

BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING

5

LESSONS FROM AMOS ON THE MISUSE OF BLESSINGS AND MISTREATMENT OF THE POOR

Selections from Amos 2—5

By Marlene Nathan
and Beth Crawford

“The Old Testament prophets were as much forthtellers of God’s message for their own times as they were foretellers of the future. Their mission as forthtellers, preachers of the Word of the living God with its continuing claim upon us all, is an enduring one. Those who center their attention chiefly upon the predictive aspect of prophecy are therefore shutting their eyes to some of Scripture’s most searching teaching. A major element in the minor prophets is the lode of godly social concern that runs through their pages and gives them such vivid pertinence to our day.”

Frank E. Gaebelien

“See I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, ‘Surely this great nations is a wise and understanding people.’ What other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?...After you have...lived in the land a long time—if you then become corrupt and make any kind of idol, doing evil in the eyes of the Lord your God and provoking him to anger, ...you will quickly perish from this land....The Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and only a few of you will survive among the nations to which the Lord will drive you.”

Deuteronomy 4:5—8, 25—27

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AIM OF THE STUDY

- To examine our lives in light of God’s messages to Israel about her misuse of His blessings and mistreatment of the poor.

KEY VERSE

“But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!”

Amos 5:24

PREPARATION

The authors suggest you read over the notes on “How to Teach the Bible in Small Group” and “Some Practical Suggestions for Leading a Small Group Discussion” in Vineyard Church of Columbus’ *Small Group Leadership Training Manual* if you feel your inductive study skills are rusty. Then, before you read over the Scripture text, pray that God would give you direction for leading your group and teach you something relevant. Then read through the passage keeping an open heart and ear to the Lord. Finally, read through the Bible study below.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than any group will cover in a meeting. **Therefore, use this Bible study as a framework for the discussion you lead in your small group meeting. This means, you will need to**

- Go over the questions and **choose** which ones you want to emphasize and which you will eliminate since your time is limited.
- Note that the application questions are marked with an asterisk (*). Rather than leaving all of these to the end of the study, ask one or two as you work through the passage so people are being confronted by Scripture’s truths and applying them to their own lives.
- Pace yourself. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could **summarize** some of the passage and then go to the final questions. **Note:** this particular study requires you to summarize at various places in order to move through several chapters of the book. This will help your group study several passages in context.
- Select **one application question** you will use with your group at the end. The question may have more than one part, but the vital Biblical truth you want to encourage your group to put into practice should be the focus of your final question.
- Feel free to suggest that your group **continue** a discussion at the next meeting or at another informal get together. You want to leave time for worship, listening to God, and prayer ministry, so don’t feel you must cover every nugget of truth in a passage or allow each group member to share a mini-sermon on every question!
- Also, you may want to create your own introduction by using a personal example or current event that illustrates the point of the study. Your introduction and any background material shared should help lead the group members’ thoughts from the present moment into the text.

The authors are providing these questions and accompanying material for the leaders’ benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to supply resources for possible

questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously, we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor. We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The New Bible Commentary* as excellent resources for further study.

PREPARATION RECOMMENDATION

All leaders need to bring to their small group meeting resources listing opportunities to **participate** in or partner with the **urban ministries** of our church. If you already support or engage in ministry with them on a regular basis, several days before this meeting, ask someone in the group to share a highlight from being involved in that work. If you do not have a regular place to serve, come with a few ideas for the group to decide on. You may find this information on a printed sheet in the church lobby, which has suggestions for both groups and individuals. Some of these are usually listed in a current issue of *The Mix*, our monthly magazine, or on our website. For more specific details, contact the Administrative Assistant of the Fruit of the Vine (Urban) Ministries.

OPENERS

Privileged. Chosen. Special. Promising. Honored. Advantaged. Wealthy. Talented. Young. Elite.

