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AMOS 1: 1 -2: 1 6

The Lion Roars!

If the Prophet Amos were to come to our world today, he would probably feel very much at home; for he lived at a time such as ours when society was changing radically. Both Israel and Judah were at peace with their neighbors, which meant that their wealth and energy could be used for developing their nations instead of fighting their enemies. Both kingdoms were prosperous; their cities were expanding rapidly; and a new wealthy merchant class was developing in society. The two kingdoms were moving from an agricultural to a commercial society and experiencing both the benefits and problems that come with that change.

However, in spite of their material success, all was not well with God's chosen people. They were experiencing what the British poet Oliver Goldsmith wrote about back in 1770:

Ill fares the land, to hast'ning ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay...'

There were ills aplenty in *all* the lands of that day, the Gentile nations as well as the Jewish kingdoms of Israel and Judah; and Amos wasn't afraid to name them. He opened his

book with a denunciation of the sins of six Gentile nations, and no doubt the people of Israel and Judah applauded his words. Nothing would make the Jews happier than to see the Lord judge the surrounding nations. But when Amos denounced Judah and Israel, that was a different story; and his popularity began to suffer at that point.

1. Judgment on the Gentile nations (Amos 1:2-2:3)²

God wanted to get the nations' attention, but people weren't listening. You'd think they could hear a lion roar or the thunder roll and know that danger was at hand. God was speaking ("thundering") from Jerusalem, for judgment always begins at the house of the Lord (1 Peter 4:17). He had sent drought to the land so that even fruitful Carmel was withering, but it didn't bring the people to their knees. So God called a common farmer to preach to His people and warn them. "A lion has roared! Who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken! Who can but prophesy?" (Amos 3:8, NKJV)

Eight times Amos used the phrase "for three transgressions and for four," a Jewish idiom that means "an indefinite number that has finally come to the end." God is long-suffering with sinners (2 Peter 3:9), but He marks what they do and His patience eventually runs out. To try God's patience is to tempt the Lord; and when we tempt the Lord, we invite judgment.

Syria (Amos 1:3-5). Damascus was the capital of Syria, one of the Jews' persistent enemies. Amos denounced the Syrians for their inhuman treatment of the Israelites who lived in Gilead, east of the Jordan River. They cruelly "threshed them" as though they were nothing but stalks of grain. God had called the Syrians to punish Israel (2 Kings 10:32-33; 13:1-9), but the Syrians had carried it too far.

The man who began his prayer with "Lord, no doubt You saw in the morning newspaper..." was stating a great truth

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in a clumsy way: God sees how the nations treat one another, and He responds appropriately. Benjamin Franklin said it well at the Constitutional Convention, "I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—that *God governs in the affairs of men.*"³

The phrase "I will send a fire" (Amos 1:4, 7,10,12,14; 2:2, 5) means "I will send judgment"; for fire represents the holiness and judgment of God (Deut. 4:11, 24, 36; Heb. 12:29). Indeed, the Lord did judge Syria: The dynasty of King Hazael ended; his son Ben-Hadad was defeated; Damascus lost its power (business was done at the city gate, Amos 1:5); and "the house of Eden" (delight, paradise) became a ruin. King Josiah defeated Ben-Hadad three times (2 Kings 13:25), but it was the Assyrians who finally subdued Syria and took them into captivity.

Philistia (Amos 1:6-8). Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath, and Ekron were the five key Philistine cities (Josh. 13:5), and Amos denounced all of them for trading in human lives.⁴ They raided Jewish villages and captured people to be sold as slaves. To add insult to injury, the Philistines sold these slaves to Israel's ancient enemy, the Edomites. Since Edom was descended from Esau, Jacob's brother, it was a case of brother enslaving brother. (God had something to say to Edom in Amos 1:11-12.)

Throughout the history of ancient Israel, slavery was practiced, but the Law of Moses clearly governed how the slaves were to be treated. The law that permitted slavery at the same time protected the slaves. However, it was one thing to put a prisoner of war to work and quite something else to kidnap innocent people and sell them like cattle. Neither Jesus nor the apostles openly denounced slavery, but they made it clear that all people are sinners whom God loves and that all saved people are one and equal in Christ (Gal. 3:26-29). It took centuries for the light of the Gospel to dispel the dark-

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ness and make slavery illegal, although there are still places in our world where people are abused and exploited.

