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An Introduction to the Book of Amos

In 1961, a man by the name of A. W. Tozer published a book in which he endeavored to warn the church in America that it was headed in a dangerous direction. It wasn't liberalism that concerned him; not formally. It was something much more basic.

It is my opinion that the Christian conception of God current in these middle years of the twentieth century is so decadent as to be utterly beneath the dignity of the Most High God and actually to constitute for professed believers something amounting to a moral calamity. (Tozer, 1978, p. 10)

Shortly before his death in 2001, James Montgomery Boice issued a similar warning:

For years I have spoken about what I consider to be the worldliness of the liberal churches... what has hit me like a thunderbolt in recent years is that what I had been saying about the

liberal churches at the end of the 1960s and in the 1970s now needs to be said about the evangelical churches as well. ¶ Well over a decade ago, Professor Martin Marty, always a shrewd observer of the American church, said in a magazine interview that, in his judgment, evangelicals would be 'the most worldly people in America' by the end of the century. Marty's observations are not always right, in my opinion, but in this case he was on target. (Boice, 2001, p. 7)

I don't think there are many who would disagree with either quotes. Truly, the church as it exists today in America is in sad shape. And since the '60's/'70's, it has only gotten worse. Liberalism continues to be a problem. There are many today who question the doctrine of justification. The pulpit in many places has become a means of entertainment or of furthering the political agenda of a preacher or church. In some places the church is "emerging." In other places, it has submerged itself into inane, petty, and divisive rancoring.

Yet there isn't anything new under the sun. In 1866 Samuel Stone wrote concerning the church in his day:¹

Though with a scornful wonder men see her sore oppressed,
By schisms rent asunder,
By heresies distressed.
Mid toil and tribulation,
And tumult of her war,
She waits the consummation of peace for evermore.

Now about 2,000 years ago as Timothy was being attacked by his very own congregation, Paul reminded him:

2 Timothy 2:20, "...in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor."

The church is a mixture of saved and unsaved people such there is going to be unrighteous conflict. As a result, faithfulness at times will mean warfare!

Family of God, today we remain the Church Militant; we indeed are at war! Yet the war we wage today is not unique; it has been waged throughout Redemptive History. In fact, the book of Amos was written at a time when the church in Israel was moments away from eclipse! As we'll see, the prophecy was written in 765 BC which means that as a nation/church, Israel only had 43 more years until it was destroyed.

The book of Amos was given by God as a warning cry to His people that they need not perish. It wasn't too late. And while there are elements in this prophecy that are situation specific, nevertheless the overall message of this book is still as pertinent and relevant for the church today as when it was first written. And I want to introduce you to the book as a whole.

The Background: The Prophet, The Date, The Religious Setting, Joel 1:1

We begin our examination of the historical context of the book of Amos in 2 Kings 14.

2 Kings 14:23, “In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash king of Israel became king in Samaria [the date was 793 BC], *and reigned* forty-one years.”

This passage was given to introduce us to the wicked and evil reign of the northern King of Israel, Jeroboam II the 13th king of Israel who reigned from 793-753 BC. It was during his reign that Amos penned this prophecy.

Amos 1:1, “The words of Amos, who was among the shepherders from Tekoa, which he envisioned in visions concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake.”

From this and other considerations we conclude two things: First, the book of Amos was written fifteen years after the book of Jonah, specifically 765 BC, and secondly, it was given as a word from the Lord to the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Now to understand the concern of this prophecy, we need therefore to be familiar with the reign and rule of Jeroboam. Jeroboam II was one of Israel’s most illustrious rulers such that he ushered the northern kingdom into its golden age. Under this monarchy the northern kingdom enjoyed a sovereignty and independency which it had never had nor would ever have again.

Like his father before him, Jeroboam carried on the policy of aggressive expansion such that he was able to restore Israel’s boundaries to what they were under Solomon. In fact, recall that Jonah had a part in this expansion (cf. 2 Kings 14:25). Jeroboam was a gifted administrator who assumed power at a time when the pagan nations surrounding Israel either were weak² or preoccupied³ with other matters. As such Israel at this time enjoyed a level of prosperity it had known only in the reign of Solomon. This is reflected throughout Amos.