All these words applied to the life of William Borden, heir to his family's dairy fortune. In 1904, he was already a millionaire before graduating from a Chicago high school. His parents gave him a trip around the world as a graduation present, and during that journey, he developed a burden for the lost and hurting people. So he decided to give his life to serve on a mission field overseas. He wrote in the back of his Bible, "**No Reserves.**"

At Yale University, he impressed his classmates with his total commitment to Christ. As a freshman, he initiated small prayer and Bible study groups that spread throughout the campus. By the time he was a senior, one thousand of the one thousand three hundred students on campus were involved in these groups. He often chose the most hardened college student as the next person to share Christ with. He also went into the city of New Haven, Connecticut and tried to reach alcoholics on the streets, eventually founding the Yale Hope Mission. He would offer a meal or find housing for someone all the time hoping to lead that person to Christ.

He pursued his studies and calling to missions with equal seriousness. He turned down job offers that would have made him even wealthier and wrote two more words in his Bible, "**No Retreats.**"

After deciding to go to China to reach the Muslim population there, he entered Princeton Seminary. After finishing at Princeton, he began his trip to China. En route, he stopped in Egypt to study Arabic to be better prepared for outreach to the Chinese Muslims. He was there only four months, became ill with spinal meningitis, and died at age twenty-five. Americans were shocked when the news of his death reached them. Was his life a waste?

William Borden didn't think so. He had added two more words to the back of his Bible, "**No Regrets**" (Culbertson, "William Borden").

William Borden was born with great advantages over many people of his time. He could have had anything he wanted in terms of material comfort and possessions. He could have gone anywhere, met anyone, and experienced anything the early twentieth century had to offer. But he viewed his life—his time, talents, and worldly privileges—not as means for self-promotion and selfish indulgence but as assets to be used for the Kingdom of God. William Borden gave his life and his fortune to bless the nations so that others might have the privilege of knowing Jesus Christ.

The nation of Israel was also a privileged people. They were a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a people belonging to God (Isaiah 43:10, 20–21, 44:1–2; Exodus 19:5–6; 1 Peter 2:9). They had been selected by the Lord to receive His tender care and blessings. He had promised their ancestor Abraham a land, a nation, and the privilege of blessing others around the world. He revealed His glorious nature to them and visited their nomadic camps until they settled in the Promised Land. God had been faithful, trustworthy, patient, and merciful in their relationship, even though His people were quick to doubt Him, to complain, to reject His ways, and to search for other gods to ensure their prosperity and happiness.

Why had the Lord given Israel so many privileges? Was God simply lavishing love, protection, provision, and His person on His people as a parent loves to give a child everything the child needs for spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical health? Was Israel a chosen, honored, wealthy nation because she had so much potential or deserved the very best God had to offer?

In the Old Testament, God sent His spokespersons, the prophets, to remind Israel of why He had chosen her and done so much for her. God's treatment of Israel was to reveal the excellencies of His character as well as to reveal how a people might thrive under His divine rule (Deuteronomy 4:5–8). Israel was to be the prime example of how a people live in right relationship with the holy and all-powerful Creator and King of the universe. The Lord also told Israel through Moses that He simply chose Israel out of love and was keeping His promises first made to their ancestor Abraham (Deuteronomy 7:6–8).

The prophets of God were bold and outspoken when Israel failed to live up to her calling. When Israel strayed from absolute loyalty to God or neglected to show justice to the poor and needy, the prophets came with sharp words of rebuke. The most common indictments of God's people by the prophets were for idolatry, empty ritualism, and social injustice. These are major themes in Amos' messages. This study examines parts of Amos 2–5 to see what God has to say to us about the way we should view our privileges and responsibilities as God's people of today

Information for leaders, which does not have to be covered in the group discussion:

Prophets were usually men who were called by God to speak forth His Word (Exodus 3:1–4:17; Isaiah 6; Jeremiah 1:4–19; Ezekiel 1–3; Hosea 1:2; Amos 7:14–15; Jonah 1:1). God's calling was crucial, and those who assumed the office of prophet

without God's commission or spoke without listening to Him were considered *false* prophets (Jeremiah 23:16–32). Prophets in Israel both proclaimed the Word of God and predicted future events. In other words, their ministry involved **forth telling** of the truth and **foretelling** of what might happen in the future. The prophets were God's "mouthpieces"—spokespersons He used to reveal Himself, His will, and His plans to His people.

