

Lessons from Amos

Key Thought: Acts of inhumanity are sins against God and will be judged accordingly.

Alion in Scripture often represents the king of the animal world. His appearance evokes irresistible strength and majesty as well as ferocity and destructive power. Even when not actively hunting, the lion can be heard, its roar audible for miles. Amos, a shepherd, was sent to the Israelites to warn them that he had heard a lion roar—and the lion was none other than their Lord! Moved by the Holy Spirit, the prophet Amos compared God's way of speaking to the nations, as well as to His special people, with the roaring of a lion (see Amos 1:2).

Amos was called to prophesy to the nations who committed crimes against humanity. He also was sent to a society where a privileged and religious people lived in peace and prosperity. Yet, this same people oppressed the poor and allowed for dishonest business and bribery in court. This week we will listen to what the Lord has to say about these despicable actions.

Crimes Against Humanity

Read Amos 1 and 2. Why does the Lord warn that punishment is coming?

The first two chapters in Amos' book contain seven prophecies against neighboring nations, followed by a prophecy against Israel. The foreign nations are not judged because they are Israel's enemies but because of their violations of universal human principles. Two things stand out in Amos' condemnation: the absence of loyalty and the absence of pity.

For instance, Tyre was a leading merchant city located on the Mediterranean coast north of Israel. Because of its almost impregnable island fortress, the city boasted of its security. Moreover, the leaders of Tyre secured peace treaties with several surrounding nations, such as the Philistines. The city was allied with Israel by a "treaty of brotherhood" during the reigns of David and Solomon (1 Kings 5:1, 12) and even of King Ahab (1 Kings 16:30-31). It is not surprising to read in 1 Kings 9:13 that Hiram, the king of Tyre, called Solomon "my brother."

Yet, the people of Tyre had violated the "covenant of brothers." Tyre was not condemned for taking away the captives, but for handing them over to Israel's enemies, the Edomites. Thus, the people of Tyre were responsible for the cruelties that these captives suffered at the hands of their enemies. From God's perspective, the person who assists and supports a crime is as guilty as the person who commits it.

Because God is all-sovereign, He holds the destiny of all the world in His hands. He has purposes and concerns that reach far beyond Israel's borders. The God of Israel is the Lord of all nations; all human history is His concern. He is the Creator God, who gives life to all, and all are accountable to Him.

Who among us does not bristle in pain at the incredible injustice we see? Were there no God, what hope would we have of justice ever being done? What does the promise, found throughout the Bible, of God bringing justice and judgment to the world mean to you? How can we learn to cling to that promise amid all the injustice that we see now?

Justice for the Oppressed

God's universal judgment is one of the central teachings found in Amos. In the beginning of his book, the prophet announces God's judgment on several of Israel's neighbors because of their crimes against humanity. Then, however, Amos boldly declares that God also will judge Israel. The anger of the Lord was directed not only at the nations but also at the people He had chosen. The people of Judah had rejected the Word of the Lord and had not kept His instructions.

At the same time, Amos dealt with Israel much more extensively than even Judah because she had broken God's covenant and committed so many sins. Israel's economic prosperity and political stability led to spiritual decay. This spiritual decay displayed itself in social injustice. In Israel, the rich exploited the poor, and the powerful exploited the weak. The rich cared only for themselves and their personal gain, even when it came at the expense and suffering of the poor (Not much has changed in a few thousand years, has it?).

In his preaching, Amos taught that there is a living God who cares about how we treat others. Justice is more than an idea or a norm. Justice is a divine concern. The prophet warned that Israel's stone houses, ivory-laid furniture, top quality food and drink, as well as the best body lotions—all would be destroyed.

Read Isaiah 58. In what ways does this chapter capture aspects of present truth? In what ways, though, is our message to the world much more than this?

The Bible clearly teaches that social justice should be a natural product of the gospel. As the Holy Spirit makes us more like Jesus, we learn to share God's concerns. The books of Moses insist on the fair treatment of foreigners, widows, and orphans (Exod. 22:21-24). The prophets speak of God's concern about the just and compassionate treatment of less privileged people (Isa. 58:6-7). The psalmist calls the God who lives in His holy dwelling "a father of the fatherless, a defender of widows" (Ps. 68:5, NKJV). Christ showed great concern for those who were rejected by society (Mark 7:24-30, John 4:7-26). The Lord's brother James calls on us to put our faith into action and help the needy (James 2:14-26). No follower of Christ can do anything less and really be a follower of Christ.

The Peril of Privilege

Amos' prophetic message was not intended to be restricted to the historical situation in Israel but to expand the scope of the message beyond Israel and Judah. In the Old Testament, Israel had a unique but not exclusive claim on God.

Read Amos 3:1-2. The Hebrew verb yada, "to know," which is used in verse 2, bears a special sense of intimacy. In Jeremiah 1:5, for example, God says that He "knew" the prophet and set him apart even before his birth. Such was the case with Israel. They were not just another nation among nations. Rather, God set them apart for a sacred divine purpose. They stood in special relationship with Him.

God Himself had chosen Israel and brought it out of slavery to freedom. The exodus from Egypt was the single most important event in the beginning of Israel's history as a nation. It set the stage for God's acts of redemption and the conquest of the land of Canaan. But Israel's strength and prosperity led to pride and complacency in regards to its privileged status as the Lord's chosen people.

Read Christ's statement from Luke 12:47-48. In what ways can we understand the principle He taught there: when great privileges in life are abused, they will be replaced by great penalties?

