

SESSION #31

I am going to deal with the remaining books of the OT in basically chronological order, for the most part. This means we will insert the three remaining historical books – Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther – into our series at the points where their stories intersect with the timeline of the prophets. And it also means that we will begin our study of the prophetic books with two men who were called to confront the northern kingdom of Israel with God’s messages – Amos and Hosea.

Ken Taylor, the man who gave us the Living Bible paraphrase, wrote this in his preface to the prophets:

“In these days (he’s talking about our day) of endless national wealth and materialism of rising crime, bribery, divorce, drunkenness, dishonesty, murder, adultery, and general disregard for God, these are the days for reading the ancient prophets. For they lived in the same atmosphere of personal, national and international arrogance against the God of heaven, of disregard and wilful ignorance of Him, as we do today.”

So, the parallels between our day and the times of many of the prophets, especially the so-called minor prophets of the OT, the pre-exilic prophets, are very similar. And as a result, the messages of these prophets are extremely relevant to you and me today.

AMOS

Let’s then dive into the book of Amos.

1. Setting

First of all, what is the immediate setting?

Well, the immediate setting for Amos is that war had ceased in the region and they were experiencing in Israel and in Judah, a time of peace, political peace. And as so often happens, along with the political peace there was prosperity – material, economic prosperity. The rich were getting richer. The problem was that the poor were getting poorer. So, you have this increasing discrepancy between the wealthy classes of society

and the masses of the poor in society. And that growing gap becomes very significant to the message of this man, Amos.

Not only was there material prosperity, with all that went along with it, at the same time there was idolatry, moral corruption, and social injustice – these were all characteristics of the time of Amos and they were rampant, especially injustice. Of all the books in the Bible, this one has the strongest focus on injustice.

When Amos was giving God's message to God's people, the destruction of Israel was only 30 years away. They didn't know that. They didn't realize that their nation would come to a tremendous cataclysmic end within just one generation of the time Amos gives God's message to them. For us that becomes a known backdrop; for those people, they didn't realize how close to the end they were. And God graciously sends Amos to them with a strong message to alert them to their danger.

Amos was not a fulltime prophet, he wasn't a Bible college graduate, he wasn't an ordained minister. He was a businessman, a herdsman from a place near Bethlehem overlooking the deep valley down to the Dead Sea. He raised flocks of sheep and goats, and also tended sycamore fig trees. He sold his products, especially the wool, to the people in the northern kingdom of Israel, particularly in the capital city of Samaria. He had gone back and forth no doubt many times from his home in the southern kingdom to his markets in the north, taking his agricultural produce most likely twice a year. Consequently, he knew about all the bad things that were going on in Israel. And perhaps because of this, God called him out of that commercial business for a short period of time, maybe 6 months, maybe a year – we don't know exactly how long – though he wasn't trained as a prophet. His father wasn't a prophet. He was just taken out of business life for a little while in order to do this short-term missionary venture to the northern kingdom of Israel.

He's a rural layman, a farming businessman, but his prophetic messages are delivered in a sophisticated urban setting. The juxtaposition of this rural farmer with a contrasting urban setting becomes quite interesting, and he uses this dislocation to a wonderful advantage.

He also, by his life story, helps us appreciate the value of lay people in ministry. They are not ordained ministers, but they have a particular niche that is open to them and they can have a ministry that ordained people can never have. Amos is a great example of this. And if you are a lay person too, let Amos be an encouragement to you; God wants to use you in your unique sphere of influence.

2. Message

He focusses his message, as God gives it to him, on the problem of social injustice which was, as we said earlier, absolutely rampant in Israel, as well as in Judah. Because he is targeting and addressing a very sensitive issue in the nations of God's people, his message is not very well received.

Chapter 7 and verse 10, for example: *“Amaziah the priest of Bethel (that was one of the two religious centers of Israel) sent a message to Jeroboam, king of Israel. Here is the message: Amos is raising a conspiracy against you in the very heart of Israel. The land cannot bear all his words. For Amos has said, ‘Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel shall surely be led away captive from their own land.’”* (It's absolutely true; it will happen in 30 years.) Amaziah, who is the priest, the one who should be in touch with God but is not, said to Amos in verse 12, *“Get out you seer (you prophet); go back to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, do your prophesying there. Don't prophesy any more here. Don't come to Bethel again – get out!”* And the guy who gives him that message is of all people the priest, the chief religious man in the chief religious center of northern Israel, at Bethel. His message wasn't received well by most of the people to whom he delivered it because it hit too close to home.

Knowing this and the context in which the message has to be delivered, leads us to summarize the theme of his book and his message in this phrase: *“Prepare to meet the lion.”* And he pictures God as a roaring lion who is about to pounce on His people and punish them for their disobedience. As a shepherd himself, Amos knew exactly how dangerous a lion could be. Chapter 1 and verse 2, *“The Lord roars from Zion, He thunders from Jerusalem.”* Chapter 4:12 he says, *“Prepare to meet your God”*. And then chapter 3:8, *“The lion has roared.”*

The lion and the Lord are one and the same. He pictures God in this way because this is what is needed – a very dynamic message for a very disobedient people.

His use of the picture of a lion for God reminds me, as it may remind you also if you've read C.S. Lewis's Narnia Tales – of the picture of Aslan, the lion figure in the tales of Narnia. It's a picture of Jesus Christ. If you know the story of the Narnia tales you might remember that the children who find themselves in that magical land of Narnia hear about this lion, Aslan. They're just little kids and they're scared to death of meeting a real live lion. So they ask Mr. & Mrs. Beaver about Aslan and their question is: "*Is he safe?*" The beavers have a very classic response. They said, "*No, he's not safe; but he's good.*"

It's what Amos could have said about the lion that roars at Samaria – he is not safe! Oh yes, He's good. But He's not safe. And there's a danger here that God's people must be alerted to. If they refuse to walk in His ways, then He will be the unsafe lion!

The key verse is 3:2. God says through Amos to his people: "*You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth. Therefore, I will punish you for all your sins.*" In other words, you should have known better. *I didn't choose any other nation, God said. I chose you, you alone. And I gave you special blessings and privileges and you are not living up to those blessings and privileges. You've walked away from me and I'm going to bring you back again; I'm going to punish and discipline you.*

They've had lots of privileges, but they have consumed the blessings for themselves. They have abused the privileges God gave them as His people instead of showcasing those privileges and passing on the benefits to other people. So Amos pronounces God's judgment especially for abused privilege.

Chapter 5:24 – a verse which Martin Luther King used very often in the civil rights movement in America - says, "*Let justice roll down like a river*". That was his concern as it was for Amos. Let justice roll down, because there wasn't justice in the land.

We'll come back to complete our study of Amos in the next session.