Amos 6:4-6, “Those who recline on beds of ivory and sprawl on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall, who improvise to the sound of the harp, *and* like David have composed songs for themselves, who drink wine from sacrificial bowls while they anoint themselves with the finest of oils, yet they have not grieved over the ruin of Joseph.”

Not surprisingly during this time the covenant ethic of love for the brethren in which the nation cared for the weak and helpless was tossed out the window. Luxury and false worship became the norm such that sociatally the nation fell into great compromise being characterized at the time by:

- Extreme wealth and poverty (Amos 2:6-7).
- Empty religious ritual (Amos 5:21-24; 7:10-17).
- False security (Amos 6:1-8).

The Harper Bible Dictionary put it this way:

Jeroboam's expansionist activities... brought prosperity to Israel, particularly in the larger cities. The new land was presumably assigned to the king's supporters, who became part of a new class of wealthy landowners. Increased agriculture and trade brought more tax revenue into the royal court. This redistribution of land and money increased the number of poor people in the land and created a class of servants and slaves, who were exploited by the rich. (Achtemeier, 1996)

During this time God sent multiple prophets to the land, one of which was Amos who described his calling with these words:

Amos 7:14-15, "Then Amos answered and said to Amaziah, 'I am not a prophet, nor am I the son of a prophet [meaning, the office of prophet wasn't his occupation nor something into which he was born]; for I am a herdsman and a grower of sycamore figs [IOW, he wasn't a professional prophet. Rather, he viewed himself simply as a humble farmer]. But the Lord took me from following the flock and the Lord said to me, 'Go prophesy to My people Israel.'"

It was Amos' unpleasant calling to stand in the gap between God and His rebellious people, and proclaim the covenant will of a God who was displeased. The intent of course was to reclaim the nation. Yet the means resulted in Amos being a threat to the power-hungry politician, upper class, and religious leader. As a result, he would become the object of their ridicule, scorn, and hatred.

A Key Concept: The Folly of Formalism

This brings us to one of the key concepts of this prophecy.

Amos 4:4-5, "'Enter Bethel and transgress; in Gilgal multiply transgression! Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days. Offer a thank offering also from that which is leavened, and proclaim freewill offerings, make them known. For so you love *to do*, you sons of Israel,' declares the Lord God."

If we went back in time to Israel at this moment what we would behold religiously would most likely impress us. Based on this verse and the many other passages in Amos describing the religion of Israel we would think that Israel was in the midst of a revival! In fact, if you were a genuine servant of the Lord from the time when Jeroboam II ascended to the throne to the time of the writing of Amos, you might have been tempted to think that God had answered your prayer concerning the spiritual health, vigor, and fidelity of the worship of God.

At this time Israel sacrificed to God every day and tithed twice a week (Amos 4:4-5)! The country was characterized by mourning over many of the abuses of their day. They even commissioned professional mourners to weep, wail, and so call out to God (Amos 5:16-17). They understood the plan and will of God for the nations, that someday the Lord would vindicate the holiness of His name and so bring all nations and people to judgment. Israel longed for this very thing (Amos

5:18a). The ecclesiastical calendar prescribed by God was once again in full practice in Israel. The nation observed the festivals and solemn assemblies prescribed by God in the ceremonial law. They offered burnt offerings to God as well as grain offerings. They even composed songs of praise unto God at this time (Amos 5:21-23) In fact a holier and more devout people you probably would never see: they dressed in the finest of religious garments, drank their wine from sacred chalices, frequently anointed themselves with oil (a sign of commitment and devotion to the Lord), and held psalm-sings where skilled musicians improvised on stringed instrument (Amos 6:1-6⁴).

Even in the palace of Jeroboam such commitment and devotion could be seen (Amos 8:3). The revival touched the entire land from top to bottom! Again, if you were a servant of God living at this time, you might have been tempted to think that God had answered your prayer for the welfare of Israel. Yet the temptation clearly would not have lasted very long. For if you stood for the truth during this time of “spiritual revitalization and revival,” it wouldn’t have taken very long before you concluded that it was all a sham. One of the many indictments of God toward His people at this time was this:

Amos 5:12b-13, “...*you*... distress the righteous... Therefore, at such a time the prudent person keeps silent, for it is an evil time.”

