

Turn and Live! The Minor Prophets
LET JUSTICE ROLL - AN OVERVIEW OF AMOS
Stonebrook Community Church - 3/21/21 - Matt Heerema

Please turn with me to the Old Testament book of Amos. As you do, I have a question to start us:

How seriously does God take our sin?

As Christians, we rightly spend a lot of time focusing on God's grace and forgiveness through Jesus. Most of our songs are about that. Most of the popular books are about encouragement and blessing. We don't spend a lot of time on the weight of our offense against God. And I wonder if there is perhaps a dual trap when we ignore what the Bible says about the severity of our sin.

On the one hand, we can start to take grace for granted, and be increasingly bored with the idea of grace, because we forget how much we've been forgiven, and how bad it could have been. And on the other, believers all know how grieving sin is to the Holy Spirit, and if we don't call attention to the full picture of what the Bible says about the depth of our debt, and how God plans to deal with it, if there can be a foothold for the devil to creep in with accusation and lies about our guilt, and God's anger toward it.

Spending time with the whole scripture, including the often ignored prophets, can be a remedy for both.

Today we are continuing our series through the books in the Old Testament known as the "minor prophets" in Amos. Chronologically, Amos was the second of these prophets, and the first who prophesied to Israel, with Jonah being first, but he preached to the Assyrian city of Nineveh.

A DIVIDED KINGDOM

Amos preached during the time of Uzziah and Jeroboam - between the 760s and 745 BC. At this time, the nation of Israel was divided into two. The Northern Kingdom, with Jeroboam as their king and Uzziah over the southern kingdom.

This divide happened because of infighting within the tribes of Israel, and the prophets declared that God was dividing the nation, weakening and bringing shame on both of them in the eyes of outsiders, because of their failure to observe God's law and live faithfully according to their covenant.

This was a period of great wealth and luxury in this divided kingdom, and with this came decadence, pride, immorality, and oppression of the weak. Amos, a farmer from Tekoah in the Southern Kingdom, was sent by God with a message for the northern kingdom: judgement is coming, repent and find salvation.

Let's take a look at the content. I think we can identify 8 sections within these 9 chapters. Commentators have called this a good "intro to prophetic literature" - because it is well defined.

AMOS OVERVIEW

1:1-2:5 - Judgement on Israel's Neighbors

The surrounding nations were guilty and therefore headed for destruction.

Who: the nations surrounding Israel - "For three transgressions and for four" was the refrain.

- Damascus in the Northeast
- Gaza (Philistine capital) in the Southwest
- Tyre (Phoenician) in the Northwest
- Edom & Moab in the Southeast
- Ammon to the East
- Judah to the South

What they were guilty of: brutality in war (1:3), selling people into slavery (1:6,9), unrelenting anger and wrath leading to murder (1:11), Genocide (1:13), Desecration of the dead (2:1), rejection of God's law & idolatry (2:4)

I love this setup. Amos starts preaching in the Northern Kingdom by first preaching against all the Northern Kingdom's neighbors. I can imagine Israel being, much like us, gleeful at all their neighbors' faults being pointed out, and that judgement is coming for them. "Yeah, Lord! Go get those damn Philistines!"

And then God preaches to Israel through Amos. "For three transgressions of Israel, and for four..." - I can imagine Israel being like "wait, what?!" And he spends the next 7 chapters on Israel's guilt, and the judgment that is coming.

2:6-4:5 - Judgement on Israel

For: Selling people into slavery (2:6), Injustice for the poor (2:7), Sexual immorality (2:7-8), Rejecting God's word through the prophets (2:12), drunkenness (4:1), Improper worship - wrong sacrifices, boasting about offerings - (4:4-5)

4:6-13 - I warned you - yet you did not return to me.

Warnings, curses promised in the Old Covenant warnings in Deuteronomy 28 "curses for disobedience" - but they did not turn to the Lord in repentance. Repeated warning and opportunity. Israel should have gotten the hint.

This section has always stumbled me a bit. "I was really harsh to you and you didn't turn to me." - Rather this was following through on previous warnings from Deuteronomy. They should have recognized that Deuteronomy 28 was coming true. Also, it is just true of fallen human nature, that we tend to seek God in painful and troubling times, and ignore him when things are going smoothly. "Pain is God's megaphone"

"We can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world....No doubt pain as God's megaphone is a terrible instrument; it may lead to final and unrepented rebellion. But it gives the only opportunity the bad man can have for amendment. it removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of the rebel soul."

