becomes a migratory swarm.¹ The prophet Joel described the destructive force of locusts marching like an army in waves, overcoming everything in their path (1:4; 2:7-9). The economy and even survival of people in the Middle East were rooted in agriculture. The threat posed by oncoming locusts was frightening and deadly. Whole countries suddenly could become helpless before the oncoming locusts.

The source of the plague was the Lord who "was forming the locust-swarm." Locusts were considered divine punishment for covenant unfaithfulness (Deut. 28:42).

The progressive action of the verb *forming* indicates that Amos watched the swarm gradually develop. *Form* in the creation narratives describes the divine activity of creation (Gen. 2:7,19). In 4:13, Amos used *forms* parallel with *creates* to extol the Lord as Creator.

Before you read this section, ponder this question: Is every pestilence that comes our way a sign of divine punishment?

God . . . spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways.—Hebrews 1:1

Whereas God created the creatures of the earth for "good" (Gen. 1:25), in the case of these particular locusts, God's creation had a punitive purpose.

The timing of this swarm could not have been worse. The "spring crop" (April-June) was the second of two harvesting periods in Palestine. Its produce provided for the community during the drought of summer. In Amos's vision, the pestilence came when the crops had already appeared but before the harvest.

The locusts came after the first cut, known as the "king's mowing." Evidently the early gathering belonged to the royal house as a tax, leaving the second cut for the farmer and the animals. This meant that if the "swarm" did not subside, nothing would be left for the common people.

After Amos saw the complete devastation of the fields, he pleaded to the Lord for mercy (7:2). Although the prophet's mission was to preach condemnation, he took no pleasure in it. He had pity for the people. "Please pardon!" he humbly requested. He knew whom he addressed. Amos chose the word *pardon*, which is used always of divine forgiveness.

Perhaps Amos's plea was related in some way to the locust plagues that God used to draw Israel back (4:9). The rationale for his appeal was the survival of the nation. "Jacob" could not "stand," because it was "small" (7:2). Amos knew that the nation was not materially strong enough to withstand so great a devastation. He could not point to the people's repentance or any good on their part that would merit such forgiveness. He based his petition solely on the goodness and mercy of God.

The Lord honored the prayers of Amos as a righteous man, and He "changed His mind" by relenting the punishment (7:3). Other people, such as Moses and King Hezekiah, also averted the punishment of the Lord because of their intercessory prayer (Ex. 32:11-14; Isa. 37:14-20).

The idea that God changed His mind has troubled

**The effective
prayer of a
righteous man
can accomplish
much.—James
5:16**

.....

some interpreters, because it appears to contradict Scripture's teaching that God is faithful to His promises. Such passages show that God is always true to His word. Humans are liars, not the Lord (Rom. 3:4). In Amos's and Moses' situations, there is a different context. The expression "changed His mind" shows the outcome of their prayers. It does not speak to the question of the Lord's integrity.

Amos's example agrees with what we learn from Scripture elsewhere. Prayer impacts our circumstances. God honors prayers when we offer them in accord with His purposes (1 John 3:22; 5:14).

The Scriptures affirm both that God is sovereign and that His sovereignty considers our response to the gospel. Thus the Lord's death on the cross intervened for us, and believers who respond by faith experience forgiveness of sins.

His mysterious sovereignty does not revoke human responsibility or diminish the value of a person's response.

God needs our intercessory prayers. If you are troubled by *needs* in this statement, probably *needs* indicates to you the idea of weakness. God is not weak and can get along quite nicely without us. But He has chosen not to do that. He has decided to make us the object of His affections and purposes. Therefore the Lord has made us meaningfully necessary to His plan.

I say all that to bring us to the role of prayer for God's work in the world. Amos learned that the Lord hears the prayers of His people for others. God's eternal plan is tied to human prayer. He wants us to enjoy the thrill of being His partner in carrying out the kingdom's work.

The Lord sends workers into the fields, but He does so through our prayers (Matt. 9:37-38).² Hudson Taylor, who founded the China Inland Mission, first loved the people of China as a child by overhearing the

How do we go about determining God's purposes so that we may pray in accordance with them?

God needs our intercessory prayers. He has made us meaningfully necessary to His plan.

.....

prayers of his father for the great country.⁴ Are we interceding in prayer for others so that they may know Christ as Savior?

VISION OF THE CONSUMING FIRE (7:4-6)

The companion vision to the locust swarm was the revelation of a sweeping fire storm that blasted across the land. By means of the fire, God was "calling to contend" against the people. Another possible translation is "calling for a shower of fire" (NRSV).

We have already seen how fire symbolized the burning of cities, indicating divine punishment against the nations (see 1:4). Amos portrayed an inferno even more threatening. It "consumed the great deep" and "the farm land" (7:4).

This "great deep" referred to the subterranean waters and springs that fed the surface. When Amos presented the Lord as Ruler over the nations, he often depicted God with the language of creation. Here *deep* also echoed the primeval waters that He brought under control at creation (Gen. 1:2,6-10). Thus the fire was too severe for even the primeval waters to withstand.

The fire storm threatened a devastating drought, devouring "the farm land." Before the prophet's eyes, the grasslands and crops became a dust bowl. The term translated "farm land" is actually "portion" or "part." The same word referred to the "divisions" of land distributed among the twelve tribes (Josh. 18:5-6). By it, Amos may have alluded to Israel as the Lord's "portion" (Deut. 32:9) or the land tracts owned by the rich (Mic. 2:4)

This horrifying sight motivated the prophet to intervene a second time. His petition and God's answer followed virtually the same pattern as the first vision, except for a slight difference in wording. Amos's second plea was "please stop!" (7:5) as opposed to "please pardon!" (7:3). In both cases, *please* showed that the prophet fully understood that he had no grounds for demanding God's restraint. But he probably could not

bring himself to ask for "pardon" again. Rather, he simply pleaded "stop" in the sense of "leave off."

Amos made his appeals in spite of the nation's sins, because he understood the compassionate character of God. Much to his disappointment, Jonah too realized that God's mercy outweighed the sins of a wicked people (Jonah 4:2). Wrath is God's response to people who reject His love; it is His "extraordinary work" (Isa. 28:21). Mercy is inherent to God's being.²

Today, a common misconception of the prophets is that they preached a God of vengeance, while the New Testament revealed a God of love and grace. This contrast between the Testaments is the result of different emphases, not a real contradiction. Judgment was the focus of prophets such as Isaiah and Amos, because their mission was to warn. God's judgment had not yet occurred. After judgment fell, the later prophets emphasized God's merciful provision, because the Lord was delivering Judah from the Babylonian exile.

The Old Testament commonly speaks of the Lord's tolerance and forgiveness (see Ex. 34:6-7; Ps. 86:15; Joel 2:13). Even Isaiah and Hosea preached forgiveness for a restored Israel (Isa. 1:18; Hos. 11:8-9).

When we consider Jesus' piercing words against the wicked, clearly the warning of God's wrath was an important feature of Christ's ministry (Matt. 13:41-42; Luke 13:27-28). Like the prophets, Jesus' harshest words were against wicked leaders (Matt. 23:33-36). The apostles also did not soften words when they described the end of those who rejected the gospel (Eph. 5:5-6; 2 Thess. 1:7-9; 1 Pet. 4:17-18).

Our goal as Christians is to proclaim both the love of God and the coming day of wrath. We are right to emphasize God's love and forgiveness through the cross of Christ. Yet, if we do not warn, we fail in our loving duty to evangelize the world. As we warn of God's wrath, we always explain

How can we proclaim the "coming day of wrath" without turning people off so that they do not heed our words?

the avenue of escape through the blood of Christ that reconciles us to God. Believers in Him no longer are condemned (Rom. 8:1).

VISION OF THE HANGING PLUMB LINE (7:7-9)

This third vision differed from the previous two. Whereas before Amos asked the Lord for mercy, in this exchange the Lord asked Amos a question that led to a word of judgment. There was no allowance for petition. The third vision explained the reason God would no longer postpone the coming punishment.

In this vision, Amos saw the Lord standing by a vertical wall, and in His hand was a "plumb line." The term translated *vertical* is the same Hebrew word as plumb line. Thus it was a wall that was "true to plumb" (NIV) or a "plumbed wall."

A "plumb line" is a cord that has a weight (plumb bob) suspended at its end. It was used in the construction of a building so that the walls would be erected perpendicular. In Amos's vision, it was a symbol for the destruction of Israel.

God was beside or on the wall, holding the plumb line so as to show that it was vertical. This was important to the meaning of the vision, because the plumb line proved whether the wall met the builder's standard. As God had measured the wall, He would test the people of Israel.

The Lord then asked Amos, "What do you see?" and he replied, "A plumb line." The purpose in quizzing Amos was to emphasize the necessity of measuring Israel by a standard. A divine expectation remained for the nation in spite of the mercy God had shown in the previous visions.

