

Amos 1:1 – 2:16 (1984 NIV)
Holy People or Horror People?

Introduction

Chinese folklore tells the story of a poor scholar named Chen Shimei during the time of the Song Dynasty. He was later placed first in the imperial examination and was awarded to marry the Emperor's daughter, though he was already a married man. He carried a greed for wealth and power, and so he kept his earlier marriage a secret.

However, when his first wife came to the capital with their children to look for him, Chen Shimei not only claimed not knowing them, but also secretly ordered his bodyguard to kill them.

When his first wife begged for mercy and revealed the truth, Chen's bodyguard could not bring himself to kill them. Caught between his conscience and duty, he finally committed suicide after advising Chen's first wife to seek for justice at the court of Bao Zheng (also known as Justice Bao).

Bao Zheng had planned to have her confront her unfaithful husband privately so as to give him a chance to repent. But Chen Shimei tried to use his status as the Emperor's son-in-law to intimidate Bao Zheng, refusing to admit his evil ways and repent.

Bao Zheng was then convinced of Chen's corrupted character, and became determined to execute him for attempted murder and lying to the Emperor.

When he was about to order the sentence be carried out, the Empress dowager and the Princess came to pressure him to stop the execution. But Bao Zheng stood his ground, and in the name of justice—without fear and favouritism—he beheaded Chen Shimei.

Bao Zheng today is honoured as the cultural symbol of justice in Chinese society. His commemorative statue is erected in Xiqing Park (西清公园) in Hebei, China.

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bao_Zheng)

Today in Amos 1 & 2, we are going to look at justice that shows no fear and favouritism to the evil, wealthy, and powerful. It is justice of the highest order and perfection—the justice of the Holy God Himself.

Let's first take a quick overview of the Book of Amos.

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1. Amos the Author

Amos lived among a group of shepherds in Tekoa, a small town approximately ten miles south of Jerusalem. Amos made clear in his writings that he did not come from a family of prophets, nor did he even consider himself one. Rather, he was “a grower of sycamore figs” as well as a shepherd (Amos 7:14-15).

2. Amos the Prophet

Amos prophesied during the reigns of Uzziah (king of Judah) and Jeroboam (king of Israel). Their reigns overlapped for fifteen years, from 767 BC to 753 BC.

Though Amos came from the southern kingdom of Judah, he delivered his prophecy very much against the northern kingdom of Israel.

Under Jeroboam’s reign, the northern kingdom had been quite prosperous in a material sense. However, the moral decay there was also very evident.

Amos designed his prophecy such that he started with a wide circle, denouncing the nations surrounding Israel—Syria, Philistia, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab, and Judah—then he suddenly narrowed down on Israel. He devoted a little over one chapter to these other nations, including Judah, but more than seven chapters to Israel.

3. Amos the Book

Amos actually devoted only the final five verses of his prophecy to tell of God’s redemption and restoration of Israel (9:11-15). Prior to that, God’s word through Amos was directed against the prosperous people of Israel, a people who had no love for their neighbours, who took advantage of others, and who only looked out for their own concerns.

More than almost any other book of Scripture, the book of Amos holds God’s people accountable for their ill-treatment of others (Amos 2:6-8; 3:10; 4:1; 5:11-12; 8:4-6).

- They were selling off needy people for goods.
- They were taking advantage of the helpless.
- They were oppressing the poor.
- The men were using women immorally.
- They were obsessed with their own economic success.
- They had lost the concept of caring for one another.

But sadly, the people in the north used Amos' status as a foreigner as an excuse to ignore his message of judgment upon them.

Honestly, Amos is not an easy book to read, teach, or preach because of its sombre theme on God's judgment. It does not contain the encouraging and hope-inspiring prophecies of Isaiah. No, Amos speaks mostly of gloom and doom. This presents an interesting contrast when seen against Israel's rising power, wealth and influence. During the days of Amos' ministry, the nation was enjoying prosperity second only to Solomon's time. On the surface, it appeared that Israel's prosperity indicated God's approval of them. But Amos' words prove beyond any doubt that God was not pleased at all. In fact, He was deadly serious—if the people would not repent, they were doomed!

Though Amos describes what was literally happening in ancient Israel, God has intended the message for us too—to stir us to action, anticipating that Jesus Christ will return one day, even soon.

Today, let me run through Amos 1-2 with you (31 verses in all), and uncover together a key thought that the Lord has for us to take away today.

