

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 37 Part 2

Amos Concluded

U2 is my favorite band; I readily confess. The sound in their songs produces joy in my heart, and many of the songs' messages strike a chord in my mind. I find in these songs ideas and experiences that relate to me and help me explore both my life and the world around me. It has been this way for almost 30 years.

If I had only their recordings, I would be a huge fan, but having a bit of knowledge about the band further solidifies my position as "Biggest Fan In Texas." There are four members of U2, affectionately known as "Bono," "The Edge," "Larry Mullin, Jr.," and "Adam Clayton." They have been close friends since their band formed in early high school. From early on, all but Adam Clayton were blunt about their faith in Christ. The band shied away from the moniker of a "Christian band," instead asserting that they were simply a rock band made up of mostly Christians.

The songs were never overtly Christian either, although the Christian ideas and worldview permeate the songs, even when the songs seem to embrace something seemingly un-Christian. Biblical imagery is never far under the surface of Bono's lyrics. Whether it is a reference to "the bird with a leaf in his mouth, after the flood—all the colors came out," referencing Noah and the rainbow in *Beautiful Day*, or the recent song *Unknown Caller* which is replete with biblical references.¹

Bono has never shied away from making very public statements about the poverty in the third world and the near criminal nature of many parts of the civilized world's abuse of the poor. He led the debt relief effort for Africa and actively works to eradicate disease on that continent. The band has worked on Christian efforts beyond Africa. An early song of the band was "Pride, In the Name of Love," a song about Martin Luther King that challenged the racism in the U.S.A. The band used to receive a lot of threats when performing that song, and during one tour the death threats were quite blunt.

Bono tells of the time the band was set to perform in Arizona when a very specific threat was received. The threat read, "If you play Pride, your life will end tonight." The police did not want the band to perform the song that night, and the band prayed and discussed what to do. U2 decided to play the song and Bono took center stage singing with all his heart. His eyes were closed as he sang through the song and as he neared the end he opened them. It was then that he

¹ The song *Unknown Caller* seems to be a call from God to a junkie in desperate need of the

saw the largest member of the band, the earlier un-believing Adam Clayton, standing right in front of him.

Clayton had stood between Bono and the audience for the entire song -- putting himself between Bono and harm for the song.²

Different people in different places try to find where they exist within God's plans for this world. Many areas need the light of God shining and illuminating dark corners of sin, hypocrisy, and ignorance. Racism has no part among God's people, nor does abuse of the poor. These are social messages, but that does not relegate them as distant concerns of God. As we return to finish a study of Amos, we are reminded that God is not simply concerned about the personal sins of one's life. Certainly it is sinful to cheat on a test (or a spouse), to steal, to lie, to hate, and even to gossip, but God is also concerned with our corporate and social interactions on a larger scale.

God cares about the justice in our society. He cares for the poor and downtrodden. He cares for the outcast and the alien. When God's people do not care as he does, the words of Amos ring with direct confrontation and super clarity. We continue that study in this lesson considering several prominent themes in the book. In the process, we will also study basic information about the role of a prophet and the structure of Amos as a book.

REVIEW OF CONTEXT

Amos occurred during a "golden age" of Israel, the northern kingdom under King Jeroboam II. Peace from the superpowers, Assyria and Egypt, and the long reign of the Omri dynasty and Jeroboam II produced a prosperity Israel had never known. More and more people moved into the cities and an elite class of uber-wealthy emerged. These were people who profited from slave labor, who cheated the poor in trade and in the courts. For these people, religion was hypocritical performance of ritual believing God was the source of their blessings, and refusing to accept that they had real responsibilities to use their blessings as a blessing for others.

AMOS AND THE COVENANT

² Bono, *The Edge*, Adam Clayton, Larry Mullen, Jr., *U2 by U2*, (Harper Collins 2006), at 248-249 while .

Often when we think of “prophets” we think of people divining the future. In the case of Israel, the prophet certainly had insight and a future message, but in many ways, the prophet was looking back in time, not forward.

Amos’s message and concern were rooted in the covenant between Israel and Yahweh God. This was a covenant with the history of redemption from Egypt, with law delivered through Moses, and with a monotheistic commitment from the Israelites. Yet all of this history seemed lost, or at least passé, to the Israelites of Amos’s day. The prophetic condemnation was not some spectacular divine revelation as much as it was a pronouncement of curses that were given by God in view of Israel’s interactions from the past.

