

SUMMER 1 - The Lion Roars - An Introduction to Amos

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[0 : 00] Friends, let me lead you and lead us in prayer. Father, we pray this evening, thanking you for your word to us.

Thank you for your word to us, who is the Lord Jesus Christ. Thank you for your word to us, which is the gospel. Thank you for your word for us, contained in the scriptures.

Father, we pray that you tonight would speak to us through your word, through your prophet Amos, that we, Father, might live appropriately and rightly in this age.

And Father, we pray that you would help us to understand it as Christians and to apply it Christianly. Father, we pray all of these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, friends, as I told you, it's just a couple of verses we're going to look at tonight. So it'll probably be a bit shorter than our other studies, but it's important to get some good grounding in it.

[1 : 00] I want you to imagine Martin Luther. He's 18 years old when he went to the university at Erfurt in 1501. Now, in those days, university education invariably meant studying theology as well.

And in his theological education, Martin was taught that if a person does their very best morally, then God will assist them in attaining eternal life.

In other words, doing your best was the best preparation for God's grace. On the other hand, if you didn't do your best, then all you could expect from God was the justice of God, or in his language, the righteousness of God, which for him was much the same.

That is, that God would act justly to punish you for not doing your best. Now, Martin, as most of you would know, was a very intense young man.

And he had a great desire to be on the right side of God. And so that teaching, which he had inherited from the medievals, made him very worried.

[2 : 13] You see, he ended up asking over and over again whether he had in fact done his very best. He even began to wonder whether any human being could ever do their very best.

Anyway, in 1505, some four years later, Martin graduated with a master's degree in theology. And through a series of incidents, he ended up becoming a monk. And Martin tells us he was a very good monk.

He kept the rules of the monastery so strictly that he was later to say that if ever a monk could get into heaven by monkery, then he would have got there.

He maintains that if he had been a monk for much longer, he would have martyred himself to death with vigils, prayers, feasts, readings, and a whole host of other very good works.

But the more that he strove to be at peace, the more he worried and the less peace and tranquility he knew. And the more holy he became in practice, the more spiritually uncertain he became.

[3 : 19] The only thing that he knew for certain was that he would come face to face with a holy and righteous God. And he knew that that holy God would judge him with great severity.

Later, Martin confessed that he gradually came to hate this just God who justly punishes sinners. And he kept studying theology though.

He kept soldiering on. And in 1508, which we're now another four years on, he was appointed to the theological faculty of the University of Wittenberg. And in 1512, he was awarded a doctorate in theology.

But for all his theology, for all his theological study, he still had no peace with God. Day after day, night after night, he would be there in his small room in the tower of the monastery and he would be searching the scriptures for answers.

And gradually, he began to find truth. And the first thing he realized was that no sinful human being could be capable of doing their very best for God.

[4 : 26] None could be good enough to face God. Sin, you see, he came to understand, has completely enslaved us. And into this situation, he heard the great news about Jesus Christ, or he read it in the New Testament.

And he found that the New Testament records the one crucial event in all of history, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Martin came to see that the crucifixion is all about God offering up his own son as a sacrifice for the sins of all people.

Therefore, the Jesus who hangs on the cross must be, thought Martin, our righteousness.

Therefore, instead of scrabbling around trying to achieve our own righteousness, what we should do is trust the righteousness of that one, Jesus, and what he won for us.

And he came to understand that we do this by believing. By having faith in Jesus, we can belong to God and participate in God's righteousness, belong to Christ and participate in God's righteousness.

Martin found that truth revolutionary. Now, for many of us, it sounds rather trite. But trite it is not.

And it was not when he rediscovered it for hundreds of years, had largely forgotten it.

[5 : 49] He tells us that for him it was like being reborn and going through open doors into paradise. For him, the whole of scripture then began to take on a whole new meaning for him.

Up until this point, you see, the justice of God had filled him with hatred. Now it became for him inexpressibly sweet, in great love.

He realized that when we see God through Christ, we see pure grace and overflowing love. When we see him through Christ, we look upon the fatherly, friendly heart in which there is no anger or ungraciousness.