I. The LORD roars in judgment on the nations (1:2 – 2:5).

1:2 - "The LORD roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds dry up, and the top of Carmel withers."

A shepherd feeds his sheep. But a roaring lion is all ready to devour the sheep. The Lord is portrayed here not as a caring shepherd who will feed the sheep, but as an angry lion all ready to eat up the sheep.

God has been Israel's shepherd. The Israelites are familiar with the 23rd Psalm where it declares that "the Lord is our shepherd". God is the Good Shepherd who will take care of His people.

But Amos, a shepherd himself, describes God here like a roaring lion to Israel. The lion was probably the most feared animal of that time. It could attack and devour a flock of sheep while the shepherd watched helplessly.

Like the lion roars just before he attacks, the Lord is here announcing His judgment on Israel through Amos. So this imagery sets the stage to let the people know that God is angry.

Notice that Amos keeps repeating "for three sins ... even for four" in chapters 1–2 (1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6). There are many ways to understand this phrase which plays a special role in the way Amos communicates sin and judgment.

Interestingly, “for three sins ... even for four” is not a listing of four specific sins. In fact, the typical pattern is to list one or two sins and move on. Therefore, I would understand this as an expression not meant to imply a specific number of sins, but to communicate that there is a multiplicity of sins (the number three) which grows to become an overflowing excess of sins (the number four). God’s forbearance is with His people in their multiplicity of sins, but God’s judgment is pronounced upon them when they refuse to repent and their sins grow to become an overflowing excess. God will not spare them any more and any longer!

Each of Amos’ eight messages in chapters 1-2 follows a similar pattern.

- First, there is the phrase “for three sins ... even for four”.
- Second, one or two specific sins are mentioned regarding the nation being addressed.
- Third, a judgment is given.

Amos starts with Israel’s enemies and ends with prophecies against Judah and Israel. While God clearly condemns the sins of the surrounding nations, Amos’ message is dominated by judgment against Israel, i.e. God’s own people.

Yet, even in judgment, there is hope. The conclusion of Amos’ prophecy in 9:11-15 speaks of a time of future blessing for Israel. The book’s final verse in 9:15 reads, “I will plant them on their land, and they shall never again be uprooted out of the land that I have given them.”

It seems that Amos is using his judgment speeches in Chapters 1-2 to build up to a climax. He starts off by denouncing Israel’s neighbours.

- Damascus in 1:3-5
- Gaza in 1:6-8
- Tyre in 1:9-10
- Edom in 1:11-12
- Ammon in 1:13-15
- Moab in 2:1-3
- Judah in 2:4-5

And finally, Amos directs his 8th judgment speech against Israel in 2:6-16 which is the longest for any single nation with a total of 11 verses.

It seems that Amos is using this literary technique to keep his listeners’ interest, and then suddenly pronounces a judgment on his listeners to bring about a shock effect.

Just imagine Amos shouting and pronouncing judgment on the nations surrounding Israel. And his Israelite audience listening with delight as he lists the evil things their enemies have done, and what God is going to do to them.

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Remember, Israel is anticipating a day when God would deliver them from their enemies—i.e. the Day of the Lord when all the other nations would be judged.

And as his listeners are enjoying the coming gloom and doom of their neighbours with self-righteous glee on their faces, Amos drops the bombshell—the Lord is also going to judge them, and to judge them with even greater severity. The Lord is impartial; He does not play favourites; He will be a roaring lion even to His people IF they continue in their rebellion against Him.

Let's now briefly look at the judgment speeches against Israel's neighbours.

1. The sin of Damascus is that “she threshed Gilead with sledges having iron teeth” (1:3).

Damascus was the capitol of the Arameans (Hazael and Ben-hadad mentioned were previous kings of Aram). This verse probably refers to the constant battles between Gilead and the Arameans. The word “threshing” is probably figurative of the harsh and gruesome manner with which Aram's armies crush Gilead as though it is grain on the threshing floor.

So Damascus has treated Gilead with brutality. As punishment for this war crime, Amos says Damascus will be defeated and its people sent into exile in Kir. This was fulfilled 50 years later in 732 BC when Damascus fell to the Assyrians as recorded in 2 Kings 16:9.

2. The sin of Gaza is that “she took captive whole communities and sold them to Edom” (1:6).

Gaza is a major city in Philistia together with Ashdod, Ashkelon, and Ekron. The Philistines were notorious for capturing whole villages and selling them into slavery to Edom, and from there they were sold to other parts of the world (see Joel 3:4-6).

