

# Amos 1:1-2:16

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[ 0 : 00 ] Now, the last 12 books of the English Old Testament are called the Minor Prophets. It's not because they have minor messages.

If anything, they blow up our small views of God. They're minor because they're short, or they used to be called the lesser books, the lesser prophets. They're shorter than the other prophets. And they're a bit disorienting to us as we come to them because they combine God's grace and God's grief over the last centuries of Israel's existence in the land before Jesus comes. And they are tragic, terrible, and true, and wonderful as God seeks to woo his people away from idols and to warn them of judgment to come and to turn back to him before it's too late. And the book of Amos is the third of 12, and you ought to learn the 12 off by heart. And I haven't got it with me, but I'll give chocolate to anyone under 20 who can say the 12 books off by heart to me after the service.

[ 1 : 10 ] Amos 750 BC. 200 years after the disastrous division in Israel into two countries, two warring countries, Judah in the south centered on Jerusalem, Israel in the north centered in Samaria.

And that's what makes this call of Amos quite remarkable, really. If you look at verse one, Amos was not a professional prophet. He had not been to prophet school.

He was a shepherd, a wealthy shepherd we find later, who had many, many flocks and a land business. And he came from Tekoa, which is right down near Jerusalem in the southern kingdom. And God calls him to go up to the northern kingdom, and they don't like each other. In fact, they hate each other, to prophesy to the northern kingdom, Israel.

It's like calling an author, a businessman from Ukraine to go to the Kremlin and to announce the word of the Lord. That's an easy illustration.

[ 2 : 22 ] He's a godly businessman who God sends to speak his word to a country that hates his country. And not only does he come from the south, and not only does he have no theological degrees, but God sends him to the north at a time of massive peace, prosperity, and security.

There are no enemies on Israel's horizon except for the troublesome Judah in the south. They've had decades of economic growth and trade, profit, and luxury.

And they have become rich. Well, some of them have become rich. And they live in luxury with many houses, we learn later in the book. And they've kept their riches by buying off the judges. And they have a legal system which is now corrupt. They have more money than they know what to do with. And they are in no mood to listen to a prophet from the south who's not a real prophet who's going to call them to repent.

And what's Amos' message? Verse 2. The Lord roars from Zion and literally thunders from Jerusalem.

[ 3 : 40 ] God reveals himself to Israel as a lion.

Now, I've seen a lot of lions in zoos. And they're usually a bit mangy. And they're usually a bit sleepy. But I don't know if you've ever seen one out in the wild.

A couple of years ago, Bron and I were in South Africa. And we had the privilege of going on one of those, whatever you call them, game trips. Thank you, safari. And the guide said, do you see the lions?

It was about 4 o'clock in the morning. And we said, no. They're just over there. How far away? And I was looking 100 metres, 200 metres away. And then one of them roared. It was about 12 feet away. It's a chilling thing when you hear a lion really roar. And when this lion roars, the fields burn and the top of lush Mount Carmel is scorched.

[ 4 : 42 ] And these two chapters that we have to look at today are eight oracles of judgment from God. And the first six are against the other nations that surround Israel.

And the last two are against Judah and then Israel herself. And then the entire book is really to Israel. And the way God communicates and reveals his judgment to Israel is absolutely brilliant. Just think about it. Israel would be quite delighted to hear about God's judgment on those six nasty nations around about them. They would feel good about themselves. But Amos is sent and he stands in the middle of Israel and he draws a rope.

And the nations go from the northeast to the southwest to the southeast and back up. And we find that the rope wraps itself around Israel and becomes a noose.

And then God addresses Israel in his holiness and his mercy. So I've got two points this morning. The first is the first six oracles.

[ 5 : 51 ] The lion roars. He roars to the world. And the second point is he roars to the church. So let's look at this together. We'll have some details and then I'll make some points about the details.

So in chapter 1 to 2, 3, I've called it the lion roars to the world. What does it sound like when this lion roars? It's not comforting.

It's not soothing. And it was read for us this morning. God sees everything and weighs everything and assesses everything that's going on. From the highest level of political leadership right down to the intentions and motives of the human heart.

And it's a tough list to get through. He stands against every evil, every cruelty, every brutality, every injustice. And each of the eight oracles has the same pattern.

It starts for three transgressions and for four. I will not revoke. I'll not hold back my punishment. The crime is then described. And then God sends a fire.

[ 6 : 57 ] So for a chapter, the lion roars at all the nations around Israel and they're in three groups of two. Let me just look at the details. Look at verses 3 to 8.

