



# "THE LION HAS ROARED... THE SOVEREIGN LORD HAS SPOKEN..."

SERIES: STUDIES IN THE MINOR PROPHETS

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The Book of Amos  
Second Message  
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Try to imagine a nation with the following characteristics. A nation that is...

- over 200 years old
- at the very height of its economic success and political influence
- militarily powerful, and yet has enjoyed many years of peace with its neighbors
- a powerful factor in international trade, which has made many of its citizens wealthy, as seen by their grand estates near the cities and their second homes in the mountains.

A nation where...

- the rich and the politically powerful dominate everything and everyone, from judges to religious leaders
- the political leaders have learned how to use religion as a tool to influence the people
- this use of religion is effective because religion appears to be very important; why, any poll would show that more than 80% of the people believe in God, and religious buildings are always packed during major religious celebrations.

And, I should add, there is just a hint that much of the religious activity of this nation is based on tradition or on self-interest (especially on the part of the political leaders).

Can you imagine a nation like that? You probably can. You may even be tempted to think that I am talking about the United States. Perhaps that is why our study today of the Book of Amos is so interesting.

## Israel

The nation I have described is Israel (specifically, the northern ten tribes), in the eighth century before the birth of Christ. While the term "Israel" is often used for the whole nation of the twelve tribes, at the time of Amos, the kingdom was divided. The Southern Kingdom (which was often called Judah) consisted of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, and the Northern Kingdom (referred to as Israel) consisted of the other ten tribes.

What did God have to say to a nation like the one that I have described, and to a nation like ours? Today, we will "listen in" as Amos speaks God's words to Israel.

Apparently, Amos was the first of the "writing prophets," the first to leave a written legacy. He is called a Minor Prophet, because his book was brief, not because it was unimportant. The prophets before his time spoke God's word to individuals, to kings and the like (e.g., Nathan's words to David), and they spoke regarding specific situations or events (like Elijah on Mt. Carmel). Amos, and the great prophets who came later, spoke God's word to the very soul of the nation. In the eighth century BC, Amos was closely followed by Hosea, who also spoke to Israel, and by Micah and Isaiah, who spoke principally to Judah, the Southern Kingdom.

But I am getting ahead of the story. We need to go back nearly two hundred years before Amos.

Solomon, David's son, became a great king who expanded the unified kingdom and brought it to a position of prominence and glory. But when Solomon died in 931 BC, the ten northern tribes rebelled. They were fed up with paying heavy taxes and providing the labor force for his grand building projects. Israel, the ten

northern tribes, appointed Jeroboam king. Solomon's son, Rehoboam, was unable to prevent this split, so he ended up as king over only Judah and Benjamin (you can read this story in 1 Kings 12).

"Jerry," the King of Israel, had won the power struggle. But now he had a religious problem that he feared would cause a political problem and undermine his new kingdom. All the Jewish men, including those of the Northern Kingdom, were supposed to go to Jerusalem each year to offer sacrifices. Jerry was afraid if they went to the capital city they would again give their allegiance to "Rey" and then return and kill him. Ingeniously, Jerry found a "religious" solution to his religious problem. 1 Kings 12:28-29 tells the story:

**After seeking advice, the king made two golden calves. He said to the people, "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." One he set up in Bethel, and the other in Dan. (1 Kgs 12:28-29, NIV)**

Jerry was saying, in effect, "Going all the way to Jerusalem is such a hassle." So he made things more convenient with a kind of "Quik Stop" religion. He had one shrine set up in Bethel, near the southern border of Israel, on the road to Jerusalem, and another set up at Dan, in the far northern part of Israel. But, the question was, what to worship at these phony shrines? Jerry came up with the idea of golden calves, reminiscent of the Exodus from Egypt. While golden calf worship did take place during the Exodus, it represented the worst kind of idolatry and apostasy. Jerry then sold the office of priest to non-Levites, and made up his own festivals.

At the time of Amos, about 760 BC, nearly 200 years later, Jeroboam II was king. Under him, Israel reached its greatest economic and military success. That success convinced them that God favored Israel, and even that their idolatrous worship (which now included Baal worship, thanks to Ahab and Jezebel) was accepted and approved by God. International trade had made the merchant class rich, but wealth brought greed and injustice: The poor were exploited; religion was formalistic; the rulers and the rich dominated everything, including religion. It was to this self-centered, self-pleasing, self-sufficient nation that God sent Amos to speak his words of truth and judgment.