C.S. Lewis - The Problem of Pain

5:1-17– Seek me and live! A lament

A final warning to repent, a lament that they will not

Amos 5:14-15 (ESV)

14 Seek good, and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, as you have said. 15 Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

5:18 - 6:14 - Woe to you

A rebuke for their religiosity, greed, injustice, comfortable living, while ignoring God, his law, and justice:

Amos 5:21-24 (ESV)

21 "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. 22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. 23 Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. 24 But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

In 6:2-3 he challenges them to look at the other nations who do not profess to worship God: "are you any different from them?"

7:1-8:14 - Amos intercedes for the people.

So far, Amos records God's declaration of judgement on Israel in series of threes:

- Three "Hear this word..." chapter 3&4
- Three "Seek the Lord!" Chapter 5
- Three "Woe to you" 6

Then a third set of three "This is what the Lord God showed me..."

God shows Amos a series of three visions - the first two, Amos prays for God to relent, and God does. And it seems that a third one is beginning, but is interrupted! Amaziah, the priest, complains to King Jeroboam about Amos. Tells him to cease prophesying, and go bother Judah.

After this God shows Amos the third vision, summer fruit: and declares that the end is coming. The first two visions are very dramatic: catastrophic locust plague, fire devouring the sea and heading for the land, and then... a basket of fruit. Summer fruit. Ripe fruit. Simple figs that will spoil soon. Like ripe avocados or bananas. Good now, but soon will be squishy and nasty and rotten. The end is near.

9:1-9:8 - The coming destruction

From Dan to Beersheba (8:14) - Describes the whole, unified kingdom. All of it will fall.

9:9-15 - A remnant will be spared and David's house will be restored

Amos 9:8-11 (ESV)

8 Behold, the eyes of the Lord God are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the surface of the ground, **except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob,**" declares the Lord. 9 "For behold, I will command, and shake the house of Israel among all the nations as one shakes with a sieve, but no pebble shall fall to the earth. 10 All the sinners of my people shall die by the sword, who say, 'Disaster shall not overtake or meet us.' 11 "In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old...

HOW TO APPLY? - A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF HOW PROPHECY WORKS

I'd like to take some of our time today and show you a bit of my homework, and hopefully it will be helpful to you as you seek to read and apply God's word to your life. One of our goals as pastors is that you wouldn't simply wait until Sunday for your dose of the Bible, but that you'd increasingly understand how to study it for yourself.

This can be especially daunting when it comes to the prophets. But Walt Kaiser, a theologian and professor we pastors hold in high regard when it comes to these things has some encouragement for us:

The prophets' messages were not heterogeneous and disconnected predictions, randomly announced throughout an otherwise dull drone of chastisements. Nor was prediction even the main feature of prophecy. Rather, the prophets were proclaimers of righteousness, preaching both law and promise, grace and judgment, to motivate the people to repentance and a life of obedience in the will and plan of God. Their predictions were often given as incentives to their contemporaries for holy living in that day, seeing that the future belonged to their God and to his righteous reign.¹

In other words, the prophets are not full of impossible to understand, mystical, highly encoded secret messages. And we can understand them and be encouraged by them, with a little careful study.

When we are trying to understand and apply the scriptures, we need to determine two things:

First, we need to understand the **meaning** of the text: what was the original author trying to communicate to the original audience? Then we need to determine the **significance** of that meaning for our lives today.

Meaning:

What is the author saying to the audience? (Historical context, genre, flow of the argument, connection to the rest of the Bible.) The meaning of Amos is pretty straightforward when you take these things into account. Something like:

¹ Kaiser, W. C., Jr. (2008). The promise-plan of God: a biblical theology of the Old and New Testaments (p. 153). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Judgement is coming on account of years of faithlessness to the covenant. Repent, seek the Lord, and Live. But haven't and you won't. However, one day God will restore David's throne & dynasty, and restore Israel, and it will thrive again. (My summary meaning.)

Here's how I got there. We need to pay attention to a few careful things when looking for the meaning of prophetic books.

When determining the meaning of the prophets, pay attention to:

Fallacies

- Confusing the Ancient & modern nations of Israel - they are not the same!
- Genre confusion - literal vs. figures of speech, poetry, symbolism. All are present.
- Spiritualizing - looking for a deeper meaning that is absent from the context
- Universalizing - Treating a unique feature (event/action/promise) as though it applies to everyone (Twin error of personalizing)
- Moralizing - Looking for principles for living that aren't clearly there

Oracles - When you read a bible handbook or commentary over one of the prophets, you'll sometimes run into this word. Oracle means message/speech from a prophet, usually a little obscure or ambiguous) - in our case referring to the different declarations within a prophecy book. We need to correctly divide out the sections of the text.