The people we typically think of as prophets were the **writing prophets** of the Old Testament. They were mouthpieces for God, and were also social and spiritual commentators. They spoke primarily to the people and their messages were filled with rebukes, warnings, and calls for repentance.

The writing prophets delivered messages of:

- **Indictment**, descriptions of sin.
- **Judgment**, the coming punishment for sin.
- **Instruction**, how the hearers were supposed to live.
- **Hope**, developments after judgment such as deliverance and restoration.

The prophets of God were bold and outspoken about the **poor** in the Old Testament. Here is some background information about what the Scriptures teach on the poor since we will be looking at how God's people should display His justice and righteousness especially in light of the poor and needy in the world. The Old Testament has much to say to us about the poor, and one key assertion of the Scriptures is that poverty doesn't just happen. Poverty is not a normal condition but is instead the result of something that has gone wrong. We can see this when we examine the kind of language used by the Old Testament writers to describe the poor.

The Old Testament is very precise in its definition of poverty. Those who study Hebrew have identified six main Hebrew root words that are used for the word "poverty" in the Old Testament. These words occur over 200 times throughout the Scripture and can be classified into three groups.

1. The **indigent poor**. Indigent poor are those who are economically deprived and lack the basic necessities of life. Old Testament writers repeatedly note that this condition is often the result of sin, both personal and national. Proverbs warns that laziness, extravagance, gluttony, and drunkenness can lead to poverty (Proverbs 6:6–11; 10:4; 19:15; 20:13; 21:17; 23:20–21; 24:30–34; 28:19). National sin can lead to poverty since God promised to bless His people's land, crops and herds when they obeyed Him, and to curse them with bareness when they rebelled (Deuteronomy 28).

2. The **powerless poor**. Powerless poor are those who are socially and politically oppressed. This poverty is the result of the sin of others or social injustice, which usually leads to economic poverty. God is the champion of the powerless poor. He defends their rights, meets their needs, and brings about justice (Psalms 107:9; 109:31; 140:12). The entire Old Testament exhorts God's people not to pervert

justice, but instead to defend the powerless poor—the widow, the orphan, the fatherless (Exodus 23:6; Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 24:17; Psalms 82:1–3; Proverbs 31:8–9; 22:22–23; 29:7,14).

3. The **humble poor**. Humble poor are those who are spiritually meek and dependent upon God (Matthew 5:3). Often they are in this condition because they are also powerless and indigent! These people are lonely, afflicted, helpless, and in trouble. They are seen throughout the Psalms crying out to the Lord for mercy and grace (Psalms 22, 25, 37, 40, 69, 74, 149). They also testify to God’s faithfulness (Psalms 34:1–6, 15–18).

Pray that the Holy Spirit will use this study to help your group see that the privileges God has given us as His people should be used to bless others so that they might be drawn into a saving relationship with Christ as well.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

This is background information for the leaders. You may decide how much to share with your small group.

Amos was from Tekoa, a small town in Judah that was six miles south of Bethlehem and eleven miles from Jerusalem. He was a shepherd (1:1) who also tended sycamore trees (7:14). As a result, Amos spent a lot of time outdoors, which is reflected in his writings. His prophecy is dated somewhere between 760 and 750 BC (over 100 years before Jeremiah), during the reigns of King Uzziah, who ruled the southern kingdom called Judah, and King Jeroboam II, who ruled the northern kingdom, Israel. Both kingdoms were experiencing a time of economic prosperity and international influence (2 Kings 14:23–15:7). The standard of living for the wealthy rose rapidly. But while the two nations felt secure externally, with regards to their enemies, serious moral decay was present internally. God sent Amos to the northern kingdom to prophesy against them. His words were strong and straightforward. He denounced six heathen nations for their sins, then Judah, and finally Israel. His key themes were God’s justice and righteousness (5:7, 24, 6:12, cited in Hubbard, p. 112).

