

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, You are the Lord of each day.
 You are in all that inspires us to do greater things for the Kingdom,
 You are in all that challenges us to work harder in service of others,
 You are in all that arouses us to keep going until Your work is done,
 Your glorious presence sustains us through everything,
 So we praise You, Lord Jesus Christ: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Obtain a song or hymn book and sing some songs in praise to God

On-going prayers

- **Pray for those who suffer disasters.** *Pray for all who travel long distances at sea, and face its perils*
- *Pray for those in Northern Ireland and the UK, as they come to terms with the 'Bloody Sunday' report. Pray that the fallout from this will be handled well*
- *Praise God for His healing power*

Meditation

It can be hard for young people to find their way
 In a complex world with many questions and few answers:

What will you do?	The teacher said.
Why won't you listen?	The parent said.
Where does it hurt?	The doctor said.
What's the problem?	The engineer said.
Have another credit card!	The banker said.
How will you pay for it?	The accountant said.
Read more about it!	The professor said
Do an experiment!	The scientist said.
Find some perspective!	The critic said.
Get religion!	The Church said.
Why would you do that?	The counsellor said.

But the hole in my heart! the young person said.
 I can fill it! God said; believe in me, for I love you!

Bible passage – Amos 1:1-8

¹ The words of Amos, who was one of the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw in a vision regarding Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake.

² He said: 'The LORD roars from Zion and shouts out from Jerusalem; the pasture lands of the shepherds languish, and the top of Carmel withers.'

³ This is what the LORD says: 'For three crimes of Damascus, and for four, I will not withdraw the punishment, because they have threshed Gilead with iron-toothed threshing sledges. ⁴ So I will send a fire upon the house of Hazael, and it will devour Ben-hadad's strongholds. ⁵ I will smash the gate-bar of Damascus, and hew down the one who rules in the Valley of Aven, and

the one who holds the sceptre in Beth-eden; and the people of Syria will be exiled to Kir,' says the LORD.

⁶ This is what the LORD says: 'For three crimes of Gaza, and for four, I will not withdraw the punishment, because they carried into exile entire nations to hand them over to Edom. ⁷ So I will send a fire on the wall of Gaza, and it will consume her strongholds. ⁸ I will cut off the one who rules in Ashdod, and the one who holds the sceptre in Ashkelon; My hand will be turned against Ekron until the last of the Philistines is dead,' says the Lord God.

Bible Study

Review

Amos begins his powerful prophecy, which sweeps through Judah, Israel and beyond. It cries out against the injustices of war and human aggression, and declares that God is the ruler of all nations.

The book of Amos is a remarkable prophecy. At first reading, its message seems very bloodthirsty because of its many references to violence and war, but we will find that like all prophetic books, it says far more. Like all prophets, Amos spoke firstly about what happened in his own day, but later generations perceived that his message held timeless truths that should be valued as God's Word. Our task is to look carefully at what the message meant to Amos, and this will help us understand what it says to us today.

The prophecy begins with a brief introduction, which indicates that Amos prophesied at a relatively peaceful period of Israel's life in the eighth century BC (around 760BC). Only a hundred year earlier, the great prophets Elijah and Elisha had dominated the life of Israel by challenging the kings of the day to worship God alone and act justly. However, as Israel prospered she became corrupt in her religion and national affairs, and God called Amos to speak against this, long before He called the other Biblical prophets (Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel etc.). Amos was a working man, one of the many '*shepherds of Tekoa*', which tells us that Amos came from the southern nation of Judah, which was then divided from the other Israelites who lived in northern Israel. God called a southerner to go and preach to the northerners, and it was a tough call!

Verse 2 is a powerful word of intent, spoken by Amos, describing why he prophesied. He describes God's voice as like a powerful force '*roaring*' from Jerusalem and effecting the whole land from the pasture lands of Israel to the great fertile plains on Mount Carmel, in the far north. This sums up Amos' feelings as he began to prophesy; he felt God's Word within him like a wind with great force, invisible but with great power, and he was its mouthpiece!

The rest of our passage today contains two stinging prophecies against Damascus (1:3-5) and Gaza (1:6-8). Notably, this is the first time in Scripture that we read these great arresting words, '*This is what the Lord says ...*' (or as older Bible versions say, '*thus says the Lord ...*'). In addition, each prophecy is delivered with a clear formula of words, and as we read on in Amos, we will find that they begin a series of eight similar prophecies (1:3-2:5), each beginning, '*for three crimes ... and for four, I will not withdraw the punishment*' (1:3,6). So whatever Amos says about Damascus and Gaza, our suspicions should be raised that these small prophecies are part of a group that deliver a more important and as yet unknown message.