From this moment on, Martin Luther maintained that anyone who saw God as angry was not seeing him properly. Friends, you and I owe an inexpressibly great debt to this man, to Martin Luther.

For he rediscovered something that the church had forgotten and lost in the dark ages. He discovered the heart of the living God. And he found there a heart overwhelming with mercy, grace and overflowing love.

[7 : 02] And we who know Christ, you and I who know Christ, have been drawn near, haven't we, to this very heart of God. We know the fatherly disposition of God towards us.

And it is full of kindness and mercy. Now I want to tell you that today and for this next month, we're going to study the book of Amos. Amos wastes absolutely not.

Absolutely no time in telling us of the anger of God. Amos knows and understands. And I want us, as we work through Amos, so please remember this as we work through.

I want us to remember Martin and his discovery. For we're going to have to grapple with how his words, which are true and right and appropriate understanding of God, and the words of the New Testament, fit with this picture of God we find in Amos.

We're going to have to ask if God can still be angry with us, his children. For let me say, we live in a modern Christian world which says that he cannot, or at least believes that he cannot, or at least acts as though he is not and never will be.

[8 : 39] We're going to try and have to work out, if we do find him to be a God who still gets angry, how we should respond to that anger.

So let's get started. And I've raised the questions for you, and they're going to take us quite a while to answer. So you need to stick with me. But let's open up Amos at Amos chapter 1. Now we are simply going to look at the first two verses, as I've warned you.

And these two verses are very unusual amongst the books of the prophets of the Old Testament.

Let me tell you why. They are unusual because of the detail they give us about this man, and the situation into which his prophecy came.

They give us also a summary of the very core of his message. So let's get started, see what these verses tell us about Amos. And the very first thing they tell us is that Amos is, well, to tell the truth, a very ordinary man.

A very ordinary man. We're told that his name is Amos. We're told that his hometown is a town called Tekoa. Now let me tell you a little bit about Tekoa.

[9 : 44] It's in the highlands of Judah, just on the edge of the Judean desert. The surrounding countryside is very good for pasturing flocks. So that's his homeland. That's his job.

Then we turn to, well, now we turn to his occupation, his job. Amos 1 tells us that Amos is a shepherd. Now the term that's used here for shepherd is one that refers to actually probably a breeder of livestock.

So it's more than, you know, our picture that we've just celebrated over Christmas. You know, those nice shepherds sitting on a hill somewhere just overlooking whatever. No, no, this is, he's a breeder of livestock. So he's probably a pastoralist of some business acumen.

In Amos chapter 7 verse 14, another couple of terms I used that indicate that he was a cattle breeder and in charge of flocks, sheep and goats as well.

So, you know, he's a man who's sort of really into livestock in so many ways. He probably bred sheep, goats, possibly cattle that he'd then trade with others.

[10:46] Now, turn with me, if you could, to Amos chapter 7. So Amos 7, I want you to look at verse 14. We're told, Then Amos answered Amaziah, and that's the king at the time, I am no prophet.

Sorry, that's a mistake. The priest of Bethel. He said, Now, let me tell you a little bit about, these figs are not the sort of figs that you and I might have in the garden.

They're not those sort of figs. They're wild. They're a wild fig variant. And it appears as though, what you need to do to be a sycamore fig tree dresser is that you need to get to the right time to the fig tree.

You find the little figs and you have to nip them. I don't know what with. If they're to grow and ripen and be clean and insect free so that the lower classes could afford them.

In other words, they are a poor man's fig. Right? And they had to be dressed, in other words, nipped by sycamore fig tree dressers. Now, as a culter of such sycamore fig trees, Amos would have had to go through the crop at just the right time of year and individually sort of nip or puncture each individual fig.

[12:13] It's a hard way to earn a living in one sense, isn't it? The only problem is that sycamore fig trees didn't grow where Amos lived. So he had to travel somewhere to it.

Tekoa is far too high for these trees, which means Amos would have needed to travel to pursue his occupation. So there's the portrait of the man. Now, we don't know whether or not his occupation brought him much wealth or not, but probably it did.

But we do know that he was responsible for producing two very sought-after items in the ancient economy, sycamore figs and livestock of different sorts.