Amos pointed out that Israel enjoyed the privilege of being the chosen people of God (2:9–11, 3:2, cited in Moyer, p. 726) but did not live up to her responsibilities (Hubbard, p. 113). Because Almighty God had revealed His holiness, justice, mercy, and truth to Israel, He expected the nation to reflect those qualities in every day life. Instead, the people of Israel took their relationship with God and His abundant blessings for granted. Israelites grew wealthy but hoarded their abundance with no regard for the poor. Rather than being content, they became greedier and oppressed the poor in order to accumulate more. Underneath Israel’s indifference to God’s laws for social justice was Israel’s pursuit of pagan religion. When the Lord no longer had first place in their worship, His laws demanding justice and righteousness were more easily disregarded. Amos warned Israel that performing half-hearted rituals to honor the Lord while participating in pagan idolatry would not be enough for her citizens to escape judgment for their sin. As God’s chosen people, Israel would actually be judged more severely for her blatant defiance (Moyer, p. 726). Consequently, Amos was very unpopular and was openly opposed by Amaziah, the priest in Israel (7:10–

17). Many believe that Amos' ministry was short, perhaps less than a year. We do not know what happened to him after he gave these prophecies.

The book of Amos can be outlined as follows:

- I. Introduction (1:1–2)
- II. Judgment Against the Surrounding Nations (1:3–2:16)
- III. Judgment Against Israel (3:1–9:10)
- IV. God's Promise to Restore Israel (9:11–15).

Of particular interest to this study, Amos' judgments against Israel can be seen as:

- Chapter 2: Judgment for Oppression of the Poor and Polluted Religion
- Chapter 3: Judgment on the Chosen People
- Chapter 4: Judgment on an Unrepentant People
- Chapter 5: Judgment on an Unjust People

(Millard & Stek, p. 1346).

STUDY THE PASSAGES: Amos 2:6–16, 3:13–4:5, 5:1–15, 24.

Part One: Amos 2:6–16.

Amos prophesied against Israel's neighbors, beginning with the most distant one—the city of Damascus—and then like a hawk circling its prey, moved in one by one, until he ended with Israel. Israel may have rejoiced at the indictments leveled at her neighbors nearby in Judah, but Amos saved his most extensive condemnations for them!

1. Let's begin by reading Amos 2:6–8. Would someone read these verses aloud?

In these verses, what specific sins did the Lord accuse Israel of (6–8)?

In verse 6, God condemned those who falsely accused and **convicted the innocent for monetary gain**. Their greed prompted this great injustice against those who had less power. To “sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals” are connected ideas. “The righteous” here does not mean blameless, but rather those who are in the right or who have a just cause (Moyer, p. 731). Thus, in this verse, the needy and the righteous are synonymous. The same word in the Hebrew is translated “innocent” in Exodus 23:7. Scholars disagree whether Amos was referring to the practice of debt-slavery, where those in debt sold themselves as slaves to pay off what they owed or not (Leviticus 25:39–55) (Hubbard, *Joel & Amos*, p. 142).

In verse 7, God judged the wealthy and powerful for their **greed**. The translation and meaning of verse 7 is difficult. One rendering is “...who pant after the dust of the earth on the head of the poor” (Moyer, p. 731). The meaning would be that the wealthy and powerful were so greedy, they even coveted the dust the poor put on their heads in mourning (2 Samuel 1:2). The NIV translates it, “they trample upon poor as they walk on the dust of the ground” thus showing no regard for people to the point of completely ignoring them.

Also, God had Amos point out **sexual sin**. This may refer to incest (Hubbard, *Joel & Amos*, p. 142), which was forbidden in every form by the law (Leviticus 18:6–18; 20:17–21). Or it might mean the pagan practice of sexual acts with temple prostitutes. Just as in the above cases of social injustice, sexual sin was a violation of God's commands and dishonored His holy reputation.