## Amos and his message

Who was this man Amos? We know that he came from Judah, the Southern Kingdom, specifically a region south of Bethlehem, called Tekoa. Amos describes himself as a "herdsman," but the Hebrew word used here, *boqer*, suggests that he was more than a simple shepherd. He may well have owned cattle and sheep. Amos was a rancher. Thus he was somewhat wealthy for his time. He was also quite industrious and willing to supplement his income by growing and "piercing" sycamore figs (a practice that ensured that the fruit would ripen properly). This combination of cattle (hardware, if you will) and fig processing (software?) suggests to me that if Amos were around today, he probably would be an engineering manager working at Hewlett Packard.

In any case, Amos was a person of unique capability. He was well traveled and very literate, as we can see in the use of language and word pictures of this book. Although God called him

to prophesy, he was quick to point out that he was not a professional, “for hire” prophet. He had not even attended an “intern” program for prophets. (The term, “son of a prophet,” refers to a prophet school or guild.)

So Amos was called by God from humble circumstances, and God used his unique background and capabilities to minister in a very powerful way.

God is still in the business of picking unlikely people for his work, utilizing their unique background and gifts. I think of Dwight L. Moody, the shoe salesman from Chicago who became the leading evangelist in the English-speaking world of the last century. Although Moody lived before the advent of radio and television, he proclaimed the word of God to over one hundred million people. In our own time, I am reminded of Ray Stedman, and how God called him from a very humble background.

As Amos walked around Bethel and other parts of Israel, he made two principal observations. One was what people *did*; the other was what they *did not do*. Both of these have application to us today.

First, what people did: They “presumed” on God’s mercy. They interpreted two hundred years of God’s mercy to them as his approval of their religious and social behavior. Even worse, they concluded that they were blessed as a result of their ritualistic religious activity.

That is a very human characteristic: We live with the benefit of God’s blessings, and presume on his mercy and patience. We even assume that there is a cause-and-effect relationship between something that we have done, or some religious ritual, and God’s mercy to us.

I want to insert a parenthesis here to make two points that relate to the character and nature of the God of the Bible. These points are: the *patience of God*, and the *nearness of God*.

I have just noted how presumptuous we can be. As *presumption* is characteristic of us, *patience* with people is characteristic of God. It is part of his very nature. God waits with great patience for us to return to him. These New Testament texts prove his patience:

**Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness leads you toward repentance?** (Romans 2:4).

**The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation** (2 Peter 3:9, 15a).

In the Old Testament, God himself says:

**All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations** (Isaiah 65:2).

Can you imagine that? God, the Creator of the universe, waits patiently while we delay taking him seriously.

We often hear people ask, “Where is God?” But that is man’s question. In the Bible, the question is not, “Where is God?” but rather, “Where are you?” The first statement by God to mankind after sin had entered the world was not one of judgment or condemnation, it was the question, “Where are you?” God is always near! Many passages in the Bible confirm that:

**The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth** (Psalm 145:18).

**God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us** (Acts 17:27).

**Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me** (Rev 3:20).

God is patient, and he is near. Count on it!

If God is being patient with you, and blessing you with his mercy, do not be like these people in Israel, or like the man in the fifth chapter of Ecclesiastes, who never considered the character and heart of God, who demonstrated such mercy and patience toward them.

In a recent interview in *Fortune* magazine, Lee Iacocca said, “What do guys like me do who’ve had the world by the string? I got some notoriety...and made some money in the car business. You can plan everything in life and then the roof caves in on you because you haven’t done enough thinking about who you are and what you should do with the rest of your life.”

Those are good questions, Lee! The answer is obvious: Have you looked in the Owner’s Manual?

What Amos did not find in Israel was care for the poor and powerless of that society. In fact, he saw that they were exploited. The Book of Amos is justly celebrated, even in our day, for its condemnation of a society that exploited the poor and the defenseless. However, Amos knew that this behavior was primarily a reflection of the people’s relationship with God.

We will look at God’s perspective on these issues in a moment. First, we will learn *what* would happen to this nation, then we will learn *why*.

## The Lordspeaks...

The Lord, speaking through Amos, left little doubt about their future defeat and exile:

**Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: “An enemy will overrun the land; he will pull down your strongholds and plunder your fortresses”** (3:11).

