

“Transgressions of Israel”

Sermons on the Minor Prophets: The Book of Amos (2)

Texts: Amos 1:3-2:16; Romans 2:1-16

Amos was a cattle herder and a fig harvester. He was from Judah—a nation still estranged from Israel. YHWH calls Amos to his prophetic office in order to proclaim to the people of Israel (the Northern Kingdom) that God’s judgment in the form of covenant curse is drawing ever nearer. But Amos’ preaching catches Israel completely off guard. The people of Israel are experiencing a time of great economic prosperity. The nation is producing large amounts of olive oil and wine, and shipping it across the region bringing great wealth to merchants and to the royal house. King Jeroboam II defeated Israel’s nearest enemy, the Arameans, and extended Israel’s kingdom as far north as Damascus (in modern day Syria). God’s people had experienced nothing like this since the days of Solomon. The people kept up their religious obligations toward YHWH, setting up several shrines with golden calves (representing YHWH) and where priests offered sacrifices. Surely, these were signs that all was well with the people of Israel and their relationship to YHWH, their covenant Lord. And then comes Amos about 760 B.C., preaching about impending judgment. All is not what it seems in Israel as Amos is about to reveal.

Amos is the first of three of the so-called Minor Prophets sent by YHWH to Israel. Jonah and Hosea are soon to follow before Israel is swept away in 722 B.C., by the powerful Assyrian empire. Through a vision God revealed to Amos what cannot be seen by the human eye. This vision provided the contents which Amos was to preach throughout Israel to that generation living before disaster finally comes. By preaching that which YHWH has revealed, Amos’ words will penetrate beyond mere outward appearances to recesses deep in the human heart.

Yes, Israel has grown rich—the apparent fruit of God’s covenant blessing. But these blessings never made their way to the vast majority of those living in the ten tribal lands which now made up Israel. Wealth was hoarded by the ruling class, ostentatiously displayed by the king’s courtesans, and flaunted by wealthy land owners. The nation’s wealth was earned at the expense of the poor and the laborers who did the back-breaking work of producing the oil and wine, folk who never saw the fruit of their labors, even though living in the shadow of those who filled their estates with ivory, imported couches and beds (the luxury items of the day), and who treated their workers as though they were slaves. The wealthy show contempt for the poor and feel no need to help them. But YHWH hears them when they cry to him.

Yes, Israel was at peace—relatively speaking. They defeated the Arameans and had grown strong enough to ward off their traditional enemies, the Moabites and the Ammonites. Jeroboam II, they thought, was a strong leader who carried them to victory while keeping their enemies at bay. What the people of Israel did not know was the Assyrian empire to the north was growing in power and would soon exercise an aggressive military campaign against its neighbors to the south, Syria and Israel. Israel’s military success and the peace the nation enjoyed were illusory. Neither could the people of Israel foresee that Jeroboam II would die before 750 B.C., (soon after the ministry of Amos). Jeroboam’s son and successor to the throne (Zachariah) would rule only six months before being murdered by Shallum, an army officer who reigned for a month, and who, in turn, was killed by one his own captains, Menahem, who likewise claimed the throne. Whatever peace was enjoyed under Jeroboam II, it was short-lived.

The religious shrines in Israel were full of worshipers of YHWH on the Sabbath. There were priests and plenty of sacrifices offered, along with ceremonial acts of devotion and religious feasts. By all appearances, Israel maintained some level of devotion to the Lord. But as YHWH will reveal to Israel through the mouth of Amos (5:21-24), *“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. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”* Israel’s priests were not Levites. The worship they conduct was anything but heart-felt, or grounded in a desire to be faithful to YHWH’s word. Completely overlooked is the fact that YHWH is not to be worshiped in the form of images (as made clear in the second commandment). Animal sacrifices were to be made because the people felt the weight of their sin and the need to satisfy YHWH’s holy justice, not because the sacrifices were just another religious obligation, like going to church on Easter and Christmas.