In verse 8, Amos condemned the rich for heartless **disregard of the poor and God's law**. Garments, which were considered valid collateral for a loan, were to be returned to their owners at the end of each day since cloaks might be a poor man's only protection from the cold (Exodus 22:26–27). Here we see blatant violation of God's standards for how to treat the poor in conjunction with pagan acts of worship. "Every altar" and "the house of their god" also imply that the people were practicing idolatry. Thus, they committed both religious hypocrisy and idolatry in the same act.

Note: The repeated numerical motif, "for three sins...even four," was common in Semitic literature and is found in the Bible in Job 33:29, Proverbs 30:15, 18, 21, 29, and Ecclesiastes 4:12. These "numerical sayings" served several purposes including forming a list that could be easily memorized and placing particular emphasis on the final item in the series (Hubbard, *Proverbs*, p. 102). In particular, Amos seemed to use it to show that the crimes committed by the various peoples had finally tipped the scale and deserved God's judgment (Hubbard, *Joel & Amos*, p. 140).

*** What are some current examples of the types of sin described in the verses?**

Summarize:

In the next section (vv. 9–11), Amos summarized all that God had done for His chosen people Israel: He had delivered them from bondage in Egypt; He had led them through the wilderness to the Promised Land; He had given them that land by defeating their enemies; And He had provided spiritual leaders and examples for them. God had kept His covenant promises. Israel should have trusted, worshiped, thanked, and obeyed God.

This information is for leaders. Not all these details have to be discussed in your group meeting.

Amos recounted God's gracious, saving acts from their past. When God freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (v. 10), He also led them for forty years in the desert. During that time He provided food and water for the whole nation and their livestock (v. 10). He used that time to test their faith and tried to teach them to trust and obey Him. This was to prepare them to receive the fertile Promised Land. God promised to destroy the pagan nations living there and give the land to Israel, but Israel was supposed to remain loyal to and worship only Him.

"Amorite" refers to the population of Canaan as in Genesis 15:16 (Moyer, p. 731). God destroyed the Canaanites despite their intimidating size because of His Covenant promises to Abraham and family (Numbers 13:28, 31–33). "Nazarite" means "separate." Nazarites took special vows to abstain from fermented drink, to

not cut their hair, and to not touch a dead body (Numbers 6:1–12). Their vows lasted for whatever period of time they were wholly consecrated to the Lord. Both the Nazarites and the prophets were given to the people by the Lord to look after their spiritual welfare.

Instead of showing gratitude and obedience, Israel opposed God’s leaders and commands (v. 12). This revealed that the people really were rejecting God’s rule.

Israel didn’t just oppose the Nazarites and the prophets; they rejected the God behind these leaders and rebelled against His rule over them.

2. Let’s read Chapter 2:13–3:2. How would God now respond to their rebellion and rejection (vv. 13–16)?

The Hebrew in verse 13 is difficult to translate, but the picture is clear. A cart loaded with grain is heavy, and will press down or crush anything in its way. This could be a reference to the abundant harvests God had given the nation which enabled the powerful to grow wealthy (Moyer, p. 731). Likewise, Israel would be **crushed**. The picture could also be that of a heavy cart that grooved out tracks in the ground, just as Israel’s future would be grooved out for her. In either case, the message was clear – judgment was certain. No one, despite great ability and strength, would escape it (vv. 14–16).

3. What made their sin particularly painful and distasteful to God (3:1–2)?

Israel enjoyed special privileges as God’s chosen people: His presence, His revelation, His protection, and His provision. But Israel abused these or took them for granted (Hubbard, p. 146). Israel’s rejection of God was like a wife committing adultery, discounting the facts that her husband had loved and chosen to marry her, had provided for and protected her, and had been faithful to her (3:1–2). Israel had no excuse for her sin since God had clearly revealed His character, His goodness, His mercy, and His commands to the nation over many generations. He expected her to reflect His character since He promised to be her God and she was to be His people.