What was the Lord's standard for evaluation? He required justice and righteousness (5:24). Isaiah specified the same criteria for measuring Judah: "I will make justice the measuring line, and righteousness the level" (28:17). Both nations miserably failed the test.

God has a standard. What is the plumb line for your

life? Popular culture insists that morality is what you make of it, that no one can set the standard for anyone else, that morality is a personal matter, a private matter. While everyone is free to choose, this does not mean that everyone's standard for morality is valid. Try "sticking up" a grocery store. See how far you will get before the judge!

Name some specific standards of justice and righteousness by which we are measured.

A United States senator once commented on the "moral deregulation" of our times, in which we have redefined moral "deviancy down." Yet, there is a norm for moral behavior that surpasses my own standards or those created by a whole society. It is God's plumb line. When we deviate from God's moral precepts, we are left with a distorted life or society.

Years ago, when I built a privacy fence in my backyard, I used a leveler to test whether my pickets were vertical as I nailed them up. I discovered that if I were off just a bit on one, by the time I had put up a row of four or five pickets, my fence at that place became crooked. Our lives are like that. We must constantly look to the standard of God's Word if we are to have a true sense of what is upright.

God described Israel in this vision as "My people." The Lord had the right to measure Israel. As a builder erects a wall, the Lord had built Israel.

Amos's younger contemporary, the prophet Hosea, used this covenant language in naming his son "Lo-Ammi" (Not My People). As a symbolic name, it means that God revoked the covenant relationship with Israel. But Hosea also predicted a future restoration for Israel as "My people" (1:9-10,23). Strikingly, the apostles applied this passage to the spread of the gospel by the church (Rom. 9:25-26; 1 Pet. 2:10). We have become God's people because of Jesus' atoning death at the cross. God will not revoke our place in the family of Christ.

Because the nation did not measure up, God de-

clared, "I will spare them no longer." The implication was that the Builder would take the necessary steps to demolish the crooked wall. "Spare" is the translation of "pass through" or "pass by," meaning that God would no longer overlook their sins.

Three features of Israel's life the Lord would destroy (7:9): First, He would tear down "the high places of Isaac." Originally, a *high place* was a small sanctuary located on top of a hill and usually near a grove of trees. Later, any elevated area could be termed a high place. These were the suburban or rural places for worship, aside from the major centers such as Bethel.

For early Israel, worship at a high place was legitimate as long as the Lord alone was honored (1 Sam. 9:12). Later, high places became notorious as places of pagan idolatry (1 Kings 14:23). Hosea described them as "high places of wickedness" (10:8, NIV).

The association of pagan worship with Isaac, the father of Jacob and Esau, is surprising (7:9, 15). *Jacob* was the common synonym for the northern tribes of Israel. Reference to Isaac reminded Israel that God's relationship with their ancestors began long before their father Jacob.

Moreover, Isaac worshiped at Beersheba (Gen. 26:23-25), one of the sites Amos condemned for pagan worship. For the Western reader, such an appeal to ancestral history would be ineffective. In Middle- and Far-Eastern cultures, honoring one's ancestors is a powerful force in a person's religious life.

Second, the Lord promised to destroy the "sanctuaries of Israel." This referred to the urban shrines that had historically served the nation as centers of religious life. The most infamous were those established at Dan and Bethel. Amos preached the message of this third vision at Bethel itself.

Together, the high places and sanctuaries gave the nation its religious underpinning. Thus God opposed

Can worship today be a sin? If so, what would make it a sin?

the places where the people conducted worship in His name. Israel's worship was futile, because they offended the Lord by their moral corruption.

Furthermore, the Lord would "rise up against the house of Jeroboam" (7:9). Apart from the introductory heading (1:1), this verse has the first mention of Jeroboam in the book. As the king of Israel, his name stood for the political establishment. House meant more than the palace of the king. It was a common figure meaning the lineage of the royal family.

Without a king there was no defense for the nation. Without a king's lineage its people had no hope. This direct threat against the nation was the message that caused Amos's expulsion from the Northern Kingdom. That Jeroboam had brought Israel to its greatest prosperity made no difference to God. God's reward to Jeroboam was destruction for his unrivaled corruption.

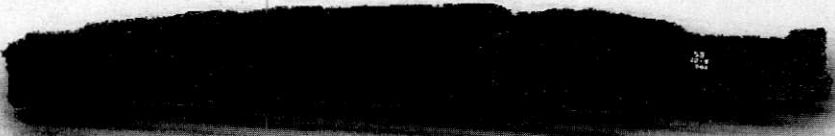
Perhaps the language of "rise up against" was God's response to Amos's earlier question, "How can Jacob stand?" (7:2,5). Both *rise up* and *stand* come from the same Hebrew word. Thus, in the third vision God continued to address the prophet's question. Ultimately, Jacob could not "stand," because the Lord would "rise up [stand] against" them. This vision was the source for the prediction that God would "raise up" a foreign nation (6:14).

The instrument of destruction was "the sword," meaning warfare. The prophets often used *sword* to indicate the military conflict by which God carried out His punishment. Amos took the message of the "sword" to Bethel where he would cry out against the religious and political strongholds of the nation.

We are weak, but He is strong. What a dramatic difference there is between human frailty and God's power! Farmers know better than most how delicate nature is and how dependent we are on our Creator. We cannot control the growing and harvesting of crops, because insects, storm, and drought are constant threats. We cannot control our own lives. The smallest, invisible

We are dependent on the enduring goodness of God for each sunrise, each breath, each bite, and each dollar.

.....



Assyrian sword from the time of Amos (Amos 7:9,17)

virus can invade our bodies and strike a mortal blow.

Sometimes, our institutions—families, schools, businesses, governments—collapse during our lifetime. We are dependent on the enduring goodness of God for each sunrise, each breath, each bite, and each dollar. God calls us to acknowledge His power in our lives and to place our trust in Him. When we do, we manifest on earth the heavenly song of the saints, “The Lord God omnipotent reigneth” (Rev. 19:6, KJV).

¹Edwin Firmage, “Zoology,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 6 (ed. D. N. Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1150.

²O. Hallesby, *Prayer* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1931), 156-57.

³Howard and Geraldine Taylor, *Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret* (Chicago: Moody, n.d.), 22.

⁴W. C. Robinson, “Wrath of God,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (ed. W. A. Elwell; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 1196.

Chapter 8

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Tyranny of False Religion

Amos 7:10-17

In the Walnut Hill Elementary School, each of us third graders faced the formidable (and required!) task of performing in a talent program before our classmates. The only hope I had of escaping humiliation was by joining a group. I linked up with two playmates to form a trio. The leader in our group chose the traditional hymn "At the Cross."

At this news, I wanted to backpedal, but I had no alternate song to recommend. I thought it strange to sing a hymn in school. After all, it wasn't Christmas. Also, I figured our school chums would gag. I remember the warm reception our teacher gave the idea, and she beamed as we struggled through each and every stanza of the hymn. To my surprise, the audience listened without much stir, and we survived to tell about it.

From this grade-school experience two things stuck with me. First, I learned that it was all right to speak about Christianity in places other than church. And, second, it took courage to do so, especially in a potentially embarrassing, if not hostile, environment. (By the way, another benefit was I don't need a hymnal to this day to sing "At the Cross"; and, yes, I smile inside every time!)

Amos had the difficult task of delivering God's message in a threatening situation. It was God's idea, not Amos's ambition! The Lord directed him to go to Bethel and preach a message of destruction and exile.

**Sometimes God
calls us to
stand for the
truth in a diffi-
cult place.**

.....

This episode is the only biographical incident we have about Amos. The religious officials of the state took steps to silence the prophet by banishing him. The important issue at stake was the question of authority. By what authority did Amos preach against Israel? What was Amaziah's authority to silence him?

The true prophet of God does not submit to a lesser authority. Sometimes God calls us to stand for the truth in a difficult place. When we have courage to obey, the Lord will help us.

AMAZIAH'S COMPLAINT AGAINST AMOS (7:10-13)

Amos had preached that God would destroy the "sanctuaries of Israel" and the "house of Jeroboam" (7:9). Sanctuaries and Jeroboam link the third vision of judgment against Jeroboam with the following incident at Bethel, the king's sanctuary.

Amaziah, priest of Bethel, confronted Amos. That confrontation shows that God's stern word of judgment against Jeroboam's monarchy was fitting. The ruling authorities had utterly rejected the message of the Lord. Theirs was not the true faith of Israel. Religion was only a servant to Jeroboam's political purposes. Together, palace and sanctuary repressed the authentic message of God.

Amaziah charged the prophet with the crime of rebellion (7:10-11), because Amos had preached that a foreign army would overrun the nation (6:14; 7:9). Next, he challenged Amos personally by disputing his authority as a prophet (7:12-13).

Charge of Conspiracy (7:10-11)

We know nothing about Amaziah apart from this scene. The narrative identifies him as "the priest of Bethel," probably the chief priest. The significance of Bethel in the history of Israel, especially during the reign of Jeroboam, gave him a prestigious position.

