

# The Poor of the Land and the Pride of Jacob

by John Piper

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*The book of Amos warns of the coming judgment of God and calls for repentance, urging Israel to seek the Lord and live, hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate.*

**Scripture:** Amos 4:12-13, Amos 5:4, Amos 5:8, Amos 5:14, Amos 5:18, Amos 5:21, Amos 8:4, Amos 9:5

**Topics:** "Gods Judgment", "Social Justice"

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## Description

John Piper preaches on the message of Amos, a shepherd turned prophet, who delivered a warning of coming judgment upon the northern kingdom of Israel. Despite Amos' faithful proclamation, the people did not repent, teaching us that the effectiveness of God's word is not always visible. The central message of Amos is the impending judgment of God, portrayed vividly through the prophet's descriptions of the Lord's power and might. Amos exposes the roots of Israel's sins - forsaking God, addiction to luxury, indifference to honesty, and hardheartedness against the poor - as the reasons for God's wrath.

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## Transcript

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Amos 6:1-8; 8:4-8

Amos was a shepherd from Tekoa before God called him to be a prophet to Israel (1:1;7:14,15). And even though Tekoa is in the southern kingdom of Judah (ten miles south of Jerusalem) Amos delivered his message to the northern kingdom of Israel. His ministry happened in the reign of Jeroboam II, probably nearer the end; which means that Amos prophesied some forty to sixty years before the northern kingdom was taken into exile by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. In retrospect we can see that Amos' warning of coming judgment upon Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom (under Jeroboam) did not cause repentance and did not save the people. From this was learned at the very outset that the word of God may not always have the effect we desire. But we must be faithful like Amos and speak what we are given from the Lord and trust that he has his secret purposes in all he does, and that they are good. If an entire Biblical book seems to have been preached in vain to a nation, don't think it strange that sometimes your own testimony falls on deaf ears. The justification for speaking the word of God is not the certainty of converts but the certainty of God's call: in the words of Amos 7:15, "The Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'Go prophesy to my people Israel.'" But since Amos' word is from God and has been preserved for us in Scripture, perhaps we had better measure its true success not by its effect on the "cows of Bashan" (4:1) but by its effect on us sinners at Bethlehem.

The book is too big this time for me to give an exposition of each section. So what I would like to try to do is picture Amos' message as a tree with roots, a trunk and a few branches. The trunk is the central message of judgment. The roots are the sins of the people which cause the wrath of God to grow. And the branches are the several calls for conversion. What gives Amos his special power and impact even today is the way he exposes the roots of Israel's sin to the light of day. So that is where we want to look closest.

But first the trunk. The big, dark, unavoidable trunk of Amos is the relentless prediction that judgment is going to fall on the northern kingdom of Israel. After our message from Joel and Zephaniah you can guess what the coming day of judgment is called. Amos 5:18-20, "Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! Why would you have the day of the Lord? It is darkness and not light; as if a man fled from a lion and a bear met him; or went into the house and leaned with his hand against the wall and a serpent bit him. Is not the day of the Lord darkness and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?" The word that sets the tone for the whole book of Amos is 1:2, "The Lord roars from Zion." That's the keynote. And in 4:12 you hear that awful warning, "Because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel!" That's the trunk of the prophesy: the terrible day of the Lord is coming. If you meet him in your rebellion you will meet him like a ravenous lion roaring out of Zion. And if you turn to run you will meet him like a bear robbed of her cubs. And if you hide in your house you will meet him as a rattlesnake on the windowsill. There is no escape for unbelievers on the day of the Lord. Therefore "prepare to meet your God, O Israel."

What gives this trunk of judgment such strength and weight in the book of Amos is the portrait that he gives us of God. Three times he pauses just to paint a picture of who the Lord of judgment is. In 4:13 he tells us who it is we are supposed to prepare to meet. "For lo, he who forms the mountains and creates the wind, and declares to man what is his thought; who makes the morning darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth--the Lord, the God of hosts, is his name." He makes mountains like Play-Dough, and mighty wind with a whisper. He knows every thought of your mind before you speak it. He governs all the workings of the solar system and steps from the Appalachians to the Rockies in one stride. Do you want to meet him roaring from Zion or rejoicing over us with gladness?

Amos pauses again in 5:8 just to ponder who God is: "He who made the Pleiades and Orion and turns deep darkness into morning, and darkens the day into night, who calls for the waters of the sea and pours them out upon the surface of the earth, the Lord is his name." In other words, prepare to meet the God who builds constellations in space like tinker toys, and spins the earth like a top in his hand, and beckons for a tidal wave like a man whistles for a dog.

