

Introducing Amos

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Grab your Bibles and let's go to the book of Amos. I don't really know how to tell you to get there. If you'll go to Matthew and go back about 2/8 of an inch, somewhere right in there. It's in the minor prophets and it's only called a minor prophet because it's short, not because it's minor in any other way. The book of Amos. We'll be introducing the book. This might be a little academic, maybe a little tedious. I'll try not to let it be too much like that but we only introduce a book one time and surely we'll not be in this book as long as we were in Luke but it's quite an amazing book of the Bible and an amazing study and so could I exhort you this morning as your pastor to discipline yourself to be alert and take in the truth this morning? Don't be like this modern age that says we come on Sunday for a religious entertainment experience. That's not what church is. I'm challenging you to, I put a lot of work into what I'm giving you, I want you to put some work in making sure you receive it. Amen? Preaching is a two-way street so gird up the loins of your mind and say, "Lord, help us to get ready in our hearts for the truths you're going to teach us from the book of Amos."

Amos 1:1 and 2,

1 The words of Amos, who was among the shepherders from Tekoa, which he envisioned in visions concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake. 2 He said, "The LORD roars from Zion And from Jerusalem He utters His voice; And the shepherds' pasture grounds mourn, And the summit of Carmel dries up."

Here in chapter 1, Amos says, "The LORD roars from Zion." Then over in chapter 7, verse 2, he says, "How can Jacob stand, For he is small?" The Lord roars from Zion so how can Jacob stand, he is so small? I can answer that: he can't. When the Lord roars against you in judgment, you cannot stand and Jacob, the patriarch head representing the whole nation of Israel, cannot stand.

Now to begin this morning, first of all, I want to give you something of a primer on the Old Testament prophets. Let's remind ourselves of what the Old Testament prophets were all about. A primer on the Old Testament prophets. Two thoughts need to come to your mind when you think about what the Old Testament prophets were purposing to

accomplish as they came preaching primarily to the nation of Israel. Sub point 1 or A: they were calling rebels to repentance. Calling rebels to repentance. You see, God ordained the priesthood in the Old Testament as the office that would guard and maintain true spirituality and true religion in the country but man is fallen and Israel would begin to backslide and she would begin to rebel, and in this season of spiritual and moral decline, God raised up a new order, a new office called the office of prophets and these men would go directly to the people. They wouldn't go through the religious establishment because far too often, maybe you might say every time, the establishment itself was the rebel problem. The religious establishment itself was the center of the rebellion so the prophets bypassed them and went straight to the people, preaching to these rebels to repent.

Now, here are five things that you typically saw when the prophet came preaching not in any particular order. First of all: they would rebuke the prevalent sin among the people. Secondly, they would denounce the idolatries established in the land. Third, they would rebuke the self-righteousness typically shown in what one scholar calls, the self-pleasing religion that they would set up. Think about that. They designed their churches around what made them happy. I heard just in the last couple of days, "So-and-so goes to this church because it fits them." Bless God, you don't want to go to a church that fits you. That's self-pleasing religion. You actually want to go to a church that makes you uncomfortable from time to time because you want it to be God-centered and you know until you're glorified you're not fully God-centered. But that's the way they were. He would rebuke the self-pleasing religion. Fourthly, he would rebuke the heartless formality. In other words, very often and it's true in the days of Amos, that the people were very diligent and regular and punctual in checking off their religious works going through the ceremonies and the rituals, but their hearts were not in it. Their hearts were fleshly and in themselves and in only the pleasures of the flesh and the world. Then lastly, he gives the threat of impending judgment.

So that's generally what you find in all the prophetic books: rebuking prevalent sin, denouncing idolatry, rebuking self-righteousness, rebuking heartless formality and giving the threat of impending judgment. 2 Peter 1:21 reminds us, "for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." That's the key. These men believed and were confident God sent them with the message. They preached for all the people to repent and turn back to their forsaken God.

