

**Key Passage: Amos 5:24 & 9:15**

Key Thought: God desires righteousness, not ritual. And the humility that recognizes God alone as the righteous One leads to the kind of life that brings about life, peace, and hope.

In 1866, Gustave Dore drew this image of the prophet Amos, looking out over the hills of Tekoa. It's a lovely image.

But when I picture Amos, I picture Jed Clampett, perhaps dressed in overalls, with a weed sticking out of his mouth, standing in Times Square in the middle of New York City.

Can you picture it? We know Amos was from the tiny southern kingdom of Judah. His occupation? a sheep herder and a sycamore fig farmer. His preacher school training? Absolutely none. Sounds just like the kind of linked-in bio that God uses to do His work.

He bypassed all the strapping lads in Jesse's house to pick the ruddy shepherd boy to be King of Israel. He saw all the sordid details in the stories of Rahab and Bathsheba and decided to let them be line leaders in the genealogy leading to God incarnate, Jesus Christ.

And so, from the small southern Judean town of Tekoa, God calls an unpedigreed, non-refined non-conformist named Amos and douses him with visions. Some are as simple as a bowl of fresh fruit (Amos 8:1-2). Others are ominous: like a swarm of locusts, or a fire that burned up the ocean before it consumed the Promised Land (Amos 7). Vision of God holding in his hand a cord with a weight attached, called a Plumb line, used to get a true straight line up and down. And the message of that vision? You aren't being straight with me, you are a crooked and perverse generation. And I am going to straighten you out (Amos 7).

That's all in Amos 7. Leading up to this chapter, Amos gives scathing rebukes against a generation that thinks the achievements of their forefathers, and the tradition they inherited, affords them the gravy train of God's goodness, regardless of what's truly going on in their hearts or minds or actions. So Amos declares a series of "woes." "Woe to you who think you live on easy street in Zion;" you who are on "your high horse" (Amos 6:1 MSG). Look around! Look how the mighty all around you are fallen! And behold your God. Because the God of Angel Armies says "I hate the arrogance of Jacob. I'm about to hand over the city and everyone in it" (Amos 6:8 MSG).

What could make God feel this way about Israel—his beloved, his own people, called by his own grace and wearing his own name? God tells us through his prophet Amos: "You've made shambles of justice, a bloated corpse of righteousness" (Amos 6:12-13a).

Did you think you could get away with it? That somehow you could get by unnoticed? On the contrary, "God roars from Zion, and shouts at Jerusalem" (Amos 1:2 MSG). And as he says in chapter 3: "The lion has roared; who will not fear?" (Amos 3:8 MSG). "He who forms the mountains and creates the wind, and declares to man what is his thought, who makes the morning darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth—the Lord, the God of hosts, is his name!" (Amos 4:13; see also 5:8; 9:5-6).

Amos begins by listing cities that many might think belong on the naughty list. You may not know much about Damascus, or Moab, or Ammon. But however you slice it, God makes it real plain by the middle of chapter 2: Amos has a word from the Lord for his own Judah—and it ain't pretty. "They rejected God's revelation" and "refused to keep my commands" says the Lord. "They swallowed the same old lies that got their ancestors onto dead-end roads." And "for that," says Yahweh, "For that I'm burning down Judah, burning down all the forts of Jerusalem" (Amos 2:4-5 MSG). It's always good to clean your own plate before pointing out to momma that junior didn't finish his supper. So, after sharing a dire word about Judah, Amos launches into Israel:

Do you know what has become of God's own people, God's own home—Israel? “They buy and sell people” and only see them as things, “ways of making money.” In fact, “they’d sell a poor man for a pair of shoes. They’d sell their own grandmother! They grind the penniless into the dirt.” (Amos 2:6-7a MSG; see also 5:11-12). “Stuff they’ve extorted from the poor is piled up at the shrine of their god, while they sit around drinking wine they’ve conned from their victims” (Amos 2:7b-8 MSG).

Do you know what they are? They are selfish. They say “when’s my next paycheck coming so I can go out and live it up? How long till the weekend when I can go out and have a good time?” (Amos 8:4-5 MSG). Selfishness results from self-centeredness. And so, over in chapter 6, he says “Woe” to you. “Woe to the playboys, the playgirls, who think life is a party held just for them! Woe to those addicted to feeling good...Those obsessed with looking good...They couldn’t care less” about others (Amos 6:3-6 MSG). They turned “justice to wormwood and cast down righteousness to the earth” (Amos 5:7 ESV). In fact, says the Lord, “They don’t know how to do right” (Amos 3:10).