God's judgment on Philistia came in the days of King Uzziah (2 Kings 18:7-8) and the Assyrian invaders under Sargon and the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar. The slave masters were themselves taken into exile and slavery.

Tyre (Amos 1:9-10). Amos has moved from Damascus in the northeast to the Philistine cities in the southwest, and now he sets his sights straight north on Phoenicia and its major city, Tyre.

During the reigns of David and Solomon, Israel had a warm relationship with the people of Tyre (1 Kings 5:1 ff). Amos called it "the brotherly covenant" ("treaty of brotherhood," NIV), suggesting that the "covenant" was more than a treaty but involved a friendly partnership that went deeper than politics. Even if the peoples of different nations don't agree in their religious practices or their political structure, they can still treat one another like fellow human beings.

Tyre, however, committed the same sins as the Philistine cities by selling Jewish captives to the Edomites as slaves (Amos 1:6-8). When the Prophet Ezekiel gave his funeral dirge celebrating the fall of Tyre, he mentioned this grievous sin (Ezek. 27:13). But Tyre's sin was worse than that of Philistia because Tyre was violating a long-standing compact that was based on friendship and a mutual respect for humanity. Tyre was selling its friends as slaves!

Judgment came in 332 B.C. when Alexander the Great wiped Tyre off the face of the earth and left it a place for drying nets (26:5, 14). "Though the mills of God grind slowly/yet they grind exceeding small."⁵ When Rudyard Kipling published his poem "Recessional" during Queen Victoria's "Diamond Jubilee" in 1897, he used Tyre as a warning to any people who rebel against the will of God and mistreat men and women created in the image of God.

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Far-called our navies melt away—
On dune and headland sinks the fire—
Lo, all our pomp of yesterday—
Are one with Nineveh and Tyre!

Edom (Amos 1:11-12). The Edomites nursed a long-standing grudge against the Jews, perpetuating the ancient rivalry between Jacob and Esau, which began before the twin boys were born (Gen. 25:21-26). In His sovereign will, God had chosen the younger brother, Jacob, to receive the blessings of the birthright and the Abrahamic Covenant (Mal. 1:2-3; Rom. 9:6-13). Esau despised his spiritual heritage and willingly sold his birthright to Jacob (Gen. 25:29-34; Heb. 12:14-17); but because Jacob cheated him out of the patriarchal blessing (Gen. 27), Esau vowed to kill Jacob. Later they were briefly reconciled, but the enmity continued (33:1-17). As far as the biblical record is concerned, their final meeting was at a funeral, where they buried their father but did not bury their bitterness (35:27-29).

The Edomites wouldn't allow their Jewish cousins to pass through their land during Israel's march to Canaan (Num. 20:14-21). King Saul suppressed the Edomite army (1 Sam. 14:47), and David conquered them (2 Sam. 8:14), but in the days of King Jehoram, Edom revolted against Judah and won their freedom (2 Kings 8:16-22).

Amos condemned the Edomites for their persistent hatred of the Jews, which the prophet described as "raging anger and flaming fury" (Amos 1:11; see also NIV). We don't know when the Edomites aided the enemy by pursuing the Jews with the sword. It could have been during any one of the numerous times when enemies invaded the land. When the Babylonians attacked and captured Jerusalem, the Edomites assisted the enemy and gave vent to their anger (Obad. 10-14; see Ps. 137:7). You would think that brother would help

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brother in a time of need, but the Edomites "cast off all pity" (Amos 1:11) and acted like beasts instead of humans. The phrase "his anger did tear" (v. 11) uses a verb that describes ferocious beasts tearing their prey (Ps. 7:2; Gen. 37:32).

Teman and Bozrah were strong cities that today don't exist. The Edomites lived "in the clefts of the rock" and had their "nest among the stars" (Obad. 3-4), boasting that their fortresses were impregnable; but the Lord destroyed their nation so thoroughly that nothing is left today except ruins. When the Romans attacked Jerusalem in A.D. 70, they destroyed what was left of the Edomite (Idumean) people, and Edom was no more.