4. How would you define “rebellion?” How do you think rebellion against God was linked to Israel’s oppression of the poor?

The complexity of sin can be seen in the number of different Hebrew words used to describe it. One that Amos used is “pasha” which means, “rebel” (4:4). **Rebellion** is simply opposition to the one in authority. It involves a break in a relationship and the casting off of allegiance, as in a political rebellion.

Rebellion is in the heart of every person and at the heart of all sin. Mankind has been in rebellion against God from almost the beginning of human history (Genesis 3:1–13). Israel continually rebelled against God, her covenant with Him, and His right to rule her. We have not changed in all the centuries between then and now. Human beings do not want to be told what to do by anyone, even by God Himself! The natural

outcome of rebellion is **sin**, going our own way, straying from God's righteous path, and violating His holy laws.

Oppression and neglect of the poor is really no different from any other sin. It is unlikely that anyone who is willful and intent on going his or her own way will stop to consider the needs of others or their responsibility to meet those needs.

PART TWO: Amos 3:13—4:5

5. Let's continue by reading aloud Amos 3: 13—15, and 4:1—5.

Summarize: In Chapter 3: 9—12, Amos pictured God revealing to Israel's enemies what was going to happen. The Lord tells the Philistines and the Egyptians that because Israel had hoarded plunder from the poor in their own fortresses, Israel would be plundered by other nations.

What did the Lord say He would do to punish Israel for her sins (vv. 13—15)? How do these punishments correspond to two major aspects of Israel's disobedience, false religion and the misuse of wealth and power?

The Lord was about to judge the two major aspects of Israel's sin: **false religion and the misuse of wealth and power**. The "altars of Bethel" were the sites of much corruption in Israel's history, and so they had to be destroyed (1 Kings 12:32, 13:2; 2 Kings 23:15—16). "Horns" in the Old Testament were a symbol of strength, similar to that of an ox that would fight powerfully against an attacker with its horns. When God gave the design for the tabernacle, the altar for burnt sacrifices had four horns, one projecting from each corner (Exodus 27:2). The horns on the altar were considered a place of refuge. One could grasp them and seek protection for his life (1 Kings 1:50, 2:28; Exodus 21:12—14). But here, the Lord said Israel would not be able to seek protection or help merely by performing religious acts. Also, their expensive homes would be demolished. Ivory was a sign of great wealth, and archaeologists have discovered some of the ivory remains from these Samaritan homes.

Note: The northern kingdom, *Israel*, had Samaria as its capital. Eventually the term came to refer to the entire northern region. During the exile, foreigners moved into the area and intermarried with the small remnant of Jews still living there. They also corrupted the religion with idolatry and pagan practices. By Jesus' day, Samaritans were hated by Jews for being half-breeds and unfaithful to Judaism. (For a more complete discussion on this, see Kingship Bible Studies #8, "WORSHIP: The Kind of Worshipers the Father Seeks.")

6. To what did Amos sarcastically compare the women of Samaria (Ch. 4:1)? How were they offending God?

The region of Bashan was known for its rich pasture land and well-fed cattle (Psalm 22:12). Women in Israelite society had little, if any, real power, so it was unlikely any were directly involved in oppressing the poor. Yet God rebuked these women because

they indulged themselves, for example in alcoholic drinks. Their indulgence represented how they demanded luxuries from their husbands, which resulted in greater and greater injustices against the poor. In contrast, the godly woman of Proverbs 31 “opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy” (v. 20).

7. What would be their fate (v. 2)?

The Hebrew words for “hooks” and “fishhooks” in verses 2–3 might refer to practices depicted in Assyrian relief carvings that show prisoners being led away with ropes attached by hooks to the victims’ noses or lips (Millard & Stek, p. 1352). The point was that these women would be led in humiliation through the broken down walls of the city and away from their homes. It is not known what “Harmon” referred to.

