

## Prayer

We praise You Lord God, for You have empowered Your church to declare the truth of Salvation throughout the ages. Enemies have attempted to destroy the Gospel from outside the church and from within, but You have guided it through the perils of human history so that more and more people might be saved and redeemed by Your Love. May we, who are Your church in this time and place, fulfil our calling and pass the Faith on to the next generation, through Jesus Christ our Lord: AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*Ask yourself whether you have confessed any sin to God recently, and check out whether you need to do this*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for those who suffer disasters.** *Pray for all those who continue to struggle with the consequences of the oil disaster in the Gulf*
- *Pray for those involved in the football 'World Cup' in South Africa*
- *Give thanks for faithful friends*

## Meditation

Listen carefully;

*Hear the Lord's voice, and walk in His ways.*

Learn intelligently;

*Keep an open mind, and a firm hold on your faith.*

Plan realistically;

*Look forward to a future in God's hands, not your own.*

Work diligently;

*Give your all for the Kingdom of God and be fruitful.*

Evaluate shrewdly;

*Discern right from wrong, and live your life accordingly.*

Share generously;

*For the Lord has told His disciples to love one another.*

And speak boldly;

*Preach the Gospel by every means, and be blessed!*

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## Bible passage – Amos 2:1-8

<sup>1</sup> This is what the LORD says: For three crimes of Moab, and for four, I will not withdraw the punishment, because he burned to ashes the bones of the king of Edom. <sup>2</sup> So I will send a fire upon Moab, and it will consume the strongholds of Kerioth, and Moab will meet death in the midst of the tumult of war, shouts and trumpet sounds; <sup>3</sup> I will remove the leader in her midst and kill all her princes with him,' says the LORD.

<sup>4</sup> This is what the LORD says: 'For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not withdraw the punishment, because they have rejected the law of the LORD. They have not kept His statutes, but have been led astray by the same lies their forefathers believed. <sup>5</sup> So I will send a fire upon Judah, and it will consume the strongholds of Jerusalem.'

<sup>6</sup> This is what the LORD says: 'For three crimes of Israel, and for four, I will not withdraw the punishment, because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. <sup>7</sup>

They trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and ignore the needs of the poor. Father and son go in to the same prostitute, profaning my Holy Name, <sup>8</sup> and they recline beside every altar on clothing taken in pledge. They also drink the wine of those who have been fined in the house of their God!

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## Bible Study

### Review

**Amos completes his round of eight prophecies with a startling attack on the godlessness of Judah and Israel. He accuses them both of religious infidelity, and accuses Israel of social injustice.**

These three prophecies complete the round of eight short prophecies at the beginning of Amos, and everything we anticipated whilst studying the previous five (1:3-15) now comes alive. The prophecy against Moab is the sixth against one of Israel's neighbouring states, and together with the previous five, it depicts God's wrath at injustice. However, the real interest in this passage today lies in what comes next, because Amos delivers two more similar prophecies; the seventh against Judah, and eighth against Israel!

As we read prophecies six to eight, it is immediately obvious that the themes change and God has harsh but different words to say against His own people, Judah and Israel. Judah is castigated for rejecting God's Law and abandoning the historic faith, and Israel are reprimanded for the injustices found within her and also for the practice of some form of prostitution or deviancy. He says, '*They trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and force the humble out of the way; Father and son go in to the same prostitute, profaning my Holy Name*' (2:7). Social injustice and religious defamation are both an insult to God!

Before looking more closely at these prophecies and trying to work out why God made these accusations against His own people, we will learn more if we reflect on what is happening in this whole series of eight prophecies.

Amos was a Judean called by God to go north to Israel and prophesy there at the sanctuary of Bethel (1:2, 7:10f.). There, he would have been unknown as a prophet, so in order to be heard, he would have needed to gather a crowd, and we now know how he did this. He created interest by prophesying against Israel's neighbouring states, first Damascus, then Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon and Moab. Each prophecy announced God's judgement on the sinful nations, and it is likely that the Israelites who heard them agreed, and welcomed this strange Judean preacher from the south who seemed so concerned about Israel and her neighbours. This was an effective way to gather a crowd.

Next, as if to complete a perfect round of seven prophecies, Amos spoke against his own country, Judah. We tend to forget today that in those days, Israelites and Judeans disliked each other immensely. Certainly, Israel despised Judah, rejected the authority of David's line (they had their own line of kings and did not accept that the Temple in Jerusalem was God's unique dwelling place).

