

# When God's People Are the Problem (Amos)

**Big Idea:** God's people can be the problem just as much as the world, and Jesus is our only hope.

I have a direct question for you: *who* do you blame for what's wrong with the world? If you could snap your fingers, and a certain group of people disappeared from the world, and it would be a massive improvement, which group of people would you choose?

That's a hard question to answer, so I'll go first. I have a book on my book list called [\*A Fever in the Heartland: The Ku Klux Klan's Plot to Take Over America, and the Woman Who Stopped Them\*](#). It's about a man named D.C. Stephenson, who was a conman, rapist, and a bigot. He became Grand Dragon of the state of Indiana, and who launched a strategy to bring the Klan out of the shadows, to recruit judges, prosecutors, ministers, governors and senators, and to have its message of intolerance endorsed from the pulpits of local churches, spread at family picnics and town celebrations. Because of his influence, the KKK recruited millions of members after decades of dormancy. He became one of the most powerful men in America in the 1920s.

If I could snap my fingers, I would love to get rid of people like him. The world would be better off without racist conmen who spread bigotry in the world. I'd love to snap my fingers and get rid of anyone who's still a member of the KKK or who's trying to spread messages of racism.

What about you? Who would you get rid of? Human traffickers? Members of the ultra-left or ultra-right? War criminals?

If you can think of someone, you're going to like the first part of the book we're looking at today. It's going to tap into our desire to see certain people get the justice they deserve from God himself.

## Introducing Amos

We're in this year-long journey throughout the Bible. We're exactly midway, so well done for tracking with us so far! I hope you've been enjoying the process as much as I have.

Today we're approaching a critical point in the story. Let me back up a little. God created a rescue plan to save the world. As part of that plan, he chose a family, and he promised to turn that family into a nation, and through that nation he would bless the world.

That family that became a nation isn't doing so well at this point. They'd had some good years under King David and King Solomon, but now the kingdom had split into two: Israel to the north, and Judah to the south. And the northern kingdom hasn't been doing so well. Instead of following God, they served idols. They didn't serve or love God as God's people. It was a time of moral and social collapse.

It wasn't all bad. Their traditional enemies were weak. Their former enemies weren't bothering them as much anymore. The economy was humming. It was a period of unusual prosperity for Israel. But they weren't heading in the right direction when it came to their walk with the Lord.

And that's when a man named Amos comes along. It's about 80 or so years after the ministry of Elisha ended. Amos is one of the prophets that God sent to Israel, but he's a little bit different from most of them. First: he's a prophet to Israel, but he's not from Israel. He's from Judah. Second: he's a "a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs" (Amos 7:14). He's not part of the religious establishment at all. He was just a blue collar worker, and ordinary dude.

So he's an outsider with a prophetic message that probably would have resonated quite well when he first came to Israel with a message.

## A Popular Message

So what was his message?

Easy. Amos made a list of Israel's enemies and delivered judgments against each of them. It would have been a message that went down easy.

He begins with a blistering attack:

*The LORD roars from Zion  
and utters his voice from Jerusalem;  
the pastures of the shepherds mourn,  
and the top of Carmel withers.*

*(Amos 1:2)*

Remember that you're from Israel, not Judah. Jerusalem is Judah's capital, not yours. So when he begins by saying that the LORD roars from Jerusalem, you wouldn't be sure where he's going. Read the room, Amos!

But the message is clear: God thunders from his residence in Jerusalem – they wouldn't like that part – and is so powerful that it Mount Carmel, 115 kilometers to the north, withers at the sound of his voice. Have you ever heard a lion roar? It's something that can give you a good shot of adrenaline, even if the lion is behind bars in the zoo. That's what God is doing, Amos says, and it's a pretty scary thing.

The people would have liked what Amos had to say next very much. He begins to work through all the nations that surround Israel, like drawing a giant circle around the nation:

- God's going to punish Damascus (1:3-5)
- God's going to punish Gaza (1:6-8)
- God's going to punish Tyre (1:9-10)
- God's going to punish Edom (1:11-12)
- God's going to punish the Ammonites (1:13-15)
- God's going to punish the Moabites (2:1-3)
- God is even going to punish Judah (2:4-5)

This would be a little like if I wore a Leafs jersey at a Habs game in Montreal and stood at centre ice and announced, "The Bruins are going down! The Senators are going down! The Leafs are going down!" The crowd wouldn't like my Leafs jersey, but they really would like my message.

But it would have been ever more resonant for them. Amos begins with a devastating critique of Israel's enemies because of their wickedness. They, Amos says, are going down, and it's not going to be pretty.

# A Surprising Twist

But they wouldn't have liked the next part. They wouldn't have been ready for what Amos said next.

*Thus says the LORD:*

*"For three transgressions of Israel,  
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment..."*

*(Amos 2:6)*

This would have been a shock. Amos went from condemning Israel's enemies to condemning Israel themselves. As Amos worked through the surrounding nations, it's like he was drawing a circle with Israel as the target in the crosshairs.

This would have been an awkward moment. Imagine someone condemning Putin in Russia, and then condemning the Taliban in Afghanistan, and then saying, "You guys are in the same category. You're under God's judgment too."