The fact that the Lord again made an oath (v. 2) indicated the seriousness of the offense and the certainty of judgment. At other times, the Lord swore by His Name, meaning His person and His reputation. Throughout Scripture, God jealously guards His Name/reputation against the accusation that He has failed to keep His Word. Here He is swearing by His holiness, which is the sum total of His moral perfection. Again, judgment was sure because God cannot and will not ever lie!

Summarize:

In verses 4–5, the Lord seems to be telling the people to go to the pagan worship sites, to worship in their hypocritical way, and thus, sin. Amos might have delivered this message with some sarcasm in His voice. The irony was that the people believed they were doing what would please God, but in reality they were offending Him. They thought they were involved in sacred acts of worship, but they were really involved in sin.

The morning sacrifices were offered every morning, and the same items were given every evening (Exodus 29:38–42). These sacrifices included a lamb, grain, oil, and wine. They were probably offered to cover any sin so that the priests and people were acceptable to God. Thus He could meet with His people as promised and speak to them (Exodus 29:42–43). Perhaps they also reminded the priests that God deserved worship every day and that Israel should never approach Him empty-handed.

8. How did the people feel about their religious activities (v. 5)?

The Israelites were proud of their religiosity and they loved to brag and boast about their religious activities. Participating in religion has a way of soothing a guilty conscience and making everything seem right. In fact, we can feel quite good about ourselves when we’ve taken time to do something religious. Such activity can give the false sense that everything is all right between God and us.

Note: The Israelites were never to burn the sacred unleavened bread in a sacrifice (Leviticus 6:17, 7:12, cited by Millard & Stek, p. 1352). This language could be sarcasm again or another way that the people were offending God.

Clearly this hypocrisy offended God. He always looks on the inside, at the heart. The people's behavior—oppression of the poor, crushing the needy, denying justice to the oppressed, etc.—revealed that their religion was meaningless. It was all for show; none of it was real, so God hated it (Isaiah 1:10–17). In the New Testament, Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for the same reason (Matthew 6:1–8 and Ch. 23; the former cited in Hubbard, p. 158).

Summarize:

In the rest of Chapter 4, God reminds Israel that He sent difficulties in order to prompt her repentance. But the nation never returned to humbly seek His forgiveness and worship in His presence, a line repeated five times (4:6, 8, 9, 10, 11). So God announced that He would come to His people—He would come in judgment. Amos warns them to prepare to meet Him.

PART THREE: Amos 5:1–15, 24

- 9. Now, let's skim through Amos 5:1–15. Would some volunteers read verses 1–3, 4–10, and 11–15?**

What was to become of Israel (vv. 1–3)?

A "lament" was a song or poem mourning the dead. Amos saw Israel's fate as hopeless. According to the Lord, only a remnant would remain. The northern kingdom never did rise again. Israel was never again established as an independent nation after her exile until 1948 when the modern nation was formed. However, the nation of Israel today is not the same theocracy ["governed by divine guidance"] we read about in the Old Testament.

"The house of Joseph" was simply another way to refer to the northern kingdom. It reflected that Joseph was the ancestor of Israel's largest tribe, Ephraim.

- 10. What invitation did the Lord extend to the people anyway (vv. 4–6, 14–15)? What does this invitation tell us about God?**

With God, there is always an opportunity for turning and repentance, even when it is doubtful the opportunity will be taken. The word "seek" means "to turn to and trust, or put confidence in." God was calling them to trust *Him* rather than their religious practices, their religious places, or religious pilgrimages to Judah (Beersheba). The seeking is a matter of life and death. If Israel wants to live as a nation, she must seek the Lord.

The Bible teaches that God's invitation is always there for us, which shows that God is merciful and patient and that He wants none to perish but desires that all to come to Him for salvation (2 Peter 3:9). But the Bible also warns us that if we fail to respond quickly ("today") to God's invitation, our hearts will harden, and it will eventually be impossible to respond (Hebrews 3:7–19).

Amos exhorted Israel to turn from the evil she was involved in, the injustices and mistreatment of the poor, and pursue what's good instead.