3. The sin of Tyre is that “she sold whole communities of captives to Edom, disregarding a treaty of brotherhood” (1:9).

Their crime against humanity is also slave trade. They have broken the covenant of brotherhood by slave trafficking—i.e. raiding and carrying off whole communities, and selling fleeing groups of refugees who are looking for help.

4. The sin of Edom is that “he pursued his brother with a sword and slaughtered the women of the land, because his anger raged continually and his fury flamed unchecked” (1:11).

Edom is Israel's most bitter enemy. However, the Edomites are the descendants of Esau, Jacob's brother (by the way, Jacob's other name is Israel). So it is a case of family members becoming the worst of enemies.

Num 20:21 records the merciless hostilities of the Edomites towards the Israelites this way - “Since Edom refused to let them go through their territory, Israel turned away from them. Anytime Israel or Judah were attacked the Edomites would take the opportunity to fall in behind and kill the half dead for plunder—they refused to show mercy.”

5. The sin of Ammon is that “he ripped open the pregnant women of Gilead in order to extend his borders” (1:13).

This is certainly a gross sin. Ancient armies would sometimes do this to terrorize the enemy. And certainly committing this atrocity against defenceless women showed how evil they had become. And they did this because of their territorial greed—they wanted to expand their borders. It's war crime against humanity.

6. The sin of Moab is that “he burned to ashes the bones of Edom's king” (2:1).

The sin of Moab listed is burning the bones of the king of Edom. It seems that in ancient times, much importance was placed on a dead man's body being peacefully placed in the family burial site so that he could be “gathered to his fathers”. So the sin of the Moabites has to do with desecrating the graves of the dead; it has to do with disrespecting the dead with cruelty.

7. And now Amos gets closer to home. He now pronounces God's judgment on the southern kingdom of Judah. The sin of Judah is that “they have rejected the law of the LORD and have not kept his decrees, because they have been led astray by false gods, the gods their ancestors followed” (2:4).

Judah is the seventh nation mentioned. Seven is a significant number and represents fullness. Imagine the audience in the Northern Kingdom of Israel glued to their TV sets and listening to the doomsday news channel. When the newscaster comes to Judah, I can imagine they are so sure and certain this is the climax of all the judgment messages. After all, the sin of Judah is seemingly the worst among the others—the surrounding nations are judged for sins committed against man, but

Judah has sinned against God—they have rejected God’s Law, not kept God’s decrees, and followed false gods.

The Israelite audience is expecting Judah to be the last and final nation to be named in the judgment speeches of Amos. Israel and Judah are one people, but the deep animosity between them has divided them into two kingdoms—Israel in the north and Judah in the south. So far, the Israelites in the north have been enjoying the preaching of Amos. “God, give it to them! Give it to them!” they yell as each of their enemies is named and judgment pronounced.

But surprise! Surprise! Amos continues even after Judah and adds a shocking 8th nation to the list—Israel! Israel is the target of this 8th judgment speech. So the seven judgment speeches earlier serve very much to build up to this 8th judgment speech ... against Israel. What a shock! The Day of the Lord that they have been looking forward to is not only a day of judgment for the other nations, but a day for them to be judged by God as well. The point is this—Israel is no better, if not worse, than all the other nations. They rejected and disobeyed God’s Word to them, and their covenantal relationship with Him when they follow other gods. They have not rooted themselves in God’s Word, and reached out to others in God’s love.

Let’s now turn our attention to this judgment speech against Israel.

II. The LORD speaks judgment against Israel (2:6-16).

Here, Amos lists the sins of Israel that can be divided into four conceptual categories.

1. Oppressing the innocent and the poor (2:6-7a).

6 They sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals.

7a They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed.

In verse 6, we see the justice system is corrupt. The law says it is okay to sell a debtor to pay the debt. The word “innocent” in v. 6 may actually mean the one who is right in a lawsuit. But the rich and the powerful may have been able to bribe judges to decide in their favour, and that allows them to sell the innocent but poor party into slavery to pay the debt.

Selling “the needy for a pair of sandals” shows that the people are being sold into slavery for just small debts or pledges. However, the Law of God has actually commanded the Israelites to give to the needy without even demanding repayment in Deut 15:7-11.