Amman (Amos 1:13-15). The Ammonites and Moabites (2:1-3) were the descendants of Lot through his incestuous union with his daughters (Gen. 19:30-38). They were a ruthless people who were the avowed enemies of the Jews (Deut. 23:3-6; 1 Sam. 11:2; Neh. 2:10-19; Jer. 40:14; 41:5-7). In order to enlarge their land, they invaded Gilead; and not satisfied with attacking the men defending their homeland, the Ammonites killed women and unborn children (see 2 Kings 8:12; 15:16). To the Ammonites, land was more important than people, including defenseless women and innocent children. Such brutality shocks us, but is "modern warfare" any kinder?

Amos announced that a storm of judgment would come to the people of Ammon and that their capital city (Rabbah) would be destroyed. This took place when the Assyrians swept over the land in 734 B.C. Not only did Amos predict the destruction of their land, but so did Ezekiel (25:1-7). The chief god of Edom was Molech (Malcham, Milcom), which means "reigning one, king." Amos 1:15 could be translated, "Molech will go into exile," thus showing the inability of their god to save them.

Moab (Amos 2:1-3). Animosity between Moab and Israel began very early when the Moabites refused to give the Jews

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passage on the major highway (Deut. 23:3-4; Jud. 11:17). The king of Moab also hired Balaam to curse Israel (Num. 22-24), and then the Moabite women seduced the Jewish men to commit fornication and idolatry (Num. 25). During the period of the judges, Israel was subject to the Moabites for eighteen years (Jud. 3:12-30).

What was the sin of Moab? Disrespect for the dead and for royalty. We don't know which king's remains were subjected to this humiliation, but the deed disgraced the memory of the king and humiliated the people of Edom. How would Americans feel if somebody disinterred John F. Kennedy's body and mistreated it? Or what would the British people do if the body of a famous person were stolen from Westminster Abbey and publicly abused?

For the most part, society today shows respect for the dead, but ancient Eastern peoples protected their dead even more. Steeped in pagan superstition, they interred bodies carefully to insure the spirit's continued existence in the next world. Relatives of the deceased often inscribed frightful curses on the tombs, warning people to refrain from opening them.⁶

Amos announced that the king of Moab and his officials were all guilty and would be destroyed, along with their cities.⁷ Moab was taken by the Assyrians, and the land eventually became the home of numerous nomadic tribes. The nation of Moab was no more. (For other prophecies of Moab's doom, see Isa. 15-16; Jer. 48; Ezek. 25:8-11; Zeph. 2:8-11.)

Before we listen to God's messages to Judah and Israel, we should pause to reflect on the messages we have just studied that were delivered to six Gentile nations. *God expected these Gentiles to listen to a Jewish prophet and heed what he said!* Though not under the Mosaic Law, these nations were responsible to God for what they did; and responsibility brings accountability. God sees what the nations do, and He judges them accordingly. World news from day to day may

give the impression that evil leaders and violent subversive groups are getting away with terrible crimes, but God is still on the throne and will punish evildoers in His good time. It is God who controls the rise and fall of the nations (Acts 17:24-28), and His judgments are always just.

2. Judgment on the kingdom of Judah (Amos 2:4-5)

In his six messages, Amos had announced judgment to the nations surrounding Israel and Judah, starting with Syria in the northwest and ending with the trans-Jordanic nations of Ammon, Moab, and Edom. (There's probably a map of the divided kingdom in the back of your Bible.) As his fellow Jews heard these denunciations of the Gentiles, no doubt they applauded and wanted to hear more. But when Amos focused on Israel and Judah (his own land), that changed their attitude completely. The very idea of a Jewish prophet classifying God's chosen people with the Gentile "dogs"! "We know we aren't a perfect people," the people of Judah would argue, "but at least we worship the true and living God!"

Yes, the temple was filled with people bringing their sacrifices, but Judah was a nation given over to idolatry. "Their lies [idols] lead them astray, lies after which their fathers walked" (2:4, NKJV). They were wandering like lost animals and like drunken men. The Gentiles had sinned against conscience and the laws of brotherhood and humanity, but the Jews had despised and rejected the very laws of God, given to them by Moses. Theirs was the greater sin, for greater privilege always brings greater responsibility (Rom. 2:17-3:9).

God had frequently punished His people *in their land* by allowing various nations to attack and subdue them, but now He would punish them *out of their land*. The Babylonian army would destroy Jerusalem and take thousands of captives to Babylon where they would live in the midst of gross idolatry for seventy years. However, unlike the six Gentile nations

Amos had denounced, Judah would not be destroyed but would be spared. In His mercy, God would allow a remnant of Jews to return to establish the nation and rebuild the temple.

