

The Lord Roars

The Message of Amos



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Introduction:

When the nation of Israel began, their future was full of promise... if only they would be faithful to God's covenant. In Amos, we step forward to the other end of the story. Hundreds of years have passed, and it's now around 762 BC - by now, the Kingdom of Israel has been divided by a nasty civil war, and there's an uncomfortable standoff between the tribes of Judah, focused around Jerusalem in the South, and the tribes of Israel, centred on the city of Samaria in the North.

For the moment, though, things are peaceful, and the northern Kingdom seems to be doing well. In fact, in a material sense they are prospering like never before. And yet in their wealth, they're ignoring the words of God's covenant. And whether they realize it or not, the covenant blessings may soon be revoked.

The Structure of Amos

Amos is a highly structured and repetitive book. Keep an eye open for the following patterns:

1. This is what the Lord says... (1:3,6,9,11,13;2:1,4,6)
2. Hear this word... (3:1,4;1,5:1)
3. Woe to you (5:18, 6:1)
4. This is what the Sovereign Lord showed me (7:1, 8:1)
5. In that Day... (8:3,9,13; 9:11)

Using these key phrases as a framework, you could summarise the message of the book like this:

This is what the Lord says – I will punish Israel's unfaithfulness.
Hear this word, and repent! **Woe to you** for your complacency. **This is what the Sovereign Lord showed me** – destruction! **In that day** he will destroy the sinful kingdom and start again with a faithful remnant.



Amos 1-2: The Lion Unleashed

Israel, 762 BC. Peaceful, prosperous... no sign of a Global Financial Crisis, and no enemies trying to storm the walls. Let's catch a glimpse of the lifestyles of Israel's rich and famous...

1. What signs of opulence do you see in...
 - a) Amos 3:15

 - b) Amos 6:4
2. Wealth on its own is never a problem. It's just that it so often seems to come with an attitude that's blind to the desperate needs of the poor... or worse, prospers at their expense. Look back at Deuteronomy 24:17-22. What laws did God make about the treatment of the poor in Israel, and why?
3. How are Israel's poor being treated now, in Amos 5:11-12?

What does this tell you about their attitude to God's covenant with them?

Hear the Roar

With those things in mind, let's turn back and take a closer look at the words of the prophet Amos.

4. Who is Amos, and when is he writing? (1:1)
5. From verse 2, what is the 'tone' of his message from God?

Notice the pattern in the following section. Eight times, Amos says, "**This is what the Lord says.**" Have different people from your group read each of the following passages (technically called an 'oracle'), while you find each location on the map on the previous page...

1:3-5	Where?	Sin?
1:6-8	Where?	Sin?
1:9-10	Where?	Sin?
1:11-12	Where?	Sin?
1:13-15	Where?	Sin?
2:1-3	Where?	Sin?

6. Summarise the sins God says he will punish among Israel's neighbours.
7. Often, people are uncomfortable with the idea of a God who judges. How do you feel about God being angry with the type of things mentioned? Should he care about this stuff?

8. Continue reading and locating...

2:4-5 Where? Sin?

2:6-16 Where? Sin?

9. What is different about these two final judgments?

10. Of all the God's judgments, which is the longest and most detailed?

11. What key differences do you see between the judgments on the other nations, and the judgments on Israel and Judah?

12. From your recollection of the regulations about garments taken in pledge in Deuteronomy 24, what does Amos 2:8 reveal?i)

13. Nazirites were Israelites who had taken a special vow before God to live righteously, avoid fermented drinks, and not cut their hair. What does Amos 2:12 reveal about Israel's underlying attitude to God and his word?

Israel and Judah face the same judgment as the nations around them! Judah has turned to Idolatry, while corrupt Israel has drunken sex parties lounging around on the stolen warm clothes of the poor. And they simply don't want to listen to God's word through his prophets!