In last week's sermon John gave the analogy of prophecy being like a mountain range. Different events described by the prophets are like mountain ranges observed at a distance. Each peak (or event described by the prophet) seems to be the same distance (length of time) away. And as we move forward through timeline of the Bible, like getting closer to a mountain, the peaks start to separate themselves, and eventually when you are fully in the mountains (as we are now after Christ has come), we find much clarity about which peaks were which (though we still have a few on the horizon).

When we read the prophets, each "oracle" is like one of the peaks.. In the text we have to correctly delineate the peaks. They can blend shift across and between the prose and the poetry. This can be tricky, and requires some teamwork.

History - Carefully determine the context of the prophecies. They were in response to identifiable historic situations

Covenants - Old Covenant (Blessing, Cursing, Restoration) - New Covenant (Christ) are key contexts for the statements of the prophets. Most of them are commentary on Israel's successes and failures

Jesus - Remember that all scripture points to Jesus. Especially the prophets. The New Testament authors were adamant that "Every prophet anticipated Christ's sufferings and victory" - (Acts 3:18, 10:43, 26:22). Our interpretation work is not done until we understand how it announces Christ.

Significance of an OT passage:

Once we have some idea about the meaning of the passage, have checked that with what commentaries say, and discussed in community with others who are also studying the passage, and modified our theories about what it means accordingly, we can have some confidence that we grasp the passage, and can move on to applying it.

When applying the old testament, there are two big-bucket questions we should ask:

1. What does the passage tell us about God and his ways?
2. How does Christ's fulfillment of the Old Covenant impact our application of this passage?

So with these in mind, I'd like to offer some application of Amos for today.

WHAT AMOS TELLS US ABOUT GOD AND HIS WAYS

Here are ten, there are more. This is a summary.

1. God has authority over every nation, tribe, tongue, and individual.
2. Every individual owes their existence and allegiance to God.
3. There is an emphasis on God's law on just treatment of the poor and weak.
4. God is rightfully angry when his law is ignored. (Injustice and violence done to others.)
5. Judgement and punishment is the right result of our sin.
6. God is extremely patient and clear in his warnings, which span decades and generations, before executing judgement, offering to relent and forgive the repentant.
7. God is not impressed with religious performance.
8. Salvation, forgiveness, and restoration can be had by all with repentance.
9. God's people are from every tribe, national, and tongue.
10. God has a plan to preserve his people, restore them, and cause them to flourish, and that plan will succeed.

Finally, how does Jesus's fulfillment of the Old Covenant impact our application of Amos?

APPLICATION IN LIGHT OF JESUS

1. We as unbelieving individuals nations were (or are) just like the foreigner/gentile nations of Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Moab, Amon - owing the creator our very existence and allegiance, and yet failing to acknowledge and love him, and to treat our neighbors with the same mercy and dignity that he shows us.
2. We, even as believers and as a church can be just like Judah and Israel, in our failure to keep God's law, and our sinful tendencies even now to act unmercifully, unjustly, and unlovingly toward one another, and toward our neighbors.
3. We, like all those nations, have judgement and punishment coming as a result of our sin.
4. We, like Israel in Amon's day, have a tendency to look to our religious identity and worship performance - and think we're safe. "I go to church. I serve the church. I give money. I believe in Jesus."
5. We, like the Northern Kingdom, like it when others' failures and foolishness are pointed out, but we don't like it as well when these things are pointed out in us. "Judge not lest you be judged by the same measure."
6. We, like Israel, are called to seek the Lord and live! Seek good and not evil. To fight for justice and righteousness in our lives and in our communities.
7. None of us succeed in seeking him fully enough to overcome the debt we owe for our sin.
8. Jesus, in his life on earth, ushered in God's plan of the New Covenant, which was foreshadowed by the prophets, by successfully seeking God, obeying God's law, and living the life of righteousness and justice that we have all failed to live.
9. Christ offered himself as a substitute for us in judgement. God's wrath was poured out on him as he stood in place of his people. Jesus's life of righteous deeds, and his punishment in place of his people will be credited to all who repent and reject their sinful way of life, and turn to Christ in faith.
10. We are to seek God now in gratitude for this salvation as we grow in living the life of love for God and neighbor that Jesus taught and demonstrated for us.