

Amos 1:3-2:5

'For three sins... even for four...'

A sorry picture

It was 24 April 1915.

600 Armenian leaders, writers, thinkers, and professionals in Constantinople were rounded up.

They were deported and slaughtered.

On the same day, 5000 of the poorest Armenians were butchered in the streets.

The perpetrators were a racist group belonging to the Central Committee of the Young Turk Party, which constituted the government of the Ottoman Empire in 1915-1916.

This Central Committee set up a Special Organisation, which in turn created 'butcher battalions' made up of violent criminals released from prison.

First the Armenians in the army were disarmed.

They were placed in labour groups.

Then they were killed.

Next, the Armenian political and intellectual leaders were rounded up and killed.

Finally, any remaining Armenians in the population were collected, told that they would be relocated, and then marched off to concentration camps in the desert where they would starve and thirst to death beneath the burning sun.

As they were marched off to the desert, they were often denied food and water.

Many were brutalized and killed by their guards on the way.

The authorities in Trebizond varied the routine.

They simply loaded Armenians on barges and sank them far out to sea.

At the end of the exercise, two million Armenians had been slaughtered.

And thus began a century that was supposed to be the most enlightened century in human history.

Since then we have seen genocide attempts in Germany, in Cambodia, in Rwanda, Burundi, Bosnia, Iraq, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, and the Sudan.

We have watched attempts to wipe out native Americans in North America.

And in our own country we have witnessed, and sometimes participated in, forced assimilation of our own indigenous population.

In the past few years we have watched as occupying soldiers brutalised and tortured their captives in Iraqi jails.

We have seen the most powerful nation on earth play legal games in order to skirt around international treaty obligations it has signed up to.

We have watched on television its orange-clad prisoners in Guantanamo Bay.

And here in our own country we have seen refugees being used as pawns in a political game because the players knew that we, the voters, did not want to share our lucky country with others.

We did not wish to treat them with the dignity and compassion that we have often prided ourselves on.

Tonight we are going to take a look at seven ancient nations.

They are nations that surround the nation of Israel.

And as we have taken a look at them, my suspicion is that there will be a tendency for us to look at them with arrogance.

I suspect that we will say that they are uneducated, ancient cultures and that we in the modern, enlightened world know better.
My reason for beginning tonight's talk with the stories that I have is so that you might resist this tendency.
You see, I think the stories we are going to look at tonight are told as representative stories. I think that they are told because they represent the way human beings are.
In other words, I am saying that we ought not to be surprised at what God is going to tell us about human beings.
For their story is our story.
Their humanity is our humanity.
They are us.
And our own history provides conclusive evidence of this fact.
So, with this in mind, let's take a look at Amos 1.

Amos 1:3-2:5

The general structure

Now, the first thing I want you to notice is the general structure of what happens.
Between Amos 1:3 and Amos 2:5, there are seven distinct speeches by Amos the prophet. Each speech is addressed to a nation that surrounds the nation of Judah.
In the Bible, seven is the number for wholeness or completeness.
In other words, these seven nations give a complete picture, a representative picture.
The second thing I want you to notice is that there are certain standard elements in each of the prophecies.
Each starts off with an announcement where God says, 'For three sins of X, even for four, I will not turn back...'
You can see an example of this in Amos 1:3.
This is a common way of speaking in the Old Testament.
It is not to be taken literally.
It is a way of saying that something has happened multiple times.
So, each of the prophecies has a standard beginning.
There is also a fairly standardised ending.
In all of the prophecies God promises to judge with fire.
Sometimes this judgment is spelt out and specific judgments against specific people or groups of people are mentioned.
An example of this is found in Amos 1:4-5:
*⁴ I will send fire upon the house of Hazael that will consume the fortresses of Ben-Hadad.
⁵ I will break down the gate of Damascus; I will destroy the king who is in the Valley of Aven and the one who holds the scepter in Beth Eden.
The people of Aram will go into exile to Kir," says the LORD. [Amos 1:4-5, NIV]*
The use of fire is a standard element in ancient warfare.
It was often used to burn down city gates.
Or to burn the city to the ground.
And by using this language, God himself is pictured as a man of war, a warrior.
He is waging war against the people to whom these prophecies are directed.
So, there is the beginning of each prophecy.
And there is the end of each prophecy.
And in between, there is the indictment.
In other words, in each prophecy there is a particular incident or sin that epitomises the sin of this nation.

With this in mind, let's take a look at the detail.

Detail

- **Against Damascus (1:3-5)**

Prophecy number 1 is directed against Damascus.

Damascus represents the nation of Aram.

And you can talk about the nation by referring to its capital city, Damascus.

Or you can refer to two of its great kings of this time, Hazael and Ben Hadad.