And finally, in 9:5,6, Amos pauses again before this God: "The Lord God of hosts, he who touches the earth and it melts, and all who dwell in it mourn, and all of it rises like the Nile, and sinks again like the Nile of Egypt; who builds his upper chamber in the heavens, and founds his vault upon the earth; who calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out upon the surface of the earth--the Lord is his name." As if to say in each of these portraits: Remember, Israel, when I say the day of the Lord is coming I mean the CREATOR! What will it mean when the creator says, "I will set my eyes upon them for evil and not for good!" (9:4)?

So the large, strong, unavoidable trunk of this prophecy is the fierce judgment of God coming upon the northern kingdom of Israel. The day of the Lord is darkness and not light for those who have loved darkness. The Creator and Ruler of all things will roar out of Zion against all his enemies. So prepare to meet your God, O Israel!

But now why has God determined such a terrible judgment against his people? What are the roots that lead to this trunk? I see one main taproot which has sent out at least three other roots, and together these four have caused the wrath of God to grow against Israel. The taproot is that the people have forsaken God. The three roots that branch off from this rejection of God are addiction to luxury, indifference to honesty and hardheartedness against the poor. Let's look at these.

First, the taproot. Israel has forsaken God. In 4:6-11 Amos describes five acts of chastisement that God had performed, each aimed at winning Israel's heart back to God. But the result is the same each time. Verse 6: "Yet you did not return to me, says the Lord." Verse 8, "Yet you did not return to me, says the Lord." Verse 9: "Yet you did not return to me, says the Lord." The same in verse 10 and the same in verse 11. The prophet could scarcely make it clearer that the taproot of Israel's judgment is that she is far from God and needs to return. Her heart is running after many things but not filled with God.

For many this expressed itself in outright idolatry, for example, in 5:26f: "You shall take up Sakkuth your king and Kaiwan your star-god, your images, which you made for yourselves; therefore I will take you into exile beyond Damascus, says the Lord whose name is the God of hosts." But there were other, more subtle, ways that their rejection of God expressed itself. For example, in their sexual behavior, they scarcely gave God a thought and brought disrepute on his name. In 2:7 it says, "A man and his father go in to the same maiden, so that my holy name is profaned." At the root of all sexual sin is an indifference to the honor of God's holy name. There are many people today who, in the Lord's house, talk as if God is real but in their sexual lives do not ask the question: Does the holy God approve of my behavior and delight in my sexual habits? That kind of compartmentalizing of God is a forsaking of God, and a preparation for judgment.

Another subtle way their rejection of God expressed itself was by going to church, giving offerings, and singing hymns. Listen to this carefully now. Bethel and Gilgal were central places of worship in Israel, and in 4:4,5 the Lord uses biting sarcasm to indict the hypocrisy of the people:

Come to Bethel and transgress; to Gilgal and multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days; offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving of that which is leavened, and proclaim free will offerings, publish them; for so you love to do, O people of Israel! says the Lord God.

Then 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 cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. 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 everflowing stream.

Amos is a devastating book for people who give token attention to God through assemblies and songs, but whose hearts are much more genuinely engaged by sports or business, or family or hobbies. If your outward acts of worship are a mask to give you some respectability while your heart is really attached to the world and to your own comfort, then God hates your worship and despises your solemn assemblies and offerings and songs.

The taproot of Israel's sin was that her heart was far from God even in her tithes and offerings and songs and assemblies. So when Amos calls for repentance in 5:4-6 the first thing he says is,

Thus says the Lord to the house of Israel: Seek me and live; do not seek Bethel, and do not enter into Gilgal or cross over to Beersheba, for Gilgal shall surely go into exile and Bethel shall come to nought. Seek the Lord and live...

In other words, get real with God. Don't equate him with places of worship or acts of religion. He is real. He is a person. Seek him. Know him. Love him. Have dealings with him. Return to the Lord your God, "lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph."

But Israel did not return to the Lord and so out from this taproot of rebellion against God grew three very ugly roots that fed the trunk of God's wrath. Israel became addicted to luxury, indifferent to honesty and hardened against the poor. She failed to heed the warning God had given in Deuteronomy 8:17-19,

Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.' You shall remember the Lord your God for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant which he swore to your fathers as at this day. And if you forget the Lord your God ... I solemnly warn you this day that you shall surely perish.

But in 6:13 Amos says to Israel, "You rejoice in Lo-debar (i.e., a thing of nought) and say, 'Have we not by our own strength taken Karnaim for ourselves?'" God had allowed Israel to prosper and her prosperity became her destruction. She fell in love with her luxury and boasted in her strength and wealth. Amos gives God's response in 6:8, "The Lord God has sworn by himself (says the Lord the God of hosts): 'I abhor the pride of Jacob and I hate his strongholds!'" When God ceases to be the treasure of your heart more than likely your heart will fasten itself on the pleasures and comforts of this life. And unless God graciously intervenes, your addiction to comfort will make you indifferent to honesty and hardened against the poor.

