

# The Lion Has Roared

Hearing God's Voice in a Sinful Society



By Dr. W. Wayne VanHorn

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## Foreword

Bible students need study helps to guide them in the understanding and application of the Scripture. Numerous resources exist for studying the New Testament books, but few helps exist for most Old Testament books. Adequate study guides for Old Testament books need to come from persons who combine scholarship and practicality. Numerous Old Testament scholars exist, but, they seem to write for the academic market. For years I have yearned for competent Old Testament scholars to write for the layperson in much the same way as William Barclay did in the New Testament commentaries in *The Daily Study Bible Series*.

For several years I urged Dr. Wayne VanHorn to write. He prepared himself in Old Testament studies at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. He became skilled in Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament. He studied the life situation and original message of Old Testament books. Studying the Old Testament from an academic, scholastic perspective has helped him grow in knowledge of the Old Testament. But while he studied the Old Testament, he served as a pastor and taught Old Testament books in many churches. Teaching and preaching the Old Testament forced Wayne to make the truths of the Old Testament practical.

Dr. Wayne VanHorn answered the urgings of many people to write. He has written *The Lion Has Roared: Hearing God's Voice in a Sinful Society* as a commentary on the Book of Amos. Dr. VanHorn combines Amos scholarship with Amos relevancy. He writes with the conviction that a text addressed in an ancient historical situation of the eight century B.C. addresses situations and issues for the twenty-first century A.D.

Readers have a good format in using the Book of Amos along with *The Lion Has Roared*. The *then* of the text is examined and the *now* of the text is applied. An overview of Amos is given in nine chapters with attractive, relevant themes. Students of Amos can follow the format in an overview fashion. Each chapter has a helpful, easy-to-follow outline. But the format is not all the bare bones of skeleton. Lots of good "meat" exists on the bones. Throughout the book Dr. VanHorn makes legitimate and timely applications of the Amos text.

The lion has roared and the scholar/pastor has written. He helps us to understand and to apply Amos to our times and to our personal lives. His applications do not come from personal opinions or mere relativism but from an authentic exegesis of Amos. Hopefully this work on Amos represents the first of many other study guides on Old Testament books written by the competent scholar and caring pastor.

I welcome Dr. Wayne VanHorn to the fraternity of published writers. The dues of writing are high. I celebrate his skill and his perseverance. I have watched Wayne VanHorn since he sat in my preaching classes at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. I celebrated his scholarship and his practical application of Scripture then, and I do now with his written overview of Amos. I celebrate this writing and I admire the writer. He has a deep experience with God. He loves the Scripture, and he loves people. Seeing him combine the scholarship of Amos with the society of today thrills me. Rejoice in this work. Read it alongside the Book of Amos. It will feed your mind, thrill your heart, and impact your life.

Harold T. Bryson  
Professor of Christian Studies  
Mississippi College  
Clinton, Mississippi  
1995

## Preface

Many outstanding commentaries are available for anyone interested in doing an in depth study in the Book of Amos. However, I have notice that few lay people study these commentaries. After all, what does Amos, a prophet from the eighth century B.C., have to say to someone facing the twenty-first century A.D.? The answers may surprise you.

*The Lion Has Roared* is my attempt to bridge the gulf between the eighth century B.C. and the twenty-first century A.D. with a message that has timely and timeless value. The lasting value and relevance of Amos' message is because this book was inspired by God's Spirit, was given to God's prophet, and was intended to confront God's people in their sin. God commissioned Amos to prophesy at a time when the nation of Israel was experiencing international peace, financial prosperity, rampant religion, and unbridled immorality. These same conditions exist in America today! God's word to ancient Israel is His word to us: divine favor is not unconditionally guaranteed.

Our words and actions reveal our relationship with God. When those words and actions are in conflict with God's will, His presence with us is jeopardized. God sends His Word to challenge us to conform to His will. The prospect of restoration and the disaster of judgment hinge on the choice we make. Will we submit to God, or will our nation become an example of God's disfavor? Israel had these options in the eight century B.C. These are the options that God presents to us. Ancient Israel chose poorly. What will we do?

## **Preface to the Revised Edition**

Little did I know when I first published *The Lion Has Roared* nearly twenty years ago that the message the book sought to proclaim would be relevant in an even greater way than it was in 1995. Since the book's first appearance, America has undergone drastic changes. Moral values have plummeted. Social behaviors that were taboo and regarded as downright perverse are now accepted without so much as raising an eyebrow. Amos decried the poor moral values of ancient Israel. I can only believe he would "have a fit" over what's happening to our once "Christian nation!"

At the time of the revision of this book, America's national debt approaches the \$17 trillion mark with no end in sight. Politicians waste money and allocate more from a system that is cash depleted. Everyone wants to live off the government, fewer people feel the need to work, to carry their own weight, or to do their fair share. National leaders seem no more worried about the disintegration of America than Israel's leaders were concerned about the break-up of their nation. Amos pronounced such political short-sightedness that sought personal gain and comfort at the expense of future generations.

Amos knew that Jacob was vulnerable due to the nation's small size. In America, we learned of our own vulnerability with the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, the 1993 Branch Davidian debacle in Waco, Texas, the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, the 1999 Columbine High School shootings, the 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and many other such instances since that time.

Clinton, MS 2013

## **Introduction**

The year 2000 is approaching. This millennial year will bring changes in technology, in fashions, in fads, and in the world events. These kinds of changes have been going on perpetually, but the millennial year will put them in a new light. Already some theologians are placing special emphasis on the year 2000 as the time of Christ's return. They often quote the prophets to support their view. But the question arises, "Were the prophets primarily concerned with our time or theirs?"

**Amos** is a prophetic book in the Old Testament containing the words and visions of a shepherd who lived in the eight century B.C. The following analysis of his Book will show that he was primarily concerned with the people of his day. God took him away from his task of tending sheep to prophesy to His people, Israel. They were living in sin, worshipping God, and acting as if everything was alright. God used Amos to deliver the message that worship must be accompanied by moral living in order to be acceptable.

Amos' audience found security in military might, in economic prosperity, and in high social standing. These three facets of their lives served as the pillars supporting their "reign of violence." God called Amos to announce that judgment was coming. The prophet's message was timely for his audience.

The prophet's message is also timeless! Therefore, Amos' words apply to us as well as they applied to the people who worshipped a Bethel around 760 B.C. We should not try to reinterpret the message; we should seek to understand how that message speaks to us today. God demanded ethical living from His people in the

eighth century B.C.; He demands ethical living from His people today.

## 1

### **Unbridled Sin**

If you had to confront someone with a wrong they had done, how would you do it? An effective method is to point out the wrong others have done, being sure to refer to the negative consequences of their sins. By helping them see the wrong in other person's actions, you can point out their faults more easily.

An example of this approach is found in II Samuel 12. Nathan told King David the story of the rich man who took a poor man's lamb to feed a traveler. As King, David had the responsibility of insuring justice. This blatant act of wrongdoing kindled David's wrath. He pronounced the death sentence on the man. Then Nathan drove the truth home. He said, "You are the man!"

Amos employed this approach. As he prepared to address the evils of Israel's society, he pointed out the atrocities of neighboring countries: Syria, Philistia, Phoenicia, Edom, Ammon, and Moab. These countries were Israel's enemies. Amos' audience no doubt took delight in his condemnation of their enemies' sins and in his pronouncement of judgment against them.

### **The Circle of Judgment (1:3-2:16)**

In condemning the surrounding nations, Amos created a virtual "circle of judgment" around Israel and its relative to the south,

Judah. The first nation Amos condemned was Syria, referred to in the text by its capital city, Damascus (1:3-5). Syria was located north and east of Israel. The Syrian armies were a source of constant trouble for the kings of Israel. Amos' pronouncement that the Lord was going to judge these enemies would have been good news to the audience.

The second nation singled out by Amos was Philistia (1:6-8). Like Syria, the Philistines were a constant problem for Israel during the formative days of the monarchy, between 1050-1000 B.C. The Philistines were located south and west of Israel. They sought to extend their control to their interior regions of Israel in order to control the international trade routes and to make Israel and Judah vassal nations.

Saul and David, Israel's first two kings, were confronted with the prospect of Philistine conquest and had to remain alert to this coastal foe. In response to David's boisterous act of taking Goliath's severed head around to the cities of Israel, the Philistines cut off Saul's head. They hung his body on the wall of Bethshean and paraded his head around the cities of the Philistines. Hatred and bitterness between Israel and Philistia continued through the centuries. For this reason, Amos' promise of divine judgment against the Philistines was welcome news.

Next, Amos pronounced judgment against Phoenicia, referred to by its most important city, Tyre (1:9-10). This nation was located north and west of Israel. Israel and Phoenicia experienced varying degrees of friendship and hostility. But, even at the height of good relations, the Phoenicians were regarded as being among the perverse nations. In the centuries following Amos' day, Tyre came to be a prophetic model of economic and moral corruption (see Ezek. 28).

Finally, Amos turned his attention to the nations across the Jordan River: Edom (1:11-12), Ammon (1:13-15), and Moab (2:1-3). Israel had clashed with these nations during the time of their wilderness wanderings and early days of settlement in the land of Canaan. The Old Testament overflows with examples of the constant skirmishes between Israel and these people. To hear of their certain decline at the hand of the Lord, the covenant God, would have brought satisfaction and joy to Amos' audience.

When Amos mentioned Judah, Israel's relatives to the south (2:4-5), the smile probably began to disappear from their faces. When he drew a bead on Israel (2:6-16), their acceptance of his message ceased. Amos had secured his audience's approval of the Lord's judgment against these enemy nations. The prophet then identified Judah and Israel as the Lord's enemies. The audience found themselves caught in the center of the prophet's attention and was the focus of the Lord's judgment. If the Lord was about to judge Israel's neighbors for the sins they had committed, how could Israel expect to fare any better? The circle of judgment had become a prophetic noose around the national neck of a decadent Israel.

### **Does the Lord Make No Difference?**

A close analysis of the sermons against the nations (1:3-2:16) reveals that all nations were guilty of inhumanity and all were under God's judgment. The striking feature of this portion of Scripture is that the covenant people of the Lord fared no better than the heathen nations who did not serve the Lord. Does the Lord make no difference in the lives of His people? How can those who claim devotion to the living Lord live as if He does not exist? The clear intent of Amos' sermons was to show that, in their rebellion and sin, Israel had marked itself as being as pagan as the surrounding nations. If those nations deserved divine judgment, so did Israel.

Other features mark these sermons as well, for example, the pervasiveness of the nations' sins. This pervasiveness is indicated by the use of the phrase "for three transgressions and for four." This language is typical of Hebrew wisdom literature. The numerical saying involves the use of a number (three) plus the successive number (four). The equivalent in English is the phrase "the last straw." "For three transgressions and for four" was Amos' way of declaring that each of the nations named had reached the full measure of sin and that judgment was inevitable. The certainty of judgment was underscored by the clause "I will not revoke it." Various English translations supply the term "punishment." Divine judgment was coming and the Lord would not revoke it because the people's sins had reached the point of overflow.

Another consistent feature of these oracles against the nations is that judgment is coming because of the sins and atrocities of the

groups mentioned. The prophet sought to demonstrate that the Lord does not judge without cause. He judges from the standpoint that an accepted norm has been violated. While the peoples' specific sins varied, all of the nations were guilty of crimes against humanity. Examples of these crimes include the Syrians threshing the Gileadites with threshing sleds, the Philistines and the Phoenicians engaging in slave trade, the Edomites' savagery in warfare, the Ammonites' brutality toward the Gileadites, and the Moabites' desecration of Edomite graves.

These judgment sermons also share the feature of military destruction. One way divine judgment was measured or understood in Amos' day was in terms of military defeat. When Amos pronounced judgment against the nations, he used such statements as "I will send fire...which shall devour the strongholds (1:4, 7, 10, 12, 14; 2:2, 5)." He also used "I will break the bar," a reference to the beam that ensured that the city gate would remain closed (1:5), "I will cut off the inhabitants...and the one holding the scepter... (1:5, 8)," and "their king shall go into captivity (1:15)." Additional military imagery included "the people...shall go into captivity (1:5)," "the remnant shall perish (1:8)," "with shouting in the day of battle (1:14)," and "with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet (2:2)."

Amos reserved his most abundant military imagery for the defeat of Israel (2:14-16). He described the complete failure of Israel's army at the very peak of battle. No one would escape. The swift warriors would not be fast enough to escape the onslaught. The bowmen would stumble. Not even warriors on horseback would get away. The bravest of the brave would lose heart (2:16). In short, the prophet predicted a total rout of Israel's army as divine judgment against the sinful nation.

### **The Lord, the Enemy of Israel? (2:6-16)**

The prospect of military defeat raised an important issue in the minds of the covenant people. How could God's people be so overwhelmed in battle when the Lord himself was on their side? The prognosis of military defeat did not ring true in the ears of people who had come to believe that the Lord would defeat all of Israel's enemies. A clear biblical example of this belief in the Lord

as the divine warrior-protector of Israel is found in Exodus 15:1-19. “The Lord is a warrior; Yahweh is His name.”

This belief is echoed in Amos 2:9-10, where the Lord declared that He destroyed the Amorites for Israel. Using metaphorical language about the cedar and the oak, Amos described the Amorites as being virtually unconquerable. But the Lord fought for Israel, giving them the victory. Now, Amos appeared on the scene and began declaring that the Lord had roared like a lion and that His voice was the voice of judgment (1:2; 3:8).

The audience was willing to accept the statement on the grounds that the judgment sermons were directed against Israel’s enemies. However, the prophet’s shift in focus from the pagan nations to Israel rendered them suspicious of his credibility. Surely, the Lord, Israel’s defender, would never allow their enemies to gain the upper hand. This reversal was impossible to their way of thinking.

Amos addressed Israel in precisely the same manner that he had addressed the other nations. He began by announcing that their sins had reached the overflow point. The indictment begins: “For three transgressions of Israel and for four I will not revoke *the punishment.*” Following this opening, Amos provided a sampling of wrongdoings taking place in Israel. The Israelites were guilty of:

1. Selling the righteous for money,
2. Selling the needy for a pair of sandals,
3. Trampling the head of the weak into the dust,
4. Turning aside the way of the humble (corrupt justice),
5. Committing sexually perverse acts,
6. Violating rules of pledge in the shadow of the altar,
7. Observing lavish religious practices at the expense of the underprivileged,
8. Forcing devout people (Nazirites) to violate their vows, and
9. Commanding prophets of the Lord to cease their proclamations.

Amos did not intend for this list to be exhaustive, but rather representative. The violations can be summed up under three headings: economic impropriety, legal malfeasance, and religious apostasy. Amos added to this list as his message unfolded. But he already had compiled a sufficient list of transgressions to portray

the people of Israel as a nation of unbridled sinners facing the imminent judgment of God.

### **Fast Forward**

Does Amos' opening volley of indictment against Israel have anything to say to those of us facing life in the twenty-first century? The answer has to be an emphatic yes! Amos primarily addressed a "religious" audience made up of people who were considered to be members of the covenant community, Israel. The easiest application of the indictments against Israel would be to the modern covenant community, the church. Are religiously minded people living by any higher standard today than the audience that Amos addressed? The eighth century B.C. audience had the same word that the twenty-first century A.D. audience has as their guide for daily living. Do we take more seriously and adhere more closely to God's Word than they did? Honesty demands a negative answer. If anything, modern church goers are frighteningly similar to their approach to life within this covenant community, the church.