Well, not only did they call on rebels to repent, another primary function of the Old Testament prophets was to reaffirm the remnant. You see, no matter how rebellious or how ungodly, how much idolatry and wickedness Israel embraced and brought into her land, God always had a remnant. They were not perfect but they were repenters. They were humbled. They were grieved by what they saw in the nation. They still from their hearts were striving to be faithful of God. They were always a small group and they were those whom God will always preserve even through his judgment. Isaiah writes of this in Isaiah 37:31-32, "The surviving remnant of the house of Judah will again take root downward and bear fruit upward. For out of Jerusalem will go forth a remnant and out of Mount Zion survivors. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this." Now, here's the

point: God says, "I'm coming in judgment and it's going to be thorough but I am just as passionate to keep and restore my remnant as I am to judge the rebels."

So the prophet came in to preach to the remnant. Now, two sub points to this. One of the things he did for the remnant was he gave voice to their silenced convictions. He gave voice to that remnant's silenced, past tense, silenced convictions. In other words, the remnant was scoffed at. They were lied about. They were despised in the land and they were overall hated by the people. And without exception, the godly remnant's greatest persecutors were those from the religious establishment of the day. You see, the religious establishment always wants to maintain the status quo because the religious leaders in the religious establishment have worked out a system that works for them, a system which gives them power and profit and pleasure and popularity and control over the people. They didn't want this prophet coming in and preaching truth which would dismantle the system. And by the way, in every great awakening, in every true revival that we've ever seen in recorded history, God dismantles, brings down the existing system and raises up some new. It's always been that way. Jesus was confronted by the Pharisees and they were telling Jesus, "Well, you're not a true prophet. You're not sent from God." They even said, "Jesus, your Father is the devil." Can you imagine such a thing? And Jesus turned to them and said, "Do you know what? You're just like your fathers because they killed the prophets." They hated the remnant, the prophet being the spokesman for the remnant.

So this godly remnant within the nation is aggrieved and broken over the sin and idolatry and wickedness that fills the land and then God will send this true and faithful prophet and they are encouraged by him because he gives them a voice. They've been squelched into silence so far but now this prophet will not be deterred. His voice is loud and clear and unceasing about, "Here's what God says about your situation." So they feel encouraged that God has not forgotten them, the faithful ones among the mass of the unfaithful. Jesus referred to the faithful remnant among his people when he ministered in Luke 12:32, remember that little verse, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom." You're not much in the world's eyes, nobody even recognizes you as being on track or being godly or belonging to God, but I'm telling you, you're going to get the kingdom and they will be the ones thrown out. So when the prophet comes, he gives voice to that silenced remnant of faithful ones within the land.

2 Peter 2:6-7 is a good cross-reference that tells us about how a godly man can be within an ungodly situation and he is grieved, he is part of the grieved and burdened remnant, "and if He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly lives thereafter; and if He rescued righteous Lot," here it is, "oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men." God was saying Lot was in that culture and we know from biblical testimony he was not perfect but he did have a heart for God and as he looked at his countrymen, as he looked at what was going on, as he looked at the rulers, as he saw the hypocrisy and worldliness, his heart was burdened and broken over it.

So not only did the prophet come in and give this remnant a voice about their convictions and their concerns, he also gave them a hope. Secondly, a hope of coming revival and coming reformation. The prophet always spoke of the grace that was coming, a day of righteousness and blessing that was soon coming for the surviving remnant. And when the prophet preached and he talked to this remnant, he would talk to them about a promised Messiah that was coming and how this Messiah was not just going to reform the nation externally but he would actually transform the hearts of people and give them a heart for God. He would preach about a perfected and glorified state including the millennial kingdom, and then beyond that including the eternal state. And then surprise of all surprises, regularly the prophet would point out that Gentiles and Jews would be a part of this eternal kingdom the Messiah would set up. So God is coming, he's sending Amos, his prophet, and he's going to preach encouraging the remnant, finally giving them a voice where they felt silenced and despised, and giving them hope that one day – listen to me – one day righteousness will reign on planet earth.

Well, there's an important word for us today here, though: the Bible says, "So we have the prophetic word made more sure to which you will do well to pay attention as a lamp shining in the dark places until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your heart." We have, we living in the New Testament era, have the prophetic word now made more sure. You see, the New Testament revelation makes more sure the truth of the Old Testament but it's essential that we understand the Old. You know, these Old Testament books are rich in Gospel truth. They are inspiring to our faith, yet no Scripture is more neglected, little studied, preached or understood than these Old Testament prophets; perhaps there is nowhere in recorded literature where there is more a rich treasure laying half buried and mostly unknown. So we plan to be diligent, to dig into the treasures of one of these old neglected gold mines, the Old Testament book of Amos.

