

The Message of Amos for Today

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Despite being composed nearly three thousand years ago, the book of Amos remains highly relevant. Its analysis of humanity's sinful condition reveals the deceptive power of sin as well as its destructive effects, and its presentation of God's justice in response to sin warns all who read it of the ultimate consequences of rebellion against God. But its promises of salvation reveal a glorious God who offers life to His enemies and can free them from a life of sin and death. Here we will first trace these themes in Amos's message and then reflect on their claim upon us.

The prophet Amos ministered in the northern kingdom of Israel in the middle of the eighth century BC. During this time, the Assyrian empire's project of bringing Judah, Israel, and neighbouring countries under its control was interrupted by its political instability, allowing Israel to flourish. Sadly, this economic prosperity enriched only a small part of its society, as imported ivory sculptures and receipts for fine wine and cosmetic oils from ancient Samaria show.

Those with power and wealth coveted more, oppressing and exploiting the poor and vulnerable (Amos 2:6-16; 4:13; 5:10-12; 8:4-7) while living in luxury (3:15; 5:11; 6:4) and with a false sense of security (6:1, 13). It goes without saying that they did this in flagrant violation of countless covenantal guidelines, all of which called them to love their neighbor (Lev. 19:18) and to take special care of the vulnerable (Exod. 22:22; Deut. 24:19).

No less seriously, worship in the northern kingdom had been idolatrous from the beginning (1 Kings 12:26-31) and was controlled by the king rather than normed by God's revealed will (Amos 7:12-13). In short, many in eighth-century Israel lived with only a superficial acknowledgement of God's relationship to them and pursued their own goals in opposition to His will.

In response to such covenant infidelity, God had already begun to inflict punishment upon Israel by the time Amos arrived on the

scene—but Israel had not repented (Amos 4:6-13)! This widespread lack of repentance led God to announce through Amos that “the end” was coming. The visions of 7:7-9, 8:1-3 and 9:1-4 reveal that no more reprieve is possible, and that the northern kingdom will fall (5:27). Yet God will not abandon His covenant commitments to Israel nor allow those who trust in Him to perish. His final work of judgment in the day of the LORD will eliminate all sinners from Israel (9:9-10), and His Messiah will fully establish His rule not only over God’s purified people, but over many from among the nations (9:11-12).

Amos’s message of judgment, his calls to repentance, and his promise of salvation and “life” found in God take on even greater power and clarity when seen in light of the gospel. God’s judgment of Israel’s sin in the exile, significant though it was, pales in comparison with His wrath against sin as expressed in the death of His only begotten Son (2 Cor. 5:21). That same wrath will be borne by all who fail to repent when Christ returns to judge the world (Acts 17:31). This reality drives biblical calls to repent (Luke 13:1-5) and animates the church’s mission to the world (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; 13:46-47).

In the same way, the message of salvation through faith and repentance that Amos sketched only in part comes fully into view in the New Testament. There God reveals more clearly than ever the good news of deliverance from judgment and entrance into His kingdom through the work of His Messiah, who makes His people willing in the day of His power (Amos 9:11-12; Acts 15:14-17). God’s purified people will inhabit the new heavens and new earth without sin and in full enjoyment of the rich blessings God has prepared for them.

With this gospel context in view, let’s look more closely at how some key elements of Amos’s message bear on believers and unbelievers alike.

- First, Amos calls us to a life with God (Amos 5:4, 14) based on complete submission to His saving, transforming rule over us in Jesus Christ. The believer’s entire person (heart, will, emotions, etc.) and life (time, money, plans, etc.) belong to God. If Israel had heightened responsibilities to Him in light of her national election (3:2), how much more is that the case for one for whom Christ has died (Heb. 12:18-29)? To note but one example drawn from Amos,

our treatment of others, especially if we hold economic, social, or other forms of power or authority over them, must serve no other goal than the glory of God, and be free of all opportunism and desire for self-advancement.

- Second, Amos insists that salvation does not depend on our being religious. Most of Amos's audience were quite serious about religious activities tied exclusively to externals (Amos 4:4; 5:21-23), but God rejected them because they lacked reverence and love for Him as their root. On the contrary, it was brazen self-advancement and rebellion against God, clothed in religious robes. True Christianity inevitably expresses itself in concrete actions, but we must beware of doing "the right thing" without the right motivation and of focusing more on externals than on what is in our hearts (Mark 7:15).
- Lastly, Amos reminds us that none who refuse to submit to God and live by their own rules for their own ends will escape His judgment. Sin, the devil, and the world will not triumph! God's people can therefore live by following His will, for His glory, and in His strength—and suffer the inevitable opposition that comes with such a life—while being confident that He has overcome the world (John 16:33). The world's belief that God doesn't matter (if He exists at all), its goal of human flourishing apart from Him, and its increasing intolerance of claims to truth and of morality rooted in our status as God's image bearers, cannot but fail.

God's kingdom has already entered the world in the person and work of Jesus Christ (Mark 1) and continues to grow, sometimes openly and spectacularly (Acts), sometimes almost invisibly and slowly (Mark 4).

Amos's condemnation of human independence from God and his promise of deliverance through God's messianic King are the message and the motive for the church's mission to a world that can never achieve its own destiny, and whose only hope lies in the crucified and risen Saviour.

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