14. What punishment does God have in store for complacent Israel? (2:13-16)

Our Luxury, Their Need

Amos sees social justice and compassion as fundamental qualities of God's people. He's taking the covenant commands of Deuteronomy seriously. Even after the punishment Amos speaks about took place (in the destruction and exiles of 722BC and 587BC) Jesus has exactly the same critique of Israel. They didn't learn their lesson. **Look what he says about the 'teachers of the law' in Mark 12:40...**

15. What does James have to say about widows and orphans? (James 1:27)

PRAYER POINTS

Amos 3:1-5:17:

When God Hates Church

Introduction

Technically speaking Amos 3:1-5:17 consist of three prophetic oracles each starting with the phrase 'Hear this Word' (3:1, 4:1, 5:1). However as you will notice as we go through the study, the theme of 4:1-5 is similar to 3:9-15 and so we will look at this section together rather than strictly following the division between oracles.

Observation - careful reading

Read Amos 3:1-4:5

1. This prophecy contains a word that God has spoken against Israel. Why is Israel being punished for her sins?
2. What pattern do you observe in verses 3:3-6?
3. What does Amos say about prophecy in verse 7-8?
4. What images does Amos use to describe the coming judgment in 3:9-4:5?
5. What places are particularly associated with Israel's sin, and what are the Israelites doing there?

Interpretation - thinking it through

6. What is the point of the seven sayings in Amos 3:3-6?
7. How do the seven sayings reinforce what Amos says about prophecy in verses 7-8?
8. How do Amos' introductory words about prophecy add to the impact of the judgment he announces in 3:9-4:5?
9. What do we learn about the nature of Israel's sin in 4:1-5? (note: Gilgal and Bethel were shrines where the Israelites could offer sacrifices for sin)

It seems likely that some people doubted that Amos' words about judgment really came from God. This is why he so strongly emphasises that his words are an inseparable consequence of God speaking. Amos then states his words about God's judgment even more strongly than at first, attacking the Israelites' hypocritical approach to making sacrifices and using the incredibly graphic pictures of the remains of a lion attack and meat being dragged away on hooks to communicate the seriousness of God's wrath.

Application - ready for action

10. Do you find it hard to accept words from God about judgment? Why?

Although God provided sacrifices as a legitimate way for the Israelites to express repentance and sorrow for sin, the Israelites seem to have been using them as a substitute for righteousness and compassion, and an easy way to placate God while they oppressed the poor and crushed the needy.

11. What activities are you tempted to substitute for Godly living in the hope of pleasing God?

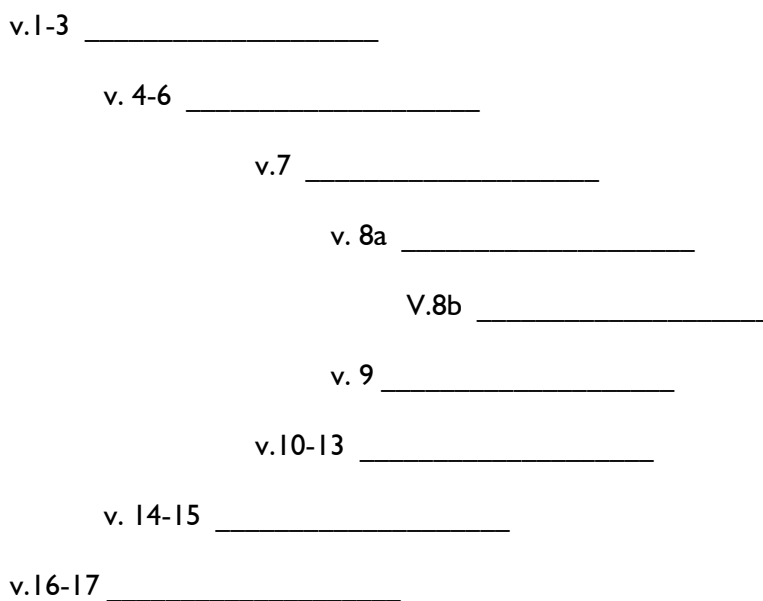
Observation and Interpretation.

Read Amos 4:6-13

12. What main point is God making to the Israelites in this section?

Read Amos 5:1-17

13. This oracle has a concentric or 'chiastic' structure where the first half of the oracle parallels the second half. Use the following diagram to summarise each section of this passage and unpack what Amos is saying.