And we do know that he would have needed to travel both to look after these products and also to sell them. So he was a quite industrious man in many ways, probably travelled a fair bit, probably saw a fair bit of the country.

We do know that he was an ordinary man. He was not a prophet nor the son of a prophet. God chose this ordinary man to be a prophet. And now going back to Amos chapter 1, look at verse 1.

[13:16] We're told that he had visions. We're told that he saw things concerning Israel. Chapter 7, 14 that we just read told us that God took this ordinary man, not a prophet nor the son of a prophet, took him from tending flocks, told him, I want you to go and prophesy.

Now let's look at what Amos tells us about the time in which he lived. So there's the man, an ordinary man living in an ordinary time. Now we've got a couple of ways of locating his time.

Now I need to tell you, you need to do a bit of work here tonight because we need to sort of work out a little bit about the culture and so on. He does the normal, there are two ways of locating his time. One is by the reign of kings or kings during which he lived.

The two kings he names, you can see them there, are Uzziah and Jeroboam. Now at this point we need to do a little bit of a historical overview. So I know many of you will know this and you'll pardon me for it, but let's just sort of put all of this in context.

Let's start at the beginning of Genesis, work our way through till we get to the right time. Book of Genesis tells us God made the world. Tells us in Genesis 12 that God called Abraham as a representative of a special nation that would flow from him.

[14:29] He was the father of Isaac. Isaac was the father of Jacob and Esau. Jacob became the father of 12 sons, one daughter. Those sons in turn became the fathers of the 12 tribes.

And these 12 tribes, you remember, end up in Egypt at the end of the book of Genesis. The book of Exodus tells us that God rescues those people out of Egypt, begins them on a journey to the promised land of Canaan.

And the book of Leviticus through to Joshua tells us how God gives them the promised land through a series of incidents. And then the book of Judges describes how they stay in their tribal groupings within the land and are ruled over, you remember, by spirit-empowered and appointed leader, spirit-filled leaders, which are called Judges.

Of course, the one that's most famous to us is Samson, because he occupies such a large slice and such an interesting character within the book of Judges. And then books of 1 and 2 Samuel tell us how the people of God ask God to appoint a king, to rule over them, and how God grants their request, though it is in many ways blasphemous, certainly idolatrous.

He gives them their first king, who is Saul. He then, Saul is succeeded by David because he's a dreadful failure. David is given kingship over the whole of the nation, both Israel and Judah.

[15:49] And the books of 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles tell us that David's successes do not rule as well as David had. And the nation becomes divided. Twelve tribes go one way, ten tribes go one way under the kingship of a series of kings, who are not sons of David.

And they are the northern kingdom, sometimes known as Israel in this part of the Old Testament.

The capital city, you remember, is of those northern ten tribes, is Samaria.

So two tribes are based in the south, perhaps even with some fringe dwellers from Simeon there as well. So perhaps two and a bit. And it's known as Judah in the Old Testament.

And its capital city, you remember, is Jerusalem. Now, with that in mind, let's go to the kings mentioned here. King Uzziah is a son of David.

He comes from the south. He is the king over Judah in the south and reigns from approximately 790 BC to 740 BC. An extraordinarily long time, if you think about it, 50 years of rule.

[16:56] King Jeroboam II is king over Israel in the north and reigns from approximately 790 to 750 as well. Now, he's not the first Jeroboam.

Do you remember the first Jeroboam? He's the one after that succeeds Solomon, Rehoboam, and then Jeroboam and rules in the south. This is a Jeroboam II. With that background in mind, I want you to have a look.

You should have had an outline when you came in. And have a look at the map that I've drawn there. There's a number of things I want you to notice. First of all, have a look and see where Israel is, where Judah is, where Jerusalem is, and where Samaria is.

So Israel, you can see up in the north, Judah down in the south, then the river Jordan flowing down there from the Dead Sea, Samaria just off there to the left, and then Jerusalem just off there to the left as well.

So there they are. Remember where Amos lives? He lives near Jerusalem. He's therefore, can you see it, in the southern kingdom. By the way, south and north were sort of like Victoria and New South Wales in terms of how they liked each other.

