

The Prophets

Lesson #8

Introduction To Amos

I. **Structure Of Amos**

- A. The nine chapters of the book of Amos emphasize one central theme: The people of the nation of Israel have broken their covenant with God, and His judgment against their sin will be severe. After a brief introduction of Amos as the prophet (1:1-2), the book falls naturally into three major sections: (1) judgment against the nations, including Judah and Israel (1:3-2:16); (2) sermons of judgment against Israel (3:1-6:14); and (3) visions of God's judgment (7:1-9:10). The book concludes with a promise of Israel's restoration (9:11-15).
- B. In the first major section of the book Amos begins with biting words of judgment against the six nations surrounding the lands of Judah and Israel. These nations are Damascus (1:3-5), Gaza (1:6-8), Tyre (1:9-10), Edom (1:11-12), Ammon (1:13-15) and Moab (2:1-3). Next he announces God's judgment against Judah, Israel's sister nation to the south (2:4-5). Because of Israel's bitterness toward Judah, Amos' listeners must have greeted this cry of doom with pleasant agreement.
- C. However, Amos was only warming up to the main part of his sermon. Suddenly he launched into a vivid description of God's judgment against the nation of Israel. With biting sarcasm, Amos condemned the citizens of Israel for their oppression of the poor (2:7), worship of idols (2:8), rejection of God's salvation (2:9, 12) and defilement of the Lord's holy name (2:7). Hypocrisy, greed and injustice prevailed throughout the land. True worship had been replaced by empty ritualism and dependence on pagan gods. Amos made it plain that Israel would be judged severely unless the people turned from their sin and looked to the one true God for strength and guidance.
- D. In the second major section of his book (3:1-6:14), Amos preached three biting sermons of judgment against the nation of Israel. He referred to the wealthy, luxury-seeking women of Samaria -- the capital city of Israel -- as "cows of Bashan" (4:1). He also attacked the system of idol worship which King Jeroboam had established in the cities of Bethel and Gilgal (4:4; 5:5).
- E. Following these sermons of judgment, Amos moved on in the third major section of his book (7:1-9:10) to present five visions of God's approaching judgment. The prophet's vision of a basket of fruit is particularly graphic. He described the nation of Israel as a basket of summer fruit, implying that it would soon spoil and rot in the blistering sun of God's judgment (8:1-14).

F. Following these messages of judgment, the book of Amos ends on a positive, optimistic note. Amos predicted that the people of Israel would be restored to their special place in God's service after their season of judgment had come to an end (9:11-15). This note of hope is characteristic of the Hebrew prophets. They pointed to a glorious future for God's people, even in the midst of dark times. This positive spirit, which issued from Amos' deep faith in God, sustained the prophet and gave him hope for the future.

II. **Authorship And Date**

- A. The author of this book was the prophet Amos, since it is clearly identified in the introduction as "the words of Amos" (1:1). Amos means "to bear," "to place a load upon," or "burden bearer." By profession, Amos was both a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. He shepherded a small, speckled variety of sheep, and cultivated sycamore or wild fig trees which exude a ball of sap and hardened into an edible fruit which the lower classes were able to afford. His hometown was Tekoa, a small village about twelve miles south of Jerusalem bounded by limestone hills and wilderness stretches. The Dead Sea, in plain view some four thousand feet below, was about eighteen miles away. It was a wild, desolate, deserted spot.
- B. God called him to deliver His message of judgment to the people who lived in Israel, Judah's sister nation to the north. Amos indicated in his book that he prophesied during the reigns of King Uzziah (Azariah) in Judah and King Jeroboam II in Israel (1:1). This places his prophecy at about 760-755 B.C. Isaiah and Micah were young men in Judah. Hosea was alive in the Northern Kingdom. Tiglath Pileser was a growing youth with dreams of world conquest. Zechariah in Israel and the weak Ahaz in Judah were probably quite young, and Jonah was probably still alive when Amos began his prophesying. Amos must have written the book some time after returning to his home in Tekoa.
- C. In one revealing passage in his book, Amos indicates that he was "no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son; but I was an herdman, and a gatherer of sycomore fruit" (7:14). In spite of this humble background, he was called by God to preach His message of repentance and judgment to a rebellious nation (7:15-16). His unquestioning obedience and his clear proclamation of God's message show that he was committed to the Lord and His principles of holiness and righteousness. Amos' keen sense of justice and fairness also comes through clearly in the book.

III. **Historical Background**

- A. Amos prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel (793-753 B.C.), a time of unprecedented peace and prosperity. The prophet speaks of the excessive luxury of the wealthy (6:3-7), who had no concern for the needs of the poor. Wealth abounded and the people gave themselves over to a life of luxury and self-indulgence. The rich gained their wealth by injustice and oppression. The poor workers in the fields suffered at the hands of the cruel landowners and the heartless creditors. The dishonest merchants and judges conspired to make the lives of the poor miserable beyond endurance. The women of the land, as heartless as their husband, made such demands on their men that they, in turn, heaped new burdens upon the peasants (4:1). It was dark hour in the life of God's chosen nation.
- B. Religiously, the nation had departed from the worship of the one true God. Jeroboam I had introduced calf worship (1 Kings 12:25-33), and Ahab and Jezebel had given emphasis to Baal worship. Cursed with two systems of false worship, the people's spiritual morale was extremely low. Extravagant religious ceremonies and rites were manifested on every hand. Tithes were offered every three days, and that which was leavened was sacrificed, free-will offerings were abundant and the amounts advertised (4:4-5). Religious fervor was high, but true spiritual devotion to God was utterly lacking. God hated their feasts and took no delight in their assemblies. The situation clearly called for a courageous prophet who could call the nation back to authentic faith as well as a policy of fairness and justice in their dealings with their fellow citizens.

IV. **Scriptural Contribution**

- A. Amos is known as the great "prophet of justice" of the Old Testament. Justice between man and God is one of the divine foundations by which we must live. His book underlines the principle that religion demands righteous behavior. True religion is not a matter of observing all the right feast days, offering burnt offerings and worshiping at the temple. Amos, from his rare atmosphere in the desert, was affected by the empty, formal, heartless thing that masqueraded under the name of religion. Instead of raising the standard of ethics and morality in the land it actually tended to degrade and lower the finer thoughts and sensibilities of the people.
- B. Authentic worship results in changed behavior -- seeking God's will, treating others with justice and following God's commands. This great insight is summarized by these famous words from the prophet: "But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream" (5:24).

V. ***Special Considerations***

- A. Although Amos was a shepherd by occupation, his book gives evidence of careful literary craftsmanship. One technique which he used was puns or plays on words to drive home his message. Unfortunately, they do not translate easily into English. In his vision of the summer fruit, for example, Amos spoke of the coming of God's judgment with a word that sounds very similar to the Hebrew word for fruit (8:1-2). The summer fruit (*qayits*) suggested the end (*qets*) of the kingdom of Israel. Like ripe summer fruit, Israel was ripe for God's judgment.
- B. Another literary device which Amos used in his sermons of judgment against the nations is known as numerical parallelism: "For three transgressions ... and for four" (1:3). He repeated this phrase seven times as he covered the sins of the various nations around Israel (1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4). The reader can almost feel the suspense building until the prophet reaches the climax of his sermon: "For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because they sold the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of shoes" (2:6).
- C. The book of Amos is one of the most eloquent cries for justice and righteousness to be found in the Bible. It came through a humble shepherd who dared to deliver God's message to the wealthy and influential people of his day. His message is just as timely for our world, since God still places a higher value on justice and righteousness than on silver and gold and the possessions that money will buy.