Interpretation

14. Normally in a chiastic structure, the most important point of the piece of writing is in the middle of the structure. How does the structure shed light on the message of the oracle?

15. What connection does this oracle make between seeking God and seeking good?

16. Summarise the message of this oracle in one sentence.

Application: Read Luke 19:1-10

16. How is Zacchaeus an example of someone who treats God in the way called for by Amos 5?

17. What does the Zacchaeus episode tell us about God's response when people seek him?

How does Jesus fit in with this?

18. Could your life be described as one of seeking God and seeking good? Do you need to change anything to make it that way?

PRAYER POINTS

Amos 7-8: Bad News

The Message So Far

Over the last two studies on Amos 1-6 we've heard God's word to Israel through Amos: the lion has roared! God is outraged at Israel's sin. After everything that God has done for Israel – far more than for any other nation in the world! – they've ignored him. They trample and cheat the poor and needy when God's law said to help them. They think they're safe because they're "God's special people." They think they're safe if they just keep up the sacrifices and special days. But that just makes it all so much worse! God won't let it continue. Judgement is coming soon. Unless... what if God gave them one more chance to turn around? Or two?...

Before you start the passage

1. Which aspect of God is stronger in your mind, his love and mercy or his anger and judgement?
2. Which do you think is more important to tell other people about?

Double Vision

Read Amos 7:1-6. Amos has been telling Israel what God is going to do to them because of their sin. But now he gets to see what will happen himself... not once (verses 1-3) but twice (verses 4-6).

Quick Questions (4 minutes tops!)

Find the similarities in the two visions:

3. What sort of thing does Amos see in his visions?
4. What's his reaction?
5. What's the best defence he can offer on behalf of Israel?
6. What's God's reaction?

Think it Through

"I like God in the New Testament because he's a God of love and forgiveness, not the angry, judging God in the Old Testament."

7. Have you ever heard someone say that or thought it yourself? (Perhaps during the earlier parts of Amos!) What does this part of the Old Testament (Amos 7:1-6) show you about God's deepest desire even in the middle of pronouncing judgement?
8. Earlier Amos had been preaching sin and judgement relentlessly. But now he pleads forgiveness for the same people he said deserved to get it! Does this surprise you? How do you think those two aspects can fit together in the same prophet?

9. Given their similarity, why don't we just hear about one vision? What do you think is the point of hearing them both back to back?

Still Seeing Double

Israel keeps sinning. The only thing saving them is that Amos keeps on praying for them and God keeps on forgiving them. If only Israel would understand that and take just one of those chances to turn around! In the rest of chapters 7-8 Amos has two more visions (7:7-9 and 8:1-3). Like the first pair of visions, the third and fourth visions have the same point as each other. But whereas the first pair highlighted God's forgiveness, now the point is very different. Each vision is followed by a section that explains God's change in attitude...

Read Amos 7:7-8:14 and try these quick questions

10. In contrast to the first pair of visions, what's the point of the second pair? (7:8 and 8:2)
11. In the third vision (7:7-9) Amos sees a “plumb line”, a line for measuring the straightness of a construction. What's the “measuring line” that Israel was “built with” and will be measured by in God's judgement? (hint: Amos 2:4)
12. Amos makes it clear he's not even a “proper prophet” who does it for a living, he's actually just a shepherd! (7:12,14). So who is Amos working for? When they reject him what are they really rejecting? (7:15-16)
13. In the fourth vision, why in particular is Israel so “ripe” (8:1-3) for judgement? (8:4-6)
14. When judgement finally comes, what will Israel wish they still had? (8:11-12)

Think it Through

15. Because Amos preaches sin and judgement, the priest and the king accuse him of treason! What's the irony of that given the prior role of Amos in 7:1-6?
16. Over the course of Amos 7-8, what reasons does God have to move from “This judgement will not happen” to “I will spare them no longer”?
17. What does Amos 7-8 tell you about God's mercy and his judgement and how they relate to each other (at least in the time before Jesus)?

What about us?