Many an Israelite male thought nothing of worshiping YHWH on the Sabbath, and then also worshiping at the pagan high places to ensure their crops would grow and that his wife would bear him many children. Many of the women invoked Baal—the Canaanite weather/fertility god—to protect her family and her children. These people were not true worshipers of YHWH. They were pagan syncretists. They are going through the motions, trying to cover all the religious bases. In their hearts they have forsaken YHWH and his covenant. But the bad news from Amos is that the Lord sees the human heart and appearances aside, YHWH knows Israel’s true material, military, and spiritual condition. He will expose Israel’s sin and send them a series of final warnings, one of them coming through the preaching of Amos.

So when Amos opens his prophecy with the words of verse 2, *“The LORD roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds mourn, and the top of Carmel withers,”* the people of Israel are exhorted to awaken from their spiritual stupor and realize that Amos is not bringing a promise of covenant blessing. Rather, Amos is bringing YHWH’s solemn declaration (a lawsuit from the heavenly court), that Israel has broken faith with YHWH’s covenant and is in grave peril. YHWH does not whisper or plead—he roars from Judah. Amos’ prophecy is not a Christmas card. It is a legal summons. *“Through my prophet’s words, the sovereign Lord, your covenant suzerain, brings serious charges against you!”* *“Israel, you have been served.”* The Lord roars from Zion.

As we saw last time, the prophecy opens in the form of a challenge to Israel, Jeroboam II, and the priests. YHWH is roaring from Jerusalem in Judah—not from Dan or Bethel (religious shrines in Israel). In effect, Amos will say to Israel, *“you may think that all is well with the economy, with your foreign policy, and with your religious duties, but you could not be more mistaken.”* This becomes clear in the verses which follow which reveal YHWH’s word of judgment against Israel’s neighboring nations, then against Judah (Israel’s estranged brethren), before Israel itself is singled out for its own sins and transgressions. Amos speaks as YHWH’s messenger, giving what we may call a prophetic oracle which includes a “messenger formula,” i.e., *“this is what YHWH says,”* which is followed by the declaration of certain punishment. The evidence YHWH brings against the guilty is presented in the form of four transgressions, followed by the announcement of the specific punishment yet to come. These oracles conclude with YHWH’s solemn declaration, *“says the Lord.”*¹

Three foreign nations are listed first (vv. 3-10): Damascus, Gaza, and Tyre. YHWH will judge them for

¹ Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 308-309.

their sin against his people and their neighbors. Then comes a prophecy of judgment upon Edom, the Ammonites, and Moab (vv. 11-2:3), smaller clans/tribal groups and Israel's traditional enemies. These nations are the descendants of Ishmael, the "other son," of Abraham, whom Muslims claim was the son offered to YHWH, not Isaac (as recounted in Genesis 22). Those in Israel receiving these oracles must have felt a sense of smug satisfaction. "God is going to judge our enemies! Such judgment proves that we (the kings and people of Israel) have rightfully earned YHWH's favor and blessing."

This sense of satisfaction must have grown all the more, when in verses 4-5 of chapter 2, YHWH announces his judgment on Judah (the Southern Kingdom) still rivals of Israel. The recipients of this oracle must have been thinking to themselves, "good, Judah is going to get what it deserves. YHWH will punish them for their stubborn loyalty to their traditions—for holding on to their Davidic kings, for their outdated and narrow-minded temple worship, and the foolish tradition that the only place where YHWH can be properly worshiped is the Jerusalem temple. About time!"

So imagine the shock and anger when the people hear Amos reveal in verses 6-16 of chapter 2, four transgressions of Israel. How dare Amos, a Judahite, preach these words to us! Yet, these are not Amos' words, but YHWH's words of judgment spoken through the mouth of his servant. Israel must shake off their false sense of accomplishment and renounce their arrogant self-righteousness. All is not right in the land—the blessings the nation presently enjoys are temporary. They can be taken away just as fast as they were given. The shadow of YHWH's inevitable covenant curses will soon extend across the land until the Assyrians invade in 722. Israel must repent, and soon. This was, of course, what no one in Israel wants to hear. Self-righteous, self-sufficient people are the last ones to heed a call to repentance. "Repent? We've done nothing wrong. Besides, we are prosperous, powerful, and worshiping YHWH. What could he have against us? We are worthy of his favor."