The wider picture will become clear in later studies, but we must now pay attention to what Amos says here. The formula of words at the beginning of each prophecy suggest God's condemnation of atrocities that had gone too far; '*for three crimes ... and for four ...*' (1:3,5). Firstly, Damascus had gone too far by using '*iron-toothed threshing sledges*' in her attacks on the region of Gilead. The city of Damascus was the capital of Syria, to the north of Israel, and was in a constant state of war with Israel at the time. Their use of agricultural implements to inflict horror in warfare was abhorrent to God, and He condemned them for this.

The second prophecy condemns Gaza, the region lying to the south and west of Israel and Judah previously occupied in David's day by Philistines. It seems that after inflicting defeat on neighbouring lands, Gaza took people captive and sold them in slavery to Edom, another nation on the eastern boundaries of Israel. Again, the point is simple, God hates such violence against people.

Now, at the beginning of our passage, we were led to believe that God had a message for Israel (1:2), yet Amos had travelled north to Israel and begun by railing against the sins of neighbouring nations! What was he doing? We will find out as we read on, but for the moment, we must accept his timeless message about the absolute justice of God, who hates all forms of unjust violence.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The timing of Amos' prophecy (1:1)
- The Lord, roaring from Zion to Carmel (1:2)
- The prophecies against Damascus and Gaza (1:3-8)

Notes on the text and translation

V1 'earthquake'

The Hebrew word here translates as '*the quaking*', and is presumed to mean 'the earthquake', though there is no other record of an earthquake in Israel at the time Amos spoke. The Hebrew word is sometimes used in the OT to refer to God's 'shaking' of a nation (Is 14:16). It might be possible to translate the passage '*two years before the shaking* (of the nation by God)'

V3 'for three crimes of Damascus ...'

Other translations:

'for three sins of Damascus ...' (NIV)

'for three transgressions of Damascus' (NRSV)

The word for 'crimes', also translated 'sins' and 'transgressions', is the Hebrew word 'pesach'. This is a common word for 'sin' or 'wrongdoing' in general, but Amos is complaining about the injustice and inhumanity of the actions of nations, that is, the war crimes of his day, hence my translation. The word also contains the idea of rebellion against God, which is explored in the study.

V3 '... I will not withdraw the punishment'

Other translations:

'... I will not turn back my wrath' (NIV)

'... I will not revoke the punishment' (NRSV)

Each translation has to deal with the fact that the Hebrew words at this point in the prophecy say no more than '*I will not hold it back*', with no mention of punishment or wrath. It might be quite good to translate the passage '*I will not hold myself back*' on the assumption that God always acts with justice. In English, we have to add something at this point to make the translation clear, but it is not obvious what this might be! I have kept to the traditional method of assuming that God is not holding back punishment for sin.

Going Deeper

The timing of Amos' prophecy (1:1)

Amos was a shepherd from Tekoa, a small town in the southern countryside of Judah to the west of Jerusalem. This tells us that Amos was a southern Judean. At that time, God's people were divided into two; the northern kingdom was called Israel with Samaria as its capital city, and the southern kingdom was called Judah with Jerusalem as its capital city. This famous split had occurred a couple of centuries earlier after the reign of Solomon, and it is important that we remember this when reading any Biblical prophecies. They all refer to 'Israel' and 'Judah', but because they were different nations, the message for each is often quite different. It will help us to remember that a few decades after the prophecies of Amos (and Hosea a little later), Israel was obliterated by the Assyrians (720BC). Now the Assyrians attempted to invade Judah and Jerusalem, but were they miraculously spared from a siege (see 2 Kings 19). However, they were eventually overthrown by the infamous Babylonians (2 Kings 25) 120 years later (587BC).

So Amos was one of the first prophets to speak out against evil within Israel and Judah, prior to these great events. So when he says that Israel is doomed, we know that history proved him right, for Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians only a few decades later. Also, when he says at the end of his prophecies that God wanted to work through the house of David, meaning Judah (9:11), then he was also proved right. His accuracy as a prophet meant that later Jewish people kept Amos' prophecies as true prophecies of God; God had done what He said through Amos, so all his prophecies were to be kept, valued and studied.