[18:14] We'll find out through the book, as the book progresses, that his ministry though, is directed primarily to the north. That is to Israel. So here he is, a southern tribe prophet, ministering to northern tribe people.

Sort of like going from Sydney to minister to Melbourne, really. It's often not very popular. Anyway, second, I want you to notice the surrounding nations.

Can you see them all there? I've just named a few of them. Phoenicia up the top, Aram up the top, Ammon out there to the right, Moab out there to the right, Edom right down south, Philistia along the coast there.

They're some of the major ones, and we're going to talk about them next week. Third, I want you to notice the boundaries of the northern kingdom. They are very large at this point. You see, the reign of Jeroboam II was a time when the big powers of the day, Assyria and Egypt and so on, were too busy to be concerned with these puny little nations sort of hanging somewhere in between them.

That meant that the northern kingdom in particular was able to expand its boundaries that had been placed in place during the golden age of Solomon.

[19:31] Trade was relatively free in these days. You could not worry about the surrounding nations. You could get on with work. And the wealthy merchant class began to develop. It was sort of like, what would it be?

Anyway, they did really well in terms of business, and they became richer and richer and fatter and fatter. Trade was so free. And the book of Amos says that the wealth that they made was not shared.

It's as though they were there during the, you know, 2000 to 2010 or whatever, making lots of money, and they didn't share it with anyone. You know, instead they made it by trading, but not on the stock exchange, but they made it by trading in goods.

And money, the poor of the land, became increasingly deprived and oppressed. Money was being poured into lavish religious rituals, because it was important to be religious at this time.

But it was only really a cover up for empty religion and greed. And as often happens, material wealth was associated with spiritual poverty and social injustice.

[20 : 39] And so as we read on in Amos's book, we can see these trends are really developed. When Amos prophesies, you can see this is a very corrupt society. They are degenerate, religiously and morally degenerate.

And as we read through his book, we can see these trends grow. That probably means that the prophecy that Amos is delivering is toward the end of the reign of Jeroboam II.

Now, you may remember that Amos gives us two bits of information. Did you notice them in those first two verses? That enable us to pinpoint the time of his prophecy. The reign of kings is very broad, but the second bit of information is very specific.

So Uzziah and Jeroboam could mean anywhere in a 50 year period. But did you notice the one item there? You see it? The earthquake. Verse one. Amos tells us that the visions came during the two years before the earthquake.

The English standard version probably to be preferred because it makes that point a bit clearer.

Now, the geology of Palestine is such that earthquakes are a fairly familiar occurrence. So it appears as though there must have been some specific earthquake because, you know, earthquakes happened a fair bit.

[21 : 49] So everyone knew about this one and they could remember it. And everyone reading his prophecy would have thought, I know which one he's talking about. And sure enough, the book of Zechariah, you might want to write down the reference.

You can look it up later on in chapter 14, verses four to five, tell us that there was a very dramatic earthquake during the reign of Uzziah. Now, archaeological digs at Hazor have told us that there was an earthquake in that region about 760 BC, give or take 10 years.

So that probably means we can date the prophecy of Amos about 760 BC, plus or minus 10 years.

That's probably very close to the end of the reigns of both Uzziah and Jeroboam II.

Now, the point that I want to make though out of this is we are dealing with a fairly ordinary time.

Sure, there was an earthquake or two, there were people making money and so on, but the people who would, that are living at this time, though they are rich and secure, they're just doing the normal things that human beings do.

They were going about life, they were making money, they were marrying, giving in marriage, living as though God didn't exist, living ordinary lives, trading, marrying, having kids, giving their kids in marriage, raising grandkids, practicing a form of religion, but basically living lives of a self-centered sort, of a rich, self-centered sort, except for the poor, who were suffering badly, but they were ordinary people in an ordinary time.

[23 : 22] And it is to this people, these people, that God sends an ordinary shepherd and a cultivator of sycamore fig trees. And his message is extraordinary.

Now let's look at verse 2. So it's taken us a long way, time to get there, but it's important to do this background so we can historically situate this book. Now I'm going to use the English Standard Version at this point, and I put the reference to verse 2 in those outlines I've given you.

It reads like this. And he said, The Lord roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem. The pastures of the shepherds mourn, and the top of Carmel withers.