Well, that's a primer on the Old Testament prophets. Now, let's go to II and I've only got two Roman numerals, all right, but this one is a little long. II. let's do an overview of the book of Amos. Let's begin with the author. His name is Amos. First of all, his background. First of all, the Bible text tells us in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 7 that he's not of the lineage of any sophistication or importance in the nation of Israel. He's not of the lineage of the priests. He's not of the lineage of any of the prophets. He says in chapter 7, verse 14, as the backslidden, hypocrite, high priest Amaziah confronts him and tells him to go back to the farm and quit preaching, he said, "Listen, I'm not the prophet, nor the son of a prophet." In other words he's saying, "God sent me and I'm going to do what God told me to do." He's the first prophet whose preaching formed a book of the Old Testament. Did you know that? His writing is the first writing that was accepted as part of the canon of the Old Testament section of the prophets. He was a fearless preacher, to say the least. He's only one of two prophets who preached to the northern kingdom. Hosea, his contemporary being the other one. And he has a deep knowledge of divine truth. His wisdom and understanding of the things of God is just amazing actually.

Now, the verse tells us in Amos 1:1, that he was "among the shepherders from Tekoa." Now Tekoa proper is a little mountaintop and it's 12 miles south of Jerusalem. Now, the pastureland around that mountaintop was also considered the regions of Tekoa and it was

sometimes called the wilderness of Tekoa. And on this mountaintop in the surrounding region, it was very rocky. It was not fit for any kind of aquaculture. As a matter of fact, it was fit more for beasts than it was for men but you could graze your sheep or your livestock on it and that's the job Amos has. He was a farmer, a country boy, who kept sheep in the wilderness of Tekoa. I thought to myself: how many nights, how many evenings as he put the sheep down for the evening did Amos sit on that mountaintop in Tekoa and you can see a long way around there, and look up at the stars and meditate on the great things of God. Amos would sit there and think about God's holiness and God's majesty and God's justice and God's love and God's grace and God's mercy. And at the same time, being of the godly remnant, Amos would think about the wickedness and the rebellion and the heartless religion of his fellow countrymen.

He was a simple man, a rural man. He came from an unsophisticated lifestyle. We not only hear that he was a shepherd but he was a gatherer of Sycamore figs. Now, in this day, to be a gatherer of Sycamore figs meant you were probably quite poor. Now, I have read some scholars who believe he was a wealthy farmer but when you put it all together, he's probably just a very simple man and probably just barely got by because gathering Sycamore figs was the common custom of those who were very poor and was trying to raise enough to feed their family for another week.

I think it's interesting to note, though, that 200 years before Amos in the same wilderness region around Tekoa, a prophet came to a man's household and the prophet told that man, "One of your sons is going to be anointed the next king of Israel." And the man said, "That's wonderful," and he paraded his fine scrapping older sons in front of the prophet and one after the other came by and the prophet kept saying, "That's not the one. That's not the one." And then finally the prophet said, "Do you have any other boys?" "Well, I've got one little runt boy. He's just a shepherd. Not much to him, he just keeps the sheep." And they brought him in and the prophet said, "That's the next king of Israel." His name was David, 250 years before Amos. And then 800 years after Amos, there was a man in the wilderness around Tekoa who was called of God to be the final prophet of the prophetic era. He would be the forerunner of the Messiah. His name was John the Baptist. Now, let me just say a quick note here because I see some people get on this farmer, country boy, rural, poor, and they think there's something intrinsically godly about that. No, listen to me: farm, country boy and poor folks can be as wicked and sinful as anybody else. Now, God does seem to call more folks from the unsophisticated, from the rural areas, but sometimes he calls them from the high up areas. God can do what he wants to do. But Amos's background: he's a shepherd from Tekoa and a gatherer of Sycamore figs.