Under divine inspiration, the prophet warns that because the people of Israel are the Lord's elect, they particularly will be held accountable for their actions. The Lord is saying that Israel's unique relationship with God carries obligations, and punishment will result if those obligations are not fulfilled. In other words, Israel, as God's chosen people, is all the more liable to His judgments, because the privilege entails responsibility. Israel's election was not just to privileged status; they were called to be witnesses to the world about the Lord who had so blessed them.

"The professed churches of Christ in this generation are exalted to the highest privileges. The Lord has been revealed to us in ever-increasing light. Our privileges are far greater than were the privileges of God's ancient people."—Ellen G. White, *Christ Object Lessons*, p. 317. Think about all that we have been given as Seventh-day Adventists. Why should the responsibilities that come with these privileges make us tremble? Do they, or have we simply gotten used to them? Have we even become complacent about all that we have been given? If so, how can we change?

Israel's Rendezvous With God

"Prepare to meet thy God, O Israel" (Amos 4:12).

Chapter 4 of Amos begins with the description of Israel's sins, and it ends with the announcement of the day of reckoning. God makes His people especially accountable for the ways in which they live and treat others.

Amos has listed a series of natural disasters, any one of which should have been enough to turn the nation to God. The list is composed of seven disasters, the full measure of punishments for the breaking of God's covenant (in accordance with the words of Moses from Leviticus 26). Some of the disasters remind one of the plagues God sent against Egypt, while the description of the last calamity explicitly mentions the total destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

According to Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple, what should disasters normally lead people to do? 1 Kings 8:37-40.

The people of Israel did not behave like normal people anymore, and God found it impossible to get their attention. Moreover, God's judgments had resulted in the hardening of the people's hearts. Because the people failed to return to the Lord, Amos presented one last chance for repentance.

The final judgment is impending, but Amos does not specify what the judgment would be. The haunting uncertainty in Amos' words makes the threat of judgment even more ominous. Israel has failed to seek God, so God goes out to meet Israel. If punishment fails, will an encounter with God save?

Amos 4:12 begins with the words "thus will I do to you" (NKJV), which echo the traditional oath formula. This solemn statement calls for a response from Israel to prepare to meet its God as they did prior to God's appearance at Sinai (Exod. 19:11, 15).

Read carefully Amos 4:12-13. If, suddenly, you were to hear the warning, “Prepare to meet your God, O [your name here]”—what would be your response? What is your only hope? See Rom. 3:19-28.

The Pride That Leads to Fall

Read the book of Obadiah. What important moral and spiritual truths can we take away from this book?

Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament, and it reports on the prophetic vision of God’s judgment upon the land of Edom. The message of the book focuses on three issues: Edom’s arrogance (vss. 1-4), Edom’s coming humiliation (vss. 5-9), and Edom’s violence against Judah (vss. 10-14).

The Edomites were the descendants of Jacob’s brother Esau. The hostility between the Israelites and the Edomites goes back to the family feud between the twin brothers, who later became the fathers of the two nations. Yet, according to Genesis 33, the two brothers were later reconciled. Thus, the Israelites were commanded by God not to “abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother” (Deut. 23:7, NKJV).

In spite of this, the hostilities between the two nations continued for centuries. When Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and took its citizens into captivity, the Edomites not only rejoiced but even preyed on the fleeing Israelites and also helped to plunder Jerusalem (Ps. 137:7). For this reason the prophet Obadiah warned that Edom will be judged by their own standard: “As you have done, it shall be done to you” (Obadiah 15, NKJV). The Edomites did not behave as brothers toward the people of Judah in their worst hour but rather joined the enemy forces (Lam. 4:21-22).

The region that was occupied by Edom is located southeast of the Dead Sea. It is a mountainous land filled with high mountain peaks, sharp crags, caves, and clefts in which armies could hide. A number of Edomite cities were located in these nearly inaccessible sites. Sela (also known as Petra) was Edom’s capital city. The nation developed an arrogant confidence summed up in the question, “Who will bring me down to the ground?” (Obadiah 3, NKJV).

God holds responsible those who take advantage of others in their time of distress. Obadiah warned the proud people of Edom that God would bring humiliation upon their heads. There is no place to escape from the Lord (Amos 9:2-3). The coming day of the Lord will bring both judgment and salvation. Edom will drink God’s cup of wrath, while the fortunes of God’s people will be restored.

Further Study:

Read the following quotations and discuss how they help us to understand the messages from Amos 1-4 and Obadiah in a clearer way.

“From the beginnings of Israelite religion the belief that God had chosen this particular people to carry out His mission has been both a cornerstone of Hebrew faith and a refuge in moments of distress. And yet, the prophets felt that to many of their contemporaries this cornerstone was a stumbling block; this refuge, an escape. They had to remind the people that chosenness must not be mistaken as divine favoritism or immunity from chastisement, but, on the contrary, that it meant being more seriously exposed to divine judgment and chastisement. . . .

"Does chosenness mean that God is exclusively concerned with Israel? Does the Exodus from Egypt imply that God is involved only in the history of Israel and is totally oblivious of the fate of other nations?"—Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, pp. 32-33.

"With the defenses of the soul broken down, the misguided worshipers had no barrier against sin and yielded themselves to the evil passions of the human heart.

"Against the marked oppression, the flagrant injustice, the unwonted luxury and extravagance, the shameless feasting and drunkenness, the gross licentiousness and debauchery of their age, the prophets lifted their voices; but in vain were their protests, in vain their denunciation of sin. 'Him that rebuketh in the gate,' declared Amos, 'they hate, . . . and they abhor him that speaketh uprightly. "They afflict the just, they take a bribe, and they turn aside the poor in the gate from their right.' Amos 5:10, 12."—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 282.