Amos 2:9-11 recounts God's provision for Israel. This reminds us of the unforgiving servant in the New Testament who refuses to forgive his fellow slave a small debt, when he has just been forgiven a huge amount by his master. I think God is magnifying Israel's guilt by setting their rebellion against the backdrop of His own gracious acts towards them. They take His forgiveness, salvation, and provision. But they do not pass it on to others.

2. Engaging in pagan religious practices (2:7b).

7b Father and son use the same girl and so profane my holy name.

Verse 7b is probably a reference to the fact that the Israelite men are going to pagan temples and participating with the temple prostitutes. In that participation, you worship and become connected in oneness with the false god. It is a false religion that allows you to continue in immorality yet feel so spiritual about yourself. It promises the best of heaven and earth for you!

3. Abusing the system of pledges and fines (2:8).

8 They lie down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge. In the house of their god they drink wine taken as fines.

The Law states that you are not to keep a cloak taken as a pledge overnight in Exodus 22:26-27. Only the very needy would borrow anything, and so lenders are not to charge interest and profit from another person's misfortune. So, they are not to keep overnight cloaks that are given as collateral. The poor person would need it to stay warm. The poor person probably is required to give his cloak as collateral so that he couldn't go from place to place borrowing from every merchant. If a person comes in without a cloak, that means he has already borrowed for the day, and he wouldn't be able to borrow anything else. But he needs his cloak back so he could stay warm that night and have something to use as collateral the next day. But in spite of this Law, these merchants are keeping the cloaks and, to make matters worse, we see their second sin—they use them to sleep on at night as they indulge in merry drinking in the house of their false god.

4. Showing contempt for God's called servants (2:12).

12 "But you made the Nazirites drink wine and commanded the prophets not to prophesy."

Verse 12 shows the corruption of the religious system and the rejection of religious leaders. The Nazirites have taken a vow not to drink any alcohol, but the Israelites are coercing them to break their vows. They also command the prophets not to prophesy. Perhaps, their sins spelt out by these prophets prick their guilty conscience too much.

Now, as you consider closely these four conceptual categories of sins—they don't seem to be as bad as, as brutal as, as cruel as those of the other nations. So what is the point? Why does God consider Israel to be worse than all the other nations?

God has given His people the Law. They should know better. God's charge against Judah in 2:4 is that Judah has rejected the Law. This is also God's charge against Israel. But Amos elaborates it in 2:6-16 because Israel is now the target audience, and God really wants to drive the point home through Amos. So the point is this—God has set Israel apart to be His holy people. They belong to God in that they have been set apart from sin. And also they belong to God in that they have been set apart for God's purpose—i.e. as they are blessed by God, they are to in turn bless and not bully those who are weak and vulnerable. Israel is given much, and hence, much is required of them.

In Amos 2:9-11, the Lord reminds the people how much He has blessed and provided for them—"Yet I destroyed the Amorites before them, though they were tall as the cedars and strong as the oaks. I destroyed their fruit above and their roots below. I brought you up out of Egypt and led you forty years in the wilderness to give you the land of the Amorites. I also raised up prophets from among your children and Nazirites from among your youths ..."

On the surface, the sins of Israel don't look as bad as those of the other nations. After all, the other nations are going to war, murdering people, and ripping open pregnant women. But in God's eyes, Israel's sins are worse because they know better in view of how much He has blessed and provided for them.

And the harsh judgment pronounced on Israel is in Amos 2:13-16 - "Now then, I will crush you as a cart crushes when loaded with grain. The swift will not escape, the strong will not muster their strength, and the warrior will not save his life. The archer will not stand his ground, the fleet-footed soldier will not get away, and the horseman will not save his life. Even the bravest warriors will flee naked on that day," declares the LORD.

Conclusion

Now, what does all this mean for us today? To be sure, what happens in Amos' time is very much alive today.

As God's people today, we can turn a blind eye to the suffering of others for "more spiritual" efforts like praying, studying the Bible, and worshipping God. But the book of Amos reminds us that these efforts, while unquestionably important in a believer's life, ring hollow when we don't love and bless others visibly and tangibly in our own lives.

So, let me share two closing thoughts:

- First, one problem in Israel then and in our time today is the sin of materialism. We can see how the Israelites compromised God's laws and principles to achieve their definition of success. The Israelites had their own theology which presumed that the wealthy person was a righteous person. This further pacified their conscience as they told themselves that their prosperity was God's sign of approval. Employ every means to get material gains; when you have it, flaunt it and use it all on yourself. Yes, such prosperity theology is still very much alive today!