Secondly, his style. The style of Amos. One thing you've got to remember as you're studying Amos, Amos was sent from God and he knew it. He's sure of that. By the way, that's what you need in a pastor in today's church, you need a man that believes he was sent from God and he believes it. Amos believed it. Whatever else you study about Amos, that's the key. God called him and he knew it.

Amos was a fearless preacher. He would tell the truth. He came to reclaim the true holiness and majesty of God and its terror for sinners. He was a powerful preacher. He was stern and as you might imagine, he was very unwelcome by the people of his day. He wouldn't have packed out the church. As a matter of fact, if he came in as your pastor, probably he would empty the church but God didn't send him to a specific congregation because he knew they would run anyway. He just sent him out and he'd catch them where they were and preach the truth to them. I mean, Amos comes in and he pronounces king, throne, people and all destined for destruction. You're going to find out why this is so powerful in a moment. His message was relevant. His message was humbling. And his message was frightening.

Now, remember he's a contemporary of Hosea. Hosea's style was very different from Amos. Hosea it seems like in every message, "Woe then the wonders of sovereign grace and hope and forgiveness." Amos doesn't do that. Amos just pounds the judgment on chapter after chapter after chapter, and then at the very end he unveils the grace of God and the hope for the remnant. Just a stern. You say, "Well, he's a hard preacher." Well, Amos would have been a hard preacher. Now, remember as we go through Amos like all the Old Testament prophets, you're not reading his literal sermons. You're getting something of a brief outline sketch of many messages that he preached.

Secondly or B: let's talk about the date and the setting. During the reigns of Uzziah king of Judah, the Bible says, into the reigns of Jeroboam II, king of Israel, that's when Amos had his ministry. Now, there's an overlapping of about 66 years between Uzziah king of Judah and Jeroboam king of Israel, so somewhere in that overlap is the time that Amos preached to the people. Now, his ministry was likely after Joel's ministry and earlier than Isaiah and Micah but he's a contemporary with Hosea. I can imagine seeing both of these guys preaching together on the conference circuit. In the early verses of the first chapter, he talks about that it was two years before the earthquake. Zechariah mentions this very earthquake but we still can't pin down an exact date. Scholars generally would tell us somewhere around 750 BC was his ministry.

Now the setting. Now before the days of Amos, Israel was 12 tribes in one united kingdom and her kings during that period, before Amos that is, were Saul and David and Solomon. Now after Solomon, the nation fell into decline and disgruntledness and old rivalries began to rise up and the kingdom was divided: two tribes became the southern kingdom, Judah, 10 tribes became the northern kingdom or called Israel. Now, Judah became the southern kingdom, Israel became the northern kingdom, and these two places were pretty much foreigners to each other. Not absolutely true but generally speaking, Judah contained more of a godly remnant and Judah was always ruled over by descendants of the lineage of David, and the northern kingdom was ruled over by kings from all varying kinds of lineages.

Thirdly or C: the economic condition. You might say it was the best of times and it was the worst of times. Both the southern kingdom and the northern kingdom in the days of Amos had a booming economy. Things were good. People were excited about it. Jeroboam II was an aggressive man and a very able ruler and he expanded Israel's

borders. He expended them to the length that they had not known since the golden days of Solomon and by expanding her borders, he expanded the territory over many important trade routes which included gaining lots of wealth from trade. So the country is wealthy, the economy is booming, things are positive and things are good. As a matter of fact, this is one of the problems. For example, Amos writes to them about living in their houses of hewn stone. Now, in this day to have a house of hewn stone means you were of the exceedingly wealthy people. He talked to them about having their summer homes and their winter homes. He uses a word for their houses that you could translate castle or palace. He talks about them having couches inlaid with ivory and couches having fancy cushions. You understand, all of this had to be done with crude tools and by hand. To have a piece of furniture inlaid with ivory and actually have cushions on it would have been extreme extravagance in this day. He talks of them eating the choicest foods and drinking wine by the bowl full. He speaks of the ladies being frivolous and worldly, calling to their husbands, "Bring me some more wine!" They anointed themselves, he says, with the finest of oils. So this was a booming, good, prosperous time for both the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom. Now, Amos's ministry is primarily centered in the northern kingdom, Israel, but it has a message for all.