Let us examine some parallels between Amos' audience and the modern covenant community. First, both audiences have in common a belief in the sovereignty of God. Simply stated: God is all powerful and is able to do whatever He wants, whenever He wants, however He wants, without concern of facing meaningful opposition. Second, both believe that God is favorably disposed toward the community of faith in spite of its shortcomings. God is viewed as being good toward "His people" without regard for their actions, whether right or wrong.

All too often modern church goers are as "worldly" as unchurched people. This similarity with pagans marks a third parallel with the audience of Amos' day, whose behavior was no different than the pagan nations surrounding them. To be sure, some people in Amos' audience were not guilty of the sins mentioned by the prophet. Just so, today's covenant community has many notable exceptions to the so called "hypocrites in the church" cliché.

Southern Baptist, the denomination to which I belong, can boast of 15 million members and proclaim that we are the largest non-Catholic denomination in the United States. But, finding those 15 million people on any given Sunday is another matter. The truth

is something less than half of those 15 million attend church or contribute to it in any way. Among this group of contributors, approximately 15-20% actually carries the real load and provides the strength of the Southern Baptist Convention. Others are content to settle for a superficial relationship with the Lord reminiscent of the kind that provoked the Lord's denunciation of ancient Israel: "This people draw near with their mouth and with their lips they honor me, but their heart is far from me (Isa. 29:13)."

The end result of superficiality is the same whether it appears in the eighth century B.C. or in the twenty-first century A.D. People develop a false sense of security based on an over emphasis on God's benevolence and a concomitant under emphasis or total ignorance of His justice. The fruit of superficiality is the belief that "saved" people can live anyway they please and still be "saved" as long as they have made a profession of faith. Their misguided understanding of God's benevolence relieves them from any sense of obligation to live out the will of God in their lives, or so they think.

Such was the case when Amos declared "The Lion has roared!" The unthinkable was about to happen. The community of faith was about to stand in judgment because they had neglected to live for God. Many religious leaders sense that a similar "divine corrective" is needed today to restore the Church to its mission of reaching the lost for Christ. The Church, known in the New Testament as the "New Israel," is to be a salvific community of faith just as ancient Israel was to be. God judged and destroyed Israel when that nation turned its back on His will. His work continued through a righteous remnant. When the modern Church turns its back on God's standard for living, citing His benevolence as a carte blanche protection from all woes, that community of faith comes perilously close to matching the attitude and actions of ancient Israel that incurred God's wrath. If God chastised us today, would we recognize His hand in our hardships?

We should rejoice in our salvation, but we also should present our bodies a living sacrifice. The same grace that offers salvation should empower us to live by God's Word. Those of us who know Christ ought to live exemplary Christian lives so others will be drawn to His love and grace.

Our special relationship with God should compel us to serve Him faithfully. We also must understand the special relationship

that existed between God and Israel in order to grasp the significance of Amos' proclamations of judgment against that nation. This special relationship and the attendant judgment is subject of the next chapter.

## All in the Family

On one occasion I was attending a revival service at a neighboring church. The visiting evangelist extended the invitation to any who needed to make a decision. At the close of the invitation the pastor addressed the congregation, thanking the visitors for coming. Then he said that the church members had some “family” matters to deal with. He cordially asked the visitors to afford them the privacy to handle those matters. The pastor did not want to “air dirty laundry” in front of all of us; so we excused ourselves and left. Later we were told that the church had suffered months of infighting, suspicion, anger, gossip, and expressions of ill feelings among the members.

Through prayer, the pastor had come to believe that revival was impossible until the church family had gotten right with God and with each other. He sincerely believed that the Lord wanted to work through their church to reach people with the Gospel, but until they could learn to relate to each other they would be ineffective in reaching anyone else.

Amos faced a similar dilemma. The Lord wanted to use His covenant community to bless all the families of the earth. In fact, this mission to the world was the constitutive aspect of Israel’s formation as a nation (see Gen. 12:3; Exod. 19:6). However, Israel had immersed itself so much in sin that divine blessing through that nation was impossible. The nation was rendered useless by the sins of the people. The Lord had tried in preceding years to get them to return Him, but all attempts had failed, which will become apparent as the message of Amos unfolds (see 4:6-12).

Therefore, the Lord sent Amos to proclaim that unmitigated judgment was headed their way. Israel would not survive. Amos made the issue of judgment a family matter employing the term family only at this point in his message. The word family renders the Hebrew *mispachah*, which refers to any group of people held

together by a common bond. In this case, the common bond was the covenant established between the Lord and Israel at Mt. Sinai through Moses. Because Israel had ignored the covenant stipulations, known to us as the Law of Moses, the Lord now poised to initiate the plans that would bring certain judgment upon the people.

### **Hear Ye, Hear Ye! (3:1-2)**

The voice of the town crier in days of old called out important news to the citizenry. The town's people knew they heard the cry "Hear Ye, Hear Ye!" that something important was about to be announced. Similarly, Amos used the language of proclamation to gain the attention of his audience,

Hear ye this word that the Lord has spoken concerning you, O children of Israel, concerning all of the family that I brought up from the Land of Egypt, saying, "Only you have I known from all the families of the land, therefore, I will visit over you with all of your iniquities."

Characteristic of his style throughout the book, the prophet identified his pronouncement as a word from the Lord himself. In this instance, Amos also described his audience from the Land of Egypt. The desired effect of this approach was that the people understand themselves as the covenant community that the Lord rescued out of Egyptian bondage. He had established a special relationship with them at Sinai. The Lord could have chosen any nation through which to work and through which to bless the families of the earth, but the fact remained, in His divine sovereignty, He chose Israel.

Therefore, the prophet related the word of the Lord, "Only you have I known from all the families of the land." The term known derives from the Hebrew *yada'*, meaning, in this instance, "to know" or "to experience in a special way." It was precisely this special relationship that formed the foundation for the judgment oracles that follow and extend through the end of the book.

In some English versions of the Bible, the end of 3:2 contains the word punish. This is a translation of the Hebrew term *paqad*,

which literally means “to visit.” This meaning is preserved in the translation given above. When the Lord visits upon a people their own iniquities, the sure result is judgment or punishment for those sins.

### **The Lion Has roared (3:3-8)**

Before Amos relayed the specifics of the Lord’s judgment, he introduced a series of seven rhetorical questions culminating in the reason for his sudden appearance at Bethel (3:3-8).

Will two men walk together unless they make an appointment? Will a lion roar in the forest without having prey? Will a young lion give out a sound from his den unless he has captured? Will a bird fall upon a snare on the ground and there be no bait in it? Will a snare spring up from the ground and not capture? Will a trumpet be blown in a city, and the people not tremble? Will there be calamity in a city and the Lord had not done it? For the Lord God will not do a thing, unless he reveals his secret to his servants the prophets. The lion has roared, who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken, who will not prophesy?

Each of these rhetorical questions demands a negative answer.

Amos was from Tekoa, a small village south of Bethlehem. The surrounding countryside is rugged, wide-open terrain. Two men traveling together would have had to make prior arrangements, for the chances of meeting by coincidence would have been very slight. A lion would never roar before capturing its prey because the prey would be alerted and thereby escape capture. The young lion gives out a sound only after having captured. No bird is attracted to a snare that has no bait. The snare springing up from the ground indicates that a bird has taken the bait and has been captured.

The *shophar* or trumpet was blown in a city to sound an alarm. When the trumpet was heard inevitably some calamity threatened the people’s safety and it would elicit a feeling of dread among the people. Finally, in keeping with the prevalent theology of Amos’ day, no calamity befell a city unless the Lord caused it to happen.

Therefore, these seven rhetorical questions would have elicited from Amos' audience a resounding and repeated no!

What the prophet established in principle was that every effect had a cause. If two men were traveling together in open terrain, it was because they first made an appointment. If a lion roared or if a young lion gave out a sound from his den, their roar meant they had captured prey. If a bird fell on a snare, his dive signaled that he had taken the bait. If the snare sprang upward, it had been triggered by the bird. If a trumpet was blown in a city, some calamity threatened the people, thus eliciting a response of anxiety. If calamity threatened a city, the Lord himself had caused it.

Having established this cause and effect scenario (3:3-6), Amos interjected an important tenet of his personal theology. He told his audience, "The Lord God will not do a thing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants, the prophets (3:7)." The term rendered secret is the Hebrew *sod*, meaning "secret counsel" or "thought revealed by God." Amos wanted to establish that the appearance of a prophet on the scene was God's way of announcing that their sins (the cause) were about to be judged (the effect).

Then he returned to his earlier format of using rhetorical questions to drive home his point, "the lion has roared, who will not fear? The Lord has spoken, who will not prophesy (3:8)?" Anyone in hearing distance of the roar of a wild lion would fear and take all necessary precautions. That is, the sound of the lion would evoke a response from those who heard it. Similarly, anyone hearing the Lord speak would be compelled to respond in an appropriate manner. For Amos the only appropriate response was to proclaim the message that the Lord was about to unleash on disobedient Israel a flood of judgment. Once he became convinced that the Lord had spoken to him, the prophet had no choice but to speak out. "The Lord has spoken who will not prophesy?" Amos was driven by an undeniable impulse from the Lord Himself.

The impact of the rhetorical questions in 3:3-8 was dramatic. Amos had established in a short space that every effect had a cause, that every impending act of God was first declared through a prophet, and that the Lord had spoken recently concerning the people in the audience that day.

### **An Invitation to View Israel's Sin (3:9-11)**

Since the audience was forced to respond to the rhetorical questions in a way indicating that there were no options, the prophet skillfully had maneuvered them into the position of having to accept that their sins demanded certain judgment. Next, in a quasi-sarcastic way, he invited the perennial enemies of Israel, Philistia, represented by Ashdod, and Egypt to gather themselves upon the mountains of Samaria to view Israel's sins.

Some English texts have the singular mountain following the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint; other English texts have the plural form mountain is correct, then the reference would be to the capital city of Samaria, which was a fortified mount. On the other hand, if the plural mountains is correct, then the prophet was referring to the entire region of Samaria. In either case the result was the same. Israel's enemies were invited to look upon the "great tumults and oppressions" of God's people.

How ironic, God had intended Israel to be a light to the nations. Instead the nations came to view Israel's darkness. The most telling aspect of the Lord's assessment of Israel, represented by the capital city, Samaria, is the clause, "They do not know how to do right." (3:10). In this instance, the Lord was not referring to any specific actions, but rather, He was indicating that the inhabitants of Israel were suffering from a serious flaw in character.

The Hebrew term rendered right is *nekoach* meaning "that which is straight," "integrity" or "straightforwardness." Because the people claimed covenant loyalty to the Lord, while at the same time defiling His Word, the Lord accused them of dishonesty of character. Israel's sin was no temporary transgression, but rather, the fruit of deep seated moral failure. This character flaw is indicated in the Hebrew by the use of an infinite verb "to do." Thus, "they do not know to do (or doing) right!"

The prophet further described the people of Israel as "Those who store up violence and havoc in their strongholds." Again Amos resorted to irony. The strongholds were fortified cities into which neighboring villagers fled during time of danger. The stronghold was to be a place of refuge from external threats. The citizens of Israel could expect a measure of safety and security behind the walls and gates of the city, where trained militia were garrisoned.

Instead the strongholds had become incubators for every form of violence and treachery. The victims were the poor and the righteous as Amos made clear throughout his message. The prophet was accusing the government, headed by King Jeroboam II, of subsidizing terrorism against the underprivileged.

This type of treachery invoked the wrath of a sovereign and righteous God. Since the strongholds were a major portion of the problem in Israel, these fortified cities were the targets against which the Lord promised to act decisively. The prophet declared that an unidentified adversary would surround the land and that he would cause the people's strength to fail. In the process, this enemy would plunder the strongholds (3:11).

Amos did not name the nation that would be the aggressor. Was it because no international power at the time of Amos' proclamations was capable of defeating Israel? Syria, Egypt, and Assyria were all militarily impotent. Actually, the prophet neglected to identify the nation because from his vantage point the judgment was from the Lord Himself. This theological aspect is indicated by Amos' frequent reminders that this is what the Lord said (see 3:10, 11, and 12).

### **The Day of Visitation (3:12-15)**

Falling back on his background as a shepherd, Amos compared the coming destruction of Israel to a shepherd rescuing from the mouth of a lion two leg bones and the flap of a sheep's ear. In the eighth century B.C., the wealthy sheep owners hired shepherds to tend their flocks. Each shepherd was responsible for feeding, watering, and returning safely to the fold a prescribed number of sheep. The shepherd had to give restitution to the owner for any lost sheep.

If the shepherd could give evidence that a wild animal had devoured the sheep, the shepherd was exonerated of any wrong doing and exempted from costly restitution. However, one fact was very clear when the shepherd presented the bones and ear flap to the sheep owner, the sheep had been destroyed! Amos declared that the children of Israel would be delivered or rescued in the same way. The only thing left would be evidence to total disaster. As a

result of their sins against God, he would allow a foreign nation to conquer and plunder them.

Interestingly, the Lord described the coming day of military conflagration as “the day of my visitation.” In keeping with the prophet’s refusal to name a specific nation, the Lord was identified as the ultimate foe of the covenant people. The Lord, Yahweh, the God hosts would come to punish the transgressions of Israel.

In this particular passage (3:13-15), the Lord proclaimed two specific actions He would take. First, He would cut off the horns of the altar of Bethel and they would fall to the ground. The horns represented power of God. The altar was the place of sacrifice and of the restoration of the relationship between the Lord and His people. By cutting off the horns of the altar the Lord clearly signified that He was declaring the religion of Bethel powerless, null and void!

The second action the Lord would take on the day of His visitation was to smite the summer and winter houses. The houses of ivory, probably houses furnished with ivory furniture, and the great houses would perish. Was God against luxurious living? He was when it came at the expense of the poor and the righteous.

The wealthy members of Israel had gotten ahead by breaking the Law of Moses, subverting the less fortunate, and using deceit to swindle their brothers. The expensive houses of ivory and the luxury of several homes were gained through unholy means. When the Lord decided to punish the transgressions of Israel, all of their ill-gotten gain would be destroyed. Any progress the wealthy had made through illicit actions would be canceled by the corrective power of the righteous judge of history.

### **Fast Forward**

Several facets of this portion of the message of Amos have application to the contemporary Christian. I would like to examine three of these facets: a special relationship as a context for divine expectation, the inevitability of divine response to human actions, and the irony of judgment upon the covenant community. American Christians are in danger of many of the transgressions committed by Israel.

Many Israelites blended a pseudo-religious expression with an unbridled quest for luxurious living. This blending of religion and worldliness was done at the expense of the poor and righteous. The faith that many of the worshippers proclaimed at the shrines of Bethel, Gilgal, and Dan was absent from the operations of their daily lives. God refused to accept a religious expression that divorced itself from ethical conduct in the market place and in society.