The first verse of Amos gives us a good idea of when he prophesied, which was during the reign of Uzziah (of Judah, 780-744BC) and of Jeroboam II (of Israel, 790 – 750BC). Both of these kings reigned successfully and for a long time. They brought stability to their nations, but it was a stability based on trade

and increasing wealth, and it disadvantaged many (as Amos later points out). Verse 1 also says that the prophecies were given 'two years before the earthquake' (1:1) but we do not know when this was because there is no other record of it in the Bible, or anywhere else. In the notes above, I have suggested the possibility that 'earthquake' could refer to some great deed of God, but without some other Biblical reference to link to this, such an idea can only be guesswork.

Although we do not know when the earthquake happened or what it was, the very fact that we have this specific reference means that it is likely Amos' prophecies were given at one specific time. Later on in chapter 7 (7:10-14), we read about an intriguing incident in which Amos was confronted by the High Priest at Bethel, one of the shrines in northern Israel. Of course, people had a good reason to worship God there, because Bethel was the place where Abraham first pitched his tent in Canaan (Gen 12:8), and where Jacob first saw a vision of angels (Gen 28:19f.). So it was used by northern Israelites who preferred it to going all the way to the Temple in the Jerusalem, in the south. So it seems that Amos, a southern Judean, had gone from Tekoa to Bethel, one of the main religious centres of the northern kingdom, to deliver his prophecies.

The Lord, roaring from Zion to Carmel (1:2)

If you think that all this is a little too much for us to deduce simply from the first verse of Amos and a story from half way through (7:10-14), then the second verse of the book confirms the picture we have painted. Amos said;

'The LORD roars from Zion and shouts out from Jerusalem; the pasture lands of the shepherds languish, and the top of Carmel withers.'

This sounds very poetic to us, but if we are to do it justice, we must accept that it is very specific. There are three places named here, and they all help us build up a picture of God's Word going out to all His people, in the south and in the north.

Firstly, Amos says that God's voice goes out from Zion, meaning Jerusalem. In this way, Amos declared that his was a very strong prophetic message and he claimed that this message came directly from Zion. Amos claimed to speak with the authority of God's holy city! We should remember that although Israel and Judah were divided, the ordinary people were also divided in their loyalties to places like Jerusalem, so although Jerusalem was the capitol of only Judah, it was still regarded as a unique holy place, because it contained the Temple, and the 'dwelling place' of God. Even people in the north accepted the importance of 'Zion'.

Amos then went on to say that two things happened as a consequence of God's Word coming out of Zion; the pasture lands of the shepherds 'languished' and the top of Carmel 'withered' (1:2). The picture created here is of the Lord's voice roaring northwards from Jerusalem like a hot wind from the south, blowing firstly past the 'pasture lands' of the shepherds in Judea, and eventually reaching to the very top of Israel, to the flat and agriculturally fertile plain on the top of Mount Carmel in the far north west of Israel! This is not fanciful poetry, for people of those days knew all about the perils of this hot summer wind. If and when it came, it had the potential to destroy crops and create famine, and was much feared.

Amos' prophetic word was clear; God had something to say to His people in the northern lands of Israel, and it was a fearsome word that might bring destruction! Moreover, it came from Zion, via the southern lands of Judah and from the mouth of a southerner, named Amos!

The prophecies against Damascus and Gaza (1:3-8)

We have already seen that the two prophecies against Damascus and Gaza are the first two of a series of prophecies that take up most of chapters 1 and 2 of Amos (1:3-5, 6-8, 9-10, 11-12,13-15 and 2:1-3). If you have an opportunity, have a look at this in a Bible, and you will see that the prophecies are against;

- Damascus (1:3-5)
- Gaza (1:6-8)
- Tyre (1:9-10)
- Edom (1:11-12)
- Ammon (1:13-15)
- Moab (2:1,2)
- Judah (2:3-5)
- Israel (2:6f.)

From this list it now become obvious that Amos' eventual message in the seventh and eighth prophecies are directed against God's own people, Judah and Israel. This confirms what we have just worked out from verse 2, which is that although Amos speaks against a number of nations, the ultimate target of God's wrath is His own people. As we get further into Amos, this will become all too clear.