So, God gets to calling them names. And I can just see the southern, small town sheepherding farmer spoiling for the chance to say to the big city braggards what God was giving him to say: He calls them Ashdod. He calls them Egypt. He calls them “fat cows of Bashan” (Amos 4:1). And he says, “I am keeping track of their every last sin” (Amos 8:7 MSG).

You need to understand that for God, this is the last straw. He has been patient with his children. Over the years, he overlooked many a transgression, some small, some big—that time they cut their sisters hair in their sleep. That time they snuck out the window when they weren’t supposed to, and forgot they were on the second story, and someone had to stay up all night at the ER witnessing all the stiches and covering all the bills. That time their gambling debts got too big, and someone had to bail them out of the bed they made for themselves one more time. Oh, he had been patient. But what he was dealing with now was just so out of control. People were being hurt. And Gods reputation was being dragged through the mud.

And when he knew he could no longer overlook anymore, he warned them; but they wouldn’t listen. He punished them lightly, then a bit more, then a bit more; but they wouldn’t budge. He says, “I took away your bread, and you wouldn’t come to me.” “I held back the rain from you, and you wouldn’t come to me.” “I struck you with blight and mildew—even your fig trees (“O, not the fig trees, Amos interjected); “yes, your fig trees. And your olive trees—the locust devoured them all! But you still would not come to me.”

It got worse. I sent you plagues like in Egypt. I even took some of your lives and stole some of your horses, ruined your reputation, and overthrew some of your cities. But you wouldn't return to me" (Amos 4).

And so, the God of Angel Armies says: "Enjoy it while you can, you Israelites. I've got a pagan army on the move against you; and they'll make hash of you, from one end of the country to the other" (Amos 6:14 MSG). "The days are coming upon you, when they are going to rope you up and haul you off" (Amos 4:2 ESV/MSG). And on that day, I will make Israel pay for their sins (Amos 3:14 MSG). How bad will it get? "Think of the worst that could happen—your only son, say, murdered. That's a hint of Judgment Day—that and much more" (Amos 8:10 MSG; see also 5:17; 9:4). Perhaps the most ominous words in the book are found in Amos 4:12 (ESV): "Prepare to meet your God, O Israel!"

Well, by now, you can tell Amos wasn't exactly the top invite for the summer sermon series in the villages of Israel at the time. In fact, one guy named Amaziah over in Bethel sent an email to King Jeroboam. He said "Amos is plotting to get rid of you—and he's doing it as an insider, working within Israel to destroy the country! He's got to be silenced. Do you know what he's saying? He's saying the king is gonna die, and Israel's heading to exile!"

Then Amaziah sent a text to Amos: "Get outta here! You're not from around here. Go back to the sheep where you came from! This is the king's chapel. This is a royal shrine. We northerners are often thought of as uppity, but that's only because we don't like you" (Amos 7:10-13 MSG & additions).

And that's when Amos opens his Facebook page and offers this open letter reply to Amaziah; he even changed the audience from friends to public, just to make the point: "Dear Amaziah, Jeroboam, and all my friends who happen to live in the land of Israel, I never set up to be a preacher; never had plans to be a preacher. I raised cattle and I pruned trees. Then God took me off the farm and said, 'Go preach to my people Israel.' So (you) listen (up) to God's Word. You tell me 'Don't preach to Israel. Don't say anything against Isaac.' But here's what God is telling you: Your wife will become a whore in town. Your children will get killed. Your land will be auctioned off. You will die homeless and friendless. And Israel will be hauled off to exile, far from home" (Amos 7:14-17 MSG).

What a message. We need to hear Amos' message. We need to hear it because we, too, are insiders. We, too, so often rest on our laurels and think belonging to the right team or having the right pedigree is what defines us—what makes us who we are. And like the coach's kid that always plays 2nd base regardless of how bad he is, we can get used

to thinking that silver spoon in our mouths is deserved, and who cares how I treat my neighbor.

If you want a quick snapshot of Amos' Powerpoint presentations, here are his top bullet points:

1. There is only one God. Amos doesn't acknowledge any other God. Pays no attention to any other rival claim. No—you only have one father and you've been ignoring him.
2. Life and death are bound up with seeking the Lord and him alone. He says it several times in chapter 5 "Seek the Lord, and live!" In fact, here is the first sign of hope: "Seek the Lord, and live!" says God several times in Amos 5. "Seek good, and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you...Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph" (Amos 5:14-15).

Maybe you are thinking, "why didn't they all just go to church and do all 5 acts of worship right to maybe curry the Lord's favor?" If you wonder about that, maybe you need to read chapter 4 again: "Bring your sacrifices for morning worship. Every third day bring your tithe. Burn pure sacrifices (if you want to). That's the sort of religious show you Israelite's just love" (Amos 4:4-5 MSG). No. Listen to the very next chapter: "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. And the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs...I will not listen! But let justice roll down like waters! And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:21-24 ESV).