We might say today, “as sure as two plus two is four, if you do *abc*, then rest assured, *xyz* will happen!” Amos said the same things, but in the language of his day:

Do two walk together, unless they have agreed to meet?
Does a lion roar in the forest, when he has no prey?
Does a young lion cry out from his den, if he has taken nothing?
Does a bird fall in a snare on the earth, when there is not a trap for it?
Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid?
(Amos 3:3-6).

As certain as these things were to Amos, so Amos was certain of the word of the Lord which he was proclaiming. It was what some today term a “no-brainer!”

The Lord God has spoken; who can but prophesy?
Proclaim... An adversary shall surround the land
And bring down your defenses from you,
and your strongholds shall be plundered.
(Amos 3:8, 11).

In looking back, the prophet interwove God’s immediate history with his audience with the history of their forefathers:

I also withheld the rain from you...
I struck you with blight and mildew...
Your fig trees and your olive trees the locust devoured...
I sent a pestilence after the manner of Egypt...
I overthrew some of you, as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah.
(Amos 4:7-11).

Amos pointed to the past to explain the future. He later recounts the Israelites’ forty years in the wilderness in mocking refrain of the man-centered religious

practices of his day (Amos 5:21-25). As Amos delivers his final confirmation that God's eyes were set upon Israel and its destruction, he does so harkening back to God first placing Israel in the land:

“Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt?”
Behold the eyes of the Lord God are upon the sinful kingdom,
And I will destroy it from the surface of the ground,
except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob.
(Amos 9:7-8).

Point for Home: *“I sent a pestilence after the manner of Egypt”* (Amos 4:10).

Reflection is useful on many levels. Reflection can lead to praise for the work of God in our lives and leading up to our lives. Reflection can help us remember who we are and how we got where we are. Reflection can also serve as a source of hope. It can reinforce faith as we remember the mighty outstretched arm of God working wonders.

We need to take a warning from the words of Amos. We live in a time of great advances in knowledge as we see in science, in medicine, in the Internet, and in exploration and travel. We live in a culture that is international in reach, integrating people and ideas more readily than ever before in history. With all these “advances” there is a strong tendency to disassociate the values or mores of the past as “outdated.”

I am relatively certain the Israelites in Amos's day were confident they were doing things right, knew much more than their forefathers, and did not need to concern themselves with the outdated values reflected in the old ways and the old religion. They were in their “golden age” and no doubt felt quite enlightened. Many probably took solace in their riches as indicative of God's blessings.

Here we consider the role of reflection as it adds to our ability to contemplate our actions, choices, and priorities. Do we reflect the values and priorities of Christ? Do we show the love of God in the things we do? Is the heart of the divine our heart? At some point we need to know that we have not outgrown the simple values and heart of the God who does not change. If he cared for the poor and downtrodden at the time he gave the law to Moses, does he not care for them today? If Jesus was concerned with not causing a child to stumble, does Jesus still have that concern today?

Let us reflect on the past with an eye toward how we act today, aware of Paul's admonition, “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap... So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:7-10).

AMOS AND YAHWEH

Amos came into the northern kingdom as God's voice into the peoples' lives. In the book bearing his name and prophecies, we have several verses that give us some insight into Amos the man, but it is not merely as a man that Amos spoke to the people. Amos spoke as the mouthpiece of Yahweh God.

Much of what we know about Amos comes from an interaction he had with King Jeroboam II's priest named Amaziah, which we read about in Amos 7:10-17. Amaziah was a priest in Bethel, one of the two towns where Jeroboam I had set up golden idols the century before in an effort to stop the Israelites from venturing to Jerusalem to worship (1 Kings 12:29). Amaziah sent king Jeroboam II word that Amos was conspiring against the king, proclaiming that the king would "die by the sword" and that Israel would "go into exile."

Amaziah then confronted Amos,

O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there, but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom (Amos 7:13).

Amos responded bluntly. He explained that he was "no prophet, nor a prophet's son."³ In other words, Amos was not a professional prophet who walked around and earned his keep by pronouncing some omen or oracle of some god. Amos was there on Yahweh's business, not his own. Amos told Amaziah,

I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. But the LORD took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.' (Amos 7:15).

As a "herdsman," Amos was probably more than a simple shepherd. He was likely one who oversaw a larger commercial exercise of breeding and maintaining sizable herds.⁴ Amos was a travelling countryman but also a businessman. He was in Israel because God took him out of his career and told him to go proclaim

³ There was a profession of "prophet" where the prophets were paid for their services (see, e.g., 2 Kings 5:16-23 where Elisha is offered payment by Na'aman and 1 Kings 18:19 where it implies that Ahab's government was paying the prophets of Ba'al). Old Testament scholar Douglas Stuart theorizes that Amaziah thought Amos was prophesying in Bethel because the money was better there than in Judah. Stuart, Douglas, *Word Bible Commentary: Hosea-Jonah*, (Word 1987), at 284.