The first facet of this portion of Amos' message that has its parallel in contemporary Christianity is the existence of a special relationship as a context or basis for divine expectation. In other words, because Israel enjoyed the privilege of a special relationship with the Lord, they were accountable to Him to a greater degree than were the other nations. God's expectations for Israel exceeded His expectations for her neighbors. To whom much is given, much is required.

Similarly, God demands from believers a sincerity of faith that characterizes all that we do. He makes us stewards of the material things he gives us. He expects us to distribute our wealth in a manner that will take care of our families and help others too. Christians should learn to be content with the basics of life and use their means to help those who do not have those basics.

We should never seek to advance at someone else's expense. If we climb to the top only by stepping on the backs of others, then God would demand that we not climb. Our task is to devote ourselves to the way, will, and Word of God, to order our steps by His precepts, and to be honest in our dealings with others. Any lifestyle that detracts from or cheapens the high standard of ethical living presented in the Bible is an abomination to the Lord and most certainly should be avoided.

The second facet of this portion of Amos' message that has its parallel in contemporary Christianity is the inevitability of divine response to human actions. The prophet utilized rhetorical questions to demonstrate the inevitability of his ministry and the inevitability of the Lord's decisive action. Christians should be aware that God will be no less decisive in the twenty-first century A.D. than He was in the eight century B.C. He is not pleased with us when we choose to live outside of His will and in disobedience to His Word. His displeasure will irrupt inevitably against us in some

form of chastisement or abasement. He will act definitely to counter our rebellion against Him.

The Third facet of this portion of Amos' message that has its parallel in contemporary Christianity is the irony of judgment upon the covenant community. "You only have I know of all the families of the earth (3:2)!" These words, which should have represented all that was right with being in a special relationship with the God of the Universe, revealed the anguish felt by Almighty God, a visit from the Lord Himself should be an occasion of joy and of excitement. Instead, the day of the Lord's visitation was for Israel one of judgment and despair.

In the same way, the unique relationship between God and Christians should be a source of profound joy and excitement. We should draw strength from the assurance of our salvation. Encouragement from our brothers and sisters in Christ should be the norm of our daily lives. How sad it would be if Christ came again only to find His children fighting each other or ignoring His commission to serve. The message of Amos is relevant today. We better recognize the responsibilities as well as the privileges of being God's children. Now is the time to conform our lives to His will and to live out His Word in our daily routines.

### **Can I Have Your Attention, Please?**

We have all heard that question before, usually just before an important announcement or the sharing of vital information. Such was the case during the years prior to and culminating in Amos' arrival on the scene in Bethel. God was seeking to get the attention of His people in order to share with them vital information, namely that they were straying from Him and that they needed to return. The divine intent was to seek the repentance and the return of His wayward people. The result was quite different and very disappointing.

#### **Calling All Cows (4:1-3)**

The initial call for the attention of the people came in a rather peculiar form. The prophet pronounced an oracle of judgment against the leading women of Samaria, referred to cryptically in the text as "the cows of Bashan." Bashan was a fertile, grassy region east of the Jordan River, noted for its abundance of grazing lands. Cattle raised in this region was notably better fed than animals from other areas. Amos used the analogy of the fat cows of Bashan to refer to the relatively well-off women who lived in the mountain of Samaria, the capital city of Israel. He accused them of three specific sins. They oppressed the poor, they crushed the needy, and they commanded their husbands to bring wine that they may drink. The clear intent of this last indictment was that they wanted to maintain a "party" mentality. The three charges actually reflected a single atrocity, i.e., the wealthy women of Samaria were pressuring their husbands to provide a luxurious standard of living at the expense of the less fortunate members of society. They had no concern for others, but rather, they cared only that their own selfish desires be met. If innocent people were oppressed or crushed in the process, then so be it!

Against this self-serving mentality, the Lord sent His promise of divine retribution. Amos declared, "The Lord God has sworn by His holiness, that behold, the days are coming over you, and He will lift you up with hooks, and your hind parts with fishhooks. And you

will go out through the breaches single file, and you will be cast toward Hermon.” Just as Amos perceived the women of Samaria as fat cows, even so, he pictured their judgment in similar terms. These fat cows would be led away to the slaughter. The breaches represent the broken walls of Samaria, a sign that the capital city would fall during a military siege. The phrase “toward Hermon” indicated that they would go in to exile to the northeast, the precise historical route of conquest by the great Mesopotamian powers, Assyria and Babylon (745-539 B.C.).

### **Sarcastic Invitation to Sinful Worship (4:4-5)**

Worship was important to those who compromised Amos’s audience. Their devotion to religion constituted one of the most misleading appearances of the entire book. The Lord was not fooled by the outward religious activity of His people. The profundity of their worship was more than countered by their total disregard for His Word in their daily routines.

The prophet sarcastically invited the people to worship at Bethel and at Gilgal. But, his invitation had a twist. “Come to Bethel and rebel! To Gilgal...multiply (your) rebellions!” The Hebrew term rendered rebel is *pasha*, meaning “to openly defy a known standard or boundary.” The point is clear, the people were not guilty of inadvertent misconduct; they were guilty of blatant and willful violation of the covenant agreements they had made with God.

The invitation caustically included references to their sacrifices and their tithes. It is hard to discern whether Amos was referring to the abundance of their worship or to the fact that the worship centers were always busy. Offering sacrifices every day and the tithes every three days was excessive by any standard and may give an indication of the religious extravagance of the people.

The references to the thank offering of leaven and to the proclamation of freewill offerings (4:5) betray the sarcasm with which Amos broached the subject of their religion. Leaven was expensive. To use it in daily sacrifices was to demonstrate one’s wealth. Similarly, to proclaim or call out freewill offerings was paramount to calling public attention to personal piety. Amos, speaking for the Lord, declared, “For thus you love (to do), O children of Israel!” The people took delight in boisterous worship that was long on show and short on substance.

### **The Unheeded Chastisements of God (4:6-11)**

Characteristic of his style, the prophet utilized a list or series to convey his point. In this case, the list contained examples of God's prior acts of chastisement against Israel. These divine acts of chastisement were intended to abase the people and to move them toward repentance. The fact that Amos listed five such chastisements with each action being devastating in its own right, indicated the intensity of the Lord's desire to gain His people back.

The five chastisements share some formal characteristics. First, all five chastisements begin with the covenant Lord as the subject of the action. The Lord through Amos sought to show His people that various calamities which they had suffered in the past were the direct result of divine activity. Second, each of the calamities depict widespread turmoil as oppressed to localized problems. The Lord intended through these actions to teach the entire nation that they were on the wrong course. We should note that three calamities related to the economic aspects of life in Israel and that the remaining two crises related to military aspects.

These two facets of Israel's existence, economic and military, seemed to be particularly troublesome to the nation with regard to their loyalty to the Lord and to His covenant. The economy was based upon an agrarian society. The first three calamities were all directed against the economic base: famine (4:6); drought (4:7-8); and crop plagues (4:9). As certain members of society became wealthier, their focus shifted from dependence on God as the source of life's necessities to a desire to manipulate the market place to gain riches for themselves.

The Book of Amos is replete with examples of the socio-economic chicanery in vogue in the prophet's day. Similarly, the strength of Israel's army during the time of Jeroboam's early reign was a source of great pride. The weakness of Israel's defenses were exposed through the final two chastisements: the defeat of the army (4:10) and the overthrow of cities (4:11). By undercutting their economic and military confidence, God opened the door for them to reposition their confidence, once again placing it in the Lord Himself.

The third formal characteristic shared by the five chastisements is the fact that each concludes with the statement, "Yet, you did not return to me, utters the Lord!" How tragic! God intensely sought to

win back His people and to deliver them from a destructive path, but they did not return to Him.

The word return renders the Hebrew *shub* (pronounced *shuve*). This term is used of both physical and spiritual turning. One can turn around physically and walk in the opposite direction or one can turn around spiritually, repenting of their sin, and beginning to live correctly. The Hebrew term most often translated repent in English versions of the Old Testament is *shub*. The problem at the time of Amos's proclamation was that the people did not repent.

### **An Invitation to Meet God (4:12)**

Their obstinacy and refusal to repent was so great that they continued to turn their backs on God. Thus, more drastic measures were necessary. Amos called for the people to prepare to meet God (4:12). This passage mistakenly is taken to be an evangelistic text. In its original setting however, the prophet was not inviting the people to repent, but rather to prepare to meet God in battle.

Apparently a portion of the verse, describing the imminent, punitive action of the Lord toward Israel, has been lost. No extant manuscript of the Book of Amos contains the missing elements. The prophet, speaking for the Lord says, "Therefore, thus I will do to you, O Israel, because I shall do this to you, Prepare to meet your God, O Israel!" The reader is left to wonder what originally appeared between the "thus" and the "this." We know from other passages in the book, that Amos envisaged judgment via military conflagration.

The intent of the passage is preserved in the last line of the verse, "Prepare to meet your God, O Israel!" The word rendered prepare is reflexive, imperative form of the Hebrew verb *kun* (pronounced *coon*), meaning "to fix" or "to establish oneself," in this case, for battle with the Lord. Inherent in the term is the idea of being steadfast or determined.

Ironically, Amos was telling the audience "because you have been so deliberate in your obstinacy against God, you better now be just as determined to fight Him in battle because He is coming after you!" Their persistence in sin was the spiritual equivalent of throwing down the gauntlet to God.

### **First Doxology (4:13)**

The call to do battle had been issued. In order to help his audience correctly size up their opponent, the prophet employed the first of three doxologies describing God (see also 5:8-9; 9:5-6). Doxologies are hymns or verbal proclamations that ascribe glory to God. These doxologies employ participles (verbs of duration) to demonstrate that the great acts of God are continually in His power to perform. The Lord has not diminished in strength or determination:

For behold, the one forming the mountains and the one creating the wind and the one declaring to man what His thought is; the one making dawn into darkness and the one treading upon the high places of the earth, Yahweh, the God of Hosts, is His name.

The steadfastness of the mountains and the power of the wind are in the Lord's control. God declares His thoughts to mankind. He turns the light of day into the darkness of night. The mountains are mere pedestals upon which the Lord steps as he treks across the earth.

Why use a doxology at this juncture? Was Amos trying to be sarcastic? Was he seeking to goad his audience into a fight? The definite reason why he employed this and other doxologies may never be known precisely. However, since Amos was addressing allegedly religious people at the altar of Bethel (see 7:13), it stands to reason that they would be familiar with the doxologies the prophet used. What was different, however, was in how he used them.

The people, no doubt, had sung or uttered the words of these doxologies as part of their worship at the altar in praise of Yahweh. The prophet uttered the same doxologies in order to describe to the people the God whom they had chosen to ignore. The affect is powerful. The people could not claim that they did not understand who God really was because they had employed the same doxologies in their worship of Him. The God that the prophet was telling them to prepare to meet was a formidable foe indeed. Repentance would have been the easier course, but since the people did not repent, they now faced a fight with God.

## **Fast Forward**

The fourth chapter of Amos provides several theological aspects to consider. First, Amos addressed women who encouraged their husbands to provide them a luxurious lifestyle at the expense of the underprivileged members of society. This brief passage warns all of us. We should never promote personal aggrandizement at the expense of someone else. Wives should not be in a position to direct their husbands toward evil actions. God has ordained that the husband be the spiritual head of the household. If the moral fiber of society is to be restored for the twenty-first century, men will have to ascend to the position of spiritual leaders of the homes.

The position stands in stark contrast to what we see in Amos 4:1-3. In this passage, the wives were directing their husbands in evil activity. Personal comfort and indulgence was their main concern. In contrast to this, God desires us to seek Him rather than personal comforts and extravagances. The husband is ordained of God to provide spiritual leadership to the wife and family. The will of God as revealed in the Word of God is to be our main concern. When we elevate personal comfort and gain above the will of God, our families and ultimately our society begin to deteriorate. Such deterioration is inevitable. It happened in ancient Israel; it is happening today. Look around!

The second theological aspect to consider is the issue of whether the Lord uses natural and military crises to gain the attention of His people. Sometimes before Amos appeared on the scene at Bethel (ca. 760 B.C.), the Lord had chastised Israel with natural and military disasters. The intended result was repentance; the actual result was obstinacy.

That was then; this is now. Does God still use natural calamities and military crises to call His people back to Him? Two facets of the issue need to be explored. First, "What was the prevailing theology in Amos' day?" Second, "Is the Lord bound by ancient theology to act the same way in our day?"

With regard to the first facet, the prevailing theology in Amos' day was that of sole causation. Nothing happened unless the Lord Himself had done it. We have seen this theology in Amos 3:6, "Will there be calamity in a city and the Lord Himself has not done it?" Quite simply Amos and his audience believed that both blessings

and curses were from the Lord. This theological fact made their obstinacy all the more poignant. In light of this theology, Amos would have no difficulty in declaring that past catastrophes were acts of God to get their attention.

The second facet of the issue concerns whether or not God is bound by ancient theology. The answer is no! Even Israel began to expand its theological perspective after the Babylonian exile to accommodate the idea of secondary agency, the belief that God allows things to happen without directly causing those things Himself. The post-exilic tendency is aptly demonstrated by comparing the pre-exilic passage, II Samuel 24, with the post-exilic passage, I Chronicles 21.

If the question is “Can God use natural and military disasters to get people’s attention?” then the answer is yes! All of us have heard requests for prayer during or following times of threatening weather. With regard to military crises, who can forget the nationwide calls for prayer during times of war? Even fast food joints had requests for prayer on their signs! When bad things threaten us, we find religion quite quickly.

If, however, the question is “Does God have to act toward us in the precise manner in which He dealt with ancient Israel?” then the answer is no! God is free to relate to us in any way He deems appropriate. We should never rush to interpret every natural disaster of our times as a direct punitive act of God. On the other hand if such events make us think about the Lord, then the resulting sensitivity to His presence is desirable.

Spiritual leadership of the home and divine chastisement through natural and military disasters are two theological aspects of the fourth chapter of Amos that have relevance in our day, but there is a third aspect as well. The third theological aspect of this chapter to consider is the role of religion in expressing our relationship to God. Many people make the mistake of equating religious fervor with spiritual maturity. The people who comprised Amos’ audience were religious fanatics. They worshipped intensely; they worshipped often. Between worship sessions, they sinned! Religious expression *toward* God without relational experience *with* God is not only meaningless in the eyes of the Lord, it is hazardous to your spiritual health.

As for the intensity of their worship, a modern proverb sums up the point adequately, “It does not matter how high you jump when you worship, but how straight you walk when you hit the ground!” The prophet’s sarcastic invitation to worship at Bethel and Gilgal (4:4-5) coupled with his use of a popular doxology to describe God (4:13) indicate that he confronted and opposed the false association of religious fervor to relationship with God. Religious fervor is an excellent way to show our devotion to God, but in and of itself, it is no substitute for the relationship it supposedly represents.

In Amos’ day the worship centers were “packed.” The people were bringing sacrifices every day and tithes every three days. If the same conditions existed today, we would declare that the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon our Church and that true revival was breaking out. We would ascribe this religious fervor to the presence of God and to the faithful devotion of His people. Amos 4 provides us with a caution. Unless relational walk is in tune with the will of God, our religious talk, no matter how fervent, is meaningless and detrimental. Amos’ audience decided to live with and seek true spiritual health. Will we settle for the same delusion?