But that brings us to 3. Seeking the Lord is not found in religious rituals, it is found in righteousness. One can be religious but not righteous. It is possible to seek the Lord the way pagans seek their deities of wood and stone: by turning God into our image, then paying homage through rituals of worship so we never actually have to change who we are. It's not that God really hates rituals...he prescribed too many for that to be true. It's that ceremony and ritual are only extensions of who we are. The sacrificial lamb represents a sacrificial heart. If we are not who we say we are, ceremony and ritual are vain and empty.

But here lies the rub. What we expect point #4 to be is this: Go do all the right things the right way and everything will be hunky dory. But we are New Testament Christians. We already know the ace in the hole God had been carrying around in his pocket. "There is none righteous, no not one. No one who understands. No one who seeks God. No one does good, no not one." But isn't that the starting point for the gospel?

You can't trust in your good deeds to save you. Your getting-it-all-right. Your achievements before God? Salvation doesn't come through anything I can boast about. Not my religious deeds...and not my doing everything right.

And that brings me to number 4. If there is ever going to be a good word, a happy ending to this story, a positive outcome when no positive outcome can be seen...it will not be a story about you and me; it will be a story about God.

We have studied the prophets long enough to know that judgment and annihilation is never God's last word. He is a covenant keeping God and when we are faithless, (says Paul to Timothy), He is faithful. We are talking about his children. And his banner over us is love.

So, in the final chapter, Amos begins by assuring us that God is going to level the place. "He has his eye on the Kingdom of Sin, and he's going to wipe it off the face of the earth" (Amos 9:8). But...notice the last line: "Still, I won't totally destroy the family of Jacob" (declares the Lord). (Amos 9:8).

Instead, God says he's going to throw all of Israel into a sifter. Shaking them good. Shaking out all the sin and those who hold onto their sin. But something survives the sifter. "No real grain will be lost" (Amos 9:9 MSG).

And then, God gives Amos one last word. As always, it is a word of hope. And it's not about the goodness of you or me or the remnant; it's all about the goodness of God.

But also on that judgment day, I will restore David's house that has fallen to pieces. I'll repair the holes in the roof, replace the broken windows, fix it up like new. David's people will be strong again...

And everywhere you look, blessings! Blessings like wine pouring off the mountains and hills. I'll make everything right again for my people Israel:

They'll rebuild the ruined cities.

They'll plant vineyard and drink good wine.

They'll work their gardens and eat fresh vegetables.

And I'll plant them, plant them on their own land.

They'll never again be uprooted from the land I've given them."

God, your God, says so. (Amos 9:11-15 MSG).

I can't help but hear the gospel in Amos. I hear the call to live out the kingdom of God. I see that whatever is done to the least of these, Christ's brothers, is done to him. I see that God desires mercy, not sacrifice. I hear the sermon on the mount

ringing in my ears and the call for our righteousness to exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees. Oh, I hear that.

But I hear this as well. For a righteous man some might die; but God commends his love toward us in that while we were enemies of God—Christ died for us. God made him who knew no sin to become sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God. And one day, I shall be found in him, not having a righteousness that is of my own, but that which is through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.

And I hear this too. God gathers the nations. God works his wonder. The ending of one house that was rotting from the inside, gives way to a restored house, with enough rooms to include outsiders like you and me. Isn't that what the church in Acts 15 picked up on, when God began saving Gentiles left and right. The Jewish church in Jerusalem had a come-together meeting to talk about this. And it was James who fired up pro Presenter and flashed Bible gateway on the wall for all to see—it was Amos 9, and his version read that when God restores the tent of David that had fallen, it will make room for the Gentiles—for you and me—in keeping with the gospel that God gave Abraham long ago (Acts 15)

Hear the gospel in Amos. Remember the prophetic message from Jed Clampett:

Come and listen to a story about a man named Amos
A poor southern farmer, the farthest thing from famous
And then one day, heard a voice in the wind
God said that the North needs to hear they have sinned
Against God, that is, broke covenant, you see

Well the first thing you know Ole Amos on his way,
Headed to the North so they'd hear what God would say,
He said Bethel and Samaria is where he ought to be
So he asked for God to guide him, and visions he did see
Tons of them, locusts swarms and firestorms

Amaziah thought “goodbye to Amos and his gloom”
He tattled to the king “Amos says that we're all doomed!”
That's true, said God's man Amos, but there's a happy ending
First God brings down a condemned house, but then He starts the mending
We'll plant new trees, and sit a spell. Take our shoes off on holy ground.
And judgment will never come back now...you hear?