So what was the problem? Honestly, the outward spiritual condition of Israel at the time of Amos would be something we could only dream about. Who wouldn’t want to live at a time when:

- Christianity became the focus of an entire nation?
- The president, his cabinet, and congress all worshipped the Lord?
- Churches were full and offerings were given not just once a week, but twice a week?
- New songs of praise and adoration to the Lord were being written?
- The greatest musicians of the land employed their talents in the service of God?

So what was the problem? In a phrase: it was all a show!

Amos 6:8, “The Lord God has sworn by Himself, the Lord God of hosts has declared: ‘I loathe the arrogance of Jacob, and I detest his citadels; therefore, I will deliver up *the* city and all it contains.’”

During this great time of “reformation,” the only revival that occurred was a revival of the people’s sense of pride over the religion of Yahweh. At this time God’s people had turned back to their religious roots, but they had not turned back to God! As such, they became more religious, but they denied the heart and soul of true religion. Genuine religion, the heart and soul of the Kingdom of God, is captured in at least three things:

- The worship of God in spirit and truth.

John 4:24, “God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

We've talked much about this passage in the past so I will not expound upon it here. However note that the people whom God desires- the genuine servant of God- is someone who worships God according to how God has prescribed in His word AND who worships with integrity (that is, what they say they mean!). Find a time in church history when God's people flock to church but offer self-styled worship. God's people offer true worship to God yet with a heart of insincerity. And you will have found a time NOT of revival or reformation, BUT rebellion!

- Dependence upon God as evident by responsiveness to the Lord's word. Paul told the Corinthians this:

1 Corinthians 7:35, "And this I say for your own benefit [this is the goal behind giving you the word of God as I have]; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is seemly, and *to secure* undistracted devotion to the Lord."

Paul proclaimed the word of God to the Corinthians that they might become a people wholly devoted to and so dependent upon Christ. That is the goal of all teaching. At a time when professed believers had the word of God but were not practicing it, Paul wrote this:

1 Timothy 1:5, "But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith."

So find a time and place where the people of God lust for the word of God, genuinely respond to it such that it transforms them into a people of love, devotion, dependence upon Christ, and you will have true reformation!

- Love and care for the weak and helpless amongst us.

James 1:27, "This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of *our* God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, *and* to keep oneself unstained by the world."

We've discussed this in the past as well. If you want to judge the merits or quality of any religion, nation, or people, then simply ask this: How do they treat the poor and disadvantaged in their community? Look at any cult, sect, or schism such as Islam, Buddhism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and even modern day western Christianity and ask "Are their women the object of care or are they used? Are their children disciples or servants? Are the weak and poor amongst them cared for or are they extorted or consumed?"

God has gone on record to say that any covenant community which does not place as their passion and goal the care of the weak, poor, or disadvantaged amongst them is corrupt and perverse! It was on these three fronts that Israel at the time of the writing of Amos fell short. Consider the worship they offered to God, the prophecy is laden with examples (cf. Amos 2:7-8, 11-12; 5:10; 8:5-6), but I will only give you a few.

Amos 4:4-5, "Enter Bethel and transgress; in Gilgal multiply transgression! Bring your

sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days. Offer a thank offering also from that which is leavened, and proclaim freewill offerings, make them known. For so you love *to do*, you sons of Israel,' declares the Lord God"

Though externally Israel at this time worshipped God according to that which was prescribed in the ceremonial law, nevertheless in their worship they were sinning. What was the problem? If you consider the rest of the chapter it is quite obvious.

Amos 4:6b, 8b, 9b, 10b, 11b, "...'Yet you have not returned to Me,' declares the Lord."

Truly, the word of Isaiah given to the people of God in Judah around this time is apropos.

Isaiah 29:13b, "...this people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me."

Though the religion of Israel seemed to be in a time of revival, nevertheless it was all a show. Very few were turning to the Lord. The love of God was all but gone. How about their responsiveness to the word of God and so their dedication and devotion to the Lord?

Amos 2:11-12, "'Then I raised up some of your sons to be prophets and some of your young men to be Nazirites. Is this not so, O sons of Israel?' declares the Lord. But you made the Nazirites drink wine, and you commanded the prophets saying, 'You shall not prophesy!'"