Here is Syria and the Philistines. And the crime of Syria in verse 3 is a ruthless cruelty to the people they conquered. They threshed Gilead with threshing sledges of iron.

A threshing sledge is like a gigantic heavy cheese grater upside down. And can you imagine a people who are conquered and running a gigantic cheese grater over them?

And the Lord sees it and the Lord knows it. And the Lord will hold Syria accountable just as he will hold the house of Assad accountable today. And the lion, he says, I'll send a fire on Damascus and take you into exile.

And it's exactly what he did. And no doubt in that day, the news feed said, well, it's got to do with politics and weaponry and those kinds of things. But Amos says, no, what is happening comes directly from the hand of God as punishment.

[ 8 : 12 ] And the crime of the Philistines is very similar. It's a form of genocide, verse 6. They carry into exile a whole people to deliver them up to those who will kill them, to Edom.

They treat human beings who are made in the image of God as objects without compassion for their own selfish, crushing prophet, Syria and Philistine.

I see you. I know. Fire is coming, says God. Then he turns to Tyre and Edom, verses 9 to 12. And the sins of these two nations are worse because what they did, they did to nations that are related to them as brothers.

Verse 9, they delivered up a whole people to Edom. They forgot the covenant of brotherhood. So it's human trafficking, but it's human trafficking against their promises.

And God sees the suffering of every single person who's trafficked. And even more remarkable is that the crime of Edom, I don't know if you noticed or not, in verse 11, is a crime of the heart.

[ 9 : 23 ] In verse 11, he pursued his brother with a sword and cast off all pity, and his anger tore perpetually, and he kept his wrath forever. If you remember back to the book of Deuteronomy, you may remember that for hundreds of years now, the nation of Edom have cultivated an attitude of bitter hatred and anger against Israel.

They've nourished their spite. They've taken every opportunity for revenge and attack, despite the fact that they're related to Israel through Esau. And then thirdly, we have the Ammonites and Moab in 113 to 23.

And I'm hesitant to say this, but their cruelty and terror is described very briefly. Tearing pregnant women open to kill the children.

And immolating burning leaders alive. It's a rough list. And you could take the list from the world today.

I want to draw out three lessons before we move on into the lion roaring to the church. The first lesson is this. These words are a deep comfort for all who belong to God.

[10:39] When we look at the world today and the massive inequalities and the atrocity and the violence and the evil, it seems that so many who perpetuate these things get away with it.

And I think the temptation is to ask ourselves, does God really care? I mean, does God really care about cruelty and the victims of indescribable evil? Does God care what happens in the Ukraine or Syria or Somalia or Sudan?

Does God care about what happens to you? And the answer of this passage is an unequivocal yes. And not only does he care, but he counts every crime and he counts every tear.

And every person and every group and every thought that's ever lived will be held accountable by him. And I think that's the purpose of that little phrase that's been repeated.

For three transgressions and for four. It's not a mathematical formula where God says you can get away with evil three times and four times. It's a sign of the patience of God.

[11:50] God's great patience. He's already been patient. Some of these nations for hundreds of years, he's not brought judgment over and over and over. But patience is a virtue only if it is exhaustible.

It's good to be slow to anger. It's not good to be incapable of anger. To be incapable of anger is not a virtue. It's either moral indifference or cowardice.

And so much of the inequality and oppression and violence and evil in our world today is a sign of God's patience. But it's not a sign of his weakness, nor is it a sign of his indifference.

He will not let evil go unpunished. And sometimes he brings the judgment into history. And sometimes he waits until the end of history where there will be a day when all evil will be brought to an end.

And God will set right everything that has been done. And he will judge everyone according to the works that we have done. That's the first lesson from this first half.

[12:59] The second lesson is I think we need to feel the weight of monotheism, belief in one God. These nations, these six nations roundabout, worship other gods.

They don't even recognize the Lord of Israel. But the God of Israel, the sovereign God, is not just Lord of his people, but he is Lord of all the earth.

Every person, every nation under heaven. That's the weight of monotheism. The claim of the Bible is that there's only one God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He's made everyone. He's made us for himself. And he's given us enough revelation to know that he is there. And we are personally accountable to him in this life and the next.

And I know as soon as I say that, it's not a congenial view, is it, today? I mean, that's not a happy view. It's not a... What I've just said would not be welcomed warmly in many places on the West Coast in the 21st century.

[14:05] What I hear people say is that there is no belief that's absolutely true for everyone. You can't claim that there's only one God over all. But if you just have a moment's thought about that, the idea that there is no belief that's absolutely true for all is itself an absolute belief.