**Is religion used today as
a tool to further political
purposes? In this country?
Other countries? Give an
example.**

Bethel had a strong spiritual heritage that reached back to the time of Abraham and Jacob. When the northern tribes broke free from Jerusalem rule (931 B.C.), Bethel and Dan were designated as official religious shrines. As Jerusalem was the religious center of the south, so Bethel was among the tribes of the north.¹

The religious leaders at Bethel parroted the policies of the royal house. Amaziah's clash with the prophet illustrated how the state viewed disagreement with its practices. Perhaps Amos's warning, "Do not resort to Bethel" (5:5), was related to this confrontation. The reasons for Amos's special impatience with Bethel were its religious hypocrisy and idolatry.

The battle for freedom from civil constraints continues in the church today. Christians must speak to the moral issues of our society. At the same time, we must never so closely identify with a political faction that we cease to speak for God independently of what any political movement may require. Christians may freely participate in the political process, but we fail if we compromise our message and integrity for political advantage. Regimes come and go, but God's kingdom is "not of this world" (John 18:36).

Because of Amos's preaching against Bethel, Amaziah sent a message to the king to inform him of Amos's interference. Likely this message came to Samaria, the royal residence. The report presented Amos in the worst possible light.

First, Amaziah interpreted Amos's preaching as insurrection. Amaziah's report to Jeroboam was prejudiced. He charged Amos with conspiracy; and then, he personalized the threat as against Jeroboam himself ("against you," 7:10). The term *conspired* often occurs in the context of political intrigue and assassination.

Political assassination was common during these

Locate Dan and Bethel on an Old Testament map or the map on page 11.

Some say the words Christian and politician cannot be linked. Do you agree? Disagree? Why?

**Do not receive
an accusation
against an elder
except on the
basis of two or
three witness-
es.—1 Timothy
5:19**

.....

times, and this probably contributed to Amaziah's alarmist language. Murder had secured the ruling dynasty (Jehu) of which Jeroboam was a member (2 Kings 10:9). Also, during Jeroboam's lifetime, two regimes in the Southern Kingdom (Joash and Amaziah) were toppled by murderous treason (2 Kings 12:20; 14:19).

The charge against Amos was false. He was not a political revolutionary or operative. The prophet had not encouraged plots against the king. Nor did he recommend social rebellion. Rather, he called the nation to repentance. This was neither the first nor the last time that God's people were misrepresented by hostile opponents. Remember the trial of Jesus (Matt. 26:59-60)?

Amos had preached "in the midst of the house of Israel," and this especially annoyed Amaziah. That the prophet spoke treachery was bad enough, but that he had brazenly preached in Bethel itself was even worse. To challenge Bethel was to challenge the nation's right to exist. Amaziah thought it imperative that the king put a stop to this troublemaker.

Next, the Bethel priest interpreted the consequence of Amos's preaching: "The land is unable to endure all his words" (7:10). Amaziah warned that the king would lose his political grip on his subjects if Amos persisted. Amaziah considered Amos a serious threat.

Like Amos, our Baptist forefathers, Roger Williams and John Clarke (1639), challenged the governing church of the Massachusetts settlements. They were instrumental in establishing religious freedom in America.

Williams was expelled from Massachusetts for his resistance to civil control over religious matters. Clarke was arrested and fined for leading in a prayer meeting without authorization. Later, Clarke in 1663 obtained a formal charter for his Rhode Island colony, permitting the "lively experiment" of religious pluralism.²

Amaziah further reported that Amos had predicted the violent death of Jeroboam ("by the sword," 7:11) and the exile of the nation. Actually, Amos preached that the house of Jeroboam would die, meaning his dy-

nasty (7:9). This probably made little difference to Amaziah since he equated this threat with a personal attack on the king. History bears out that Jeroboam died peacefully (2 Kings 14:29). His "house" came to a quick end with the murder of his son Zechariah who reigned only six months (2 Kings 15:8-10).

Amaziah, of course, related only the most inflammatory part of the prophet's preaching. He did not report the pleas of Amos in behalf of Israel.

Modern history can point to governments that in the name of religion persecuted "infidels" for their beliefs. The Islamic revolution in Iran (1979) installed Islam as the official religion of the state. The Ayatollah Khomeini arranged for a government of the clergy. Pro-Buddhist, pro-Hindu, and other governments also are intolerant of Christian evangelization.

Are you prone to tell only that part of the truth that supports your position? Is God pleased with that practice?



Learning about other religions helps us understand persons with whom we relate.

Challenge to Amos's Authority (7:12-13)

In this challenge against Amos, the Bethel priest identified Amos as a "seer." *Seer* was an older term used of the prophets. It was synonymous with the more popular term *prophet*. Perhaps *seer* was chosen by Amaziah since Amos received his messages from visions.

The priest was shortsighted, however. He thought the motivation for Amos's preaching was to earn a livelihood. He directed Amos to return home where he could obtain an income ("eat bread") by prophesying in Judah. Amaziah told him "there" (Judah) he would have a favorable hearing.

Perhaps a word of caution is in order. We are not to hawk the gospel for profit. Today we live in a Christian subculture that in many ways has become a big business. Books, seminar tapes, and music videos have helped the Christians in many ways. Yet, with the good that such opportunities bring, the seamy motivation of greed is a temptation.

Christian authors and artists, as well as those of us in the churches who buy their works, must be careful to honor the Lord in all that we do.

Also, we do well to ask whether we promote our evangelistic and educational programs with integrity. A common charge leveled against the

church focuses on its interest in money. While such charges often stem from ignorance of biblical teachings on stewardship, we do not want to be guilty of Amaziah's accusation, even in appearance. Let us be fully devoted to caring for the souls of people.

Amaziah rebuked Amos especially for preaching in Bethel, because it was the "sanctuary of the king" and a "royal residence." He claimed special privilege for Bethel as the king's personal chapel. This was a battle over turf. Bethel was Amaziah's territory, and he spoke for the king. Since the state had staked out Bethel for itself, no room was left for a dissenting voice.

How would you answer one who said of your church, "All they are interested in at that church is my money"?

A legitimate question we might ask is, Who was interfering with whom? Clearly Amos preached against worship at Bethel by threatening that God would destroy its altars (3:14). The difference was in how the prophet saw this taking place. Amos called for repentance and hoped the people voluntarily would change, but he left punishment of the nation to God. Amaziah had the force of law, and he imposed the religion of Jeroboam on the people.

We do not know Jeroboam's response to the priest's report. We may safely assume that Amaziah's action against the prophet was consistent with the king's wishes. The Bethel priest prohibited Amos's prophesying and banished him to Judah on the grounds that the prophet did not have the authority to preach at Bethel.

AMOS'S CONDEMNATION OF AMAZIAH (7:14-17)

Amos responded to Amaziah's attacks in reverse order. First, he explained the authority for his message (7:14-15). Second, he persisted in announcing the exile of Israel by prophesying the death of the priest (7:16-17).

Amos's Call to Prophecy (7:14-15)

Amos denied that he was a prophet by profession or heritage. Amaziah had dismissed Amos's message on the grounds that he was looking for employment. Amos, however, made plain that he was a businessman and that his call to preach was not out of economic need.

The language of Amos's rebuttal in the Hebrew text is very strong in tone. The negative *not* heads each clause. Also, to add force, the Hebrew does not have a verb. English translators must decide on the basis of the context what tense of the verb to supply.

Some versions have the past tense, "I was not a prophet" (KJV, NIV). This translation would mean that Amos did not have a previous connection with the prophets. Thus he was not denying that he presently was a prophet.

Other versions have the present tense, "I am not a

Volunteer laypeople who labor without monetary reward make an invaluable contribution to the life and work of many churches in the Southern Baptist Convention.

.....

prophet" (NASB, NRSV). If this interpretation is followed, Amos was vigorously denying any formal connection with the prophets at all. This seems to fit best with the context of Amos's remarks.

Amos clearly was denying his relationship with the prophets in a professional sense. "Schools of prophets" arose connected with prominent prophetic figures. Such a school was associated with Bethel during the time of Elijah and Elisha (2 Kings 2:3). By saying "nor am I the son of a prophet," Amos probably meant that he was not the product of such a religious community.

While some schools were of godly prophets, such as with Elijah, others were companies of false prophets. Kings employed prophets to serve the throne as political cronies. Ahab and Jezebel, for example, hired 450 Baal prophets (1 Kings 18:19). Thus Amos's denial meant that he was not a professional prophet looking for a paycheck. Amaziah was implying that Amos was like the court prophets of Jeroboam.

Amos identified himself as a "herdsman" and farmer of "sycamore figs." He produced crops during the growing seasons and herded flocks at other times. This enabled him to have a year-round income. Out of this setting God took Amos to deliver His message to Israel. Amos insisted that he prophesied because of the Lord's call, not for any other reason.