⁴ Smith, B. K., and Page, F. S., *New American Commentary: Amos, Obadiah, Jonah* (Broadman & Holman 2001).

God's message. Amaziah was not standing against Amos. Amaziah was standing against Yahweh! Amos responded to Amaziah accordingly.

Now therefore hear the word of the LORD. "You say, 'Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.' Therefore thus says the LORD: 'Your wife shall be a prostitute in the city, and your sons and daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be divided up with a measuring line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land'" (Amos 7:16-17).

This response of Amos contains several phrases that are typical of Amos (and many other prophets). Amos was not speaking his opinion. He was not giving his gut reaction to the state of affairs. He was not theorizing on what he thought God believed. Amos was speaking the word of the LORD!

Throughout Amos we read these phrases:

Thus says the LORD ... (Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13, 2:1, 4, 6; 3:12, etc.)

Hear this word that the LORD has spoken ... (Amos 3:1; 7:16)

The LORD has sworn... (Amos 4:2; 6:8; 8:7)

The LORD says... (Amos 1:5, 8, 15; 2:3, 11, 16; 3:10, 11, 13, 15, etc.)

Amos was speaking God's word over Israel as well as over the other nations. As we discussed in the first part of this lesson, the book opens with a set of oracles, six of which were to foreign nations (seven foreign nations if Judah is counted as "foreign"). Amos understood that the LORD spoke not simply to the Northern and Southern kingdoms, but spoke to all nations. God was not territorial; he was much larger than Israel understood. God was sovereign over all people and all nations.

Even beyond the opening oracles we see God's sovereignty when Amos spoke of Yahweh as the "God of hosts," meaning the hosts of heaven (Amos 3:13; 4:13; 9:5). To the polytheists who worshipped other gods as well as Yahweh, this phrase set Yahweh above any idea of god they might have or worship. Yahweh made "the mountains and creates the wind" (Amos 4:13). Yahweh made the stars and constellations (Amos 5:8). Yahweh is the Supreme and All Powerful God who reigns over all people and all things.

This is why the idolatry of Israel was absurd. It is also why the idolatry of Israel was dangerous and self-destructive. Even if Israel had regular heartfelt worship for idols (Amos 5:21-28; 8:3), it was a destructive worship and religion. In worship, humans are ascribing worth to something or someone. When worth is seen in the covenant God Yahweh, then the attributes of Yahweh and the attentive care of Yahweh is sought. When people ascribe worth to something or someone

else, than whatever is deemed worthy of that “worship” becomes the object of desire and imitation. This idolatry led the Israelites to sins that offended the character of God as well as the instructions of God. These will be considered in our next section. Stuart Douglas explained it well,

On God’s behalf Amos denounced Israel’s idolatry, not simply because idolatry was a fraudulent means of worship, but also because it was a system of life which in contrast to covenant religion required no personal ethics, thus allowing its practitioners to exploit others for their own gain.⁵

Point for Home: “...*the Lord said to me, ‘Go...’*” (Amos 7:15).

Amos had a full time job, one apparently where he was doing quite well for himself. Then he was called upon by God to do a task. It was not necessarily a fun task, and it involved travel, confrontation, and rejection. It may not have been easy, but it was very important. It was to deliver the word of the Lord in judgment. Interestingly, though, based upon the message of Amos, as well as the narrative history given in 2 Kings, the people did not heed the words delivered!

Does that make the task a wasted one? Absolutely not! For the words of the Lord delivered by Amos had at least two effects. First, the prophetic demise of Jeroboam II and Israel came right around the corner, at least within the life span of many hearers of Amos’s prophetic announcement. Undoubtedly this is at least one reason that Amos’s oracles and visions were recorded for the people of Israel (and in God’s providence for us as well). People wrote and copied the words of the prophet who clearly spoke such predictive truth!

A second reason is related to the first. Amos, the prophet who spoke clear future truth does not end his message with prophetic doom of Israel. In the closing chapter of Amos, after announcing Israel’s destruction and the bitter mourning that would accompany it, Amos declared another day that would come later. This was a day when God would restore Israel:

In that day I will raise up the booth of Israel that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old... says the LORD your God” (Amos 9:15).