And so you say, how do you know that's true? Well, there's no belief that's absolutely true for all except that belief. Basically, what you're saying is what I think is better than what you think, even if there's no reason for it.

But Amos faces the world of cruelties and unresolved terrors and he announces God's judgment and he says, the whole world has seen by this one God with whom we have to do.

Are you with me so far? Let me make it a little bit more pointy. If this is true, it means that every Hindu will answer to God, this God.

Every Buddhist, every Sikh, every Muslim, every animist, every atheist will not be judged by their standards, but will be judged by God and his standards.

[15:19] That's the weight of monotheism. Thirdly, and quickly, the focus in these first six nations is on God's wrath and judgment, not because of their explicit rejection of him, not because they've gone after other gods, but because of what they've done horizontally to other humans.

It's their tyranny and murder and cruelty to each other. None of these nations had the Bible, but their ignorance is no excuse. What provokes the lion to roar is their crimes against humanity, their

disregard for basic human rights.

And the Bible teaches, of course, that all humans are born to be the image of God, and we're all born with a conscience about what is right and wrong, whether we've heard God's word or not. But everywhere we find humans, we find they've acted against their conscience, and every single human, including us, must give an account to God because of what we've done.

And we'll get on to this in just a moment. But God takes no joy in the death of the wicked, but he is warning these nations so that they might seek him and live. So I need to move to the second point. I feel like having a pause and just seeing how the choir are going. Is everyone awake behind me? Good. Good. Excellent. Very good. All right. So the lion roars to the world.

[16:46] Secondly, the lion roars to the church. Chapter 2, verses 4 to 16. Right up until now, what Amos has said, pretty happy in Israel, pretty pleasing.

Yes. Every oracle, even the oracle against Judah in 2, 4 to 5 would have made them happy. And they would have counted the nations, 6 and then 7 with Judah, and they would have said, oh, that's a perfect number.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's go to lunch. But God is not finished. And in chapter 2, verse 6, Amos drops the bomb. 2, verse 6.

For three transgressions of Israel. And for four, I will not revoke the punishment. This is where God has been leading. This is the climax of what he wants to say.

And from here on out, the book is addressed to Israel, calling on them to turn away from their sins. And it's the longest of these eight oracles.

[17:42] And I want you to see how God reveals and explains their crime to them. It's beautiful. He does it in three steps. And remember, he's speaking to his people.

And the three steps start at the surface, go deeper, and then finally to what's really going on. It's a threefold crime. On the surface are their personal and social crimes against each other.

Verses 6 to 8 of chapter 2. Their oppression and their greed and their abuse and their violence and their corruption. They're no difference from the pagan nations roundabout. In fact, Israel has made themselves into a foreign nation to God.

And what they have done with all the peace and all the prosperity that God has given them, they've become materialists. Self-centered, conspicuous in their consumption.

They've grown wealthy and held on to their wealth at all costs with a combination of exploitation and corruption. The legal system is paid for by the wealthy.

[18:44] They drag the poor to court and they pay the judges and then they enslave the poor who can't pay the fines, even though God said they should never do this.

So it's a place of extortion and greed. They crush the poor. They imprison widows. They look just like the Canaanites around them. And sexually, they're more Canaanite than the Canaanites, all under the cover of religion.

They trample the needs of the poor. Old men and young men use women sexually. There's a hint of violence in that phrase. The temple has become a place for boozing and drunkenness.

They've dishonored the law of God. They've disgraced themselves sexually. They've demeaned each other for a profit. They've degraded the law, the legal system, and they've dehumanized those who they were exploiting.

That's step one on the surface. Step two. What makes that so grievous is that all this was a sin against grace. And if you look at verses 9, 10, and 11, you can hear the grief in God's voice.

[19:56] Look at verse 10. It was I who brought you out of the land of Egypt. I led you 40 years in the wilderness to possess the land of the Amorite. I raised up some of your sons for prophets.

Is it not indeed so, O people of Israel? This is how God experiences our sin. He acts to us in kindness and grace and goodness.

He gives us life. He gives us every gift that we have. He rescues us from slavery. He binds himself to us with covenant. He makes promises of the future.

He is faithful beyond measure to us day after day after day. And when we give our hearts to other things and when we flirt with sin and when we commit sin, we betray him personally.

We're unfaithful to him. So you see, sin in the Old Testament, in the Bible sense, is not so much the bad things we do. It's giving our hearts to other things.