He insisted that God instructed him: "Go prophesy to My people Israel." This wording is very similar to the language of Amaziah's prior rebuke of Amos where he ordered Amos to "flee away to the land of Judah" to do his prophesying (7:12).

The Lord calls every Christian to serve. Amos was not a professional minister, but he was a faithful servant of the Lord who responded to God's call for a difficult task. As a result, his life became far more meaningful to the kingdom of the Lord than he could have imagined.

What ministry or service has God called you to perform? If you are not clear about this, talk to Him about it.

We can have a more meaningful life when we answer God's call to be a witness. Because we live in a society that values specialization in most areas of life, we may think only trained ministers can serve the Lord effectively. Not so; every Christian is equipped by the Spirit to serve (1 Cor. 12:4-6).

Amaziah had no problem with Amos's prophesying as long as he did it somewhere else! The contention was over Amos's authority to prophesy in the north. But the Lord's command sent the prophet to "My people Israel," showing that God claimed Israel as His own. By divine commission, Amos maintained his right to proclaim the word of the Lord at Bethel.

As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

—1 Peter 4:10

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Amos's Prophecy of Destruction (7:16-17)

The authorities could not silence the prophet. Amos immediately reissued the message of exile without reservation. This time he recast it in a personal word for the priest. Amaziah and his family would suffer because he opposed the prophetic word.

God is not the servant of the state. Both in ancient and modern times, governments have attempted to control religious expression. Amaziah was a partner in the ambitions of the king, but Amos spoke for a higher authority.

Historically, Baptists hold that all religious faiths may conduct themselves according to their own conscience. The American tradition established the free exercise of religion as guaranteed by the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights. Government cannot promote or be hostile toward religious expression. In our free society, the church may comment on the state of the nation, but legislatures may never dictate the state of the church.

Amos introduced his prophecy with language typical of his previous pronouncements against the nation: "Hear the word of the LORD" (7:16). God's message for

How does supporting a Christian politician mesh with the idea of "separation of church and state"?

priest and nation was one and the same.

The prophet contrasted the opposition between the priest's orders ("you are saying") and God's command ("Thus says the LORD"). This wording conflicted with the priest's report to the king: "For thus Amos says" (7:11). The striking difference between the two expressions pointed out the priest's mistaken opinion. He regarded Amos as an agitator whose message was of his own making, when in fact it had come from God. In the end, this mistake would lead to Amaziah's death.

Likewise Israel would undergo exile for the same reason. The ruling hierarchy had refused to hear God's message. The sad irony was that the authorities charged Amos with rebellion, but it was they who had revolted against the true Sovereign of Israel.

Amos predicted that the priest and his family would experience the misery typical of war in the ancient Near East. First, the priest's wife would become a prostitute in order to survive since her husband and sons would die. This was not the cult prostitution of Canaanite rituals that the Israelites practiced. Rather, it was the more disgraceful street prostitution.

Second, his children would die in the conflict. Family continuity was of great importance to people in that day. This was particularly the case for a priestly family which appealed to its lineage for legitimacy. Amaziah's name would not survive.

Third, Amaziah would lose all his lands that would be "parceled up by a measuring line." Assyrian rulers forced foreigners to immigrate and resettle the cities of Samaria's province (2 Kings 17:24).

Finally, the priest himself would die "upon unclean soil." The term *unclean* is commonly used for anything that is ceremonially stained. Here it referred to a pagan land. As a priest, Amaziah was to experience the utter humiliation of death in exile among the Gentiles.

In spite of the threats of the Bethel authorities, Amos's message did not waver. He concluded the mes-

sage with the same force as before: Israel "will certainly go" into exile.

What was the outcome of this clash? Did Amos return to Judah? We don't know what became of the prophet Amos. According to one legend, he was tortured by Amaziah, clubbed by his son, and escaped to Judah where he died a few days later.³ For the author of the book, the message was more important than the messenger.

Courage comes from the authority of God's Word. We, like Amos, can have courage to live as witnesses for Christ when we have confidence in God's Word. Our commission for service comes from Jesus as our Lord (Acts 1:8).

When we remember that our stand rests on the authority of God, then fear will not paralyze us. We may have a timid personality, but we can be staunch in our convictions by the enabling of the Spirit (2 Tim. 1:7). As we meditate on the promises of God's helping presence, we are strengthened to speak confidently.

¹D. Fredericks, "Bethel," *Holman Bible Dictionary*, ed. T. Butler (Nashville: Holman, 1991), 169.

²W. R. Estep, "Clarke, John (1609-1676)," *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, eds. D. Reid et al. (Downers Grove, Inter-Varsity, 1990), 291-92.

³D. R. A. Hare, trans., "The Lives of the Prophets," *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol. 2, ed. J. H. Charlesworth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 391.

**You shall receive
power when the
Holy Spirit has
come upon you,
and you shall be
My witnesses.
—Acts 1:8**

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Make Winter Bible Study a Family Affair

Are you among those Christian parents who long for ways to involve the whole family in Bible discussions? Are your children in WBS studies? If so, you may use these "discussion starter" questions to help make WBS a family affair. With young children, three minutes may be a good discussion time. With older children you may let their interest govern the length of discussion. For this sort of family exercise, too little is probably better than too much.

DISCUSSION STARTERS to use after Session 4:

Questions for Younger Preschoolers (Birth-2):

Session Title: Thanking God for Jesus

Your child heard that "Jesus loves me." Sing the song "Jesus Loves Me" with your child.

Questions for Older Preschoolers (3-5):

Session Title: God Sent Jesus

Your child learned that God sent His Son Jesus because He loved us. Take time to say a thank-you prayer with your child to thank God for His love.

Questions for Children:

Youth studied about the hope God held out to His people. Say: God promised hope to Israel. Can you think of some Bible promises God makes to us today?

Questions for Youth:

For what is a plumb line used? What is God's message to us through the plumb line? How does the Bible compare with the plumb line? (Plumb line is the standard by which a vertical wall is judged; the Bible presents the standard by which we are judged.)

Chapter 9

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Visions of Destruction

Amos 8:1—9:10

Among the Vatican marvels in Rome is the famed Sistine Chapel. Renowned sculptor and artist Michelangelo decorated its ceiling and walls with painted frescoes in 1508-12. As a teenager I visited the chapel and remember the wondrous images that commanded my attention.

Neither my untrained eye nor the art scholar realized that centuries of accumulating grime had distorted the original colors of the artist's brush. A painstaking process of restoration in 1980-92 revealed a different Sistine Chapel. Modern scholars believed that Michelangelo painted the chapel with somber colors, but the removal of layers of soot showed that the ceiling and walls were alive with radiant hues.

God also used brilliant colors—life and prosperity—to create the ancient nation of Israel. But centuries of religious corruption and social abuse soiled what God had made. Now the Lord declared that a reformation process was required to restore Israel to its once-beautiful sight. Amos learned through visions that the Artist Himself would purge Israel of its sins.

This chapter covers the last two of the five visions that the Lord gave to Amos (7:1—9:10). All five visions are interrelated as shown by their recurring themes and language. These five visions shaped the content of Amos's various messages that are in his book.

This connection between vision and sermon showed that Amos's prophecies came from the Lord, not from his own imagination. Consequently, the eighth-century

prophet conveyed a message that went beyond his own times to our own, because he spoke the eternal, universal word of God.

The first and second visions, the locust plague and the drought (7:1-6), form a pair that show God's temporary delay in His judgment. In each the prophet interceded for the people, and God relented. Unlike these two, the subsequent pair of visions, the plumb line (7:7-9) and summer fruit (8:1-3), had no element of mercy. These two revelations declared the certainty of the coming judgment.

The final revelation, the temple altar, does not have a matching vision (9:1-10). Without a parallel vision, it stands alone in the group of five and brings to a climax what the previous visions had predicted. In the vision, the prophet anticipated the collapse of the temple crushing the people at worship. This depicted God's wrath against Israel's shallow religion. Sacred places would not exempt Israel from the Lord's judgment. On the contrary, the people's empty religious life contributed to their guilt.

Although the last two visions (summer fruit and altar) severely rebuked the nation, they still held out a message of hope for future generations. God tempered His judgment by promising, "I will not totally destroy" the nation (9:8). With God there was always hope, even in the midst of purging. Today that hope shines brighter, since we know the full revelation of God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ (1 John 2:1-2).

VISION OF SUMMER FRUIT (8:1-14)

The vision of summer fruit (8:1-3) prompted the prophet to deliver a stirring message in which he described the end of Israel (8:4-14). The intended audience was not stated. Amos probably spoke against the wealthy aristocracy, particularly its merchants who abused the penniless through fraud.

Amos was not attacking a social class in order to change the existing social structure. Rather, he con-

demned the evil “deeds” of the powerful who took unfair advantage of the social system (8:7).

The Vision (8:1-3)

In the vision, God “showed” the prophet a “basket of summer fruit.” As in the previous visions, God interpreted its meaning to the prophet. The vision meant that “the end has come” for the northern tribes.