**“On the day I punish Israel for her sins, I will destroy the altars of Bethel...I will tear down the winter house along with the summer house; the houses adorned with ivory will be destroyed and the mansions will be demolished”** (3:14a-15).

My wife Yvonne and I have been in Samaria, at the site of the winter palace, and we found that archaeologists are still digging up the pieces of ivory used to decorate it.

**“Therefore this is what the Lord says: ‘And Israel will certainly go into exile, away from their native land’”** (7:17b).

In the face of this prophecy, Amos utters this touching lament:

**“Fallen is Virgin Israel, never to rise again, deserted in her own land, with no one to lift her up”** (5:2).

That did happen in, 722 BC, about thirty-five years after Amos said this. The ten tribes went into captivity and never returned to their land. The Southern Kingdom, Judah and Benjamin, who witnessed this tragedy, did not learn from it; they also went into captivity, about 120 years later.

So the message of the Book of Amos is one of judgment and restoration. However, God’s love for the people and his willingness to be merciful can be observed throughout. God wanted them to see their situation from his perspective, then perhaps they would repent. There was still time enough to do so.

While Amos could only see events from the “outside,” what was happening in the people’s lives, God could also see the “inside”—what was going on in their hearts. And God did not like what he saw. Biblical religion is expressed in both its vertical and horizontal components; that is, a person’s relationship with both God and other people. This is clearly seen in these words of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew, where he defines the essence of Old Testament teaching in these words:

**Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments”** (Matt 22:37-40).

In chapter 4 of Amos, we get a view of the people's relationship with God. In 4:4-5, God himself says:

**“Go to Bethel and sin;  
go to Gilgal and sin yet more.  
Bring your sacrifices every morning,  
your tithes every three years.  
Burn leavened bread as a thank offering  
and brag about your freewill offerings—  
boast about them, you Israelites,  
for this is what you love to do,”** (4:4-5)

Bethel and Gilgal are the site of major religious festivals, and yet God labels all their activities there as sin! All of their religious activity was self-invented, self-pleasing and thus, pointless!

- They go to Bethel and Gilgal when they were supposed to be in Jerusalem
- They worship a golden calf idol instead of the living LORD
- They are ritualistically precise with their phony sacrifices and tithes
- They burn leavened bread, the very thing the Law forbade
- They brag and boast about their freewill offering, which was to be a private matter between an individual and God.

Why did they behave this way? God says: “For this is what you love to do.” This is all done to publicly honor self, not the Lord.

God's comment on Israel's hypocritical religious ritual is heard, in Amos 5:21-22:

**“I hate, I despise your religious feasts;  
I cannot stand your assemblies.  
Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
I will not accept them.  
Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,  
I will have no regard for them.”** (5:21-22)

The people of Israel were convinced that their history and their religious ritual obligated God to bless them. Do not believe for a minute that anything you do will obligate God to provide you with health and wealth! This is not a “do” issue, it is a “heart” issue. The Lord is not impressed with religious activity. He wants a “heart” relationship with us. And so he waits patiently nearby for us to end our rebellion and return to him in repentance.

This can be seen further on in chapter 4. In verses 6-11, the Lord lists the difficulties of life confronting the people of Israel. In the face of famine, drought, war and tragedy, God says: “Yet you have not returned to me!” This is so significant that it is repeated five times! Even we cannot miss this point. Then we have the Lord's conclusion to this situation: “Prepare to meet your God.” God is saying: “You would not return to me, so I will come to you at last. Get ready!”

Amos then adds verse 13. He wants to be sure that they know “who” this God is who is talking to them:

**He who forms the mountains,  
creates the wind,  
and reveals his thoughts to man,  
he who turns down to darkness,  
and treads the high places of the earth—  
the Lord God Almighty is his name** (4:13).

Literally, the “God of Hosts,” “the God of Armies” (the Hebrew word *sabaot*). This title is used nine times in Amos. The prophet saw that these people believed in “god” all right (every poll showed that), but, which god? They were willing to worship Moloch, the star-gods, Kiyyun (the planet Saturn), Sikkuth (the Assyrian war god), the idol of Samaria, the god of Dan and the god of Beersheba! Sure, they worshipped “god”—right after they checked their horoscopes in the morning newspaper, knocked on wood and thanked their lucky stars that business was so good. Of course, they worshipped “god.” If one god is good, more gods

would be better.