Is this amazing? Two of the most sacred callings to which a man could give himself at this time became the special object of attack. The Nazirite whose life spoke of devotion and dependence upon God by virtue of their abstaining from the drinking of the fruit of the vine were forced to abandon their devotion and so drink! The genuine prophet of God was rejected, ignored, and silenced. And this was a revival? Amos himself encountered the same, cold response.

Amos 7:12-13, "Then Amaziah said to Amos, 'Go, you seer, flee away to the land of Judah, and there eat bread and there do your prophesying! But no longer prophesy at Bethel, for it is a sanctuary of the king and a royal residence.'"

It is one thing for the royal palace to have songs of praise and adoration sounding forth from its porticos (that requires very little), but submit to the word of the Lord? This was asking too much!

What about the third characteristic of genuine religion, the care for the weak and helpless? What was going on in Israel at the time of the writing of Amos? We don't have to read very far in this book to discover that the weak and poor no longer were the object of care and compassion, but extortion! Listen to just a few verses.⁵

Amos 2:6-7a, "Thus says the Lord, 'For three transgressions of Israel and for four I will not revoke its *punishment*, because they sell the righteous for money and the needy for a pair of sandals. These who pant after the *very* dust of the earth on the head of the helpless also turn aside the way of the humble..."

Amos 5:11a, “Therefore, because you impose heavy rent on the poor and exact a tribute of grain from them, *though* you have built houses of well-hewn stone, yet you will not live in them...”

Amos 8:4, “Hear this, you who trample the needy, to do away with the humble of the land.”

Truly the revival/reformation that was going on at this time was a sham. In fact, it makes me think of a quote I heard from John MacArthur years ago. During the ‘70’s when revival seemed to be sweeping America and people were flocking to church, a reporter asked John MacArthur, “To what do you attribute this revival?” MacArthur said, “Revival? There is not enough of a revival in this land to fill a thimble.”

Truly, while people may have been flocking and so clinging to churches at the time, many of these churches weren’t clinging to the word! And hence we conclude it was just another religious awaking, but not a genuine longing for God, His word, His Christ, or the cross! Such was the case in Israel at this time. In fact the religion of Israel at this time was so bad, God compared them to their fathers who wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. Throughout this time, God’s people served and worshipped the Lord according to what He prescribed in His word. Yet, according to Amos 5:26-27, in the privacy of their tent and heart they bowed before the false gods of Egypt! At the time of the writing of Amos, Israel was no different!

As a result, the call of Amos is a sober exhortation for the people of Israel to cease seeking after external religion, but in humility to seek the Lord.

Amos 5:4-6a, “For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel, ‘Seek Me that you may live. But do not resort to Bethel, and do not come to Gilgal, nor cross over to Beersheba; for Gilgal will certainly go into captivity, and Bethel will come to trouble. Seek the Lord that you may live...’”

The word for “seek” is a broad term in the Bible used of many things. In the context of the Kingdom of God it would have referenced the following.

- Seeking God’s Forgiveness, Isaiah 55:6-7.

Isaiah 55:6-7, “Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the Lord, and He will have compassion on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.”

Clearly at this time God would have Israel seek Him that their sin might be forgiven.

- Seeking God’s Fellowship, Philippians 3:8a.

Philippians 3:8a, “More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord...”

When it came to Christ, Paul sought for nothing less than communion/fellowship. As one who

came to the Lord for forgiveness, Paul took advantage of the blessing that comes as a result and so spent much time enjoying a love relationship with Christ.

- Seeking God's Kingdom, Matthew 6:33a

Christ exhorted the disciples this way:

Matthew 6:33, "But seek ye first the Kingdom of God."

From the very beginning, it was God's intention to establish His Kingdom on this earth. Yet in a coup of epic proportions, Satan successfully tempted God's co-regents to rebel against the rule of Christ and so endeavor to reign in a kingdom of their own making. And so mankind suffers today in a prison of their own making. Yet God in His grace and on account of His great love for His people, deigned to retake the earth and so reclaim His people who this time would be zealous for His glory. Accordingly the story of redemption is the revelation of the good news of the Kingdom of God (cf. Matthew 4:23)! Accordingly to seek the Lord certainly involves seeking the manifestation of His dominion on the earth.