"I don't know why you preach about the sins of Christians," a church member said to the pastor. "After all, the sins of Christians are different from the sins of unsaved people."

"Yes," replied the pastor, "*they're worse!*"

3. Judgment on the kingdom of Israel (Amos 2:6-16)

Both Israel and Judah were enjoying peace and prosperity, and divine judgment was the furthest thing from their minds. Remember, Jewish theology equated prosperity with God's blessing;⁸ and as long as the people were enjoying "the good life," they were sure God was pleased with them. They knew what the Law said about their sins, but they chose to ignore the warnings.

Amos first exposes *their sinful present* and names three flagrant sins. To begin with, the people of the Northern Kingdom were guilty of *injustice* (Amos 2:6-7a). Supported by corrupt judges, the rich were suing the poor, who couldn't pay their bills, and forcing them into servitude and slavery. Even if they couldn't pay for a pair of shoes, the poor were neither forgiven nor assisted. Instead, they were trampled like the dust of the earth. As we shall see in our continued studies, the Prophet Amos has a great deal to say about caring for the poor (see 4:1; 5:11; 8:6; also Deut. 15:7-11; Ex. 23:6-9; Prov. 14:31; 17:15).

Their second gross sin was *immorality* (Amos 2:7b), with fathers and sons visiting the same prostitute! These may have been "cult prostitutes" who were a part of the heathen idolatrous worship. Thus there was a double sin involved: immorality *and* idolatry. Or the girl may have been a household servant or a common prostitute. You would think that a father would want to be a better example to his son by obey-

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ing the Law of Moses (Ex. 22:16; Deut. 22:28-29; 23:17-18). Perhaps what's described here is a form of incest, which was, of course, strictly forbidden by Moses (Lev. 18:7-8, 15; 20:11-12). Regardless of what the act of disobedience was, it was rebellion against God and defiled His holy name.

The third sin was *open idolatry* (Amos 2:8). The wealthy men took their debtors' garments as pledges but did not return them at sundown as the law commanded (Ex. 22:26-27; Deut. 24:10-13, 17). Instead, these rich sinners visited pagan altars, where they got drunk on wine purchased with the fines they exacted from the poor. Then, in their drunken stupor, they slept by the altars on other people's garments, defiling the garments and disobeying the law. The officials were getting rich by exploiting the people, and then were using their unjust gain for committing sin.

After describing their sinful present, Amos reminded them of *their glorious past* (Amos 2:9-12). God had led His people out of Egypt (v. 10a), cared for them in the wilderness (v. 10b), and destroyed other nations so the Jews could claim their inheritance in Canaan (vv. 9, 10c). He gave them His Word through chosen prophets (v. 11a), and He raised up dedicated people like the Nazirites (Num. 6) to be examples of devotion to God. What a glorious past they had! But instead of being humbled by these blessings, the people rebelled against the Lord by rejecting the messages of the prophets and forcing the Nazirites to break their holy vows. The Jews wanted neither the Word of God nor examples of godly living.

Amos closed his message with the announcement of *their terrible future* (Amos 2:13-16). Israel would be crushed by their own sins just as a loaded cart crushes whatever it rolls over. Judgment is coming, and nobody will be able to escape. The swift won't be able to run away; the strong won't be able to defend themselves; the armed will be as if unarmed; and

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even the horsemen will be unable to flee. The bravest soldiers will run away while shedding their equipment and clothing so they can run faster. Yes, Assyria would invade Israel (720 B.C.) and the nation would be no more.

Amos has looked around with eyes gifted with prophetic insight, and he has seen and announced what God would do to six Gentile nations and to the kingdoms of Judah and Israel. The lion has roared! Next, the prophet will *look within* and expose the corruption in the hearts of the Jewish people by explaining four divine calls.

But before we examine these four calls, we need to pause and ask ourselves whether we truly fear God and seek to obey His will. Just because we enjoy a measure of peace and prosperity, it doesn't mean God is pleased with us. For that matter, the goodness of God ought to lead us to repentance, as it did the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:17; Rom. 2:4).

"'Vengeance is Mine; I will repay,' says the Lord. And again, 'The Lord will judge His people.' It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:30-31, NKJV).

However, we can still claim the promises of 2 Chronicles 7:14 and 1 John 1:9 and experience the forgiveness of the Lord.