## A Midnight Call

Several years ago I received a call at midnight. I was in the process of packing books into boxes and preparing to move onto the campus of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. When the phone rang, I immediately thought, “This is a prank call, a wrong number, or bad news.” Bad news was the correct answer. The police were on the line telling me that they had found my car, which I had not realized was stolen until the phone rang. Since that time, midnight calls alarm me.

Amos appeared at Bethel to relay the Lord’s displeasure with His people. His preaching had the impact of a midnight call. Reading the fifth chapter of Amos is similar to overhearing one half of a telephone conversation. At first glance, the various segments of the chapter may seem unrelated. However, when we consider that Amos was not doing all the talking and that he paused to allow his audience to respond, the chapter flows more smoothly.

The fifth chapter of Amos contains evidence that the prophet was *conversing with*, not just *preaching to*, his audience. A perfect example is 5:14 when Amos said, “And so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said.” Also, Amos’ outburst against invoking the day of the Lord in 5:18 was a response to his audience’s belief in God’s favorable disposition toward them. These examples warrant a possible reconstruction of the kind of conversation that took place. The words of Amos 5 represent Amos’ part of the talk; creative imagination will supply the people’s part.

### Conversing With Amos (5:1-27)

The following reconstruction is meant to serve as a tool of learning only. If Amos was talking with his audience, the conversation could have gone something like this.

**Amos:** “Here this word that I am lifting over you, a lamentation, O house of Israel: Virgin Israel has fallen, not to rise again; she is forsaken on her land, with no one to raise her up.”

**Audience:** “Fallen? Forsaken? Amos how can you say things like this? Israel has never been stronger than she is right now. Our army rivals the size and the strength of David’s army. As long as our military is strong, we are safe!”

**Amos:** “For thus says the Lord God: The city that sends out a thousand shall have a hundred left, and the one that sends out a hundred shall have ten left to the house of Israel.”

**Audience:** “What are you talking about? The armies of Israel have never lost a battle as long as the Lord was on our side. Can’t you see how devoted we are to the religious shines established by our fathers? We worship at Bethel, Gilgal, and Beer-Sheba. As long as we are religious, we cannot lose.”

**Amos:** “For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel: Seek me and live, but do not seek Bethel, and do not seek Gilgal or pass over to Beer-Sheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into exile, and Bethel shall be wickedness. Seek the Lord and live, or He will rush like fire against the house of Joseph, and it will devour, with no one extinguishing for Bethel.”

**Audience:** “Why would God destroy Bethel?” “How can you possibly thing the Lord would allow that to happen to us?” We’re the ones who truly love God.

**Amos:** “The ones turning justice to wormwood, and bringing righteousness to the ground!”

**Audience:** “Our justice system is superior to any system in the world and there is nothing wrong with our righteousness either! Besides, what kind of God would destroy His own people?”

**Amos:** “The one making Pleiades and Orion, and turning deep darkness to the morning, and He darkens the day to night, the one calling to the waters of the sea, and He pours them out on the face of the earth, Yahweh is His name. The one causing violence to burst forth on the strong, and He brings violence on the stronghold.”

**Amos:** “They hate the one reproving in the gate, and they abhor the one speaking honestly. Therefore, because you trample on the poor and take from them coerced gifts of grain, you have built houses of cut stone, but you shall not dwell in them; you have planted desirable vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your rebellions, and how mighty are your sins, the ones oppressing the righteous, ones taking a bribe and you turn aside the needy in the gate. Therefore, the prudent man will be silent in that time; for it is a calamitous time.”

**Audience:** “Amos, we realize that certain inequities and indiscretions exist in our society, but that is the case in every nation. But we also have a noticeable religious influence that other nations do not have. The Lord is with us in spite of these inequities. Some evil will exist in every society, we can’t change that!”

**Amos:** “Seek good and not evil in order that you may live. And it may be so that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you just as you have said. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate! Perhaps the Lord, the God of Hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.”

**Audience:** “What do you mean establish justice in the gate? Our system is perfect, but it’s the best system in the world. And what do you mean by the remnant of Joseph? We’re not a remnant, we’re the greatest nation on Earth. None of these gloom and doom scenarios will befall us.”

**Amos:** “Therefore thus says the Lord, God of hosts, the Lord: In all the squares there shall be wailing; and in all the streets they shall say, “Woe! Woe!” They shall call a farmer to mourning, and ones knowing a lament to wailing; in all vineyards there shall be wailing for I will pass through the midst of you, says the Lord.”

**Audience:** “Wailing everywhere? Amos, don’t you know your history? Every time a foreign nation sought to overtake us, the Lord came to our rescue. Every time they thought the day had

come for our destruction, it became a day of the Lord's deliverance. He did it so many times that we established an annual festival called "The day of the Lord" to commemorate God's divine protection. Even if our enemies tried to kill us they could not. Remember the day of the Lord, the day of the Lord, the day..."

**Amos:** "Woe to the ones desiring the day of the Lord, for what is this day of the Lord to you? It is darkness and not light! Just as a man will flee from a lion and a bear meets him, then he enters the house, leans his hand on the wall and the serpent bites him. Is not the day of the Lord darkness and not light? Deep darkness with no brightness to it?"

**Audience:** "The day of the Lord is certainly not darkness! When God delivered our fathers from their peril, it was a joyous time. Each year as we commemorate God's deliverance at our "Day of the Lord" festival, we sing, celebrate and worship. How can you see the great crowds here at Bethel, and say the day of the Lord is darkness?"

**Amos:** "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I will not delight in your assemblies! Even if you offer up to me burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Turn aside from me the noise of your songs: I will not hear the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

**Audience:** "How can you say the Lord hates our festivals? They are dedicated to Him! We have all the justice and righteousness we need! Surely the great number of sacrifices and extravagant offerings prove our love for the Lord."

**Amos:** "Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? You have lifted up *Sikkuth* your king, and *Kiyyun* your images, the star of your gods, which you made for yourselves; therefore I will take you into exile beyond Damascus, says the Lord, the God of hosts is His name."

The midnight call came to an end. Israel heard enough and slammed down the phone. Amos had told of coming exile in a foreign land. According to him, the Lord hated the religious activities of Israel. The Lord also was not pleased with the way His people conducted themselves in the market place and in the gate of justice. They had heard enough, but Amos was not finished.

## **Doom's Day**

Have you ever been part of a spectacular worship experience? Annually, our churches sponsor revival meetings during which we present special music and messages designed to inspire people to draw closer to God. Ancient Israel had a similar emphasis each year. They gathered at the religious shrines, particularly Bethel. Their worship was devoted to the Lord and included elaborate sacrifices and offerings. To these extravagant displays of loyalty to the Lord, they added specially prepared music. This annual celebration honoring the Lord came to be called "the day of the Lord." It was designed to draw people closer to the Lord much like our modern revival services. To Amos, the day eagerly awaited the day of the Lord, while the prophet warned that the day would bring devastation?

The reconstructed conversation between Amos and his audience (presented in the previous chapter) will aid us as we examine the meaning of 5:1-27. Remember, only the prophet's words were recorded. The responses of his audience were recreated as a possible representation of their beliefs. Based on Amos' reaction to his audience, they believed that the day of the Lord was going to be a glorious time for Israel. Inherent in this popular conception of the day of the Lord, were thoughts of world domination, abundant power, and divine blessing. The people longed for the day of the Lord. In theological terms, their concept of the day of the Lord was like a great mountain that Amos had to climb in order to get their attention.

### **A Funeral Lament (5:1-3)**

A close examination of Amos 5:1-27 reveals that the prophet was building up to his reformulation of the concept of the day of the Lord. Inherent in his reformulation was the idea of the death of the nation. Therefore, he used a funeral dirge to initiate his final ascent up the great theological mountain known as the day of the Lord.

Hear this word that I am lifting over you, a lamentation, O house of Israel: Virgin Israel has fallen not to rise again; she is forsaken on her land with no one to raise her up (5:1-2).

Delivering this lamentation at Bethel was paramount to preaching a funeral to people sitting in the audience. Can you imagine their shock at hearing they had died and were being buried? Amos said the covenant people were fallen and forsaken with no one to help. The prophet's reference to the house of Israel indicates that he had the entire nation in mind.

The impact of Amos's declaration was dramatic. The people probably responded with an attestation of their military might. They deemed themselves too strong to fall in battle. Yet, Amos was undaunted in his proposal. He foretold a great military disaster in their near future. The language of 5:3 refers to sending out troops from a city. Amos portrayed a military defeat of catastrophic proportions. He declared that a full 90% of the troops would not return from battle. The prophet attacked the military basis of their unbridled optimism.

### **A Prescription for Renewal (5:4-15)**

#### 1. Look For God (5:4-7)

The first part of the prescription for renewal was to look for God. The gloomy scenario of military defeat did not mesh well with Israel's popular belief that the Lord was on their side. Since the Lord could not be defeated in battle, they felt secure. What was the source of their assurance that the Lord was with them? They pointed to their participation at the worship centers as evidence of their loyalty to the Lord. God was surely with them because they were such staunch worshippers. In reality, they were looking for God in the wrong way. To enjoy the true security of God, the people needed to seek His presence, not a place.

Amos pleaded with the people on behalf of the Lord to avoid the error of replacing Him with religious activity. The Lord declared, "Seek me and live; but do not seek Bethel, and do not enter Gilgal, or pass over to Beer-Sheba; for Gilgal will surely go into exile and Bethel shall be wickedness (5:4b-5)". The appeal to seek the Lord is repeated in 5:6. The consequences of failing to seek the Lord would

be as perilous as an unquenchable fire (compare 5:6 and 7:4-6). The address was directed to “the ones turning justice to wormwood, and bringing righteousness to the ground (5:7).”

In broad terms, justice refers to the equitable treatment of all members of society, especially those within the covenant community. The Hebrew term for justice is *mishpat*. It derives from the verb “to judge.” Therefore, justice, in essence, is the dispensing of proper judgments in a court of law. Amos already had indicted the people for perverting justice. In 5:7, he generalized his complain by saying they were turning justice to wormwood, a bitter plant. Ironically, justice should have been sweet, but the kind doled out in Israel was the opposite.

The other term Amos used was righteousness. The Hebrew word *zedekah*. Righteousness refers to conformity to an accepted norm. In the case of Amos’ audience, the norm was the covenant the Lord made with Israel at Sinai. To be righteous meant that a member of the community was conforming their life to the standards of the covenant. Unfortunately, the people of Israel had brought righteousness to the ground like a bird knocked out of flight. With justice poisoned and righteousness downed, the people needed to look for God.

## 2. Recognize God’s Sovereignty (5:8-9)

The second part of the prescription for renewal was to recognize God’s sovereignty. At this point in the message, Amos employed the second of three doxologies (see also 4:13; 9:5-6).

The one making Pleides and Orion, and turning deep darkness to the morning, and He darkens the day to night; the once calling to the waters of the sea, and He pours them out on the face of the earth; Yahweh is name. The one causing violence to burst forth on the strong, and He brings violence on the stronghold.

As was the case with the first doxology, these verses underscore the fact that the Lord had become Israel’s enemy. Also, in this doxology Amos repeated the reference to God’s ability to turn darkness to light and vice versa. In the first doxology, the prophet spoke to God’s power in forming mountains and creating the wind.

To this impressive resume', the prophet added that the Lord made the stars that comprised the constellations, and He controlled the waters of the sea. However, the most striking feature of the second doxology is the idea that the Lord caused violence to burst forth on the strong and on their strongholds or fortresses. This represented a deliberate attempt by Amos to convince the Israelites that the God they worshiped and the invincible foe they were to face were one and the same person. They were setting themselves against the sovereign Lord.

### 3. Guard Against Sin (5:10-13)

The third part of the prescription for renewal was to guard against sin. The first doxology was followed by Amos' presentation of the funeral dirge for Israel (4:13-5:2). Similarly, Amos followed his second doxology with a rehearsal of their crimes and the anticipated judgment.

They hate the one reproofing in the gate, and they abhor the one speaking honestly. Therefore, because you trample on the poor and take from them coerced gifts of grain, you have built houses of cut stone, but you shall not dwell in them; you have planted desirable vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know many are your rebellions and mighty are your sins, the ones oppressing the righteous, ones taking a bribe and you turn aside the needy in the gate. Therefore, the prudent man will be silent in that time for it is a calamitous time.

The double reference to the gate in this particular passage indicates that Amos was particularly concerned with the legal system. The gate was the place where people entered or exited the city; also the elders conducted court there. Citizens who were found guilty of crimes were cast out of the gate; those who were exonerated were allowed to reenter the city. This reentry symbolized their acceptance back into the community.

Amos revealed that the wealthy members of society hated the one reproofing in the gate. The term reprove literally means "to set right." Coupled with this indictment was the fact that they abhorred the one who spoke honestly. The few people who tried to

do what was right and who spoke the truth were loathed by other members of society. Honest elders were in a minority; miscarriage of justice was commonplace.

The ultimate victims of this crooked legal system were the underprivileged. Amos referred to them as “the poor,” “the righteous,” and “the needy.” The prophet brought the picture into clear focus. Wealthy people would worship the Lord at Bethel, then return to their perverted lifestyle in Samaria. The people thought their worship secured Yahweh’s favor; the prophet saw only Yahweh’s wrath.

The punishment for the crimes listed consisted of a reversal of fortunes. Through their immoral scheming, houses of cut stone, which were very expensive in Amos’s time. These houses were surrounded by vineyards that were planted on ancestral lands confiscated from the underprivileged. However, because they obtained this property unjustly, God would not permit them to enjoy that fruit of their labors.

Some scholars think the background for this judgment is Leviticus 26. In that passage, the Lord’s blessing was demonstrated in terms of fruitfulness, peace, and abundance. In contrast, the judgment of the Lord was demonstrated in terms of warfare, pestilence, turmoil, and exile. Amos included all of these curses in his message. The similarity of thought between Leviticus and Amos underscores the covenantal background of the prophet’s message.

God declared that the people’s rebellions were many and their sins were mighty. The term rebellions used here is the same one used in Amos 1-2. It refers to deliberate violations of known boundaries or restrictions. Amos also used the term sins. This word means “to miss the mark,” and could refer to the deliberate or inadvertent wrongdoing. By saying their rebellions were many and their sins were mighty, Amos was reiterating the truth found in the earlier phrase “For three transgressions...and for four...” In fact, things were so bad that the prudent men of society knew that it was futile to speak out. God was not going to tolerate Israel’s rebellion any longer.

#### 4. Rearrange Priorities (5:14-15)

The final part of the prescription for renewal involved a rearranging of priorities. Having described the despicable climate of Israel's legal system, the prophet issued another invitation.

Seek good and not evil and order that you may live. And it may be so that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you just as you have said. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate! Perhaps the Lord, the God of Hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

This invitation called for the people to rearrange their priorities. Instead of turning aside the needy in the gate (5:12), they were to establish justice there. They were to seek and to love good instead of subsidizing evil and deceit. Amos said that life and the presence of the Lord were possible for those who lived God's way. Even in this brief glimmer of hope Amos was certain that judgment was imminent. Still, he hoped for the favor of the Lord to be shown to a remnant. Amos used Joseph as a way of referring to the northern kingdom (5:5, 15; 6:6).