With that last “says the LORD your God,” the book of Amos closes. But Scripture, of course, does not close there. This is the passage that James quoted in Acts 15:16 when the council of Jerusalem is debating the implications of the Gentile ministry of the church. James writes the Amos quote with to link the restoration to

⁵ Douglas at 292.

the inclusion of the Gentiles. James understood, as Israel failed to in the time of Amos, that Israel was blessed to be a blessing to others. In like manner the church is blessed today to be a blessing to others. So we see James use the Amos passage as preserved in the Septuagint⁶, to emphasize the idea of God's people being blessed to bless others:

After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old (Acts 15:16-18).

In more specific terms, you and I are blessed to be a blessing to others. We are to lead our lives reflecting God's love and concern for all people. He is the One whom we worship; no idol or other item should ever trump our pursuit of God and his message!

AMOS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Because I had sent an email to our class about Amos and his message of social justice, one of my friends (Bill Young) in class approached me last Sunday with a ream of articles on "social justice." "I'm ready for this!" he warned me. The top article was printed from the Wikipedia page for social justice. It starts,

Social justice generally refers to the idea of creating a society or institution that is based on the principles of equality and solidarity, that understands and values human rights, and that recognizes the dignity of every human being... The term and modern concept of "social justice" was coined by the Jesuit Luigi Taparelli in 1840 based on the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas.⁷

Bill had his hands on a good definition of social justice. These issues of equality, human rights, and human dignity, are issues in Amos, because they are issues that concern God. The plight of the poor, the decadence of the rich, the abuse of the lower classes, the abuse of power by the higher ranking social figures, the bribery and corruption of the courts—these were abuses of social justice in Amos's day that were abhorrent to God.

⁶ The Septuagint was the Greek translation of the Old Testament used often in the early church as well as in Jewish circles at the time of Christ.

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_justice.

In the opening oracles concerning the foreign nations, frequently there are references to the failure of these nations to adhere to God's values of equality and justice. Damascus "threshed Gilead with threshing sledges of iron" (Amos 1:3), calling to mind the image of running a metal threshing machine used to separate grain over helpless people. Gaza "carried into exile a whole people" (Amos 1:6), taking people captive, and forcing them away from their homes and possessions. Tyre "did not remember the covenant of brotherhood" (1:9), but went back on treaties made likely through marriage. Edom "pursued his brother with the sword (1:11) using force and violence to take that which did not belong to them. The Ammonites abused pregnant women and their unborn in order to take property (Amos 1:13).

Setting aside the foreign nations, the sins of Israel detailed in Amos's eighth oracle speak strongly to social justice issues. Selling the "righteous for silver" is the perversion of taking bribes rather than upholding the rights of those in the right (Amos 2:6). Selling "the needy for a pair of sandals," or trampling "the head of the poor into the dust of the earth" (Amos 2:6-7) was scandalous bargaining that devalued the weak and needy.

In the fourth chapter, Amos challenges the acts of those he terms "cows of Bashan." Bashan was in the northern area in a fertile region where the livestock could grow strong and fat. Psalms 22:12 speaks of the "strong bulls of Bashan," and Ezekiel would later write of "fattened animals from Bashan" (Ez. 39:18). In modern American we might call these folks "fat cats!" but for Amos they were simply "cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria," the capital of the Northern Kingdom (Amos 4:1). Amos indicts these fat cats, "who oppress the poor, who crush the needy" (Amos 4:1). Amos says the day would come when they would be led off into slavery bound with hooks!

This is the judgment of Amos. The abusers of others would themselves receive abuse. Consider what Amos said about the powerful in Israel's cities that did not uphold truth:

They abhor him who speaks the truth. Therefore because you trample on the poor and you exact taxes of grain from him, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not dwell in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate (Amos 5:10-12).

All the devout religious festivals attended by the Israelites would not excuse their lives and actions:

"I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:21-24).

This indictment went to "those who are at ease in Zion," and to "the notable men." (Amos 6:1). In arrogance these people thought themselves better than their neighbors. They were lying on their "beds of ivory," eating "lambs from the flock," and singing "idle songs to the sound of the harp." They were drinking "wine" and anointing themselves "with the finest oils," but having no grief over the problems of those around them (Amos 6:4-6). Therefore God was set to deliver these at ease as the first to go into exile, adding,

"I abhor the pride of Jacob and hate his strongholds, and I will deliver up the city and all that is in it" (Amos 6:8).

The indictment continues as Amos points out that the people "have turned justice into poison" (Amos 6:12).