Now, D or fourth: the moral condition. Unfortunately, what we find in Israel is that the economic revival was not enjoyed by all. This was truly a day of the haves and have-nots. Now, I remember when I was doing my graduate work in Memphis, I drove through a very bad part of downtown Memphis, sort of a slum area, and I would see nice cars in driveways, color televisions in the den and I'm sure they had microwave ovens and as cell phones came along, I'm sure they had cell phones. In other words, today what we call poor is not really poor. What we have today when people talk about the disadvantaged or socioeconomic injustices, what they're saying is somebody doesn't have as much as somebody else. What they're really about is communism, everybody ought to have the same, not helping the true poor. Well, folks, that's not what Amos is talking about. Amos is talking about there were really destitute, poor people throughout Israel. There were the haves and have-nots. The wealthy and the powerful gained and maintained their prosperity on the backs of the truly poor. There was great injustice in commerce. Amos talks about them selling to the poor man chaff and really ruined and worthless wheat as if it was a prime quality of wheat. The court systems were rigged against the poor. They had no way to get justice for themselves. The upper class and then you had just abject poverty below them. The upper class was made up of land owners and business owners, the king's counselors and administrators of justice. The lower class were just simply menial laborers.

So the great wealth and the prosperity and the affluence was only shared by a small group of the wealthy and the powerful but this led to spiritual decline and the multiplication of sin in the nation. Amos points out further that there was a great disrespect for authority and there was a forsaking of the rule of law in the country. It kind of sounds like a country I know. Doesn't it sound like that to you? Public standards of morality were falling and they were at an all-time low and even the leaders of the country led in the breakdown of the public morality and of the wickedness. Now, you've got to understand this is a church state, it's a theocracy, the religion and the state are one thing. If one is

rotten, the other is rotten because they were still very religious but they were very hypocritical and false in their religion. Basically if the poor could not meet the need of the wealthy, they were neglected and left to be broken and destitute.

Well, 5: the spiritual condition and this is always the foundation stone. This is always the root problem. Listen, when a nation declines spiritually, moral and economic ruin follows close behind. America is writing that story right now. So the spiritual decline comes first and the moral and cultural decline always follows fast behind.

There is a paradox here, though, because these Jews in this day gloried in their elect position. They believed themselves to be the elect of God. They would tell you point-blank, "We hold as our great heritage that God called us through our forefather, Abraham, and from Abraham he converted that man and made a great nation. And then we were enslaved in Egypt. We know God delivered us through Moses. We know God established us in the Promised Land through Joshua. We are the people of God." They considered themselves as walking with God. They embraced God's covenant that he had promised blessings on them and they viewed the great prosperity of their day as, "God is blessing us." They looked forward to the coming promised Messiah and they would tell you that they are sure he's coming and one day he will make Israel greater than she's ever been and all the other nations will bow down before her and we will share in the honor and in the glory.

Two things that Amos exposes, though, about their faithful religious practice and their condition. 1. The heartlessness. Heartless in their work. They did the things, they dotted the i's, they crossed the t's in their religious observance but their heart was not in it. Their heart was far from God because they loved themselves and they loved not God and all of their religious observance was empty ritual and formalism, sometimes I use the word externalism; it was just something they put on externally and went through the motions. They had lost the foundation and the centrality of the word of God yet they held tightly to their religious tradition. Heartless.

Secondly, perversity. They were perverse in what they were doing in their churches. First of all, they moved the center of worship to Bethel and to Dan instead of Jerusalem where it's supposed to be. In 1 and 2 Kings, we learn that they developed what scholars call the Jehovah bull cult. They actually got two bulls, formed them of gold, and these bulls stood, one bull stood for strength and one bull stood for virility, and these were the objects of the Baal worship of the Canaanites of the day. Baal was the most prominent God among the Canaanites and so what they actually did was they brought those bull idols into the center of their Jehovah worship. They would call it, "Hey, we're serving the true God, Jehovah. We're checking off the sacrifices, the festival days, the cleansings, all the things that Jehovah requires. We are doing these, we just want some of the bull worship in here too because that makes us relevant and this makes us happy."