We will proceed in the balance of our time by briefly surveying the oracles against the nations, and tribes (1:3-2:3). Then we will devote our attention to the words of judgment against Judah and Israel (2:4-16) before drawing some application.

The first oracle is spoken against Damascus (vv. 3-5). *"Thus says the LORD: 'For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they have threshed Gilead with threshing sledges of iron. So I will send a fire upon the house of Hazael, and it shall devour the strongholds of Ben-hadad. I will break the gate-bar of Damascus, and cut off the inhabitants from the Valley of Aven, and him who holds the scepter from Beth-eden; and the people of Syria shall go into exile to Kir,' says the LORD."* At the time, Damascus was the capital of the Aramean empire, which, although finally subdued by Jeroboam, had repeatedly invaded Gilead, part of Israel's tribal land.

Notice YHWH's repeated "I will" throughout these oracles of judgment. The meaning is not I will allow bad things to happen, but I will bring judgment against you. I will not revoke the punishment. I will send fire on Hazael and Ben-hadad, royal houses in Damascus. I will break the gate-bar of Damascus—the heart of the city's defenses. The agent of this punishment on Damascus and its royal house, will be the Assyrians.

The next oracle is directed toward Gaza (vv. 6-8), the region to the south along the Mediterranean Sea between Judah/Israel and Egypt, and the home of the ancient Philistines (the fierce "Sea Peoples"). *"Thus says the LORD: 'For three transgressions of Gaza, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they carried into exile a whole people to deliver them up to Edom. So I will send a fire upon the wall of Gaza, and it shall devour her strongholds. I will cut off the inhabitants from Ashdod, and him*

who holds the scepter from Ashkelon; I will turn my hand against Ekron, and the remnant of the Philistines shall perish,' says the Lord GOD." Any trade conducted between Israel and Egypt went through Gaza. Gaza's sin was tolerating the practice of local warlords taking captive Israelite families moving along these trade routes, and then selling them into slavery—specifically to the caravans which passed through Gaza east to Edom (one of Israel's enemies). Fire will destroy the main cities of Gaza—Ashdod, Ashkelon and Ekron. The Philistines will perish as a people.

The next oracle (vv. 9-10) is directed against Tyre. *"Thus says the LORD: 'For three transgressions of Tyre, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they delivered up a whole people to Edom, and did not remember the covenant of brotherhood. So I will send a fire upon the wall of Tyre, and it shall devour her strongholds.'*" Tyre was a Phoenician city and a center of Baal worship. It was also a center of commerce, and therefore a rival to Israel's own burgeoning trading empire. Tyre broke a "covenant of brotherhood," an indication that at some point a treaty existed between Israel and Tyre banning the taking of Israelites captive, and then selling them as slaves to the Edomites. Tyre's sin is treachery.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth oracles are aimed at the descendants of Ishamel. In vv. 11-12, Amos proclaims, *"thus says the LORD: 'For three transgressions of Edom, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because he pursued his brother with the sword and cast off all pity, and his anger tore perpetually, and he kept his wrath forever. So I will send a fire upon Teman, and it shall devour the strongholds of Bozrah.'*" At one time (during David's reign) Edom was a client state of a united Israel. But since the time of the divided empire, Edom was regarded as an enemy and a willing recipient of those Israelites taken into slavery. The historic connection between Edom and Israel is implied by the title "brother," which may indicate a treaty relationship, now broken by Edom. Fire will fall on its chief trading centers (Teman and Bozrah) when the Babylonians later invade Judah in 587 B.C., conquer it and while there, destroy and occupy most of Edom.

Next up are the Ammonites. The oracle given in vv. 13-14 follows the patten of the previous. *"Thus says the LORD: 'For three transgressions of the Ammonites, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they have ripped open pregnant women in Gilead, that they might enlarge their border. So I will kindle a fire in the wall of Rabbah, and it shall devour her strongholds, with shouting on the day of battle, with a tempest in the day of the whirlwind; and their king shall go into exile, he and his princes together,' says the LORD.*" The Ammonites, who lived in what is now Jordan, were exceedingly vicious. They took no captives, but slaughtered woman and children when they attacked Gilead, seeking to expand their kingdom. The fate of Ammon will be total destruction by empires to the north and east. The royals of Ammon will suffer a better fate than they inflicted upon Gilead. They will be taken as slaves and sent into exile in a foreign land.