Amos indicted the people through oracles and also through visions. God gave Amos visions of judgment in the forms of locusts devouring crops (Amos 7:1-3). God gave a vision of judgment by fire (Amos 7:4-6). The LORD showed Amos a plumb line that would show Israel laid waste (Amos 7:7-9). Jim Hoffmeier explains this plumb line vision as one which brings together the "testing/weighing and judgment" that is the standard by which the people were measured and found wanting.⁸

The central core of Amos is the complaint that the comfortable, wealthy and powerful are living off the backs of the weak, the poor, and the powerless. Rather than realizing they were blessed to be a blessing, the Israelites were thinking they were blessed because they were special and deserving of the blessings. This lifestyle came from a false image and worship of false gods. They did not understand the heart or command of the LORD. This was the source of God's judgment.

Point for Home: *"I take no delight in your solemn assemblies"* (Amos 5:21).

⁸ Hoffmeier, James, "The 'Plumb Line' Vision of Amos 7.7-9," *Boundaries of the Ancient Near Eastern World*, (Sheffield Academic Press 1998), at 317.

David Platt, in his book, *The Radical Question: What is Jesus Worth to You?*,⁹ warns the 21st century American church to seriously consider whether it is living for the American dream or for the Lord. It is the question we pose as we consider our final point for home.

How do we, who live in the wealthiest culture and time in human history, handle our luxuries while there are others starving? How do we ignore the millions and millions of children who die each year because of starvation and a lack of basic medicine? What does it say of our faith and beliefs when millions of dollars of cars are in our church parking lot while millions do not have access to pure water?

I do not have a five-sentence solution, save perhaps the admonition to love God fully and love our neighbor as ourselves. (We would need to add the parable of the Good Samaritan to make sure we understand the “neighbor” is anyone we can help, even our enemy.) So instead of giving a simple answer, let me suggest some ideas for further prayer, thinking, and discussion. First, it is simple that we are to tithe ten percent of what God has entrusted to us. This is a biblical tithe that should trump the kind of car we want or the size of our house, even the design of our clothes. Second, beyond this, we should keep in mind that the *reason* we are blessed is so that we can bless others. Part of this to me is found in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The parable arose because of the question, “who is our neighbor that we should love as ourselves?” Jesus recounts the story and tells the listeners to “go and do likewise.” In the parable, the Samaritan is not out looking for people to help. But on his road, in his daily walk, he came across one who needed his help. He stopped, and he gave that help. Surely we have the same obligation (or perhaps we should term it the “same opportunity.” In our daily walk, as we are about God’s business, we will come across those in need. When we do, we need to do what we can to help them. That seems plain and simple.

But our discussion and choices need to go beyond this. We in America live in a democracy. One thing we have is the right to vote and speak up into our government. It is not only a right, but a responsibility. We have a responsibility to reach out for the roles and uses of government that best advance God’s agenda. We should reach out to those who have no voice, protect those who cannot protect themselves, tend to the needs of those who cannot meet their own needs.

Does this mean government handouts? Maybe sometimes! Other times, maybe not. We all know the adage that it is better to teach a man to fish than to simply give him a fish.

⁹ Platt, David, *The Radical Question: What is Jesus Worth to You?*, (Multnomah 2010).

What do we do about the injustice in other countries? What do we do about the children starving in Africa (or closer by)? Do we look on the situation as the 19th century thinker Thomas Malthus, who believed that every life saved from starvation today will result in ten starving tomorrow, so it is more humane to let them die? Of course not! I think it very appropriate for families to take mission efforts into these places and take the gospel as well as hard material aid. I like the people who ask for birthday gifts that entail giving livestock, digging water wells or providing education to lesser privileged in corners of the globe, all in the name of Jesus.

This is not scolding, nor does it come from a self-righteous finger-pointing source. (I'm not sure that if I had been Bono in Arizona that I would have sung the song on the night of the death threat!) I regularly beg God's mercy and pray for better insight on how to be his steward in all things he has given. Please join me in that prayer and dialogue and let us see that God has blessed us, so that we might be a blessing to others!

WANT MORE?

Two things on our want more list today. First, read Platt's book! One of our class members (who gave me the book!) will be putting a number of copies into our church library. Second, with your family or friends, find someone to help! Maybe it's adopting a Compassion International child (www.compassion.com). It might be helping Pierre feed the homeless of Houston. Find *someone* to help in the name of Jesus! Email us your ideas at wantmore@Biblical-Literacy.com.