So what can we make of the six prophecies that come before Amos' words against Judah and Israel? To begin with, we must accept that God has always been interested in all the nations of the world as well as His

own people. This is indicated by the fact that all the nations mentioned here make up the complete number of nations surrounding Israel in the eighth century BC (not including Egypt, which bordered Judah but not Israel). Beyond this, it is possible to suggest that Amos may have had a reason for mentioning the nations in this order, but it is not clear to us now what this is. The atrocities themselves cannot be placed in a time sequence, for we cannot identify them positively within Biblical records. It seems therefore that we must be content with hearing a strong message of God against injustice, cruelty, war and slavery.

However, there is little more to these prophecies. Each one begins with a word of judgement, but if we look at the end of each one, they all conclude with a clear statement of punishment. In the cases of Damascus and Gaza, the prophecies declare that God will remove authority from their rulers. This is what is meant by the colourful language '*I will hew down the one who rule in the valley of Aven*' (1:5) and '*I will cut off the one who rules in Ashdod*' (1:8). In addition, God will bring the violence of war on those who have perpetrated it, and each prophecy contains warlike images within God's condemnation (1:4,5,7,8). Unequivocally, the judgement on the nations will be war and a removal of authority. Now with this prophesied against the nations surrounding Israel, what will be God's message against His own people, Judah and Israel? We wait to find out.

Application

Amos is obviously keeping us in suspense, and using a technique of prophetic oratory to do it! Nevertheless, we are now beginning to see the force of God's Word as delivered by Amos to His people. This prophecy reminds us that God is true peaceful and just, and He hates injustice and war. Now it is one thing to say that God is just and hates injustice, but it is another thing to say what He will do about it. In the days before the coming of Christ, Amos declared that God's punishment on warring people was to remove their authority and bring war on them, and we wonder whether God does the same today. We can surely say that for those who call on Christ, God has removed the punishment of sin and replaced this with acceptance through Christ (alone). However, we could well be justified in suggesting that for those nations and people that do not accept God's authority, their injustice will have the same results as those prophesied by Amos against the nations of Damascus and Gaza.

In the course of history, we can see plenty of examples of nations that have fallen because of their corruption and injustice. Amos' prophecy suggests that we should instead see the hand of God at work in all this, establishing His own moral law within His world. God has not left the world to wallow in its sinfulness, He is at work in all manner of ways to govern and control His world, and often, we do not perceive what He is doing. True prophets like Amos do not just give the church messages about God's love or His calling, they speak out God's message for the whole world, for those who will hear. We should listen for such messages today.

Clearly, this beginning of Amos' prophecy does not say much to us personally, but it does indicate that the Lord will choose whoever He wants in order to deliver His message. Amos was an ordinary shepherd, a man of lowly status in Judah, and God used Him eventually for a mighty work. We do not often recognise that Amos was one of the first prophets whose writings are recorded, so what happened to him and his message must have affected a considerable number of people. We must remember that God can often do something far greater than we ever think out of our efforts; and like Amos, we must be diligent to do God's will and faithful to see it through. Then we will find that He has used us!

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group what you know about the breakup of the kingdom of Israel into Israel and Judah (read 1 Kings 12).
2. Have a look at a map of Old Testament Israel (from the time of David onwards) and discuss the location of the places mentioned in this text.
3. How important are the prophets to the message of God's Word in the Bible?

Personal comments by author

I first studied this passage of Scripture when I was learning Hebrew at University, and I well remember being fascinated by the sheer complexity of the literary techniques used by Amos; it was something I had never

come across before. I was also fascinated by the way that Amos spoke given that he was a peasant farmer, a shepherd! I find it deeply moving to know that God can use someone who had no training in rhetoric or the ways of the world, to speak eloquently about the affairs of His own day. Sometimes God needs someone He can use, someone who is willing if not tutored, and will not let himself or herself get in the way of the message!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Think back through your life and consider who the Lord has used to bring His Word to you; He will have used all kinds of people. Now take time to pray and ask the Lord how your own life and witness have affected other people around you. In what ways does the Lord use you to bring His message to others?*
- *Pray for those who have no confidence in themselves and find it hard to believe that they can be of value to anyone else. Pray that God will speak to them through people they trust to build them up in faith.*

Final Prayer

All praise to You, Lord God, for all the wonderful things You do for us. We praise you for the redemption of our souls through Jesus Christ, the victory You have won for us over evil, and Your eternal salvation. We praise you for the way in which You help us in the midst of our most difficult struggles. You have done all things for our benefit, and we praise You! AMEN