### **The Day of the Lord (5:16-20)**

Apparently, the people continued to deny the truth. Since they refused to seek the Lord, they faced a future of death and devastation. Amos characterized the catastrophe as one of widespread mourning. So many people would die that no place would remain untouched by sorrow. Every street and every open place would be filled with mourners. People would be saying "Woe, Woe." This term is used three ways in Hebrew. Woe can be understood as a sight of exasperation. The term also can be used as a stern warning, similar to our term beware. The third usage of woe is in the context of a funeral lament.

Each of these meanings could be applied to the text in Amos, but the last usage fits the context of 5:16-17. To emphasize the overwhelming disaster, Amos indicated that even a farmer would be asked to play the part of a funeral mourner since professional mourners would be so busy. What could cause such a catastrophe? Amos had indicated already that a military ballet would decimate the army (5:3). However, the people were convinced

that their army would be victorious because “the Lord was on their side.”

Any attempt by Israel’s enemies to destroy them would become a day of the Lord’s mighty victory. They called this concept of invincibility “the day of the LORD.” Scholars have shown that this concept emerged from the holy war traditions of ancient Israel. Eventually, the day of the LORD’s victory became an annual celebration at which Yahweh was symbolically enthroned as ruler of Israel. The people could not believe that Amos proclaimed defeat. They responded by shouting, “The day of the LORD, the day of the LORD!”

Amos used the term “woe,” this time in the sense of “beware!”

Woe to the ones desiring the day of the Lord, for what is this day of the Lord to you? It is darkness and not light! Just as a man will flee from before a lion and a bear meets him, then he enters the house, leans his hand on the wall and the serpent bite him. Is not the day of the Lord darkness and not light? Deep darkness with no brightness to it (5:18-20)?

Amos stood the popular concept of the day of the Lord on end. Far from being a day that Israel should desire the prophet described it as a dark time. He used a simile to describe the day of the Lord. A man escapes the danger of a lion and a bear only to be bitten by a serpent in the safety of his own home. Just when he thought he was most secure, he died!

Amos’ audience resisted his message because the pronouncements of doom did not ring true to their feelings of security. In the simile Amos shared, the man did not die until he felt secure. The day of the Lord would not be as the people thought. God would be victorious as in the past. This time, however, Israel would not be on the winning side.

### **The Lord’s Assessment of Israel’s Worship (5:21-27)**

Amos hoped to get through to his audience, but as the remaining verses of the chapter suggest, the people again appealed to their religious fervency as evidence of their devotion to the Lord. Speaking through Amos, the Lord declared:

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I will not regard your assemblies! Even if you offer up to me burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Turn aside from me the noise of your songs; I will not hear the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

God used six different verbs to declare His utter rejection of Israel's worship. Some scholars believe that the day of the Lord had become an annual festival at which the Lord was symbolically enthroned as king. Was Amos declaring that the Lord rejected this special day devoted to Him? The coupling of the verbs hate and despise could hardly be any harsher. In fact, no aspect of Israel's worship seemed pleasing to God. Their music sounded like nothing but noise, and the Lord refused to listen to their melodies.

If God did not want worship, what did He want? Actually, He loved for His people to worship Him. However, when their worship was not accompanied by covenant living, their praise was abnegated. Instead of honoring God, their worship services seemed to mock Him. God said, "Take it all away, I will not accept this hypocrisy any longer!" What God wanted was justice (the equitable treatment of all people) and righteousness (conformity to His covenant standards).

Amos used similes to convey the point. "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (5:24)." The Israelites were familiar with two types of streams, the *wadi* and the *nahal*. The *wadi* was a ditch or depression that remained dry except during the rainy season. The *nahal* was a stream that always had water in it. Amos compared Israel's justice system to a *wadi*, when cases involved poor and righteous people, the stream of justice ran dry. God wanted Israel's justice to roll down like waters instead of being like a dry ditch.

God also wanted the Israelites to conform to covenant standards. He wanted their righteousness to be like a *nahal*, always running full of life giving water. Right living revealed true love for God. But the Israelites lived as though they believed people related to God only through worship and as though daily conduct

was unrelated to relationship with God. Amos countered this notion by saying:

Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? You have lifted up *Sikkuth* your king, and *Kiyyun* your images, the star of your gods, which you made for yourselves; therefore I will take you into exile beyond Damascus, says the Lord, the God of Hosts in His name (5:25-27).

God referred the people to a time when daily and extravagant sacrifices were impossible. In the wilderness, the people came to understand the power and presence of God on a daily basis. Now that they had settled in the land, they had made God a part time curiosity. God sought the daily fellowship He once enjoyed with His people. Since they were stubborn and sinful, however, the only prognosis was exile.

### **Fast Forward**

Amos 5:1-27 is the centerpiece of the prophet's message. All that precedes and follows this chapter is related to the concept of the day of the Lord. The people of Israel had come to celebrate their great warrior-king who had delivered them so many times in the past. Unfortunately, the people had divorced morality from theology. This divorce enabled them to live immorally, while at the same time worshipping the Lord. God sent Amos to denounce this practice and declare that such worship would incur the wrath of God. Has anything changed? Do some Christians not think that devoting an hour on Sunday is sufficient to show their love for God, only to leave the worship service to return to their worldly ways? Every pastor could supply a list of names of people who practice the ritual of attending church on Easter Sunday only. Some believers attend regularly, but never devote their lives to God. They do not seem to realize that the Lord wants to be in their lives, in their decisions, in their habits, in their friendships, and in their relationships.

Ancient Israel believed that they could live immoral, unjust lives and then pay God off through elaborate worship. Some modern believers act and think the same way. Amos' call for Israel to

repent is our call too. In the previous chapter we compared Amos' conversation at Bethel to a telephone call. If that were the case, the people would have slammed down the phone. They could not tolerate the truth! Amos is on the line now talking to us. What will we do?

**Key Dates and People in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.**

786 – Jeroboam II begins his reign over Israel  
II Kings 14:23-29

783 – Uzziah begins his reign over Judah  
II Kings 15:1-7

780 – ministry of Jonah to Nineveh (?)

760 - ministry of Amos to Israel

750-727 – Tiglath-pileser III rules Assyria

742-700 – ministry of Isaiah to Judah

735-700 – ministry of Micah to Judah

726-722 - Shalmaneser V rules Assyria

721-705 – Sargon II rules Assyria

721 – Samaria, Israel's capital, falls to Assyria

704 – 681 – Sennacherib rules Assyria

701 – Sennacherib besieges Jerusalem

## The Party's Over

The party's over! These very words provoke a sense of foreboding, as if the fun is past and the price of carelessness now has to be paid. The joy of revelry and the fun of the party vanquish as an ominous feeling emerges. Was the party worth it in light of the heavy price we now have to pay? Eighth century B.C. Israel was depicted as celebrating an ongoing party. They were literally "at ease in Zion," until of course the prophet showed up and said, "Woe to the ones at ease in Zion!" (6:1). The party was officially over.

### At Ease in Zion (6:1-6)

Woe to the ones at ease in Zion, and the ones trusting in the mountains of Samaria, the notable ones of the first of the nations, even the houses of Israel comes to them. Pass over to Calneh and look, then go from there to Hamath the Great, then descend to Gath of the Philistines...Are you better than these kingdoms? Are their borders greater than your borders (6:1-2)?

Amos began this portion of his message by returning to the term "woe" that he used in 5:16-18. Of the three nuances of the term provided in the previous chapter, the one that best fits the present context is the funeral lamentation. The Hebrew term *ho* or *hoy* appears in Amos 5:16, 18, and here in 6:1. Some English translations insert "woe" at the beginning of 6:4 also. When juxtaposed to the description of people being "at ease" and "trusting", the impact of the term is heightened. This verse parallels the imagery of the man leaning against the wall of his home after successfully escaping a lion and a bear, only to be bitten by a serpent that was hiding in a crevice of the wall (5:19).

Amos addressed this particular message to the leaders of the people. In the translation above, I used the phrase "notable ones." This reflects the meaning of the Hebrew term *naqab*, which literally refers to "a piercing of the skin" to designate social standing. Apparently, leaders wore decorative jewelry that marked them as

ranking members of the community. Since they enjoyed a special standing with the Lord as a result of the covenant relationship, they viewed their nation as the first of the nations. Such was the original intent of God.

Amos also said of these leaders that the house of Israel came to them. These men provided the leadership that effected the entire nation. Leadership had its privileges and its responsibilities. The leaders in Amos' audience abused the privileges and ignored the responsibilities. Small wonder, the Lord sent Amos to deliver the funeral lamentation over them.

After getting their attention with the funeral lament, the prophet challenged the leaders to pass over to Calneh, to look, then to go to Hamath the Great, and from there to go down to Gath to the Philistines. The purpose of this figurative trip was to get them to consider the answers to the two rhetorical questions, "Are you better than these kingdoms?" and "Are their borders greater than your borders?"

All three cities Amos mentioned were located in military buffer zones between international military powers. These locations were precarious because one major power or another was seeking constantly to control these regions. The inhabitants of these cities could never afford to become complacent or over confident. A state of war existed perpetually. Infinite vigilance was the cost of living in Calneh, Hamath, and Gath. The prophet sought to warn the leaders of Israel that their arrogance was unwarranted and that it was about to cost them severely. The phrases "at ease" and "trusting in the mountain of Samaria" (6:1) are best understood as referring to military readiness. Rather than being on the alert, the leaders and their troops were in a relaxed frame of mind. An attitude paralleling that of the inhabitants of Calneh, Hamath, and Gath was more appropriate, but rather than preparing to meet God (4:12), they were partying.

Their party was subsidized by ill-gotten gain from the underprivileged of society. The poor and the righteous were subjected to violence at the hands of the ruling class. Amos referred to this period of havoc as "the seat of violence" (6:3b). God would counter their day of revelry with a day of judgment, the day of the Lord mentioned in 5:18-20. The leaders Amos addressed

pushed away the day of reckoning, or “the evil day” (6:2), and they caused the seat of violence to draw near.

At this point in the message (6:4-6), Amos began to characterize the activities and lifestyles of these wicked leaders. He utilized seven verbs to emphasize the life of unreserved, unbridled luxury. The picture is dramatic. Five of the seven verbs appear in participial form, indicating the continuing nature of the activities. Elements of the indictment include lying on beds of ivory, being extended on couches, eating choice lambs from the flock and calves from the stall, chattering over the sound of a harp, inventing instruments of song, drinking wine from large bowls, and anointing themselves with expensive ointment. The prophet’s depiction of their lifestyle revealed their carousing and arrogance.

The overabundance of partying concealed the signs of decay. Amos concluded this section by saying of these leaders that “They are not sickened by the break-up of Joseph.” The verb “sickened” refers to a spirit of apathy or indifference. The Hebrew term, *chalah*, is used to indicate physical and mental sickness and weakness.

“Break-up” renders the Hebrew term *sheber* (pronounced *shever*), which means “to break,” “to fracture,” or “to crash.” Israel was morally broken, socially fractured, and on a crash course with the unmitigated judgment of God. The leaders of Israel, however, were not concerned! Instead of the mental and spiritual anguish that they should have been feeling toward Israel’s disintegration, they were indifferent. As long as good food, prime wine, and plenty of music were in supply, nothing else mattered. They did not know that the party was over!

The prophet’s reference to Israel as the “house of Joseph” is interesting. He used this terminology in three places; 5:6, 5:15, and 6:6. Joseph’s two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, comprised two of the northern tribes that made up the nation of Israel. Additionally, Bethel, the chief religious center, and Samaria, the political capital, were located in the territory assigned to the Josephite tribes; Ephraim and Manasseh (see Josh. 16-17). By referring to Israel as the “house of Joseph,” Amos may have been seeking to focus upon those two centers of corruption, Bethel and Samaria. Additionally, the prophet may have wanted to contrast the present corruption of Joseph’s descendants with Joseph’s personal legacy of

righteousness in the past. Another possible reason why Amos referred to Israel as the “house of Joseph” may lie in the Josephite legacy of military prowess (Josh. 17:17-18). In this passage, the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh are called the house of Joseph.

### **Promise of Coming Judgment (6:7-11)**

Therefore, now, they will go into exile at the head of the ones going into exile, and the cry of revelry will turn aside from the ones being unrestrained. The Lord God has sworn by Himself, an utterance of Yahweh, the God of hosts, I am one utterly abhorring the pride of Jacob, and I hate his strongholds, so I will deliver up a city and that which fills it (6:7-8).

The word “therefore” connects the promise of judgment to the preceding description of corrupt activity. The stated punishment facing these leaders was political exile. In order for one nation to exile another, several factors had to be in place. First, the military forces of the nation going into exile had to be decimated. Second, the leaders of the losing army had to submit to the leaders of the conquering forces. When Amos prophesied that the leaders of Israel were headed for exile, he was saying that their military might, with its concomitant arrogance and pride, would be decimated.

Further, the prophet stated that soon they would lead the long line of prisoners marching into oblivion in a distant land. The prophet provided a pun in the phrase “at the head of the ones going into exile.” The term “head” derives from the same root as the term “first” (6:1) and “chief” used in 6:6. The leaders viewed themselves as the “heads” of the “first” of the nations; they anointed themselves with “first” class ointment. Therefore, it was only fitting that they would be “first” to go into exile, “heading” up the throng of prisoners!

To underscore the idea of lamentation, Amos declared that the “cry of revelry will depart from the ones being unrestrained (6:7).” The term rendered by the phrase “ones being unrestrained” is the

Hebrew word *seruchim* (pronounced *suh-roo-keem*). The basic meaning of this term is “to go free” or “to be excessive.” It also occurs in 6:4. The same term is used in Ezekiel 17:6 with reference to a sprawling vine. The imagery is vivid. Just as vines grew wildly in every direction, these leaders were excessive in every area of their lives, restrained by nothing, not even God’s Word or their covenant relationship with Him. The party mentality was about to pass only to be replaced by sorrow and woe.

Once again Amos reminded his audience that this declaration was God’s pronouncement of judgment. In 6:8, the prophet declared that “the Lord Yahweh has sworn by himself.” This terminology reflects an ancient oath formula whereby one party gave assurance of compliance to an agreement by swearing on something tangible. One promised to perform an action and backed his promise up with real collateral. In this case, the Lord could swear or bind Himself by nothing more tangible than His own existence. The quality of collateral determined the strength of the oath. The fact that God swore by Himself or put forth His very existence as tangible collateral of this oath signified that His oath to act against Israel was to be taken seriously.

In the text of the oath itself (6:8-11), Amos included several key elements as shown in the chart below.

<b>Element Of The Oath Formula</b>	<b>Actual Terminology Employed</b>
Collateral Of The Oath	The Lord God has sworn by Himself
Source Of The Oath	An utterance of Yahweh, the God of hosts
Reason For The Oath	I am one abhorring the pride of Jacob, and I hate his strongholds
Essence of the Oath	I will deliver up (for destruction) a city and that which fills it (or its inhabitants)
Result Of Implementing The Oath	See Amos 6:9-11, where massive destruction is depicted

An analysis of this chart reveals that this is a serious oath, direct from God, uttered against Israel, wide in scope, and tragic for Israel.