We have seen the relationship that God wanted with the people of Israel. Now we must ask, What is the relationship that the God of the Bible desires with us? We have looked at Jesus' summary of the Old Testament: “Love God...Love your neighbor.” The first part is a quote from Deut 6:5: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”

This command to love God is very unusual among the world's religions. The idea that God loves you is even more unusual. The Bible proposes a relationship between God and man based on love. Philip Yancy points out how surprising this idea is in a recent article in *Christianity Today* (June 17, 1996, p. 34):

On our own, would any of us come up with the notion of a God who loves and yearns to be loved? Those raised in a Christian tradition may miss the shock of Jesus' message, but in truth, love has never been a normal way of describing what happens between human beings and their God. Not once does the Qur'an apply the word *love* to God. Aristotle stated bluntly, “It would be eccentric for anyone to claim that he loved Zeus”—or that Zeus loved a human being, for that matter. In dazzling contrast, the Christian Bible affirms, “God is love” and cites love as the main reason Jesus came to earth: “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.”

What is the relationship with you that the God of the Bible desires? God wants all of you, starting with your heart. Where your heart leads, your life will follow. This is why a right relationship with God begins by loving him with all your heart. It is a personal, one-to-one relationship. The people of Amos' time relied on impersonal ritual and tradition. Do you do that today?

When I first arrived at Peninsula Bible Church, Palo Alto, I thought highly of religion. I even approved of God. But, I was somewhat irritated by the emphasis that was placed on the reality and health of my personal relationship with God. That was what was stressed at PBC. I expected that if I attended church regularly, and made sufficient contributions, the details of my salvation would be taken care of by the religious professionals (the ministers), sort of like a spiritual root canal!

At last, I began to realize that PBC was there to equip and encourage me: First, to make me see that I needed a personal relationship, a heart relationship, with the Lord; and then, to strengthen that relationship. That takes place through studying the word of God, and prayer and fellowship with one another. I learned that I could not come into a right relationship with God merely by joining a religious organization (even one with correct doctrine), or by participating in religious activities. This is what the people of Israel were counting on—a ritual religion with years of tradition. But we have seen God's view of that.

Jesus said that we must love God and love your neighbor as yourself. We have seen that the Jews did not love God, so it is no surprise that with regard to the poor in that society, Amos says:

**They sell the righteous for silver,  
and the needy for a pair of sandals.  
They trample on the heads of the poor  
as upon the dust of the ground  
and deny justice to the oppressed** (2:6b-7a).

**You trample on the poor  
and force him to give you grain** (5:11a).

**You oppress the righteous and take bribes  
and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts** (5:12b).

They systematically exploited the poor and powerless. Yet, human responsibility for one's neighbor is a part of Biblical religion, from the story of Cain and Abel to the end of the book of Revelation. This is especially true with respect to the most vulnerable and defenseless in society. In Biblical times, these were epitomized by “widows and orphans.” The Lord himself said, in Exo-

dus 22:22: "Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan." And Moses, repeating a command from God, said: "Cursed is the man who withholds justice from the alien, the fatherless or the widow" (Deut 27:19).

The Psalmists also stressed God's care for widows and orphans. Psalm 68:5: "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling." In the New Testament, James says: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (1:27). James also calls the command to "Love your neighbor" the "Royal Law of Scripture."

The people of Israel ignored and exploited the poor around them. And yet they were confident that their religious festivals and traditions were adequate proof of their secure position with God. But God himself removes that false hope, in chapter 5:

**This is what the Lord says to the house of Israel: "Seek me and live; do not seek Bethel, do not go to Gilgal, do not journey to Beersheba. For Gilgal will surely go into exile, and Bethel will be reduced to nothing" (5:4-5).**

What is the significance of these places? Why does the Lord single them out for condemnation? And why did the people of Israel rely on them? Bethel was closely associated with the patriarch Jacob. Jacob named Bethel, and it was there that God gave him the name "Israel," which the Jews had taken as their national name. Jacob had two encounters with God there, leading him to say: "God is in this place." So he named it Beth-El (the House of God). The people of Amos' time thought this was the "place" of God. The theme for Bethel was: "God is here!" Imagine how surprised they were to hear Amos say: "Do not seek Bethel. Bethel will be reduced to nothing. Seek the Lord and live." They thought: "God is here at Bethel." But God responded (verses 6-13): "You have trampled the poor and you withhold justice. There is no evidence that you have encountered God here!"