A wordplay linked the vision and its interpretation. The Hebrew words translated “summer fruit” and “end” are similar in sound. *The New International Version* has translated both words as “ripe” to show the connection. The meaning is clear: Israel was like over-ripe fruit because of sin. The end of the nation was at hand.

The image of the basket containing gathered fruit symbolized a completed harvest. Summer fruit included grapes, dates, and figs. Farmers harvested the summer fruit in August, which was near the close of the agricultural year.¹ August fruits signaled the end of summer and the beginning of the final season of harvest in the fall months.² Amos’s vision declared the immediate end of the nation.

In spite of this dreaded message, God continued to refer to the nation as “My people Israel.” This same expression occurred in the vision of the plumb line (7:8) and in Amos’s confrontation at Bethel with Amaziah (7:15). “My people Israel” indicated that God still recognized the people as His special covenant possession. This explained the reason He would not exterminate the nation. He would use the Assyrian invasion to purge Israel of “sinners” (9:10).

Another connection of this vision with that of the plumb line is the repeated phrase: “I will spare them no longer” (8:2; 7:8). By “no longer” the passage inferred that God had preserved the nation on previous occasions. This was the effect of the first two visions in

If you were to give an object lesson on the condition of our country today, what image would you use?

**On the "day"
of God's coming
He will finally
and utterly
destroy the
wicked.**

.....

which God delayed His judgment (7:1-9). In 743 B.C., for instance, King Menahem averted total disaster by paying heavy tribute. But now, the Lord declared, there would be no escape for Samaria.

Next, the interpretation of the vision alluded to the celebration of harvest. God declared that festive "songs of the palace" would become times of mourning (8:3). The season's harvest ended with thanksgiving celebrations. Songs of "wailing" would replace their merriment because of the numerous "corpses in every place." Theirs would be a harvest of death!

Reference to the "songs of the palace" echoed Amos's earlier condemnations against the callous rich for their lavish lifestyles while many suffered in grinding poverty. *Palace* also may be translated "temple" and thus would refer to professional temple singers.

When would this horrible "end" occur? "In that day" repeatedly appears in this judgment speech (8:3,9,11, 13), pointing to the terrible "day of the LORD" (5:18-20) as the fulfillment of this prophecy. This would be the "day" of God's coming when He would finally and utterly destroy the wicked.

The Mourning (8:4-10)

Following the vision and its interpretation, the prophet announced his message by calling his audience to attention ("Hear"). This was typical of how Amos began his preaching (see 3:1; 4:1; 5:1; 7:16). This message repeats his earlier condemnation against Israel's abusive powers (2:6-8). Disaster would come because of unbridled greed and oppression (8:4-6).

Amos described the actions of the offenders. They "trample" the poor, and they "do away" with the "humble" or destitute (8:4). *Trample* vividly depicted how barbarously they mistreated the weak, vulnerable people with no power, no recourse. *Do away* means "destroy" or "terminate."

Amos detailed their crimes by quoting from the culprits themselves (8:5-6). The merchants viewed holy

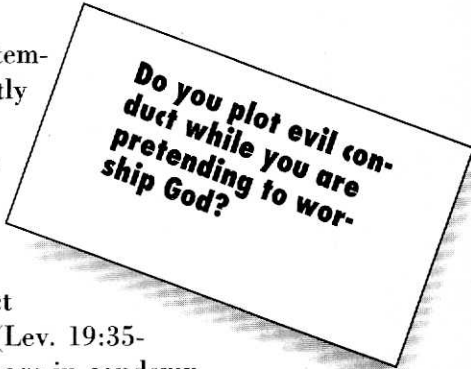
days, such as the "new moon" and "Sabbath," as hindrances to their daily business. "New moon" celebrations occurred each month. "Sabbath" observance was a weekly day of worship. Sabbath law prohibited work, which included the sale of wares. The people observed the customs of the Sabbath, but all the while they yearned to return to their greedy enterprises. May we never contemplate evil desires while sitting arrogantly in the pews of our church!

Amos described the immoral way in which they carried on their business (8:6). They sold inferior grain ("refuse") at inflated prices by misweighing it. Their actions were a direct offense against God's commandments (Lev. 19:35-36). Scripture uses the strongest language in condemning such deceit as an "abomination" to the Lord (Prov. 11:1).

Though scams aimed at gaining the "quick buck" abound, honesty is still the best policy. A law-enforcement "sting" operation caught more than 100 people who faked automobile injuries in order to profit from insurance claims. In the sting, a car hit a city bus in the rear. Cameras recorded people secretly boarding the bus after the collision. Later, they emerged from the bus as though injured.

Some individuals in Amos's day, and in ours, made cheating their routine way of doing business. For them, more than a hidden camera recorded their deeds. God's "eyes" were against them (9:4). Deceit in tongue or practice shows that we have no knowledge of God's ways.

To add to their corruption, the people of Israel utilized their unjust gain for vile purposes. Their goal was to enslave. They bought the "helpless for money" and the "needy for a pair of sandals" (8:6). *Pair of sandals* can mean a meager sum or refer to the barter system used in the marketplace. Ancient commerce sometimes



Do you plot evil conduct while you are pretending to worship God?

involved the exchange of a sandal as a symbolic gesture of purchase (Ruth 4:7).

Amos's charge against the merchants was their abuse of debtor slavery. A family member was sometimes sold into slavery to pay debts. While Amos did not give specifics, clearly he condemned the powerful for somehow taking advantage of the poor people's desperate conditions.

As a result of such evil "deeds," the Lord took a personal oath, vowing "by the pride of Jacob" to bring judgment. The expression "pride of Jacob" (8:7) is another reference to God Himself as in previous oaths (see 4:2; 6:8), showing that the pledge of judgment is guaranteed by His own character. It echoes the language of 6:8: "I [God] loathe the arrogance [pride] of Jacob." By this allusion, the prophet mocked Israel's claims on the Lord as its "pride" when, on the contrary, He hated their religious "arrogance."

The Lord wants kingdom builders. Whose kingdom are we building? Our own kingdom? We are tempted to invest all our energies in the families we create, the businesses we produce, and the pleasures we enjoy.

Israel's leaders had built their kingdom on selfishness. Their success resulted in their ruin. As Christians, our purpose is to build God's kingdom. Jesus said, "He who has lost his life for My sake shall find it" (Matt. 10:39). Jesus' agenda must become our agenda.

Amos then turned to the coming catastrophe itself (8:8-10). First, the land would "quake" and then flood as when the "Nile of Egypt" rose, engulfing the land. Such an earthquake was probably taken as evidence of the fulfillment of Amos's prophecies (1:1).

Second, the sun would descend at noonday, leaving the land enveloped in darkness. A solar eclipse occurred in 763 B.C. which may have prompted this analogy of God's coming judgment.³

Third, the prophet warned that the inhabitants would "mourn" because of the loss of their lands. God would

**The Lord wants
"kingdom"
builders. Whose
kingdom are
you building?**

.....

transform their "festivals" into "mourning." The land with its luscious produce provided the rich the extravagant lifestyle that they flaunted. God pledged to take away their source of revenue and leave them as refugees.

Their "mourning" would be like the intense weeping over the dead. Their "songs" would become "lamentation," as a funeral dirge. They would wear "sackcloth" instead of expensive finery. "Baldness" would exhibit their depth of shame and remorse (Isa. 3:24).

Finally, Amos described the severity of their mourning. Their loss would be as painful as a parent grieving over the death of an "only son."

**The wages of sin is death.—
Romans 3:23**

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The Hunger (8:11-14)

Not only would the people suffer the loss of family and possessions, but they would experience an even greater misfortune. They would hunger for "the words of the Lord" but without satisfaction. "Days are coming," predicted Amos, when the prophets would be silent.

In ancient warfare, famine was a consequence of a prolonged siege. For armies to surround a walled citadel and starve out its inhabitants was commonplace. Utilizing this analogy, Amos foresaw that with the siege also would come a spiritual "famine."

The people would search for the prophetic "word of the LORD" (8:12). Their search would be thorough, but they would "stagger from sea to sea" and "from the north even to the east" without success. This search was a contrast to the actions taken by the Bethel priest, Amaziah, who had hindered Amos's preaching. The Israelites had established a history of rejecting the prophets.

Yet, when the Assyrian crisis would occur, Amos foresaw a renewed desire for God's Word. No doubt, the "word" they would seek was a message of deliverance. They would want a fresh word from God concerning their contemporary situation.

In the same way today, people want to hear a rele-

A saying during wartime is: "There are no atheists in foxholes." What does this mean? What are some other examples of such a "crisis mentality"?

vant message from God when a crisis occurs. But like the people of Amos's times, they do not always know where to turn for authentic spiritual guidance. Many times it is simply too late to avert disaster.