Amos elaborated on the death and devastation that would accompany the judgment of God against Israel 6:9-11:

And it shall be if ten men are left in one house, they will die! Then his relative, and one burning him (his body), shall lift him up to bring the bones from the house. Then he will say to whoever is in the recesses the house, "Is (anyone) yet with you?" And he will say, "No one." Then he will say, "Hush, for (we shall) not remember the name of the Lord! For behold, the Lord is commanding, and He will smite the great house into fragments and the small house into pieces."

The intent of the passage is clear. The prophet described a situation in which most of the men (soldiers) have been killed. In the event that a small number survived and sought refuge in a house, even they would die. The cause of the death of this small

group is not specified. Perhaps the need to burn the corpses indicates some kind of contagious disease.

Amos may have chosen the number ten in order to tie this judgment passage to the earlier section devoted to military defeat in 5:3. In the earlier text, the prophet indicated that the city fielding an army of a hundred men would have only ten men left over after the battle. Whether 6:9-10 is to be viewed as a continuation of 5:3 or as a separate catastrophe, the result is the same, total devastation. Both great and small houses would suffer a similar fate. The term “house” can refer literally in this context to the houses of the people of Israel or figuratively to their families. Either way, God’s judgment would be complete.

### **The Absurdity of Israel’s Actions (6:12-14)**

Will horses run on the rocky crag? Or will one plow the sea with oxen? Yet you all have turned justice to poison and the fruit of righteousness to bitterness, the ones rejoicing in *Lodavar*, the ones saying, “Have we not by our (own) strength taken for ourselves *Qarnaim*?” For behold me causing to raise over you a nation, O house of Israel, an utterance of Yahweh, the God of hosts, and they will oppress you from the entrance to Hamath unto the Wadi Arabah.

Amos concluded this portion of his message by indicting Israel for the absurdity of her behavior. He used two rhetorical questions to demonstrate his point. Horses have a difficult time on rocky terrain and for that reason they do not run there. Equally preposterous is the idea of plowing the sea with oxen. The obvious answer to both of these rhetorical questions was no!

The absurdity of both questions was understood readily. The reason Amos posed these questions to his audience was to provide an opportunity to assess their political behavior. The leaders were guilty of malfeasance in the judicial realm. Amos forcefully declared, “You have turned justice to poison...” (The reader is referred to the previous chapter for a fuller discussion of the issue of justice and what God expected.)

The reference to the “fruit of righteousness” indicates that these leaders faced indictments with reference to the social realm.

Righteous men and women conformed their lives to God's expectations as revealed in His Word. A rewarding life blessed by God was the result. Instead, these leaders manipulated society in such a way to deprive the righteous of their rightful rewards and blessings. This deliberate tampering with those faithful to the Lord incurred His wrath and guaranteed His punishment.

Amos was referring to the leaders. These men were "the ones rejoicing in *Lo-davar*, the ones saying, 'have we not by our (own) strength taken for ourselves *Qarnaim*?' " In this instance Amos employed two puns to stress the absurdity of their arrogant attitudes. "*Lodavar*," the name of a small city, literally means "not a thing" or "nothing." "*Qarnaim*," another insignificant city, means "horns," which were figurative of strength. Therefore, Amos was accusing the political and military leaders of rejoicing over nothing and taking strength by their own strength, or declaring themselves to be strong without substantial proof on the field of battle. The source of their confidence was shortsighted pride and untested arrogance. The Lord would prove to be a more formidable foe!

Amos depicted the Lord as raising a nation over Israel to oppress them from the north, the entrance to Hamath, to the south, the Wadi Arabah, (6:14). This broad scope of destruction and oppression is consistent throughout Amos' presentation. Similarly, he stressed again the fact that the real foe would be the Lord Himself. Thus, God said, "Behold me raising over you all a nation, O house of Israel, an utterance of Yahweh, the God of hosts..." In this verse, Amos employed the demonstrative particle "behold" with the first person pronoun "me" and the elaborate name "Yahweh, the God of hosts," to call special attention to the Lord's role in the coming military catastrophe.

### **Fast Forward**

We have noted the importance of spiritual leadership in the home (4:1-3). Amos 6:1-14 raises the issue of political and military leadership at the national level. What happens when national leaders are spiritually insensitive? In answering this question we are confronted with a difficulty as we seek to apply the biblical text of the eighth century B.C. to our twenty-first century A.D. situation. Stated concisely, can covenantal standards forged within the context of a theocracy be applied in a meaningful way to the context

of a democracy? Israel was a theocracy initially, and later became a theocratic monarchy. Our government is a democracy and our national leaders are subjected to the constraints of our form of government. In order to understand whether or not covenantal standards of a theocracy can be applied to a democracy, we must first understand the basic differences between the two forms of government. The following chart delineates some of the key differences between theocratic and democratic forms of government.

<b>Theocracy</b>	<b>Democracy</b>
God as the head of the nation	President as the head of the nation
God's Word as the foundational document	Constitution as the foundational document
God's will as the determinant of appropriate action	Will of the majority as the determinant of appropriate action
Stability based upon obedience to the covenantal norms (immutable)	Stability based upon obedience to the law of the land (mutable)

We glean from this comparison that several fundamental differences exist between the two forms of government. These differences will affect the way we apply covenantal standards to our present context. In keeping with the limitations of their offices, many of our national leaders will make decisions based upon the popular (majority) view without regard for whether the position is biblical or not. Many Christians are disturbed when political leaders advocate unbiblical positions.

As a Christian, I would love to see every political leader live by biblical standards and lead our country in a Godly direction. However, I have to realize that our form of government allows people to express themselves in a variety of ways, many of which are unbiblical. Does this disparity between forms of government mean that Amos 6:1-14 has nothing to say to our national leaders? Quite the contrary!

The prophet indicted Israel's leaders for three crimes that our leaders would do well to avoid. First, he indicted them in the matter of their misplaced trust in military might. They trusted in "the mountain of Samaria" and boasted of their military prowess in taking two insignificant cities, *Lo-davar* and *Qarnaim*. I remember the great pride Americans felt when our nation won a military victory over the Island of Grenada. Some things never change! I also remember the intrigue I developed toward our sophisticated weaponry while watching the Persian Gulf War. I was fascinated with the fact that a jet pilot could release a bomb two miles from a site and then guide it to a target no larger than a shoe box using a laser beam. Such intrigue and fascination comes perilously close to unwarranted trust and confidence. I am grateful that our technology is superior, but if we ever put our trust in human weaponry instead of in the Lord, we will be in trouble!

A second crime that Amos indicted the national leaders of was inappropriate behavior. In the eighth century B.C., that behavior was rowdy, unrestrained extravagance based in part on a superficial confidence they had in military might and in part on immoral living. Many of our national leaders are guilty of violating even the most basic standards of human decency. Arguably, many laws are passed today that unfairly favor the wealthy at the expense of the underprivileged in our society. Such was the case in Amos' day also.

Attendant to this misconduct in the social and legal realms is inappropriate behavior in the judicial realm, the miscarriage of justice based on economic standing. Our nation is replete with examples of disparity between justice for wealthy and justice for the poor. No system is perfect, but when a rich person can commit a crime and then buy his pardon, something is wrong. Unfortunately, this scenario has played out too many times.

In addition to misplaced trust in military might and inappropriate behavior, Amos indicted the national leaders for their failure to appreciate the scope of the deterioration of the nation. When we analyze the seeming lack of productivity of our leaders in dealing with the major problems plaguing our nation, can we help but wonder, "Do they have a firm grasp on the scope of our difficulties?" We are left to assume that either they do not care or they do not know about our problems. In Amos' day the leaders

knew, but did not care! Our leaders can learn from this inattentiveness to national disintegration and use their positional authority to do something constructive about solving the issues that plague us.

## **Visions of Collisions**

Have you ever tried to imagine what God looks like? Have you ever visualized God interacting with this world or the people in it? Sometime near the middle of the eighth century B.C., God showed Amos several images of His activity in this world as it was about to unfold. Amos recorded these five visions (chapter 7-9). Each vision has a message complete in itself. Taken together, however, the collective message is profound and determined. Amos' visions of God meant certain trouble for Israel. The covenant people were on a collision course with the covenant God. For that reason, I refer to these mental pictures as visions of collisions.

Many scholars believe that God gave these visions to Amos while he was still a shepherd in Judah. They then became the basis of his prophetic ministry. This view finds some support in Amos 1:1, where we are told that the Book contains "The *words of Amos...which he saw.*" The similarities between the visions (Amos 7-9) and the words of Amos (Amos 1-6) are easy to note. Both visions and words speak of divine judgment. Both depict the Lord as one who has averted full judgment. Finally, both visions and words proclaim the coming end of the Northern Kingdom.

If the visions preceded the words of Amos, why do they occur after most of his words had been proclaimed? The most likely answer is that the harsh proclamation of judgment prompted Amos' audience to question his credentials. In response, Amos related how God revealed to him the message of approaching disaster. Another possibility is that the visions appear in the order they were received, that is, after Amos had proclaimed judgment. Their purpose then would not be to serve as a basis of the prophet's words, but as an encouragement and reinforcement of those words. Either way, the visions are by nature and impact graphic.

### **Vision #1: The Swarm of Locusts (7:1-3)**

Having declared judgment on the leaders of Samaria (6:1-14), Amos related his first vision.

Thus, the Lord God caused me to see, and behold one forming a locust swarm at the beginning of the going up of the latter growth, and behold, the latter growth after the king's mowing. And it came to be that it completely consumed the green grass of the earth. Then I said, "O LORD God, forgive please, who can stand, Jacob? For he is small!" The LORD relented concerning this. "This shall not be," says the LORD.

Several key elements comprise this vision. First, the vision proper relates what Amos saw, in this case a devastating locust plague. Second, the vision contains an autobiographical account of the prophet's intercession on behalf of Israel. Finally, the vision concludes with a confirmation that the Lord indeed averted the judgment.

The vision proper reveals a destructive locust plague that annihilates the latter growth. In Israel, grains were cut twice during the harvest days. The king's household received the first cutting as a form of royal tax. The latter growth was harvested for the people. By showing the total decimation of this latter growth, God was depicting a nationwide disaster that would result in famine.

Amos knew that this plague would be disastrous. His first impulse was to intercede on behalf of the people of Israel. Whereas Israel was proud and arrogant because of their strength (see 6:13), Amos appealed for the Lord's forgiveness on the grounds of their smallness. The prophet knew that Israel would not survive the divine onslaught. The term rendered *forgive* in 7:2 is used only of God in the Old Testament. Only God can do the kind of forgiving called for in this text.

The King James Version reads, "The Lord *repented* for this." The question arises, "How can God repent? Is He guilty of wrongdoing?" This issue is a problem for English readers. The Hebrew term *nacham*, rendered "relented" in many translation, means "to console oneself." God breathed a sigh of relief because He did not have to destroy His people. He postponed judgment, not because the people repented, but because a concerned prophet interceded on their behalf.

### **Vision #2: The Consuming Fire (7:4-6)**

Amos immediately related his second vision without any reaction from his audience to the first vision.

Thus the Lord God caused me to see, and behold, the Lord God was calling for a contention in the fire. And it consumed the great deep and it consumed the portion of land. Then I said, “O Lord God, cease please, who can stand, Jacob? For, he is small!” The Lord relented concerning this. “This also shall not be,” says the Lord God.

This second vision uses symbolic language to indicate an unstoppable blaze. If the fire consumed the great deep (a reference to the deepest known waters), then the land surely would not survive. In the vision that Amos saw, a portion of the land was consumed, indicating that the fiery judgment had begun already. In the Old Testament, fire is often a symbol of military conflagration. This interpretation would match the words of Amos that he had proclaimed concerning Samaria (6:1-14).

Amos intercede a second time on behalf of the people of Israel. He again appealed to the Lord on the basis of the nation’s smallness. Again the Lord relented, averting judgment because of the prophet’s intercession. This second instance of successful intercession provides a sense of God’s patience and His pleasure with human intercession.

### **Vision #3: The Plumb Line in the Lord’s Hand (7-9)**

The third vision follows on the heels of the second without any intervening discourse.

Thus, He caused me to see, and behold, the Lord stationing Himself upon the wall of the plummet and in His hand a plumb line. And the Lord said to me, “Amos what are you seeing?” And I said, “A plumb line.” And the Lord said, “Behold me setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel. I will never again pass over him! The high places of Isaac will be desolate and the

sanctuaries of Israel will be put to the sword, then, I will rise over the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”

Amos saw the Lord holding a plumb line in His hand as He stood by a wall. This vision contains only one of the elements of the first two visions, the revelation of the vision proper. The prophet’s intercession and the Lord’s postponement of judgment are absent in this vision. Instead, the vision is enhanced by the inclusion of a conversation between the Lord and Amos.

The meaning of the vision is clear. The wall of plummet signifies a wall that originally was built perpendicularly. Now the Lord stands beside the wall with a plumb line in His hand. He is checking the alignment of the wall. The wall represents the nation of Israel. The plumb line depicts the covenant under which Israel originally was constituted as a special nation before God.

The Lord’s declaration that He would never again pass over Israel means that the nation failed the test of covenant fidelity. A wall can lose its original integrity or perpendicularity. Just so, Israel had lost its original uprightness in relation to God. Leaning walls are torn down! Unfaithful nations are destroyed.

Amos’ use of the phrase *pass over* suggests a deliberate reversal of the great Exodus event in which the Lord passed over His people. The “high places of Isaac” and the “sanctuaries of Israel” refer to various religious shrines in Israel. Their destruction indicates that these centers were a major source of covenant infidelity.

The vision concludes with a promise that the Lord will rise up over the house of Jeroboam with the sword. This promise of coming conflict indicates that king encouraged and supported the idolatrous worship centers. Instead of living justly in the land as the law commanded (Deut. 17:18-20), Jeroboam had sanctioned religious apostasy and syncretism. Syncretism was the blending of false and true religions. God promised to act decisively.

#### **Vision #4: The Basket of Summer Fruit (8:1-3)**

Amaziah’s warning to Amos (7:12-13, see chapter 8 in the book) went unheeded. True to his calling, the prophet resumed relating the visions that the Lord caused him to see. His fourth

vision seems idyllic at first glance, but the meaning of the vision is the exact opposite.

Thus the Lord God caused me to see and behold a basket of summer fruit! Then He said, “What are you seeing Amos?” And I said, “A basket of summer fruit.” Then the Lord said to me, “The end has come to my people, Israel! I will never again pass over him. So, the songs of the temple will become howlings in that day,” an utterance of the Lord God. “Many corpses in every place will be cast out in silence.”

We can imagine the beauty of a picture of just ripened fruit, freshly picked and nicely arranged in a basket on the table. What the Lord was showing Amos, however, was not a delightful picture. Using a pun, lost in the English text, God showed Amos a basket of *summer fruit* (*qayitz* in Hebrew). Then the Lord said, “The *end* (*qētz* in Hebrew) has come to my people, Israel!”

Then, repeating the promise made in the third vision, the Lord said He would never *pass over* Israel again. Attendant to this vision is the proclamation that festive temple songs would be replaced with funeral howlings; superficial worship would be replaced by the solemn necessity of casting dead bodies out of houses (8:3).