As a church family we're obviously in a very different situation to ancient Israel. Amos was sent to preach judgement to Israel, under the terms of God's legal contract with them (his 'covenant law'). As we see throughout the New Testament, Jesus has made all the difference for us. But that doesn't mean we should be complacent!

Read Hebrews 10:19-31

18. How do these two aspects of God, his judgement and his mercy, meet in Jesus?

19. How is our situation so much better than Israel's?

20. How is it more dangerous?

21. What's your responsibility to other people at church? How can you do that practically?

Jesus has taken God's judgement on himself so we can be spared. He's the perfect sacrifice for our sins. But the danger for us is complacency. Israel thought they could keep sinning because they were God's chosen people – and you might be tempted to think you can keep sinning because you're a Christian! We might misinterpret the delay of judgement day as meaning there's no judgement at all. So pray for each other. Pray that you'd always remember the great confidence you have before God because of what Jesus did on the cross. Pray also for one another that you'd keep going with Jesus, keep listening to him and obeying, throughout your whole life.

PRAYER POINTS

Amos 9: Renovation Rescue

In chapter 9, the final vision of the prophet Amos, the message of God's judgement on Israel comes to a climax. Be warned: you might be horrified by the extent of God's judgement on his own people. Of course, it's not like the earlier parts of Amos left us completely unprepared... though wait until you hear the end!

Before you start the passage ... “Christians are just hypocrites”

Have you ever heard someone say that? What do you think they mean? Do they have a point?

Read Amos 9:1-10

1. Where's God standing when destruction starts? What's the first thing to go? (9:1)
2. How will God deal with the survivors? (9:1-4)
3. What's the guarantee that the judgement will be effective? (9:5-6)
4. What can Israel no longer trust in? (9:7)
5. What are some people still thinking? (9:10)
6. What's the one note of hope? (9:8)

Think it Through

7. Which themes from earlier in Amos have been summed up here? Compare

3:14, 4:4-5, 5:5-6

9:1

4:13, 5:8-9

9:5-6

1:3-2:16

9:7

5:18-20

9:10

8. How do you feel personally about God's actions in 9:1-4? Would you prefer God left evil unpunished?
9. Will any be saved? 9:1-4 said 'no survivors', 9:8 says 'the sinful kingdom will be destroyed from the face of the earth'. But now Amos says that Israel will survive! What clue does 9:10 give as to how someone might **not** be judged as a sinner?

Saving the Best for Last

After such a long time of almost nothing but sin and judgement, Amos finally gets a sneak peak at the other side of judgement day ...

Read Amos 9:11-15

Previously, Israel was going to be judged just like the other the nations (1:3-2:16). They'd already endured famine and thirst (4:6-8). They'd never escape the coming judgement because their king supported their sin (7:10-13). So everything - even their buildings - was going to be destroyed (3:15, 6:11, especially 5:11). Finally they'd be exiled from the promised land (5:27, 6:7, 7:17).

Quick Questions

How will God reverse each of these things in the end?

10. King judged:

11. Israel and the nations judged:

12. Famine and thirst:

13. Buildings destroyed:

14. Exile:

15. When will this all happen? (9:11, compare 5:18-20, 8:3, 8:9-10)

Living in the 'Day of the Lord'

It turns out the 'Day of the Lord' is not quite the "salvation" Israel is expecting. Instead of being a national celebration, it's going to bring judgement for the unfaithful. National Israel will come to an end! But there WILL BE salvation for those who long for righteousness. There will be a whole new start for the new people of God.

We saw last study how God's judgement and salvation culminated in the cross of Jesus Christ. So how does that make a difference to us, living today?

Read Acts 15:12-17

16. Which parts of Amos 9:11-15 does James say have already happened?

17. So which parts are what is "still to come"?

In the next few verses James recommends to the new Gentile Christians how they can SHOW the Israelites they have turned from pagan idolatry to worship the true God of Israel. They can SHOW that the salvation promised to Israel has started!

18. How can we show the people around us that the salvation of Christ is real? Thinking back over the themes of Amos in particular, how can we be more than "Christian hypocrites"?

PRAYER POINTS