As for Moab, also in what is now Jordan, the oracle recorded in vv. 1-3 of chapter 2, follows the pattern of the previous, but focuses upon a taboo. *"Thus says the LORD: 'For three transgressions of Moab, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because he burned to lime the bones of the king of Edom. So I will send a fire upon Moab, and it shall devour the strongholds of Kerioth, and Moab shall die amid uproar, amid shouting and the sound of the trumpet; I will cut off the ruler from its midst, and will kill all its princes with him,' says the LORD.*" The kings of Moab fought against Edom, and in the process desecrated the tombs of Edom's kings. The strongholds Moab will be destroyed and their royal house will not be taken into exile, but killed—down to the last prince and princess.

At this point, we can imagine the reaction of those in Judah hearing Amos proclaiming that YHWH will

judge all Israel's enemies and rivals. Amos is telling them what they knew all along. YHWH is on their side! Because he is, their material prosperity is well deserved, the peace they enjoy is because their king is mighty and to be feared, and proof of their devotion to YHWH is the shrines are full, the sacrifices are offered, and the holy days honored. Imagine how the next oracle would be received by those of Israel—an oracle from YHWH directed against Judah, Israel's long estranged brothers and sisters.

In verses 4-5, the sins of Judah are revealed for all Israel to hear, followed by a punishment which seems to affirm the wisdom of Jeroboam I in renouncing the line of Davidic kings reigning from Jerusalem, and the necessity of sacrifices and worship at Solomon's temple. Amos (who mind you is from Judah) proclaims the following; *“Thus says the LORD: ‘For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they have rejected the law of the LORD, and have not kept his statutes, but their lies have led them astray, those after which their fathers walked. So I will send a fire upon Judah, and it shall devour the strongholds of Jerusalem.’”*

At first hearing we might think this oracle is just like the others. But there is a profound difference between this one and every oracle previously uttered. There are no specific atrocities committed by Judah mentioned, but there is a list of Judah's violations of YHWH's covenant.² The specific sins of Judah now publically exposed by YHWH's prophet Amos begin with the fact that Judah has rejected the law of YHWH (i.e., the commandments given at Sinai and reaffirmed before the united nation entered the promised land). By rejecting God's law—the very foundation of Judah's existence as a nation—Judah has become no better than the Canaanites living all around them.

The next sin of Judah mentioned is failure to keeping YHWH's statutes (commands). The people of Judah worship how they wish, not as God has revealed. They worship Baal and Canaanite deities in addition to YHWH. They seek protection in their armies, not YHWH's “hosts of heaven.” They have gone their own way, forsaking the LORD. They are even committing the same sins their fathers (ancestors) had done, and this despite the repeated warnings and calls to repentance by a series of prophets. Judgment came in the form of calamity and defeat by enemies (the era of the Judges).

Those in Israel hearing Amos preach were likely thrilled to hear oracles against their enemies and especially the oracle against Judah. You can just hear them shouting “amen,” in response to each oracle. “God's prophet is telling it like it is.” “He's confirming that YHWH is pleased with us and has blessed us.” But anyone listening carefully must have gotten a sinking feeling when Amos announced that Judah has rejected YHWH's law, broken his commandments, and committed the same sins as their fathers. The same people cheering Amos on but who also listened carefully might have begun to realize that the sins of Judah identified by YHWH's prophet are the same sins they were committing.

That this is the case becomes clear when Amos proclaims one final oracle—this one against Israel. Suddenly, Amos' preaching becomes an offense to those previously cheering him on. The oracle against Israel comes in verses 6-16. It is not a word of blessing, nor is it an endorsement of the nation's present spiritual condition. It is a catalogue of Israel's sins, an urgent call to repent, and a warning of judgment.

In verse 6, the oracle against Israel opens with now familiar messenger formula. *“Thus says the LORD: ‘For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they sell the*

² Billy K. Smith and Franklin S. Page, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, vol. 19B, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), Logos Bible Software, on Amos 2:4-5.