- Seeking God's Righteousness, Matthew 6:33

Christ further exhorted the disciples this way:

Matthew 6:33, "But seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness."

To seek the "righteousness of God" is to seek to be holy, upright, and pure in one's life. That certainly is part and parcel of what it means to seek the Lord. In fact notice:

Amos 5:14-15, "Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and thus may the Lord God of hosts be with you, just as you have said! Hate evil, love good, and establish justice in the gate! Perhaps the Lord God of hosts may be gracious to the remnant of Joseph."

God's message at this time to His people was a call to forsake their love of religion, and so:

- Return to the Lord!
- Rend their hearts and not their garments!
- Seek the Lord!

This is what God wants from each of us this day. Now let us not miss the point. There is nothing wrong with offerings and burnt sacrifices. There is nothing wrong with...

- Bible reading.
- Worship.
- Christian service.
- Sharing the gospel.

- Engaging culture.

However if we are doing these things NOT out of a heart of love for Christ BUT in the hope that God will love us more, we have just missed the heart of genuine religion! We need to hear this! By virtue of our creation, mankind is religious. Now the temptation will be to fall in love with the ceremonies, the ordinances, the ritual thinking that these things are what please God. And to hold to a form of godliness, but deny its power (2 Timothy 3:5)!

Let us understand that God is not after an offering from us for He owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Psalm 50:10). If He wanted a creature who never missed

- Worship.
- A family devotion.
- Daily prayer.

He could have created something far more holy and devout than us. God's intent was and is to create a people with whom He would enjoy a love-relationship unto His glory! Accordingly the call in Scripture, the call of Amos, is to delight ourselves in the Lord and to seek not religious practices, but the Lord and His strength!

Again this doesn't mean that we abandon worship, the reading of the word of God, or any other calling of God. It is that we participate in these things in order to fellowship with Christ. Sadly it was this calling that most in Israel at the time would miss! They would persist in their man-centered, self-centered practices voicing the mantra which will be heard in the last days: "Peace and safety!" (1 Thessalonians 5:3) Yet you must know that there was a remnant at this time in Israel who did not take delight in their religion, but God. This made them the special object of attack and ridicule in their day. On account of their love for Christ, they would lose much (cf. Amos 5:12-13).

Yet amazingly they did not view themselves as victims, nor did they fret over their losses. According to Hebrews 11:16, they had their eye on the heavenly country! In the words of Paul (2 Corinthians 4:18), they looked at that which was not seen! How is it that these despised ones could remain vigilant in a time of great apostasy and trial? They lived in light of the promises of God given to all whose delight is the Lord.

Amos 9:13-15, "'Behold, days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'When the plowman will overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows seed; when the mountains will drip sweet wine, and all the hills will be dissolved. Also I will restore the captivity of My people Israel, and they will rebuild the ruined cities and live *in them*, they will also plant vineyards and drink their wine, and make gardens and eat their fruit. I will also plant them on their land, and they will not again be rooted out from their land which I have given them,' says the Lord your God."

Such is the reward awaiting us, for in Christ nothing less than this promise has been granted us (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:20)! In light of this glorious hope, may we run with endurance the race that set

before us, ever and always fixing our eyes of Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith (cf. Heb. 12:2)!

End Notes

¹ *The Church's One Foundation*, Red Trinity Hymnal #347.

² Effective Assyrian intervention in Palestine ended with the campaigns of Adad-nirari III (809-782 BC), who at the end of the ninth century moved west and defeated the Aramaeans of Damascus, who had been harassing Israel since the end of Jehu's reign (ca. 816 BC; cf. 2 Kings 13:5).

³ During the first half of the 8th century, the Assyrian nation was preoccupied both with Armenia and with internal strife.

⁴ That this pericope describes the religious fervor of the people of God at this time is seen in v. 6b. God's people did all these "commendable things" yet they "had not grieved over the ruin of Joseph."

⁵ cf. also Amos 3:9-10; 4:1; 6:12.

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on January 16, 2011. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.