Beersheba was not in Israel; it was located fifty miles south, in Judah. In Genesis, we learn that this place was visited by Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Here all three patriarchs received assurance of the companionship of God. The people of Amos' day thought that by making the pilgrimage to Beersheba they could claim the companionship of God—his presence in their lives. They probably had their Pilgrim Passports stamped to prove they had been there.

How shocked they must have been to hear Amos quote the Lord as saying: "Do not journey to Beersheba." If they wanted the Lord to be with them, what they had to do was, "Seek good...then the Lord will be with you" (5:14). They thought: "Beersheba proves that God is present with us"; we have peace with God." But God responded: "I am coming to be with you, but you won't like it."

Here is how Amos actually put it, in 5:16-17:

**Therefore this is what the Lord, the Lord God Almighty, says: "There will be wailing in all the streets and cries of anguish in every public square. The farmers will be summoned to weep and the mourners to wail. There will be wailing in all the vineyards, for I will pass through your midst," (5:16-17)**

Gilgal, which is near Jericho, was a very historic site for Israel. It was here they made their first encampment after crossing the Jordan. At Gilgal they were reconstituted as a nation. They celebrated Passover, and circumcised all the males who were born during the forty years in the wilderness. Here they stopped eating manna and began partaking of the first "fruit" of the land of Canaan. At Gilgal, Joshua set up headquarters. Saul, their first king, was confirmed there. This especially appealed to the ten

Northern Tribes in their rebellion against the house of David.

Gilgal, which sounds like the Hebrew word for "roll," was so named because it was here the Lord said: "Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you" (Josh 5:9). The people of Amos' time were convinced that Gilgal proved God had given them the undeniable inheritance of the Promised Land, and the security which that implied. Gilgal, the site of a great religious festival, was a shrine they had venerated for hundreds of years. So imagine their outrage at hearing Amos' words: "Do not go to Gilgal...for Gilgal will surely go into exile" They thought: "Gilgal proves that our inheritance from God is secure." God responded: "I will not breathe in the odor of your festivals" (v 21). In other words, "Your religion stinks." It is an idolatrous mixture that I despise."

**"Therefore I will send you into exile beyond Damascus," says the Lord, whose name is God Almighty" (5:27).**

God is saying to them: "You roll into Gilgal for you religious rituals, and then you roll home and forget to bring my character into your daily life and relationships."

God continues:

**"But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream" (5:24).**

Righteousness and justice are linked together over sixty times in the Old Testament. These are fundamental concepts. The Psalms declare them to be the foundation of the throne of God. Abraham was told to command his children and household to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice (Gen 18:19).

Righteousness refers to "conforming to a moral and ethical standard." The original meaning of the Hebrew word is, "to be straight." The Hebrew word for "justice" has the sense of "to rule or govern"—the overall function of government. It is broader than our idea of the judicial function of government. In contemporary business jargon, we would say that righteousness is "doing the right things," and justice is "doing things right." That is what God wanted to "roll on" and to flow through that society's relationships—and that is what he wants from ours as well.

Clearly, this fifth chapter of Amos sets a very high standard for anyone who aspires to "Love your neighbor as yourself." That is because it is the visible result of a heart living in the right relationship to God. Actually, you cannot do this on your own. Only a life changed and transformed by God, and guided by the Holy Spirit, can truly respond in this way.

## Conclusion

How did the people of Israel, especially the priest at Bethel, respond to the message of Amos? You can read about that in chapter 7. At the end of the book there is the great reminder that a remnant, including Gentile believers, will be preserved and that a restoration will eventually take place. I also leave that to your reading.

Perhaps the simplest summary of the message of Amos is as follows: "Go to Bethel! Do not go to Bethel!"

Chapter 4 of Amos says: "Go to Bethel." If you want "Religion," especially, self-pleasing religion, almost any religion will do.

But if you want "Life," if you want to have a right relationship with God and with the people in your life, then there is only one answer. That comes in chapter 5 of Amos: "Do not go to Bethel. Seek the Lord and live." This is the choice that we all face in life: to seek what pleases self, or to seek the Lord and life in him. It is a daily choice, a moment by moment choice.

May God give each one of us the grace to choose life in him!