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.” The list of Israel’s sins is long. It begins with the neglect and shaming of the poor—enslaving them, treating people as property. To this is added the sin of treating those enslaved as objects of gratification, the young women forced to service men of wealth and power. *“A man and his father go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned.”* This is not only sexual sin (a violation of God’s law), but this despicable practice shames the name of the Lord—the very thing Jesus prays that we honor in the first petition of the Lord’s Prayer.

Those who exploit the poor, also mock them. *“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.”* Garments “pledged” are those valuables taken from the poor who owed the wealthy money. The wealthy think nothing of drinking the wine of the poor seized by default. In verse 9, YHWH reminds Israel why they now have peace. *“Yet it was I who destroyed the Amorite before them, whose height was like the height of the cedars and who was as strong as the oaks; I destroyed his fruit above and his roots beneath.”* Israel was victorious only when YHWH was their protector. YHWH reminds the people of their own history. *“Also it was I who brought you up out of the land of Egypt and led you forty years in the wilderness, to possess the land of the Amorite.”* YHWH secured Canaan for Israel. This was not something Israel accomplished in their own strength. The people of Israel, including Jeroboam II, are where they are because YHWH mercifully willed it, not because Israel deserved any covenant blessing.

Because he is merciful, YHWH repeatedly warned that his covenant curses would come unless Israel repents. According to verse 11, *“and I raised up some of your sons for prophets, and some of your young men for Nazirites. Is it not indeed so, O people of Israel?” declares the LORD.* Nazirites take vows of abstinence from alcohol and do not cut their hair (like Samson). Together with the prophets, they were sent as models of devotion to warn and instruct Israel. How did the people of Israel respond? *“But you made the Nazirites drink wine, and commanded the prophets, saying, ‘You shall not prophesy.’”*

Amos announces that word from YHWH which everyone hearing him preach does not want to hear—judgment will fall upon Israel just as it will overtake all the other nations who reject the Lord and his mercy. *“Behold, I will press you down in your place, as a cart full of sheaves presses down. Flight shall perish from the swift, and the strong shall not retain his strength, nor shall the mighty save his life; he who handles the bow shall not stand, and he who is swift of foot shall not save himself, nor shall he who rides the horse save his life; and he who is stout of heart among the mighty shall flee away naked in that day,” declares the LORD.* All the outward appearances of material blessing, peace with their enemies, and their empty religious rituals will do nothing for Israel. Judgment is coming and none will escape. Amos’ words from YHWH cut right to the heart. The smug Israelites are thrilled at Amos’ declaration that God’s judgment will fall on the nations, having long forgotten the truth which now hits them square in the face like a bucket of ice-cold water. Judgment begins in the house of the Lord. We can only wonder what those hearing Amos thought of his oracles now. How many of them will remember his words a generation later when Assyria sweeps down from the north and slaughters, enslaves, or exiles the majority of those who live in the tribal lands of the Northern Kingdom

Our application is exactly the same as Amos’ message to Israel—and just as painful. How many times have we been pleased when our enemies, rivals, or those from whom we are estranged suffer calamity, embarrassment, or hardship? How many times have we read a Bible verse, heard a sermon, or read some sort of self-improvement plan and then thought to ourselves, “so and so really needs to hear this”? How many times have we thought that our neighbor does things we would not do, and then we turn right around and do the same or worse? The surest proof of how deeply sinful self-righteousness adheres in all

of us is the thought which pops into our head when we hear words like this that others deserve God's judgment (even when they do) without ever considering our own deserving of the same things.

In our New Testament lesson (the first few verses of Romans 2), the Apostle Paul, tells the Jewish Christians in the church in Rome what people should have been thinking when Amos proclaims to Israel his oracles against Judah and the nations. *“Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?”*

Beloved, where would we be if God's kindness does not lead us to continual repentance by exposing our sin through the demands of his law? Where would we be if God chose to judge us without sending a Savior, Jesus Christ, who was judged for us and in our place on Calvary's cross? Where would we be? Let us take seriously the transgressions of Israel—for they are the same as ours. Let us cling to the kindness of God, who forgives these sins through the blood and righteousness of his dear Son, our Savior Jesus. Let us discover our own transgressions and then repent. For our God is kind to us. He has sent to us a Savior, who delivers us from our own self-righteousness.