[20:56] It's not so much breaking God's rules. It's breaking his heart. It's not so much a violation of principles as a violation of his vulnerability.

And that's the second step. So it's not just their external behavior, but it's a sin against grace and the heart of God. And the third step is the way that they were able to do this is they block their ears from hearing the word of God.

You see down in verse 12? You made the Nazarites drink wine and you commanded the prophet saying, you shall not prophesy. So whenever God would send a prophet to call them to repent, they block their ears.

La, la, la, la, la. And they did it in all sorts of sophisticated ways, you'll find in chapter 7. And in their affluence, they could not bring themselves to believe that what God really meant what he said. They wanted speakers and preachers and prophets who would not offend them, who would tell them everything's fine. God loves you. Go and do what you want. And that is the essential sin.

[ 22 : 01 ] It's to turn away from the word of God. And here's the question to ask Mr. Amos. What does God do when his people constantly and continually turn away from his word?

And if you're in chapter 2, just hold your finger there and turn over to chapter 8 for a moment. To one of the most chilling promises in this entire book. Chapter 8, verse 11. What does God do when his people continually turn away from the word of God?

8, verse 11. Verse 11. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.

And they shall wander from sea to sea and from north to east, and they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it.

So God will not allow his word to be trampled underfoot. And his judgment to a defiant and disobedient and unbelieving church is to withdraw his word.

[ 23 : 10 ] To send a famine of the preaching and the hearing of the word of God. And that's like a sentence of spiritual death, because we live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of our God.

Now, today is our Tidzo Sunday. And at the end of our service, we're going to graduate three of our apprentices for ministry. We ought to pray with thanks for our Tidzo.

And that God would continue to raise up young men and women for the harvest in this land and elsewhere. So that Canada would be filled, not with a famine of the word of God, but with the plenty of the word of God, the people would hear and believe.

There is the danger of Amos. All the peace and prosperity that God had given to Israel. It had become a spiritual snare and a peril for his people.

What has it done to them? Has it driven them to trust God? No. And what about us? Has our peace and our prosperity driven us to trust God?

[ 24 : 19 ] Has it driven us to act with grace and generosity to others? Has it caused us to live a life of thankfulness and kindness to others?

Or have we become materialists like Israel? I think this is where the word of God is so important to us. It takes a prophet like Amos to cut through the lies and self-deceptions and to announce what's really going on.

And what's really going on is that the church and the society in which they live, although outwardly everything looks fine, is living on borrowed time. It is only 20 years until Israel is taken off into exile by the Assyrians, never to recover.

Their past commitments mean nothing without present love and obedience. All religious activity without moral change, God despises.

And so as a father with young children, he disciplines us, as he may be doing with some of us this morning, particularly if you're refusing something that he's saying to you or moving down a sinful path.

[ 25 : 29 ] So it's a stern word. And I have two things to finish. And then we'll go to prayer. Just two comments.

The first is, I hope you'll pick up the trail of grace through this passage. The focus of the passage is certainly holy judgment. But God takes no joy in this work.

God takes no joy in the death of the wicked. And we know from elsewhere in the Old Testament that judgment is not natural to God. It is his alien, his strange work.

It is aroused in him by sin and evil that corrupts and kills and perverts and harms his creation and his people. It is aroused by his holiness and he will deal with evil.

But even his judgment is rich with grace. Look at the trail. Number one, even the very fact that God sends Amos to warn his people is an act of grace.

[ 26 : 32 ] His desire is they would turn back to him, seek him and live. Secondly, that phrase for three transgressions and for four indicates that God has already been restraining his judgment.

Even though he watches the abuses and he weighs them, there is no hasty explosion of rage. There is a deliberate and perfect warning.

And thirdly, we see the grief of God, particularly in chapter two. This trail of grace leads right to his heart. He's made us for himself. He's acted to save and everything we have comes from him.

So when you hear the lion roar, it's time to seek him and live and to walk that trail of grace. That's the first comment.

And the second comment is about the ultimate shape of grace. We know, don't we, ultimately that God himself came to earth.

[ 27 : 30 ] In the person of Jesus Christ, he was a victim of violence and oppression and abuse. And he deliberately took our suffering and he deliberately took our punishment on himself as God himself suffered on the cross in his son.

And on the last day, the day of judgment, we know that Jesus himself will be the judge of the living and the dead. The man who lived for us and died for us, revealing the depth of God's love and his holiness.

We will be in his hands, the hands that still bear the marks of the nails on them. And I don't want to be in anybody else's hands, frankly, but his.

Amen. Let's kneel and pray.