The verses seem to illustrate a progression from **acts of the will** ("seek me," "seek the Lord," and "seek good") to **attitudes of the heart** ("hate evil, love good"). This is often the process by which we experience change in an area of life. We can't always wait until we feel like doing what's right. Usually we must first choose to do something out of obedience, and eventually our attitudes and feelings will follow.

Note: There is also a connection between our vertical relationship with God ("seek the Lord") and our horizontal relationships with others ("seek good, not evil"). Getting things right with God is the foundation for being able to make things right with others. And it is impossible to have things right in our relationship with God and not "fix" the things that are wrong in our relationships with others. These two great commandments are inseparable: love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:34–39). And loving the Lord (responding to His love for us) is a clear prerequisite for loving our neighbor unconditionally (1 John 4:7–12, 19–21).

11. What further indictments did Amos level at Israel (vv. 7, 10–13)?

The Hebrew word for bitterness literally is "wormwood," one of the bitterest plants. Amos meant that the people were perverting justice until those suffering became deeply bitter. The people were guilty of hating those who told the truth (v. 10), exploiting the poor for gain (v. 11), denying the poor justice in the courts (again for monetary gain, v. 12), and doing whatever they could to keep the poor under their control (v. 7).

***How do people "turn justice into bitterness," "trample on the poor," "oppress the righteous," or "deprive the poor of justice" today?**

Summarize:

In verses 8–9, Amos pointed out the two realms the Lord rules over. The Lord is sovereign over all of creation *and* over the affairs of men (v. 9). Amos inserted this little "doxology" here to arouse his listeners out of their complacency. All of them knew God was creator and in control of the heavens and the earth. They needed to be reminded that He was also sovereignly watching over them. If He said judgment would come, then judgment would come!

He also told them that those who were looking forward to the day when the Lord would appear and right all wrongs ought to be afraid of His coming. Rather than finding His people innocent victims of other nations' brutality, He would judge Israel more severely than the other nations since she should have known what He desired.

12. Turn with me to one more verse: Amos 5:24. Let's have someone read it aloud. This is key to the whole message of Amos because it reveals what God desires.

What did God want from His people (5:24)?

God did not want hypocritical worship and meaningless sacrifices, "But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" **Justice** emphasizes bringing God's good order and government to a society while **righteousness** indicates that people are in right relationship with God and each other (Hubbard, p. 169). This would be a nation where there is no partiality toward the rich or powerful, no oppression of the poor or powerless, where God is honored, His holiness is reflected in our lifestyles, the needy are cared for with grace and humility, and others are treated with the same dignity and worth God shows each of us.

Later in the book, Amos did deliver a message of hope to God's people (9:11–15). However, the Lord's terrible judgment came prior to rescuing them and restoring the remnant to their homeland.

APPLICATION

***What blessings or privileges do you enjoy? How does God expect you to use them? Think honestly, have you used them for your own enjoyment or have you freely given to others what God has entrusted to you?**

***When have you presumed on God's kindness or mercy? Is there anything you need to repent of after going through these passages?**

***How has living in an affluent culture affected your spiritual condition? How has it impacted your thoughts about the poor?**

***How does loving God necessitate that we will love and serve the poor?**

*** What practical ways can we join others in our church to show God's heart for the poor?**

Refer to instructions in the Preparation Recommendation section.

WRAPPING IT UP

We Christians have many of the same problems and struggles as the people of God did in the Old Testament. "Idolaters," people who devise their own security and higher powers, surround us, and we are often swept into the worship of the idols of our day. We also are living in a time of relative affluence and security. We perform our "religious duties" and feel that we've done enough, that God is satisfied. But the stinging message of the prophet Amos wakes us from our spiritual complacency. His words have tremendous relevance for us. This week, let's take time to evaluate our lives. What has God given us that He intended for us to use in serving others? What is our usual reaction or response to the poor or someone in need? Where, when, and how could we as a group and as individuals begin to alleviate the oppression of the poor and the injustices of the needy?

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