#### **Vision #5: The LORD Standing beside the Altar (9:1-4)**

After addressing the sins and punishment of Israel (8:4-14, see chapter 8 in this book), Amos recounted his final vision from the Lord.

I saw the Lord stationing Himself by the altar, and He said, Smite thou the capitals until the thresholds shake, and break them on the heads of all of them; and those who are left I will kill with the sword; not one of them shall flee away, and not one of them shall escape. If they dig into *Sheol*, from there My hand shall take them; if they go up to heaven, from there I will bring them down. And if they hide themselves on the top of Carmel, from there I will search out and I will take them; and if they conceal themselves from before My eyes at the bottom of

the sea, from there I will command the serpent, and it shall bite them. And if they go among the captives before their enemies, from there I will command the sword, and it shall kill them; for I have set My eyes upon them for calamity and not for good.”

Seeing the Lord standing by the altar reminds us of an earlier time when Jeroboam I (931-910 B.C.), the first ruler of the Northern Kingdom, stood by the same altar in Bethel (1 Kings 13:1-10). In that situation the Lord sent an anonymous prophet from Judah, Amos’ native country, to pronounce judgment against the altar.

Now, about 170 years later (760 B.C.), Amos was seeing the Lord standing by the altar, proclaiming the imminent fulfillment of the earlier prophecy. Ironically, the king of Israel carried the same name as the earlier one, Jeroboam II (786-746 B.C.). These two kings were related only in their determination to maintain the sinful shrines at Bethel and Dan.

The meaning of the vision is clear. The Lord will bring judgment upon, those worshipping at Bethel. This vision is consistent with Amos’ proclamations concerning Bethel (see 3:14; 5:5-6). The destruction is to be complete; the scenario is one of death and devastation. To underscore the futility of attempting to escape, Amos utilized language reminiscent of Ps. 139:7-12. The psalm praises the benevolent omnipresence of God.

Amos turned the meaning around and used the language to reflect the inescapable presence of the Lord. No matter where the Israelites might flee, no matter where they might hide, the Lord will find them and destroy them. They could not outrun the watchful eyes of the Lord that were upon them for calamity and not for good (9:4).

### **Fast Forward**

What are we to make of these visions today? Several important biblical truths emerge from our analysis of these passages. First, human sin brings divine judgment. In all five visions, we see people on a collision course with God. The cause of the impending doom was the people’s sins. Likewise, if we choose to live in sin, we place ourselves at odds with God. We travel the dangerous road of a head on collision with the Lord.

The second theological truth that emerges is that intercession makes a difference! In the visions of the locust swarm and of the contention in fire, we see Amos interceding on behalf of the people of Israel. Amos rightly assessed Israel's true strength. Far from being the military powerhouse Israel thought it was, the nation was small in the face of divine judgment. Amos pleaded with God to forgive and to cease His punishment. In both cases the Lord granted Amos' request.

In fact, the Lord was relieved that He did not have to destroy His people. The prophet's intercession brought Israel more time in spite of the fact that the people had not repented. God averted judgment on the legitimate basis of intercessory prayer. We should learn from these visions that God accepts our prayers on behalf of others. We may be able to avert the judgment of God on some sinner and buy that person more time to repent.

Another truth is that eventually even intercession fails. Unlike the first visions Amos saw, the visions of the wall of plummet, the basket of summer fruit, and the Lord standing beside the altar contain no mention of prophetic intercession. Amos realized that intercessory prayer only postponed God's judgment. Unless accompanied by heartfelt repentance, intercession can do nothing to avert divine judgment. Visions three through five parallel Amos' earlier proclamations of unmitigated judgment against Israel. Unrepentant sinners today must realize that the prayers of the saints on their behalf cannot secure their pardon. They must repent or face the consequences.

Fourthly, we learn that God judges us by well-known standards. In the vision of the wall of plummet, the Lord tests the perpendicularity of the wall with the same plumb line used to build it. Likewise, the Lord judged His people's righteousness by the covenant stipulations laid down at Sinai when the nation was first established.

Unlike the gods of other ancient nations, the Lord was not capricious. He did not act on a whim when dealing with His people. His interactions with the covenant community were delineated plainly. Because God is consistently faithful, we can relate to Him on His terms and know that He is satisfied with us. He does not change the rules of the game from day to day.

A fifth theological truth arises from our analysis of these visions. Religious pomp and grandeur may be a sign of spiritual poverty and imminent destruction instead of spiritual wealth and divine blessing. Throughout the book, Amos condemned the religious shrines in Israel and the people who worshiped there. In the final three visions, Amos referred to the destruction of these worship centers.

We must be careful today not to equate religious activity with genuine revival. Daily conformity to the precepts of God's Word is less spectacular than elaborate worship rituals, but believers draw closer to God through obedience.

For all their emphasis on sacrifices, offerings, festivals, assemblies, music, and celebration, the people of Israel came no closer to God. In fact, those practices only heightened Israel's delusion of being in good standing with God. Their practice of worshiping and praising God one day and living immorally the next indicates their spiritual insensitivity.

Today, many professing Christians merely go through the motions as if religious activity is all God wants from them. The lives of some professing Christians seem untouched by the Master's hands. The high principles of Scripture apparently make no difference in their lives. God did not accept this in Amos' day; He does not accept it in our day either!

A sixth truth that emerges from an analysis of these visions is that God's harshest judgment may occur at the very places we confess our devotion to Him. The unmitigated judgments contained in visions three through five, involved specific references to the worship centers in Israel. To live in willful violation of God's Word is bad enough, but the people of Israel went even further. They flocked to the religious shrines to pay tribute to God, thinking they could secure His favor in spite of their deliberate rebellion against His precepts.

This way of thinking reveals the people's cynicism toward God. They actually believed they could deceive Him. Because their worship only enhanced God's displeasure, He directed His judgment against their religious shrines. In the same way, our church houses can be places of genuine worship or monuments to spiritual superficiality. We determine their true nature by moral choices we make on a daily basis.



## **Close Encounters of the Prophetic Kind**

Some years ago, movie goers flocked to the theaters to see a space fiction entitled “Close Encounters of the Third Kind.” The basic plot of the movie showed people from different worlds coming into contact with each other. The contact was both painful and informative. Each participant walked away with a deeper appreciation of the other person’s nature and disposition.

### **Amaziah, Meet Amos! (7:10-17)**

Sometime around 760 B.C., Amos came to Bethel to share the Word of the Lord. When he arrived, he had a dramatic confrontation with Amaziah, the priest of Bethel. This encounter, recorded in Amos 7:10-17, follows the story line of the fictional space movie mentioned above. Amos and Amaziah were from vastly different worlds. Amos was a rustic “jack-of-all-trades” pressed into prophetic service by the Lord. Amaziah was a professional priest, no doubt well trained and highly skilled. Amos was from the country region of Judah. Amaziah was a “city slicker” living in Israel. Amos spent most of his time tending to sheep and doing agricultural chores like pinching sycamore figs. Amaziah worked for King Jeroboam II. Their two worlds could not have been more different.

Not only were these two “men of God” from different worlds, but their encounter was very painful. Amaziah represented the king’s court and was subservient to Jeroboam. Amos came in the name of the Lord, representing the covenant God. Because Jeroboam’s policies clashed with the Lord’s covenant stipulations, the encounter between his representative and the Lord’s prophet could only be confrontational! Just as in the fictional movie, both parties in this prophet-priest clash were impacted by the encounter. Amaziah became alarmed at Amos’ preaching; Amos became more determined in the face of Amaziah’s obstinacy.

Amaziah’s alarm is reflected clearly in his action of sending a dispatch to King Jeroboam II (7:10-11). The biblical text does not tell us where the king was at the time. The two best possibilities

would be that he was either in the capital city, Samaria, 25 miles to the north, or that he was in the vicinity of Bethel, attending the “Day of the Lord” festival mentioned in Amos 5:18-20. Either way, the king was aware of Amos’s preaching. Amaziah informed the king that a prophet from Judah had conspired against him and that the land was not able to bear all of his words.

The dispatch is saturated with exaggeration and irony. For example, how could one man conspire against the king? To this exaggeration, Amaziah added that the land was not able to endure all of Amos’ words. The irony is intentional. Amos, whose name means “burden,” had unloaded the burden of the Lord upon the worshippers at Bethel. The burden was that the relationship between God and Israel could not endure the strain of covenant infidelities. However, in an ironic twist of reality, the priest of Bethel declared that the land could not endure Amos’ words. For him the problem was not covenant infidelities, but rather the words of this unknown prophet from Judah.

Amaziah added two specific charges against Amos (7:11). First, he accused Amos of saying that the king would die by the sword. We learn from II Kings 14:29 that Jeroboam did not die by the sword, but rather “he slept with his fathers,” a euphemism for natural death. Was Amos wrong? No! Amaziah had reported the prophet’s word inaccurately. What Amos actually said was that the Lord would rise against the “house of Jeroboam” with the sword (7:9). The historical fulfillment of this event is recorded in II Kings 18:8-12. Jeroboam’s son, Zechariah was killed in a conspiracy, thus bringing Jeroboam’s house (dynasty) to an end.

The second specific charge against Amos was that he proclaimed Israel would go into exile. This charge is true. In denouncing the festivals and assemblies of Bethel, Amos had declared that the house of Israel would go into exile (5:27) and that the leading men of Samaria would be the first in line (6:7). This threat of exile is repeated in 7:17. The full impact of exile can be understood only in the light of the importance of the land as a covenant gift (see Deut. 8:1-10). The loss of the land was a clear signal that the covenant relationship had suffered a severe blow!

Apparently some time elapsed between the sending of the dispatch to the king in 7:10-11 and Amaziah’s address to Amos in 7:12-13. Amaziah, relaying the king’s response, extended a clear

warning to the prophet to flee to his homeland of Judah, to eat bread and to prophesy there. In essence the priest of Bethel was telling Amos, “Go home and provoke your own people, you are not welcome here!”

Amaziah’s justification for ordering Amos out of Bethel was two-pronged. First, Bethel was the “sanctuary of the king.” Amos was in violation of royal protocol, particularly in the area of threatening the king and the future of Israel. Second, Bethel was the “house of the kingdom.” *Bethel* means “house of God,” but Amaziah called it “the house of the kingdom.” God’s Word was not welcomed at God’s house!

The description of Bethel as the “house of the kingdom” refers to Bethel’s special status as a national religious shrine, established as such in the times of Jeroboam I around 931 B.C. shortly after Solomon’s death and the division of his kingdom (I Kings 12:55-33). From the earliest days of the divided kingdom, when Jeroboam I led the northern tribes away from Judah, Bethel and Dan were established as rival religious shrines to the temple in Jerusalem. Amos did not spare Bethel in his sermons (3:14; 4:4; 5:5-6) or Dan (8:14). These shrines are referred to in First and Second Kings as “the sin of Jeroboam son of Nebat.”

Amaziah’s warning prompted Amos to respond, “I am not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet” (7:14). Though Amos was acting in the role of a prophet as he brought God’s Word to Bethel and Samaria, he did not make his living as a prophet as Amaziah had suggested (7:12). His understanding of the prophetic mission is given in 7:15. Amos declared, “*The Lord* took me from behind the flock and *the Lord* told me, “Go! Prophesy to my people Israel!” Amos was at Bethel because God sent him there with a message for his errant people.

Amaziah’s warning did nothing to discourage the prophet. Having stated his reason for prophesying, Amos returned immediately to his message:

And now, hear the word of the Lord, you are saying do not prophesy concerning Israel and do not preach concerning the house of Isaac. therefore, thus says the Lord, your wife will be as a harlot in the city, and your sons and daughters will fall by the sword, and your

land will be portioned off by a cord, and you will die on an unclean land, and Israel will surely go into exile from upon his land (7:16-17).

This proclamation of judgment is consistent with the rest of Amos' preaching and typical of the confrontational meeting he had with the priest. Notice how Amos contrasted what Amaziah was saying with what the Lord was saying. The word rendered *preach* above literally means "to drip" or "to drop" and may refer to the animated way in which the prophet delivered his message.

The coming judgment on Israel would affect every area of Amaziah's life. His wife would be as a harlot in the city, probably a reference to rape associated with warfare. His children would die during the conflict. His land would be divided up among strangers. Amaziah faced exile and death in a foreign or "unclean" land, a particularly onerous end for priests who specialized in remaining ritually clean. So the confrontation between royal priest and faithful prophet came to an end. The day that Amaziah met Amos was not one of his happier moments.

### **The Famine of the Word (8:4-14)**

This passage follows the revelation of Amos' fourth vision, the basket of summer fruit. The Lord interpreted that vision to Amos as signifying the end of His covenant people, Israel. These verses indict the people for specific sins of the market place. They are placed after the fourth vision as an explanation for the coming end of the nation. Amos had in mind a day in the near future on which God would destroy the nation of Israel.

The indictment focused upon the marketplace (8:4-6). A just God demanded just dealings in the economic sphere. Instead, the wealthy merchants of society were trampling upon the needy and "wiping out" the poor of the land. This metaphorical language refers to dishonest practices in the marketplace that made life unbearably harsh for the underclass. These merchants sought relaxed laws related to New Moon and Sabbath observances in order to prolong the business week.

During business hours they were guilty of at least four moral discrepancies. First, they made the *ephah* small. The ephah was similar to our measuring cup. They decreased the capacity of this

cup by using a false bottom. Therefore, when a poor widow bought an ephah of grain she was getting less than she paid for. Second, the merchants were making the shekel great. This practice refers to the counter weights used to measure money. In Amos' day money did not have value but rather weight. Coins were placed on one side of the scale and then balanced by weights on the other side. The weights of the merchants were heavier than they were supposed to be, thus requiring additional coins to balance the scales.

Third, to these immoral practices, the merchants added the use of false scales. These scales tipped in favor of the rich seller, requiring the poor buyer to give more money. Fourth, as if these evil tendencies were not enough, the merchants also were guilty of selling the refuse of grain. When grain was processed the outer husk was separated from the kernel inside. The kernel was the desirable part of the grain, but the wealthy merchants were decreasing their overhead and increasing their profits by mixing chaff in with the kernels.

God was not going to tolerate this kind of immorality among his covenant people. Since they refused to change, He refused to continue the relationship. In 8:7-8, the Lord took an oath on the "pride of Jacob." An oath was only as good as its collateral. The fact that God swore by the "pride of Jacob" indicates that the nation's pride was as real as it was problematic. At any rate, the Lord promised never to forget any of their deeds. The compassion of the Lord for the underprivileged comes to the fore in this passage. He will stand up for them when no one else will.

God's response to immorality in the marketplace was to take a specific form. Amos told of a coming day when darkness would occur at midday (8:9), reminiscent of the darkness of the day of the Lord. This dark day would see feasts turned to mourning and songs to lamentation (8:10). The references to sackcloth, to baldness, and to mourning for an only son indicated that a nationwide catastrophe was to come on Israel.

During this dark period of judgment, people would seek the Lord. They would hunger and thirst for His Word (8:11-12). However, since they were not willing to hear His Word and repent when He sent them prophets, He would prevent them from hearing

His Word during their judgment time. Amos said, “They shall run to and fro, seeking the Word of the Lord, but they shall not find it.”