A common theological misconception in thinking about God's blessing is that it is brought about by our generosity. God's grace and goodness is never based on our generosity/good works. If it were, then we would have never received the fullness of His grace that is Jesus Christ. God is gracious and generous to us even when we are not. That is how loving and faithful our God is.

Our generosity is more of a gauge of our heart's content than a requirement given to get a pass into God's blessing. When we are blessed, the proper response is generosity not materialism. If we respond in selfishness when God blesses us, it only shows that our hearts are in the wrong place. God's concern is our heart, not so much our giving.

God looks beyond our giving because He knows that we can give with the wrong motives. When we give out of sheer compulsion or to show off our financial capacity, we do not please God. But when we give with the intent to show gratitude to God for His goodness and to be a blessing to others, God is pleased and honoured.

That's why 2 Corinthians 9:7 says, "Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

Giving will surely bring blessing when done with the right heart motive—not because of what we have done but because of who Jesus is and what He has done for us.

- Second, unlike the Israelites who abused people in need, we may not overtly abuse people today, but how concerned are we for the

needy? What are we doing for them? Are we ignoring them or ministering to them? I think in our society we often expect the government to take care of them and US. Perhaps the reason why we often criticize the government is because we often look to the government to do what we ought to be doing for others and for ourselves.

Here are some godly wisdom in Proverbs related to taking care for others and not just ourselves.

- Prov 31:8-9 – “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.”
- Prov 22:22-23 – “Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in court, for the Lord will take up their case and will exact life for life.”
- Prov 3:27-28 – “Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to act. Do not say to your neighbor, ‘Come back tomorrow and I’ll give it to you’—when you already have it with you.”
- Prov 14:21 – “It is a sin to despise one’s neighbor, but blessed is the one who is kind to the needy.”
- Prov 14:31 – “Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.”
- Prov 22:9 – “The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor.”

We look at society and think other people are bad. But we may be doing worse things in God’s eyes because we know better. God expects more from His people.

In Amos 1 & 2, the heathens are judged for their violation of basic principles of righteousness. However, the people of God are judged for their unfaithfulness to God’s revealed Word (His Law and decrees).

Having read the judgments God pronounced upon the eight nations ...

- We are reminded that God is a righteous God.
- God holds all peoples and nations accountable for their actions.

Two soul-searching questions:

- Are you ready for that great Day of Judgment when you will be held accountable for your actions?
- Are you willing to let the Word of God persuade you to do what is right?

A key thought that the Lord wants us to take home from our text today is this—God has set us apart to be His holy people—we belong to God in that

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we have been set apart from sin. And also we belong to God in that we have been set apart for God's purpose—i.e. as we are blessed by God, we are to in turn bless and not ignore those who are weak and vulnerable. When much is given to us, much is required of us.

One day, I visited my cancer-stricken aunt in the hospital. As I was walking toward her bed, I noticed that my cousin's husband was sitting not beside her, but beside an elderly female patient on the next bed. He was holding her hand and talking with her in a gentle, engaged manner.

I asked curiously, "Johnny, you have a relative warded here too?"

He answered, "No, she is not my relative. I don't know her at all until a while ago."

I asked again, "But you both are talking so heartily to each other."

He then stood up, led me to one corner and said, "When I came, I noticed that every patient here already had some visitors with them, except for this elderly lady. From the look on her face, she seemed lonely and even abandoned. Then her eyes looked at me with intense sadness. I could sense that she was longing for someone to be a friend, or a son, or a relative to her. Sensing her desperate need for companionship and conversation, I decided to befriend her."

My cousin's husband is a lay Christian. But that day, he taught me a profound lesson in pastoral care.

We are given much love by God. How much love are we giving to others who sorely lack and desperately need His touch of love? To him who has been given much, much is required.

The Book of Amos was first written in another time and another place, but its message remains the same today. It says to us who practice rituals; have traditions and rules & policies—"Don't forget the oppressed, the needy, the poor, and the hurting among you."

To whom more is given, more is required ... required by the Lord in His Word to care for the less endowed because being blessed by God lies not so much in getting more (more money, more time, more knowledge, more training ...), but in giving with gratitude towards God and love for others with what we already have in hand.

The Lord has spoken to us in and through His Word. Let's be both hearers and doers of the His Word this day. Amen!