God's Word feeds our souls. Have you ever been famished after a hard day at work or play? Carrot sticks won't do. Load up the chicken, "taters," and peas—followed by a piece of warm pie slowly drowning in vanilla ice cream. Common sense tells us to feed our bodies with good food, but our souls often go undernourished.

How can we possibly meet the demands of our spiritual lives without the banquet table of God's Word?

Do we try to get by with as little reading of the Bible as possible? If so, we will not have the reserves we need to face the trials that inevitably come. The psalmist prayed, "Strengthen me according to Thy word" (Ps. 119:28).

"In that day," Amos announced, the victims of the siege would include the "beautiful virgins" and "young men" (8:13). These were the young and hearty who were most likely to survive the trials of war. Amos expected the majority of the population, young and old, to perish.

In concluding his message, the prophet ridiculed the idolaters who turned to their false gods in the hope of escaping the judgment (8:14). Amos named specifically the popular sanctuaries of Samaria, Dan, and Beersheba.

He quoted the oaths the idolaters made to their gods. First, he mocked those who vowed "by the guilt of Samaria" (8:14). Guilt was the common term for "wrong" or "trespass." Here, the prophet probably substituted *guilt* for the name of the calf deity worshiped at Samaria. Thus he mocked their "guilt" (idolatry) whereby the worshippers themselves became guilty in God's eyes.

Second, he ridiculed people who swore by the calf shrine in Dan: "As your god lives, O Dan" (8:14). Like Bethel, the city had a long history of idolatrous worship (Judg. 18:14-20,31; 1 Kings 12:28-29). Yet, their "god" had never lived, did not live, and never would live. The coming disaster would prove their misplaced trust.

Finally, the passage also condemned persons who vowed "as the way of Beersheba lives" (8:14). This expression is difficult since we would expect the name of a pagan deity in the oath. The traditional reading "way" is nevertheless sound when taken as a reference to their religious pilgrimages (5:5).⁴

What would be Israel's "end"? Amos predicted that the idolators would "fall and not rise again." Rise was used later by the prophet to indicate the future restoration of God's people (9:11, "raise"). In this passage, Amos focused on the destruction of the nation. Only after the visions of doom had been realized would the Lord resurrect Israel (9:11-15).

*In what "gods" do
people misplace
their trust today?*

VISION OF THE ALTAR (9:1-10)

The final vision portrayed the Lord standing beside the altar of worship. In the vision, the temple's altar was crushed, and the falling debris killed the people who were worshipping.

Certainty of Destruction (9:1-4)

The prophet "saw" the "Lord" stationed "beside the altar." The definite article (the) with "altar" indicated that this was a specific altar. Probably it was the altar at Bethel where Amos confronted the priest Amaziah. In 3:14 the prophet had predicted God's judgment against the "altars of Bethel."

Amos heard the Lord give two exhortations: "Smite the capitals" of the temple, and "break them on the heads of them all." The identity of the person or agent who carried out the command for destruction is not specified. Whether the prophet himself or another was



Amos 9:3: "Though they hide on the summit of Carmel, I will search them out and take them from there."

to carry out the task, the point was that God initiated the devastation.

In the vision, the prophet saw the roof of the temple collapsing upon the people. They could not hide from God's judgment in their places of worship. Perhaps the destruction was the result of the earthquake that Amos had earlier announced (8:8; 9:5). The scene is reminiscent of Samson who pulled down the temple, killing the hated Philistines (Judg. 16:26-30).

Furthermore, God promised to "slay by the sword" any who escaped the falling debris. Amos described how the Lord would hunt down the fugitives wherever they might hide (9:2-4). These survivors would flee to the extremities of the universe, but God's search for them was comprehensive.

First, some would try to hide below in "Sheol" or high above in "heaven," but neither place guaranteed escape. *Sheol* is the English transliteration (not translation) of the Hebrew word (the KJV uses "hell"; the



NIV, “grave”). The precise meaning of the word is determined by its context. Here, it seems to mean the depths of the earth. “Heaven,” its opposite direction, pointed to the skies.

Second, others would hide “on the summit of Carmel” or “on the floor of the sea.”

“Carmel” is a line of mountains about 15 miles of which extend from central Palestine westward to the Mediterranean Sea. Probably the “floor of the sea” referred to the Mediterranean. God would “take them” from the many caves of Carmel or send the “serpent” to strike them.

Finally, some fugitives would hope for shelter in the “captivity” itself (9:4). They probably considered themselves safe in faraway Assyria. After all, Assyria was the domain of the god Asshur. But even there God would “command the sword” to kill them. No one can hide from God.

Thus, because the people chose “evil,” the Lord

Why do some people find comfort in the presence of God and others find fear?

would "set My eyes against them for evil and not good."

For the Christian, as with the psalmist (139:8), the eternal presence of God is a comfort. Nothing can separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8:38-39). But for the wicked, as with these terrified fugitives, God's powerful presence is the unbeliever's fearful dread come true.

The Awesome God of Destruction (9:5-6)

In these verses, the prophet celebrated the glorious might of the Lord. The Lord was not only willing but was able to accomplish such a widespread devastation.

Amos identified God as the royal Commander over all authorities, "the Lord GOD of hosts" (9:5). He was the One "who touches," "who builds," and "who calls." By these actions, the prophet showed that God was active in the world and thus in the national life of Israel.

First, the prophet spoke of God's impact on the earth. He need only "touch" the earth, and "it melts." The magnitude of God is too great for the earth; it cannot withstand His presence. This may have referred to the earthquake that God used to bring down the temple completely.

Second, God "builds" His abode in the "heavens." Here, Amos revealed God as a Master Builder who constructed His citadel beyond the range of human access. His is an invincible fortress. From heaven, He controls the earth.

Third, the Lord "calls for the waters of the sea" and "pours them out" upon the earth. Ancient people feared the mysterious and threatening "seas," but God ruled over the raging waters. To God they were merely servants who answered His call.

Who was this mighty God? "The LORD is His name," exclaimed the prophet (9:6). *LORD*, when spelled with small capital letters, is the translation of the name of God, "Yahweh." The 1901 edition of the *American Standard Version* translated this name as "Jehovah."

Yahweh is the personal, covenant name of God (Ex.

3:14-15). Amos repeatedly identified “Yahweh” as Israel’s God in his songs of praise, because he wanted to celebrate the Lord as the Master of the universe, who also was Israel’s covenant Savior.

Today, we do not address the Lord in prayer as “Yahweh” (or “Jehovah”) as we find in the Old Testament. Jesus taught His disciples to address God as “Father” (Matt. 6:9; 7:11). *Father* reflects the intimacy Christians enjoy with God. Our prayers depend on the authority of Christ’s name (Matt. 18:19; John 14:13-14).

Of what significance is the name by which we address God in prayer?

Reason for Destruction (9:7-10)

The people mistakenly felt secure since God had delivered their ancestors from Egypt and founded them as a nation (see. 2:9-10; 3:1-2). Here the prophet explained the reason Israel’s relationship with the Lord in the past did not exempt them from judgment.

The Lord asked two rhetorical questions of Israel: First, “Are you not as the sons of Ethiopia to Me?” By this the Lord meant that He would judge Israel on the same moral basis as any other people. Second, did not God also bring up the “Philistines” from “Caphtor” and the “Arameans” from “Kir” as He did “Israel” from “Egypt”? God founded these nations too, but He condemned them for their wicked brutality (1:5-8). Israel’s past deliverance was not a guarantee for future security.

Because of the “sinful nation,” God declared that His eye was against it. Nevertheless, the prophecy revealed that the Lord would “not totally destroy the house of Jacob” (9:8). God would deliver a “remnant” (5:15).

This passage reflects the tension that we sometimes find in the Old Testament. On the one hand, God promised Israel a blessed future; yet, on the other hand, He also severely chastened His people. How can we better understand these apparently opposite ideas?

To recall that God dealt with Israel at two levels is

helpful. First, God founded Israel as a political state among a world of nations. Second, Israel was also the center of God's spiritual kingdom in the world. He created it as a "holy kingdom" to impact the world spiritually (Ex. 19:6).

When Israel failed spiritually, God disciplined the nation so as to purge the wicked from among the people. He would "shake" the nation as grain is caught by a "sieve" (9:9). Harvesters used a mesh to separate eatable grain from dirt and chaff. God would use the judgment to separate "all the sinners" (9:10).

When we read Amos's sermons, we would not be human if we did not have a sense of awesome fear toward God. But the Scriptures abound with "Fear not!"

As we will see in the final section of our study (9:11-15), God promised to revive His work with Israel. But this renewed work would focus on the spiritual contribution of the people. In particular, Jesus Christ would accomplish for God's spiritual kingdom what Israel as a nation could not achieve.

¹O. Borowski, "Harvests, Harvesting," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 3, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 63-64.

²R. S. Cripps, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Amos* (London: SPCK, 1955), 240.

³O. Bussey, "Amos," *The New Bible Commentary*, eds. F. Davidson et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 708.