Amos is telling something. What if the problem isn't just the KKK or human traffickers or Putin? What if we are just as bad? What if God has a beef with us too? You may think, "Wait. We're God's people! We're not in the same category!" But God is no respecter of persons. As James Montgomery Voice says:

*Israel does not have any privileged position just because she has benefited from God's past acts on her behalf. She is not God's pet. If any irregularity exists, it is in the opposite direction, for the benefits of her history imply a greater obligation.*

As we're going to see, God cares about justice, and God's people don't get a pass. In fact, Peter tells us, "it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God" (1 Peter

4:17). The God who roars doesn't just roar against the problem people out there. God roars against his own people when we fail to live up to how he's called us to live.

## Two Lessons from Amos

There's so much in Amos I wish I could show you. But let me highlight two of the most important lessons that Amos has for us today.

### **One: God's people can be the problem just as much as the world.**

Why was God angry at Israel? Amos gave a threefold critique in verses 6 to 8:

*....because they sell the righteous for silver,  
and the needy for a pair of sandals—  
those who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth  
and turn aside the way of the afflicted;  
a man and his father go in to the same girl,  
so that my holy name is profaned;  
they lay themselves down beside every altar  
on garments taken in pledge,  
and in the house of their God they drink  
the wine of those who have been fined.  
(Amos 2:6-8)*

What's the problem?

- They sinned against others by trampling on their rights. In particular, they sinned against the poor and vulnerable.
- They disobeyed God's direct commands, probably by engaging in sexual religious practices. Basically, they had adopted the sexual values of the world and had brought them into church.
- In the very house of God, they perverted worship by going on drinking binges.

We understand, I hope, that God cares very much about our relationship with him. He cares that we genuinely love him and serve him. But Amos is clear: God also cares about issues of justice. He cares how we treat the poor. He cares about our sex lives too. And we will not escape God's judgment just because we call ourselves Christians.

Later on, God tells them that their religious observances won't save them.

*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;  
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.  
(5:21-23)*

God's basically saying, "I hated your worship service. I couldn't stand the songs you sang. I want no part of your church." Why? Because God hates when we engage in re-

religious practices externally while our hearts are far from him. God wants our hearts and obedience, not just our religious rituals.

In fact, God is saying that God's people are held to a higher standard. Because these were God's people, he expected more from them. "You only have I known of all the families of the earth," he says (3:2).

So I have to ask: what would God say to us? Where have we mistreated the poor, disobeyed his Word, and distorted what worship is meant to be?

God cares about this. We don't get a pass. Amos warns us: God's not just going to judge the world for its wickedness. God is going to hold us to account as well, and we'd better ask him to reveal what's out of line.

That's one reason why we need the mirror of God's word. It's why we confess our sins each week. We want God to reveal what's out of line and to change our hearts so we please him.

Here's the truth: God's people can be the problem just as much as the world. We are sinners. We need repentance.

But here's the other central message that Amos teaches us:

## **Second: Our only hope is Jesus.**

Most of the book of Amos is convicting. It's an important book, because it exposes so many of our blind spots. I appreciate what James Montgomery Boice wrote about Amos:

*The Book of Amos is one of the most readable, relevant, and moving portions of the Word of God ... The book speaks powerfully against social injustices and*



*religious formalism, and many who would otherwise read the book have been implicated in such sins and are condemned by it.*

It's such an important book, but it's a challenging one. Read the book to be challenged, but don't read the book to be comforted, because you won't find much encouragement in there. It gets so bad that a priest complains to the king about Amos, and they try to kick him out.

No wonder. He's scathing. The beginning of the last chapter, chapter 9, is called "The Destruction of Israel." Amos doesn't mince words.

But then we get to the very end of the book of Amos which strikes a very different tone from the rest of what came before:

*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...  
I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,  
and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them;  
they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,  
and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.  
I will plant them on their land,  
and they shall never again be uprooted  
out of the land that I have given them,"  
says the LORD your God.  
(9:11, 14-15)*

Over and over again, Amos talks about the day of the Lord, and it's one of judgment. But this time, the day of the Lord is something different: a day of restoration. He promises a new king in verse 11 who will sit on David's throne. He will bring a unity among the nations and a restoration of the earth. He will bring an end to the insecurity that plagues us today. The scope of the restoration is astounding, and God will do it.

God calls us to repent. Amos is scathing in his critique of our sin. But then he reminds us: our only hope is the restoration that Jesus will bring.

Imagine if you heard somebody playing Mozart, but they butchered it. You might say I'm never listening to Mozart again. But that would be ridiculous. The player doesn't tell you how beautiful Mozart music is. The player only shows you how well they can play Mozart's music.

In a similar way, the church aims to play the music of Jesus, but we often get it wrong. But that doesn't mean Jesus is wrong. It means that our playing has a way to go. But Jesus plays it perfectly. Jesus lived a life that we never could. Better yet, he takes our mistakes on him. He died for our sins in our feelings. If you look to the church, you will be disappointed. But if you look to Jesus, you'll never be disappointed.

Ultimately our hope is not ourselves. We are sinners in need of the Spirit's help. We need him to change us. I hope is in Jesus, the only one who is perfect, the only one who died for those of us who are imperfect. He is our hope. He will save us. He will change us.