Lions were very common in Palestine at the time of Amos. Amos tells us in chapter 3 verse 4, that the lions roar when they have prey in their sights.

The aggressive sort of roaring of a lion is part and parcel of the way they assert their place in the natural world. Now we don't think of lions in Palestine, but that's where they were. And you see, roaring was just designed to paralyze and frighten anyone who came within Kui of a lion.

[24 : 32] You see, the extraordinary part of this verse is that God is pictured as a lion roaring, aggressively roaring.

He's roaring from the place where he's seen to dwell. And did you notice it there? The Lord roars from where? From Zion. Now remember where this prophecy is coming to. It's coming to the north,

who are not really interested in the Lord roaring from Zion to some extent.

He's aggressively roaring, not in Samaria, but in Jerusalem, in Zion, the city of David, in Judah. In other words, God is roaring aggressively from the south up to the north, and he's telling them, you have problems.

And as we read on in Amos, we will find that he is offended at their false religion. He is affronted by their social injustice. The second part of the sentence tells us that he utters his voice.

The words used here are the words often associated with thunder. You see, they often occur at times when God is revealing himself in a theophany, in a dramatic way, giving a covenant, judgment, or God coming in judgment.

[25 : 40] These are the words that are used here. And the next half of the sentence, it's clear that it is God that is doing this. He is roaring, in surprising, in terrifying judgment.

And his judgment will result in devastating and thorough drought. You see, what will happen?

Carmel is a range of hills near the Mediterranean coast. And the name Carmel literally means garden land, or fruitful land.

It is a densely, or it was a densely vegetated, little inhabited stretch of land with luxurious growth.

And the thrust of the prophecy is clear. God is about to judge.

And what he is going to do will be so, so, so severe that the pasture lands of the shepherds will mourn and Mount Carmel will wither and dry up.

Now, the background of this prophecy is that God has instituted his covenant with his people. And in that covenant, he promised to care for his people. He said, I will be your God.

[26 : 47] And then he said, and you will respond to me. And you will be my people. And you will keep my commandments. The Israelites used to stand on two hills and shout these things to each other.

They would have no other gods but him. They would act justly and kindly to each other. But what God says in Amos is they have broken those vows.

They have broken that covenant. That covenant is shattered. And so the covenant curses, which they used to yell at each other, will be applied. Instead of caring for them as a shepherd cares for sheep, he will become a roaring lion wandering among them, seeking its prey.

Not only will nature itself rise up against God's people in God's land, but God himself will rise up as a lion, bringing catastrophic judgment.

He will act swiftly, firmly, and in devastating manner against his people. And the prosperity that God's people are experiencing now will be gone. And in his place will be drought and dissolution.

[27 : 57] Friends, the point of the message of Amos is clear, isn't it? God has a chosen people. But with those people, he is not pleased.

And because he's not pleased, they can expect his judgment. There's this very telling verse at the end of David's adultery with Bathsheba, where the text says, and God was not pleased.

And you know, when God's not pleased, you're going to find out about it. And that's what's going to happen here. You see, these are people of privilege. They've been given so much by God, but as people of privilege, they are under a stricter judgment.

God expects more from them because he has given more to them. And with that in mind, I want us to go back where we started as a way of sort of tying things together for us. Do you remember Martin Luther with whom we began?

Luther reminded us that if we are Christians, then we have come to know the mercy and kindness of God in Jesus Christ.

[29 : 04] He has, Martin Luther reminded us that the heart of God is a heart of mercy, grace, and overflowing love. And that that is God's overwhelming disposition.

God has to be dragged kicking and screaming from it in one sense. And Amos knew that he knew God's disposition was toward his people.

And the last chapter of his prophecy makes that clear in a couple of other places in between. We can trust that in Jesus, we have come to know the core of God's being.

And at God's heart, it is exactly as Luther came to know. There is a God who is mercy and compassion and love. And the Old Testament knows us as much as the New.

For he is the Lord, the Lord, the gracious and compassionate God, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. That's the overwhelming statement of the Old Testament as much as the New.