⁴D. A. Hubbard, *Joel and Amos* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1989), 225.

Chapter 10

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God's People Restored

Amos 9:11-15

If you enjoy a crisp, tasty apple, you may choose the delectable Granny Smith apple. These delightful apples were named after Maria Ann Smith, who lived in New South Wales, Australia. She grew the first of her apples in 1869 from the seeds of rotting apples that she retrieved from a gin barrel.

Sometimes surprising new beginnings can come from spoiled remains. Although the Northern Kingdom was rotten because of its wicked practices, it was not rotten to the core. In the concluding message of the Book of Amos, God promised to raise from among the fallen nation a new people for Himself. To accomplish this, the Lord would restore the ruling house of King David (9:11-12) and return the people to their land (9:13-15).

This future restoration of Israel contrasts strikingly to the previous vision (9:1-10) where the prophet described the destruction of the nation. The 9:11-15 passage shows that God can reverse the destiny of a people or an individual when they repent and trust Him. God wants to correct, not consume.

From elsewhere in the Old Testament, such as Psalms and the Prophets, we learn more about this future kingdom. Amos's contemporaries, Isaiah and Micah, described a future descendant of King David who would save the humble and establish a worldwide kingdom (Isa. 9:6-7; Mic. 5:1-5a). The apostles in the New Testament identified this remarkable King as Jesus of Nazareth (see Acts 2:22-36).

Amos's message reached far beyond his times to our

**AND YOU,
BETHLEHEM . . . OUT
OF YOU SHALL COME
FORTH A RULER,
WHO WILL SHEPHERD
MY PEOPLE
ISRAEL.—Matthew
2:6**

.....

very day. All Christians are the recipients of God's promises, because they have trusted in Israel's King. As we read Amos's prophecies, we can rejoice that we are seeing their fulfillment today as God adds to His church through our Lord Jesus Christ, "the son of David" (Matt. 1:1).

RESTORING THE KINGDOM OF DAVID (9:11-12)

Unless we have paid careful attention to earlier hints (5:3,14-15), we are caught off guard by the optimism of the prophet in these final verses. To this point in the prophecy, the focus had centered on the harsh realities of Israel's sins and coming judgment.

The expectation of a restored kingdom was not new. It was common among the prophets who preached before Israel and Judah were taken into exile. Even in the nation's darkest hours, the prophets had a message of future hope. Their message of doom always supposed that repentance would bring a day of salvation. Amos's final message of hope was not out of place.

**God would yet
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ture for the
broken nation.**

Also, the prophets did not originate the idea of a future glorious kingdom. Before Amos's time, the psalms portrayed God's anointed King ruling over all nations (Pss. 2; 72). Amos's final word simply continued the tradition that God would yet accomplish a marvelous future for the broken nation.

What made Amos's message special was that he was among the first, if not the first prophet, to relate this kingdom to the "day of the LORD" (5:18). This meant that Amos expected Israel's salvation to be the climactic event at the end of history. This explains the excitement generated by the preaching of Jesus who announced the presence of the "kingdom of God" (Mark 1:14-15).

Rebuilding David's Reign (9:11)

As in previous prophecies, Amos identified the time of the future restoration by the obscure "in that day." This expression corresponded to the "day of the LORD" (5:18-20) when God would rain down destruction, but

here it announced a day of salvation.

This future "day" would include a series of events. First, on the negative side, would be God's purging of the nation by its destruction. And second, on the positive side, a restoration would follow. This renewed work would establish a nation mightier than ever before. This future kingdom would include a reunited Israel and Judah under the reign of David's family descendant. Also, more importantly, it would include the Gentiles as well as the Hebrews.

From a historical perspective, we can point to the Assyrian exile as the "day" of judgment against Israel that Amos predicted (722 B.C.). The "remnant of Joseph" (5:15) survived the holocaust and offered future hope for a restored people. Later followed the exile of the southern state Judah under the rule of the Babylonians (586 B.C.). We recall that the Jews returned from Babylon and had a limited restoration under the governors Zerubbabel and Nehemiah (around 538-430 B.C.).

But this historical restoration did not meet the lofty descriptions presented by the prophets, such as this passage by Amos. A future restoration remained that would not be fulfilled until the coming of Jesus as Israel's Christ (Messiah).

The early church understood that the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ initiated the kingdom of God as predicted by the prophets. The apostle James interpreted Amos's prediction of a renewed kingdom as fulfilled in the preaching of the gospel and the expansion of the church (Acts 15:13-18).

Amos emphasized the role of God in bringing to pass this revival of the nation (9:11-15). "I will raise up the fallen booth of David" is the first of four places where God spoke in the first person ("I"). The miraculous renewal painted by the prophet could not occur except by the intervention of the Lord. Israel's future salvation would

**Read Acts 15:13-18
to see how James
interpreted Amos
9:12.**

not be the result of human ingenuity or government.

Reference to Israel as "the fallen booth of David" is surprising, because Amos preached to the Northern Kingdom, which did not honor Jerusalem's kings. Since the civil rebellion led by Jeroboam I two centuries earlier (931 B.C.), no descendant of David had ruled in the north.

Some scholars think the "booth of David" referred only to the Southern Kingdom. Amos's prophecy, though, foresaw an era when once again Israel would be under the dynasty of David's offspring. Earlier in Israel's history the northern tribes gladly claimed the rule of David (2 Sam. 19:43). The fame of David continued among the northern tribes (see Amos 6:5). Amos envisioned a day of national reunion.

The "booth" was a lean-to or hut. The same term described the temporary shelter used by the Israelites in the wilderness wanderings. These small "booths" were constructed of branches and leaves.

Reference to the nation as a booth is a contrast to Amos's earlier descriptions "house of Jacob" (9:8) and "house of Israel" (9:9). The destruction of the nation would reduce the country from a house to a flimsy shack. From the viewpoint of the prophecy, the feeble shelter had already "fallen" over by the winds of God's judgment (5:2; 8:14).

The Lord promised to "wall up its breaches," "raise up its ruins," and "rebuild" the nation "as in the days of old." "Days of old" looked back to the golden past when the tribes were united under David and Solomon.

However, Amos spoke primarily of a future spiritual kingdom, not a political one. The prospects for a restoration depended on a spiritual renewal.

How does a nation go about experiencing a spiritual renewal? (See 2 Chron. 7:14.)

Extending David's Reign (9:12)

The purpose of this future glory was "that they [Israel]

may possess the remnant of Edom." Why did Amos specify Edom? Edom was probably representative of the Gentiles in general. This is shown by the parallel phrase "all the nations" in the following line of 9:12.

**Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations.—
Matthew 28:19**

Edom was a traditional enemy of Israel, although the Edomites were relatives of the Hebrews. Their father was Esau, the twin brother of Jacob. The Lord chose Jacob, not Esau, for the promised blessings. Edom represented the Gentiles with whom God had not made a covenant of promise.

David had conquered the Edomites (2 Sam. 8:14), but the Lord was not speaking of a future military campaign. Rather, God described the nations as those "who are called by My name." This same wording is used in the Old Testament for Israel (Isa. 43:5-7), but here amazingly God referred to the Gentiles. God would expand the "booth of David" to include Gentile nations.

Amos's prediction of the inclusion of the Gentiles was not new. Other prophets foresaw a day when the Lord's salvation would include all the nations (Isa. 49:6). This echoed the original purposes of God who called Abraham to be a vehicle of blessing for all peoples (Gen. 12:1-3).

What is our role in fulfilling the prophecy that God's salvation includes all nations?

Persons who submitted to the Lord's anointed King would become a part of the kingdom. The purpose then of resurrecting the "booth of David" was not for Israel's benefit solely, not even primarily. This aspect of Amos's prophecy probably encouraged the apostle James's application of the passage to the early church as it grew in Gentile converts (Acts 15).

A better understanding of how James interpreted Amos will guide us in applying the message for today. A controversy arose among the early Christians concerning circumcision. Some Christian Jews argued that Gentile converts to Christianity had to be circumcised, but others disputed this. The church met in Jerusalem

(A.D. 49) to resolve the issue.

The apostle Peter testified that God was saving the Gentiles without the rite of circumcision. After Paul and Barnabas gave similar evidence from their missionary experiences, James rose to speak. He appealed to Scripture by quoting Amos 9:11-12 as confirming evidence (Acts 15:16-18). A significant detail in James's quotation of the Amos passage bears a closer look. James quoted from the Greek version (Septuagint) that read "mankind" rather than "Edom," which is in the Hebrew text. The Greek translation expressed clearly the meaning of "Edom" as representing all peoples.

For James, Amos's prophecy meant that God would reestablish His King whereby all nations ("mankind") would have salvation. The apostle understood that Jesus as the Son of David fulfilled the prophecy by bringing salvation to Jews and Gentiles alike.