Listen to Amos' slam at the lovers of comfort in 6:1, "Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure in the mountain of Samaria." Verse 4: "Woe to those who lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches." Verse 6: "... who drink wine in bowls and anoint themselves with the finest oils but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph." Does that refer to anyone today: people who live for comfort and do not grieve over the lost; people who are experts in loving themselves but have not thought the first thought about what it means to love your neighbor as yourself. What governs your getting and spending? Is it the desire to fill your little three score and ten with as much comfort as you can? Or is it the God-given desire to do as much good for others as you can to the glory of Christ? There is a warning in 3:15 which hits so close to home in middle-class Minnesota that I hesitate to read it. But it's here, so I will: the Lord says, "I will smite the winter house and the summer house; and the houses of ivory shall perish and the great houses shall come to an end." Take heed and guard your hearts diligently, lest you find yourselves enslaved to comfort and addicted to luxury.

It doesn't stop there. The love of comfort leads to dishonesty and callousness toward the needy. It may be that Amos was from a poor, small-town family (1:1; 7:14f). Whatever the reason, he attacks this evil in Israel more than any other. His very first word against Israel in 2:6,7 goes straight to the issue:

Thus says the Lord: 'for three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes--they that trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and turn aside the way of the afflicted.'

In 4:1 Amos gives a graphic picture a wealthy women in the upper crust of Samarian culture: "Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are in the mountains of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, 'Bring, that we may drink!'" Then in 5:12 he shows how corruption and callousness mingle: "I know how many are your transgressions and how great are your sins--you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate." And finally, in 8:4-6 we see how religious hypocrisy and love for wealth, dishonesty and hardheartedness all combine:

Hear this, you who trample upon the needy, and bring the poor of the land to an end, saying, 'When will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain? And the Sabbath that we may offer wheat for sale, that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great, and deal deceitfully with false balances, that we may buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and sell the refuse of the wheat.'

These are the roots that feed the wrath of God in Amos' day and they feed his wrath in our day: rebellion against God (even when cloaked with church attendance), addiction to luxury and comfort, indifference to honesty, and hardness against the poor.

Now there are only a few branches that spring up out of the trunk of God's wrath, only a few calls to repentance. One we saw in 5:6, "Seek the Lord and live." So there is hope for the converted. But 5:14,15 make it clear that conversion is more than just changing your mind about God. It means exchanging love of comfort for love of goodness and justice. Amos says,

Seek good and not evil, that you may live, and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, as you have said. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord the God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

O, to have a church full of people who don't care if they live in comfort, but who hate evil, love good and who devote themselves to establish justice in the gate! People who feel grief and indignation not just when their right to get rich is threatened, but also when children die of starvation and anyone dies without salvation.

What does it mean to have justice established in the gate? I don't think it means to have a society without distinctions, but a society without oppression. No more exploitation; no more small print in the contracts; no more price-manipulating monopolies; no more Marie Antoinettes who say of the poor, "Let them eat cake." And no more Robin Hoods who steal from the rich. No more central socialist committees who hold a gun to your head and tell you how much of yours is really your neighbors, and no more fat capitalistic cats who walk by Lazarus every day on their way to work off their latest five pounds of wine on the silver running machine. No more false advertising; no more slipshod workmanship at \$30 an hour. When every wage is fair, every contract is plain, every agreement is kept and everyone strives for the advancement of his fellow man and not just his own--and all to the glory of God, then justice will be established in the gate.

And how shall we do it? By striving to produce men and women whose hearts are aflame with the righteousness of God. And by struggling together to know what elements of righteousness should be enacted into civil law. When a slumlord gouges a Laotian family with exorbitant rent in the Phillips neighborhood, it is not necessarily because of bad laws; it's because of a bad man. Therefore, we must guard ourselves against the naive idea that those who work for rent control at city hall are necessarily working harder to establish justice than those who work to convert evil men so that their hearts and business practices will ring with the righteousness of Christ.

If America stays free--which, by the way, is not the main goal of the church but, I pray, a happy byproduct--if America stays free, it will not be because Christian right-wingers push through a prayer amendment, or because Christian left-wingers push through bigger government subsidies for housing and health and jobs. It will be because the salt of the earth and the light of the world have exerted such a profound spiritual effect on the heart and soul of the nation that men and women feel pangs of conscience when contracts are broken, and refugees are gouged, and prices are inflated and workmanship is shabby and babies are intentionally aborted. Constraining civil laws are necessary in a fallen world. But if violations of love are not treated at the spiritual spring, then the river of evil that flows out of man's heart will break through every legal dam and sweep the world away with injustice. One group on earth has this potential and this mission--the Church of Jesus Christ. If we are not wholeheartedly engaged in this indispensable spiritual work, no one else will do it, for no one else has the message of redemption. And justice will most assuredly then not be established in the gate. And then who will stand when the Lord roars from Zion!

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