I want to be careful that I don't go too far here this morning because I'm going to camp here later. In the average evangelical church, they've got a big closet where they've got two golden bulls. They check off some of the orthodox things but in their heart they are

Baal worshipers. When you bring the world into Jehovah's house, when you bring the gimmicks, the things the world glories in and bring them into God's house as if God is not attractive enough, that's Baal worship. That's golden bulls. Well, they thought they'd figured it out. We're relevant. We're cultural. It makes people happy. We can keep our Judaism but bring the Baal worship in here too and there was a synchrotizing of the two, a perverse synchrotizing, blending them together. This is what the scholar called self-pleasing religion.

Now, Amaziah was the priest of the day. Amaziah's job was to maintain true spirituality and true religion. Amaziah should have done what Moses did when Aaron made them a golden calf. Remember that? Amaziah should have burnt the thing and had them all drink the water but he didn't. He was part of the problem. He just kept hanging onto the status quo. He gloried in his position. Amaziah was enamored with the great structures and temples and altars they could build with their prosperity to worship God as they called him. Amaziah had no interest in the word of God. Amos would come preaching the truth and he would just push him away. Then, of course, Amaziah, the false priest, worked to discredit and even destroy Amos.

Now, when you looked at Israel in this day, the widespread immoralities and injustices called for God's judgment but now listen, the most serious offense was their heartless and perversity of true religion. That's why the judgment will come. Motyer in his good commentary of the book of Amos, listen to this quote, it's very piercing. He says, "The book of Amos reveals that nothing is so effective as religion to separate us from God's love and cement us to God's wrath." Do you want to make yourself the primary object of God's wrath? Then mix yourself up with a lot of shallow, going through the motions, heartless and even perverse Christianity. Trust me, the great harlot promised in the book of Revelation will look really good from the outside. It will look solid but it's not. Someone said religious façade is both invalid and dangerous because it is repulsive to God. That's why from day one, faulting, failing, repenting, nevertheless we have covenanted ourselves together to what? Be a true church, as God gives us strength to be a true church because nothing evokes the wrath of God like a counterfeit that's working to be that way.

So Amos is sent from the farm to the city to proclaim God's judgment upon them. He's going to tell them that, first, God's going to send natural calamities against them, and then he's going to send conquering enemies to overthrow them and carry them away into exile. What we need to hang onto is this: God uses judgment to purge out the false and to purify the true. Did you hear me? God uses judgment to purge out the false and to purify the true. If you've been around Grace Life for very long, you've watched that. We have experienced a purging of the false, we have experienced the purifying of the true. And by the way, that's not unique to us, that's true in every true congregation that's ever existed, Old or New Testament. He is always purging his church and purifying his church.

You see, when the Lord roars, how can Jacob stand? We know that as Amos ends the book, that his last word is not judgment. As a matter of fact, are you listening? God's last word is never judgment. Amen. His last word is never judgment. At the end of his

preaching, or rather in the end of his preaching, he throws before them a strong word of grace that God will yet forgive, God will yet revive, and God will yet restore them and bless them. You see, the Lord is seen as a lion roaring in judgment as Amos preaches, however, there is grace. Now listen: in his roaring strength, he will take upon himself the sins of his people. In his roaring strength, he will forgive, redeem, revive and restore his people. And in his roaring strength, he will keep them for time and for eternity.

Here's what you've got to understand, are you listening to me, child of God? God is terribly tenaciously committed to bring justice against sin but he is even more so committed with all the might of the Godhead to restore, forgive, reestablish and save his own people. So as you tremble at the wrath of God, know that same power and more is focused on me in grace to keep me and save me and preserve me forever. There is always hope. Look, God is going to judge America. God is going to judge America. As Billy Graham's wife said before she died, "If God doesn't judge America, he's going to have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah." God's going to judge America but that ought to give us hope because the fires and the powers of judgment come against the wicked are powers he will turn in grace for our good.

When the Lord roars, how can Jacob stand? He can't unless God causes him to stand, unless God props him up. As Revelation 5:5 reminded those weeping and burdened, "Stop weeping; behold, the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome." Hallelujah! Praise his name! Glory, glory, glory! He roars in retribution against sin but he roars in redemption for his elect children. Praise his name.

Let's stand together, all right?