Against this background, Amos' seventh prophecy confirmed Israel's view that Judah was consumed by false religion (2:4)! The Israelites would have cheered to hear from Amos that their reviled neighbours were to be punished by God (2:5), and would have been surprised to hear these words from a Judean! They may have thought that he was a convert to the ancient faith of northern Israel, which honoured the memory of Abraham and Moses, but certainly not David!

But Amos had more to say, and he had gathered a substantial following of Israelites who listened to His every word. Then, just as was hinted at in his phrase '*for three crimes ... and four ...*' (1:3), Amos added one more prophecy to the previous round of seven, to deliver a grand and climactic eighth message, and it was directed straight at Israel herself! Let us be under no illusions; all Amos' previous prophecies are worthy prophetic messages, but it is the eighth message that God wanted delivered by Amos to Israel! At last, we now know the truth about God's commission (see 1:2)!

We now realise that all along, Amos' intent has been to gather a crowd of Israelites and deliver a stinging message of rebuke from God, addressing their injustice and irreligion. We will look more closely at this as the Bible study goes deeper, and as we will see tomorrow, the prophecy against Israel goes on to conclude chapter 2. But if we are to grasp the meaning of Amos' dramatic opening prophecies, then we must keep this picture in mind. Moreover, we should try and imagine the peril in which Amos now stood; he had gathered a crowd and proceeded to insult them!

## **Going Deeper**

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The prophecy against Moab – what does it mean?
- The prophecy against Judah – what does it mean?
- The prophecy against Israel – what does it mean?

### Notes on the text and translation

#### **V3 'I will remove the ruler'**

Other translations:

*'I will cut off the ruler'* (NIV)

*'I will cut off the judge'* (New AV)

The Hebrew word at the beginning of this sentence is interesting, because it means 'to cut off', in the sense of pruning or removing a part of something. This suggests that the prophecy is about cutting Moab down to size rather than obliteration.

#### **V4 'they have been led astray by the same lies their forefathers believed'**

Other translations:

*'they have been led astray by false gods, the gods their ancestors believed in'* (NIV)

*'their lies have led them astray, those after which their fathers walked'* (ESV)

The Hebrew sentence is difficult to translate, and reads like this *'their lies led them astray which their fathers followed'*. I do not believe that the NIV is right in interpreting this as the false gods referred to elsewhere in Scripture, because there is no other connection in Scripture between 'lies' and 'false gods'. For this reason, I have kept as close to the text as I can to maintain good English.

#### **V7 'they ignore the needs of the poor'**

Other translations:

*'deny justice to the oppressed'* (NIV)

*'push the afflicted out of the way'* (NRSV)

The Hebrew translates as this; *'the way of the poor they turn aside'*. This could mean that the poor are denied justice or told to get out of the way, or it could mean that the faith of the poor is manipulated or misguided. Whatever it could mean, the phrase is entirely general, so I have left it entirely general. As such, it stands as a clear testimony to the actions of those who ignore God's ways and is consistent with the rest of Scriptural teaching about the poor in general.

## Going Deeper

### ***The prophecy against Moab – what does it mean?***

The sixth prophecy (2:1-3) is against Moab, and it follows the same pattern as the previous five prophecies in the first chapter (1:3-5, 6-8, 9-10, 11-12,13-15). God's people of Israel and Judah were both long time enemies of the Moabites, who were the descendents of Lot by incest (see Genesis 19:30-38). Apart from the disgust with which they were held because of this ancestry, the Moabites were hated because they had formally prevented Israel from travelling directly to Canaan during the last days of their wanderings (Numbers 22,23).

In addition, at some time in their past, their religious practices seem to have involved the sacrifice of children (Judges 3:6f.), and in particular the sacrifice of first born sons (2 Kings 16:3). This was particularly obnoxious to the Israelites, and Scripture describes many wars between Israel and Moab. The particular crime that stirred up Amos to prophesy was a military campaign by Moab against Edom, in which the Moabites had sought to destabilise the region by rooting out and killing the entire ruling family of Edom (2:1-3), by burning *'to ashes the bones of the King of Edom'* (2:1). So although Israel and Judah had little love for Edom, the crime was both heinous and politically dangerous for the entire region; these nations lived very close to each other, and they either lived at peace together or all fought each other.