The kingdom includes all peoples. Remarkably the opening chapter of Amos condemned the nations, and the final chapter predicted their salvation. At first, it was difficult for Jewish Christians, such as the apostle Peter, to accept the Gentiles as equal partners in the kingdom (Acts 10—11). This kind of prejudice remains a sad feature of some churches today.

God's plan for saving the world bursts the bounds of Europe and North America. Among the nations of the world are those peoples who once lived in spiritual darkness but now live in His glorious light (1 Pet. 2:9-10). If you are a non-Jew, as I am, we must remember that the gospel came to us as Gentiles by persons who were willing to set aside petty differences. Paul brought the gospel to Europe, and we are the beneficiaries of his missionary vision.

We also are a part of the blossoming kingdom of God as the Lord gathers the restored "booth of David." This is the message we are commissioned in the church to carry to the world (Acts 1:8). When we witness to others individually or when we give of our resources for missions around the world, we are participating in



“The plowman will overtake the reaper.”—Amos 9:13

God’s kingdom building.

Do we share Amos’s vision? He foresaw the kingdom made up of all peoples of every language and family.

If we take Amos’s vision seriously, we will show prayerful and financial concern for the 350 million persons in the world who have been virtually ignored by the church. Among them, for instance, is the Rejang people of Indonesia who have only a few hundred Christians among a population of 1.25 million. They have no copy of the Scriptures and no Christian broadcasting in their Rejang language.¹ Will we strive to see that they too are a part of the “booth of David”?

RESTORING THE PEOPLE TO THE LAND (9:13-15)

The future restoration included the land, its cities, and the return of God’s people. The penalty for Israel’s sins was exile, but in the future God would reverse the curse. Once again the land would flourish, and the cities would experience renewal (9:13-14). Finally, the

Lord promised to reestablish the people in the security of their land (9:15).

Planting Fields (9:13)

Amos announced that brighter “days are coming.” As we saw earlier, “day” signaled the judgment of God. But here, the announcement heralded the coming of deliverance. Amos described the future deliverance in terms of abounding fields with flourishing crops and newly rebuilt cities (9:14).

By using this imagery, the prophecy contrasted God’s future salvation to the judgment in Amos’s day. The prophet had predicted that God’s judgment would result in the loss of vineyards (5:11,16-17). Also, the Assyrians would destroy the chief cities (3:9). During the age of salvation, though, these signs of condemnation would be transformed into beacons of blessing.

God promised to bless the land with an unprecedented prosperity. So great would be the yield of crops that the plowman would “overtake” the harvester who had not yet completed harvesting the barley. Amos used a play on the word *overtake* in his message. *Overtake* occurred in his previous description of coming judgment (9:10). Whereas *judgment* meant that calamity would overtake the wicked, God’s future blessing meant the reversal of that calamity.

Also, Amos portrayed the future blessing of the land by its astonishing production of wine. The processing of grapes for wine would go beyond the customary period and overlap with the following planting season. It will be as though the mountains themselves “drip sweet wine.”

Sin has its way of robbing us of the abundant life that God intends for us, but God has a way of restoring our losses. The people of Israel suffered the loss of family and homeland because of their wayward life. Still, the Lord is rich in mercy toward the repentant and brokenhearted. Perhaps your life has been shattered by a sinful choice. Take heart; the Lord wants to forgive and to restore you.

**God promised
to bless the
land with an
unprecedented
prosperity.**

.....

Sometimes Christian living results in personal losses as a result of faithful commitment. This does not go unnoticed by the Lord. He will come bearing rewards for the faithful (Rev. 22:12). Paul encouraged: "For [our] momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17).

Perhaps your life has been shattered by a sinful choice. Take heart; the Lord wants to forgive and to restore you.

.....

Planting Cities (9:14)

The prophet predicted the renewal of the people and Israel's cities. The Lord referred to them as "My people Israel," echoing the language of God's covenant with Moses (Ex. 6:7).

After release from exile, "they will rebuild" the ruins of their cities. *Rebuild* is the same word used earlier where God promised to "rebuild" the reign of David (9:11). Thus, by establishing the dynasty of David, the Lord would enable the people to rebuild their homes.

Also, they would "plant vineyards" and "make gardens." The exile had robbed the wicked of their ill-gotten homes and cultivated crops. Because they had acquired them unjustly, God took them away. For those who repented God would graciously provide a new start. This was the kingdom message of Jesus, offering a new beginning to all people who would repent (Matt. 4:23).

Planting People (9:15)

The final verse of Amos's hard-hitting prophecies of exile concludes the book with the inspiring announcement of Israel's return. The people would reinhabit "their land," a phrase that occurs twice in 9:15.

God promised to "plant" the people in their homeland. *Plant* plays on the idea in the previous verse where God promised to "plant" vineyards. The Lord pledged to prosper the land and to prosper the people. But there is more. The people "will not again be rooted out." The Lord assured the repentant people a secure home in the land of their fathers.

**Faithful is he
that calleth
you, who also
will do it.—1
Thess. 5:24,
KJV**

.....

This land will be what God “has given them.” This expression brought to mind the promises of their fathers (see Deut. 34:4) and the possession of the land under Joshua long ago (Josh. 21:43-45).

God obligated Himself to accomplish this in behalf of His people. He alone could return, rebuild, and restore the repentant. That future day would mean the realization of the ancient promises (1 Thess. 5:24, KJV).

This would happen only when God established the eternal reign of David’s greater Son. This reestablishment of David’s throne did not occur after the exile until the coming of Jesus, who instituted a spiritual and an eternal kingdom. The rule of the house of David in the days of ancient Israel was a foregleam of the eternal, universal dominion of God in Christ.

Historically, some 200 years after Amos’s time (538 B.C.), the people under a descendant of David named Zerubbabel returned to the land (Ezra 1—6). This return fulfilled in part the prophets’ expectations of a renewed Israel, but it only foreshadowed the ultimate fulfillment of these promises by the Messiah, the anointed Son of God.

God had promised that through David’s offspring the eternal kingdom would be achieved (2 Sam. 7:13-16). Jesus alone fulfilled this role (Luke 1:32-33). This connection in the work of God’s salvation—from the promises of Abraham and of the prophets to the coming of Jesus—demonstrates the Lord’s central purpose for the ages: We as Christians are not incidental to God’s plan but are the object of His intentional love.

At the book’s end, the last words, “says the LORD your God,” capture what Amos had insisted from the outset. His preaching was the eternal word of God. What Amos had predicted concerning Israel’s destruction came to pass. This gave hope that what Amos had portrayed as Israel’s glorious future also would come true. We as the body of Christ show God’s faithfulness to this promise.

Jesus first entered human history to establish His

kingdom by taking on Himself at the cross the condemnation of us all. At His second coming, He will reign triumphantly over all the earth; and believers who have entrusted themselves to Him will join in that everlasting rule of God.

In this uncertain world, we can enjoy security. In spite of the hardships that the world presents, peace awaits people who trust Jesus' provision for them. The certainty of future blessing, as presented in God's Word, reassures us even as God's word through Amos and other prophets encouraged the Israelites to persevere in the dark days of exile.

We experience that inner tranquillity promised by God when we remember that we are secure in God's love and eternal salvation. Such a security comes from our confidence in the Lord's promises. When we live by faith and not by doubts, we reap the fruit of a peaceful heart and a productive life.

This is the challenge that the Book of Amos presents us today. Will we adhere to Amos's warning of judgment by turning from our sinful ways? Will we join the "remnant of Joseph" and seek the shelter of the "booth of David" by trusting in Jesus Christ?

¹David Barrett and Todd Johnson, eds., "The Rejang of Indonesia," *A.D. 2000 Global Monitor* 33 (July 1993), 3.

**Peace awaits
people who trust
Jesus' provision
for them.**

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Let's Review!

1. During what century did Amos prophesy?
2. What was Amos's hometown? His occupation?
3. Who was king of Israel during Amos's time?
4. To what city did Amos go to preach?
5. What is the key principle that underpinned Amos's message?
6. Of Amos's condemnations of the nations, why is the condemnation of Judah most alarming for us today?
7. For what sins did Amos so strongly condemn Israel?
8. What visions (object lessons) did God use in showing Amos Israel's condition?
9. What nation carried out Amos's prophecy as the destroyer of Israel?
10. What balance did Amos give to his prophecy that Israel would be destroyed?
11. What do you think is the central message of the Book of Amos?
12. As you reflect on your study of the Book of Amos, what is the most important teaching for you personally?

Answers: 1-8th; 2-Tekoa; herdsman and farmer; 3-Jeroboam; 4-Bethel; 5-God judges the nations on the basis of justice and morality; 6-Our Christian tradition gives us greater responsibility for our actions; 7-enslaving the poor, oppressing the weak, sexually abusing the defenseless, exploiting the needy, sinning presumptuously; 8-locusts, fire, plumbline, summer fruit, and the altar; 9-Assyria; 10-God would restore His people to their land; 11-Your response; 12-Your response.

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AMOS

Repentance or Ruin

by Kenneth Mathews

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