This time of futile seeking would be called the “famine of the Word.” Since the people had heard the Word abundantly in the past and had chosen to ignore it, the Lord was about to send a judgment upon them so complete that it would drive them to seek the Word of the Lord. This heightened desire to hear the Word would be greeted with a famine of the Word. God would not speak to his people at the time when they realized they needed Him the most. God’s silence was the result of their sinful obstinacy and refusal to repent. If they did not need God, then He sure did not need them!

The prophet concluded his description of the coming day of judgment as a time when young women and men would pass out (8:13-14). These youthful people represent the strongest members of Israel’s society. If they could not stand the heat of judgment, then no one could. They would fall and never get up again. Amos described them as the ones who swear by “Ashimah of Samaria,” a reference to a fertility cult, and who say, “Alive is your God, O Dan,” a reference to the rival shrine in northern Israel.

### **The Eyes of the Lord (9:5-10)**

This passage begins with the third and final doxology utilized by Amos (9:5-6; see also 4:13 and 5:8-9). In this doxology, Amos described the Lord as the God who can melt the earth by touching it, causing cataclysmic events that parallel the rising and sinking of the Nile River. God’s grandeur is depicted in the portrayal of his heavenly chambers with a vault on the earth. His sovereign power is seen in His ability to call forth the waters of the sea and pour them out on the earth’s surface. This description may refer to flooding as suggested by the prior reference to the Nile River. It also may refer to the bringing of rain, something the people of Israel had ascribed to Baal, the storm god of Canaan. Amos earlier had attributed the giving and withholding of rain to the Lord (4:7-8). Either way, Amos used the doxology to portray God in all of His sovereignty and grandeur.

The doxology set the stage for the demotion of Israel to the status of heathen nation. Amos 9:7 has not received the due regard it deserves in the discussion of the message of Amos. This verse

indicates that because of their sin and obstinacy, Israel was no better in the eyes of the Lord than heathen kingdoms like Ethiopia, Philistia, and Syria. The demotion of Israel's status is given in the form of a rhetorical question: "Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir?"

The impact of this question is dramatic. Students of the Old Testament know that the Exodus from Egypt is the single greatest event in Hebrew history. For the Lord to equate the Exodus to less significant international migrations indicates that the Exodus event has been deprived of its covenantal significance. Because of their persistent moral failures and refusal to repent, the status of Israel was reduced from covenant people to heathen nation.

Amos underscored the point by stating, "Behold, the eyes of the Lord God are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the face of the earth, except I will not completely destroy the house of Jacob (9:8)." Amos held out a ray of optimism with the last clause of the verse. What did he mean when he revealed that the Lord would not completely destroy the house of Jacob?

The answer is given in 9:9-10. Amos utilized a simile of the sieve to describe the judgment process. Israel would be shaken among the nations as one shakes with a sieve. People who processed grain would place grain in a sieve. The sieve was shaken, causing the grain to fall through on to a piece of cloth on the ground where it could be collected. The sieve trapped rocks, dirt and chaff undesirable for consumption. Ironically, the merchants were selling the refuse of grain (8:6) indicating that they did not use the sieve. Now the Lord was going to shake them in the sieve of international turmoil. Just as the undesirable debris was trapped, all the sinners among God's people would die by the sword. Ironically, Amos characterized these as the ones who say, "Calamity shall not draw near or meet us" (9:10).

### **Fast Forward**

These passages are helpful in understanding several key aspects about an encounter with a God-called prophet. These aspects include how we respond to God's message, the demands of God's call, the expectations of God

on our business lives, and the consequences of our choice to live in sin.

The first key aspect of an encounter with a God-called prophet is our response to the Lord's message. Amaziah never considered that Amos was right. He assumed the problem was Amos' preaching! Many people, when confronted with the truth of God's Word, find fault with those who speak the truth. They often get angry, or worse, ignore the message, blaming others for their problems. This twisting of the truth is pure perversion. God's Word is not the problem; it's the solution! Often, in order to conform to God's Word, we are required to make changes in our lives. When we refuse to make the necessary changes, we live in defiance of God's will. The result is spiritual misery.

A second key aspect of an encounter with a God-called prophet is the demand the call makes on our lives. God's call involves a taking and a telling. Amos said, "The Lord took me from behind the flock!" He was going about his business of being a shepherd when God chose to redirect his steps. The Lord's call on our lives takes us away from the path which we have chosen for ourselves and sets us on a divinely chosen course consistent with the will of God.

God's call also involves a telling. Amos said, "The Lord told me, 'Go. Prophesy to my people, Israel.'" When God took Amos, He also told Amos what to say and what to do. God treats us the same way. When He calls us, He takes us from our course and places us on His course. He then instructs as about what we are to say and what we are to do. His call involves a taking and a telling.

A third key aspect of an encounter with a God-called prophet is the expectations of God on our business lives. We must realize that a moral God seeks morality among his people, even in our business dealings. The faith that we profess on Sunday should direct every action we take and every word we speak on Monday through Saturday. The God we exalt in our worship should be exalted equally in our daily walk. The Lord tells us to be holy for He is holy (Lev. 19:2). He does not desire that we merely acknowledge Him for who He is; He requires that we live in accordance with His precepts so that His holiness will be reflected in our lives. Nonbelievers are exposed to the holiness of God through contact with the holiness of His people. If believers today act like the merchants of Amos' day,

they bring dishonor to the name of the Lord. God will not tolerate this.

The final aspect of an encounter with a God-called prophet is the consequences of our choice to live in sin. We reflect the abominations of the heathen when we sin. Our relationship to the Lord should result in a distinctive lifestyle that reflects our loyalty to His Word. Israel became just like the heathen nations, living as if they had no knowledge of God. Likewise, many Christians enjoy the assurance of salvation while making friends with this world. If God did not tolerate willful sin in the lives of His people in the eighth century B.C., does it seem plausible that He will ignore sin in the lives of His people today?

With the words, “All the sinners of My people shall die...,” Amos concluded his message of unmitigated judgment. But the day of the Lord would not just remove the sinners from God’s people; it would prepare the way for the glorious restoration. This restoration would bring the covenant community back to its future of serving God. In the next chapter, we will examine the source and nature of the prophet’s optimism for Israel’s future.

## **Back to the Future**

Amos focused primarily on unmitigated judgment. His main concern was that the covenant people repent of their sins and that they live up to their responsibilities before the Lord. Their indifference to the Lord's demands not only rendered them insensitive to His Law, but it resulted in their deeper involvement in sinful activity while at the same time dulling their senses to the harsh realities of impending judgment. Amos countered this indifference and insensitivity with his bold statement that the day of the Lord was darkness and not light (5:18-20). Did this unmitigated judgment in the present mean that there was no hope for the future?

For Amos, the corrective act of God in judging Israel meant that there was indeed hope for the future. Speaking from the perspective of one who was witnessing the on-going decay and decline of his people and who was certain of the Lord's power, Amos turned his attention to the restorative aspects of God's intervention on the day of the Lord (9:11-15). Though some scholars view these verses as being out of character for Amos, they are consistent with his concept of divine sovereignty. If the Lord intervened to judge sin and to remove the sinners from among the people, then it follows that the resultant society would be an improvement over the way things were before He acted. This passage then is not a later addition, but rather a logical conclusion to the message of Amos. The divine Lord would judge His wayward people, removing all the unrepentant ones. Then, He would begin to restore them to His original purpose.

### **Restoration of David's Tabernacle (9:11-12)**

In that day, I will raise up the falling tabernacle of David; I will repair its breaches and I will raise up its ruins; and I will build it as the days of old. In order that they may inherit the remnant of Edom and all the nations, which My name is called over them, an utterance of the Lord, the One who is doing this.

Three features emerge from these verses. The most prominent feature is the central focus upon restoration as an act of God. The Lord Himself will raise and repair the falling tabernacle of David, a symbol of the house of David and the people of God. To remove any doubt, Amos declared that this was the utterance of the Lord, the one who is doing this. Restoration is impossible apart from the intervention and power of God at work.

A second feature of these verses is Amos' use of the present, active, participial form of the verb to indicate that the tabernacle of David was falling at the time he was speaking of renewal. The idea here is that even in the midst of the decay, when the nation was facing certain judgment, the prophet could speak of better days ahead. This optimism was not based on any repentance of the people, for they had not repented, it was based upon the sovereignty of God. In Amos' theology, the Lord was not only sovereign in judgment but also in restoration.

The third feature of these verses is the statement of purpose that Amos gives as the reason for restoration, "...in order that they may inherit the remnant of Edom and all the nations which my name is called over them." Amos here reverts back to his conception of Israel as the covenant people of God. Implicit in that concept is the idea that through the descendants of Abraham, all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:3). By removing all the sinners of His people through judgment, the Lord was not destroying the covenant community but rather He was purifying the community and facilitating its efficacy. That is to say, Amos viewed God's intervention to judge Israel as His way of "pruning the dead limbs from the tree," not to kill the tree, but to enable it to live, to grow, and to bear fruit. For this reason the imagery of 9:13-15 comes as no surprise.

## **The Book of Amos: Key Theological Concepts**

- 1. God was sovereign over all nations of the earth and expected human decency.**
- 2. When they sinned, Israel and Judah become wicked like the other nations.**
- 3. God placed Israel and Judah in a special covenant relationship that had great privileges and great responsibilities.**
- 4. God sought to confront His people in their sins and to convince them to repent.**
- 5. The covenant relationship suffered when the people rebelled against God.**
- 6. Trusting in military might, even in times of domination and peace, was wrong.**
- 7. Institutionalized religion clashed with spirit filled prophecy.**
- 8. Dishonesty in the business place was not acceptable to God.**
- 9. God's judgment served as a catalyst for positive change in the future.**

## **Restoration of God's Blessing on Israel (9:13-15)**

Behold! The days are coming, an utterance of the Lord, when the plowman will overtake the harvester and the one treading grapes will overtake the one planting the seed; and the mountains will drip with sweet wine and the hills will flow. Then I shall turn the captivity of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild desolated cities and live there; they shall plant vineyards and drink from their wine; they shall make gardens and eat their produce. Then I will plant them upon their land, and they will not be uprooted again from their land that I have given to them, says the Lord your God.

Using an agrarian analogy common to the understanding of his audience, Amos described the days of restoration in the broadest and brightest terms. Before describing the days of renewal however, he calls attention once again to the fact that such optimism is based upon the very declaration of the Lord Himself. This ray of hope was not the product of mere mental machinations of a distressed prophet, but rather the guarantee of a sovereign God who sought to put His people back on track.

Amos utilized prophetic speech formulas like the phrase “an utterance of the Lord,” to emphasize that restoration would be uniquely the act of the covenant Lord (9:12-13). The prophet also used the explicit covenantal formula, “says Yahweh your God,” to close out his message. The insertion of the possessive pronoun “your” between Lord and God (9:15) indicates that the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel would be restored. This special relationship serves as the basis for all God's restorative acts and blessings in the future.

Taken together, these prophetic speech formulas envelope the entire restoration scenario. However, in order to emphasize to the people that the rejuvenation of “David's house” is uniquely an act of God, the prophet utilized the first person form of six verbs with reference to Yahweh. Thus, it is the Lord who *will raise the falling booth of David*. He will *repair* its breaches and *raise up* its ruins. Additionally, the Lord will *turn back* the captivity of His people; *plant* them on their land which He himself will *give* them.

The prophet stressed the abundance and replenishment of the days of restoration by using hyperbole, the intentional exaggeration of a point. The actions of sowing, harvesting, planting, and treading grapes were all aspects of the agrarian society of Amos' day. These activities portrayed a settled lifestyle in which the people would be free from international turmoil. Since they do not have to defend themselves against an aggressive enemy, they would be at liberty to pursue the daily concerns of farming and harvesting.

Amos exaggerated the routine activities of farming in order to emphasize the restorative power of the sovereign Lord. The scarcity and hardship of war, implicit in Amos' judgment passages, give way to the peace and abundance of the restored community of faith. Because Yahweh is sovereign, He can bring life out of death, freedom out of bondage, and abundance out of scarcity. Thus, the prophet achieved a major victory in proclaiming the nature of God to an errant people. The Lord would not come to judge only; He also would come to restore the covenant community.

Such grandiose ideas were not possible apart from a pervasive sense of God's power and beneficence. Simply stated, Yahweh seeks to use His people to bless the world. His judgment is certain when they sin. Subsequent to His judgment and inherent in it, is the reality that the community of faith will be restored and will resume its role as God's kingdom of priests to the rest of humankind.

Characteristic of Yahweh's activity in this world, the people have a role to play in the community to come. Far from being mere recipients of the Lord's restoration, they are described as planting, harvesting, treading grapes, eating, drinking, rebuilding cities, and inhabiting the land given to them by the Lord.

The clause "In order that they may inherit the remnant of Edom" referred originally to the idea that God would reverse the realities faced by Israel and Edom during the onslaught of invading armies. Edom had aided and abetted the enemies of Israel. Indeed, the entire Book of Obadiah is dedicated to this theme of reversing the fortunes of Israel and Edom.

The phrase, "Inherit the remnant of Edom," had covenant connotations as well as does the phrase, "all the nations which my name is called over them." The clear idea was that God's community of faith would stand as a priest nation to the rest of the

world. In fact, James declared to the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:13-19) that Paul's mission to the Gentiles was a fulfillment of Amos' prophecy in 9:11-12. The restored community of faith would include people from all nations.

### **Fast Forward**

How then can the modern Church benefit from the prophet's optimism? The most direct benefit is to understand that God has a definite purpose for His people. This divine purpose is to call "all men everywhere to repentance" as Paul told the Athenians (Acts 17:30). In order to accomplish this goal of reaching the lost world for Christ, God has ordained the Church to carry the message of repentance toward God and faith in the Gospel to all nations.

Christians must, as the apostle James put it, "keep themselves unspotted from the world (James 1:27)," in order to carry out the Great Commission. Should the members of the covenant community decide to live outside the boundaries of acceptable behavior and attitude toward God and toward others, then the Lord has to correct His wayward people.

However, once the Lord has accomplished His redirecting, His people are positioned to resume their role as the kingdom of priests that He intended for them to be (Exod. 19:6; 1 Peter 2:9). God is determined to restore His people as He is deliberate in chastising their wrongdoing. The modern Church can benefit from Amos' optimism about the future because the Lord we serve is the same Lord that the prophet depicted as a restorer and planter in 9:11-15.

Another benefit of Amos' optimism for the modern Church is the underlying theology. How can a nation, decayed by incessant sin and subjected to the righteous wrath of God, rise to the prominence once again? The answer lies in the sovereignty of God. Not by Israel's might or power but by God's Spirit, the once devastated nation would attain new life.

This theology of God's sovereignty permeates all of Scripture. The optimism that Amos found in God's sovereignty in the eighth century B.C. was echoed again by Zechariah in the fifth century B.C. (Zech. 4:6). The same theology was advanced by James in Acts 15:13-17. If we allow God's Word to transform us and we seek to follow His will, His sovereignty will be for us a bottomless well of

optimism and hope. The alternative is to ignore God's purpose for our lives. If we choose this course, another prophet will appear announcing, **"The Lion has roared!"**