God's punishment of Moab is initially the same as we saw before for Gaza, Damascus, Tyre, Edom and Ammon. He will come in fire and judgement (2:2), but in addition to this, Amos prophesies that the king of Moab who was responsible for this crime would die in battle, in recompense for having slaughtered the king

of Edom. God's punishment was a royal 'tit-for tat' that would lead both Moab and Edom leaderless, and unable to offer any danger to Israel or Judah.

### ***The prophecy against Judah – what does it mean?***

Amos then gives his seventh prophecy. As we saw in the first part of the study, people would have expected this to be the last prophecy, and the most significant and important prophecy of the series. However, it sounds to us rather tame and ordinary in comparison to what went before. In verse 4, we do not read about Judah committing acts of war or provoking atrocities, or even threatening any of the other nations. Judah is condemned on religious grounds. We should be careful, however, for in ancient times, religious matters were not regarded as casual, or as less significant than affairs of state, or even war. Nations would be called to repent if a king thought his country was not right before their god (see Jonah chapter 3, for example).

We should therefore not gloss over the prophecy against Judah, because the sins mentioned here were indeed a problem for Judah and Jerusalem. Indeed, time would come when Jerusalem would be taken captive into Babylon because of her irreligion (as is clearly set out in the prophecies of Jeremiah).

In this prophecy, Amos refers to the way in which the worship of God in Jerusalem had become corrupted over many generations, and this may well have played on his own heart, as a Judean. He speaks of Judah being '*led astray by the same lies their forefathers believed*' (2:4), and if we do not understand what this might mean, we only need look in the Old Testament to uncover what had happened in the past. The records are clear, and contain many descriptions of the way in which kings, from Solomon onwards, profaned the Temple by accepting into its courts the god-images of other nations who were trading partners of Israel and Judah (see 1 Kings 11:1f.).

As we have seen, the effect of the prophecy would have been to galvanise the Israelite crowd around Amos. The heart of the disputes between northern Israelites and southern Judeans concerned the issue of 'who worshipped God properly'; and Amos' prophecy touched sensitive issues. Each nation believed that it retained the proper heritage of Moses and the forefathers, and although this denunciation of Judah may have been a sad truth, Amos used it to effect, and to prepare the way for a far more severe charge against those who were listening to him.

### ***The prophecy against Israel – what does it mean?***

For those who first heard Amos or first read this prophecy, verse 6 comes as a shock. It is unexpected, and the whole prophetic work of Amos now begins to roar into life with the stunning words that come next. Verses six to eight are indeed only the beginning of the full prophecy, which lasts until the end of the chapter, but they serve to arrest our attention and indeed to shock those who first heard Amos. Remember, these are Amos' accusation of godlessness and they are delivered face to face, directly confronting the very people who committed these sins! One of the remarkable things about the stories of the prophets is their ability to deliver prophecies in the midst of real events; Isaiah faced down King Ahaz (Isaiah 7), Jeremiah did the same to King Zedekiah (Jeremiah 27f.). We should be in no doubt, such prophets faced real, personal danger. In those times, people who were believed to insult the gods could be stoned to death by a crowd, with few questions asked..

Amos' charge was direct, and he went straight to the heart of the matter. Good people were not valued, they were traded, the disadvantaged were abused, and the needs of the poor were ignored (2:6,7). This picture of social injustice is penetrating, and cuts to the chase of social injustice even today. The end of verse 7 through into verse 8 is a little more difficult for us to understand however, and Amos makes three accusations here, each of which needs to be explained.

Firstly, '*father and son go in to the same prostitute, profaning my Holy Name*' (2:7). This refers to the practice of what can be called 'Temple prostitution', which is a feature of Ba'al worship, something that was endemic both in northern Israel and also southern Judah. Ba'al was a fertility god, and there is archaeological and written historical evidence that part of the worship of these gods involved the men of farming communities having sex with designated 'Temple' prostitutes in order to secure harvests for the forthcoming year (see also Hosea 1,2,3). Amos stood firm in his condemnation of such practices, and we will see that he makes similar accusations later on. This was a direct insult to God, because it ignored His plea to treat Him as 'One true and Only God' (Exodus 20:1,2), and it also defamed the 'image' of God by appearing to condone a religious sexual union in God's name, outside marriage (reference Genesis 1:26,27).

Amos' second condemnation reads like this, '*and they recline beside every altar on clothing taken in pledge ...*' (2:8). This refers to the practice of priests who took advantage of items of clothing they had taken 'in lieu' of offerings and other gifts appropriate at the Temple or at local shrines. This may not seem to be a 'big deal' to us, but throughout the life of Israel, God had set down strict guidelines about the holiness of religious ritual, and things that had been taken as given to God were regarded as holy; they were not for ordinary use. In the past, people had died as a direct consequence of overstepping such boundaries (see Leviticus 10:1f.).