[30 : 02] You see, we know, we can trust that in Jesus, we have come to know the core of God's being. Then there it is, mercy, compassion, and love. However, I need to say more. You see, when I read the New Testament, I find that Jesus and the New Testament authors still speak of judgment, don't they?

So Jesus can talk about us having to give an account for how we have used what God has given us. Paul can talk about rewards and punishments for the people of God, according to how they have lived in this world.

Paul can talk about the fact that we live between two comings, a first coming, which is a coming where God has shown himself in Christ and a second coming where he will judge. The right of Hebrews can talk about God being a consuming fire using the language of Exodus.

Peter can talk about judgment beginning with the household of God. And James can talk about Christians needing to grieve, mourn and wail before the Lord who's coming as judge.

The point is that God has bought us with a price. And that price is the blood of his son, his own, Jesus Christ.

[31 : 19] We are God's covenant people. But let me tell you, we are still so vacillating, aren't we? sinful, sinful, who are easily inclined to go off after other gods and to act in injustice and frailty and sin.

And let me tell you, friends, that we should be in no doubt as to God's attitude and action, to such attitudes and actions. God hates sin.

And he particularly hates it in those who should know better. He despises sin in those to whom he has been so rich in kindness and mercy.

Friends, let us not fool ourselves. God's kindness is not an excuse for corruption. As I think in our modern world, we so often think that it is. And in our modern churches, we think that it is.

We think we can just roll up and keep on repenting without doing anything. idolatry and injustice and failing to live in the light of God's kindness that he has shown to us in the Lord Jesus Christ is sin.

[32 : 32] It amounts to contempt. Contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience. And if we act in this way, then we are simply storing up wrath against ourselves in the coming day of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And we will find on that day that God will be a roaring lion and the agent of devastating judgment.

Friends, please don't think for a moment that I'm reading these things into the text. Let me reiterate. This runs throughout the New as well as the Old Testament.

Jesus, Paul, Peter, John, Jude, the writer of Hebrews, the writer of Revelation, John, they're all agreed.

God is still a God who finds sin intolerable and still gets angry at it. He's still a God who despises sin in his people for it ought not to be there.

[33 : 37] He's still a God who will judge the household of God. He's still a consuming fire and he can still be a roaring lion. Friends, let us not tempt him.

Let us be warned by how he has acted in the past. You see, Paul urges the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 10 that the things that happened to God's people in the past should serve as reminders to us.

The judgment of God towards sin in the Old Testament should serve to be an example to us. God caused their conduct and their reaction to be written down so that it might instruct us upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

1 Corinthians 10 Brothers and sisters, let us take note of the book of Amos and let me tell you frankly that through him God is going to have some tough things to say to us in the coming weeks. I hope you come back that you won't be scared off by them but they are tough things to hear, let me tell you. But he's also, let me say, going to remind us of the God we know in Jesus because he knew him too though not through Jesus and that God longs for our salvation.

[34 : 51] We are going to find wonderful things in this book, such things as we find in all of Scripture, things that will make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus for that is why the Old Testament was written and things that Paul says in 2 Timothy 3 will prove useful for teaching, rebuking us, correcting us, training us in righteousness so that we can be as Christians in the modern world equipped for every good work.

So stick with me over these next few weeks. This is a wonderful, wonderful book of the Old Testament and we're going to find terrifying and wonderful things and we'll be encouraged and let me assure you we will be challenged.

at times we'll be built up and like the prophet Jeremiah does to his people at times we'll be torn down but it'll all be for good purpose, friends. It'll be for the goal of God's glory and for the worship of his son and for the honouring of Jesus.

For that is why these things were written. So I hope this has just been a snapshot of where we're going. It'll be good but tough so come with me because there's so much good stuff here for us to learn.

Let me pray. Father, we thank you for this ordinary man living in an ordinary time but overwhelmed by an extraordinary God.

[36 : 22] Father, we pray that his words to those people in Israel in those days of Jeroboam might come to us and that through the work of your spirit they might cut us to the quick.

Tell us of your great kindness and mercy. Drive us to your son and drive us to lives that honour him. Father, please be at work in us in these coming weeks so that these things might be true.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. I think Heather's going to pray for us. Amen. I think Heather's going to come and pray for us. Thank you.