Lastly, Amos makes a third, less specific accusation; *'they also drink the wine of those who have been fined in the house of their God.'* (2:8). It is uncertain what this could mean, but one suggestion is that this is another example of the same lax attitudes towards holy things as in the previous charge. Another possibility is to link this sentence up with another part of Amos chapter 2, which speaks of the category of religious people called 'Nazirites' (12). It has been suggested that in the profligacy of the day, the traditional nazirite vows of abstinence were being eroded. As such, this was an example of the irreligion of the religious classes who should have been an example to the people.

## Application

We can easily take Amos' religious message and apply it to the Christian community today. In this way, Amos can challenge the church about whether ritual has become more important than a true relationship with God, either for the individual or for the church community. In addition, Amos' words about injustice are remarkably fresh, and for probably the first time in the Bible since the giving of the Law (see Exodus 21-23), we hear not about injustice as it affects kings and priests, but about the effect of injustice against the poor and disadvantaged (2:6,7). Amos was the first prophet whose words were taken and written in a book, eventually to become God's Holy Word, the Scriptures. It is important to remember that at the beginning of his work, he cries out against injustice, in a manner that becomes a characteristic of so many other later prophets (see Isaiah 1-5).

Apart from this, however, we should perhaps take note of Amos' extraordinary courage. From the picture we have built up, it seems almost certain that he risked a great deal to deliver this message. He was a shepherd and presumably not versed in the learning of his day, yet he fashioned a remarkable piece of oratory that has astonished scholars for centuries. Moreover, the force of his prophecy lies in a combination of holy inspiration, direct relevance and personal courage, for if the crowd had turned ugly, Amos' life would have been in danger. Certainly, chapter seven tells us that Amos was no stranger to confrontation!

So-called prophets who like to speak from the comfort of their computers or the safe haven of support in their own churches may well not deliver God's Word as He intends. Starting with Amos, the Old Testament prophets delivered God's Word precisely to the people who needed to hear it. Amos looked into the eyes of those he accused of the most heinous crimes before God. Jonah ate his pride and went against all he knew to travel to a foreign land and deliver a message of repentance to people he hated, and he did this personally, and alone. True prophecy is not just about getting words out of the mouth, but about delivering them to where they are needed despite the dangers.

We need to learn from this today. The Gospel is not merely for people who have elected to sit in pews or attend worship concerts, it must be delivered appropriately to all for whom it is given; that is, to people of other faiths, to scientists and engineers at their places of work, to politicians in meetings and committees, and to all people in every place where it is not yet known. Christian witness is not best when it is silent. It needs to be spoken to those who need it.

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## Discipleship

### **Questions** (for use in groups)

1. In your group, discuss your reaction to the picture painted by this study and the potential reaction of those who listened to Amos
2. To what extent is Amos' prophecy against Judah and Jerusalem also a condemnation of false religion today?
3. Read through verses 6 and 7 and identify the social evils within Israel condemned by Amos. What are the social evils of today?

### **Personal comments by author**

*I find it fascinating to watch how Amos uses technique to get across his message. He spoke nearly 2,800 years ago, and yet from scripture we can understand what he says and why. It is a remarkable testimony from a remarkable man. I am tempted to wonder how I would fare today if I spoke deviously to a group of people whilst 'buttering them up' to condemn them! Certainly the task of prophecy required a fair amount of bravery, and God needs brave people today to do His will.*

## ***Ideas for exploring discipleship***

- *It is either bravery or foolishness to tell people directly when they have done something wrong. The difference lies only in whether you yourself are right or wrong. What kind of person are you? Do you feel you must engage when you see something that is wrong, or would you rather stand aside and let others speak? Examine yourself before God and let Him speak to you.*
  - *Pray for God's prophets today, some known and many unknown, and pray against the forces that prevent their voices from being heard. Pray that God will make their voices heard in every way possible, and pray that God will grant His people wisdom to hear what is said.*
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## **Final Prayer**

Your love beckons us onwards, dear Lord. Surround us with such an assurance of our salvation that we are content to do Your will and proclaim Your salvation in whatever circumstance You require of us. May our hearts reflect Your great love, so that others will find You through us. AMEN

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