The town of Gilead that is mentioned in verse 4 is a town on the border of Aramean territory; it was often the first to suffer military incursions.

It seems that it was on one particular military incursion that this particularly barbaric deed happened.

The sleds or sledges referred to here are heavy wooden sleds, bent upward at the front.

They have sharpened iron props or stones fastened to their undersides and they are drawn by oxen and used to chop up the ears of grain.

The threshing here seems to be of both the land and the people.

It is a gross, cruel and inhumane treatment of the land and its occupants.

It is one for which both the people and its rulers will be judged.

They will lose the country to which they have migrated.

And they will be sent back to their ultimate place of origin.

- **Against Gaza (1:6-8)**

Prophecy Number 2 is addressed to Gaza.

Gaza is one of the famous five cities of the Philistines and represents the whole Philistine nation.

The particular sin that they are indicted for is outlined in verse 6.

They took captive whole communities and sold them to Edom.

The wholesale deportation of a population was an economic benefit of war in the ancient near east. When you conquered a country, one of the benefits is that you could sell the conquered people as slaves.

We are not told the identity of the people who were sold as slaves.

But we are told to whom they were sold – the Edomites.

It is possible that the Edomites operated as a sort of middle man in the deal and the slaves were then sold on to buyers in Africa or Southern Arabia.

Alternatively, the people might have been sold to work in Edomite copper and smelting operations.

The point is that the Philistines engaged in inhumanity and cruelty.

They abused and debased people to mere numbers and objects of merchandise.

They forgot that the victims of their war were people.

Like we do with those who land on the islands on the periphery of our country, the Philistines forgot that they were dealing with people.

People who have children and parents.

People who have homes.

And people who have a history.

The Philistines acted with inhumanity and cruelty.

They acted as no human should.

- **Against Tyre (1:9-10)**

Prophecy Number 3 is against Tyre.

Again, the name of Tyre is a way of talking about the whole Phoenician nation.

The charges listed here are similar to those charged against the Philistines.

The Phoenicians acted as agents in slave commerce by delivering people to the Edomites. Again, the nation they enslaved is not mentioned. However, there is an additional indictment against Tyre. Can you see it there in verse 9? They 'disregarded a treaty of brotherhood'. This is the only time this phrase is mentioned in the Old Testament. The actual covenant being referred to is not mentioned here. The words for 'disregard' literally mean 'did not remember'. To 'remember' a covenant means to observe it or to remember it in the way you act or behave. The point is that the Phoenicians acted in deplorable manner towards this group of people. They had a brotherly relationship expressed in a covenant of brotherhood. The people with whom they had the relationship would have expected them to act like brothers and like covenant partners. Instead, they broke the relationship and the covenant. For financial gain, they sold these people into slavery. They entered into the immoral trafficking of human beings for slave purposes. The modern moral equivalents of this action are clear. When a nation signs up to international conventions of brotherhood and justice and then throws them to the wind at the first opportunity, they are the inheritors of the condemnation handed down here. And my guess is that they are also inheritors of the judgment promised as well.

- Against Edom (1:11-12)

Prophecy Number 4 is directed toward Edom. The nation of Edom is descended from Esau, the brother of Jacob. In other words, they are a nation that has traditional ties of kingship and brotherhood with Israel and Judah. My own view is that this is probably what is meant by the term 'brother' in verse 11.¹ In the Genesis story of the relationship between the two brothers, Esau is promised that he will live by the 'sword' (Genesis 27:40). Here we are told that he pursues and persecutes his brother with the sword. In the Genesis story, we are told that the mother of Jacob thinks that Esau's anger will only be temporary (27:44-45). Here Amos tells us that the anger of Esau 'rages continuously'. Verse 11 talks about the fact that he stifled all compassion. It appears as though there is a play on words here. Nevertheless, the brunt of the comment is that the nation has an incessant, never-ending anger and fury. It has subdued all sparks of mercy. Again, the links between what Amos says here and what we see in our own world and even in our own lives is so apparent. We let anger boil. We stifle compassion. We shut our eyes to the pain we see in the eyes of others and use rationalisations and justifications regarding our behaviour. You see, the point is that God created the whole world and all the people of the world. God is the God of the whole world.

¹ Although there is the chance that the way 'brother' is being used here might be similar to the way it is being used in the previous prophecy, that is, a reference to some political treaty/covenant.

He is our God.

And as our God, he demands that we treat each other with dignity and respect.

He demands that we treat each other as humans, as we ourselves wish to be treated.

- Against Ammon (1:13-15)

This brings us to prophecy Number 5.

This prophecy is directed toward Ammon.

It appears as though the barbarities of war committed here were not unknown in the ancient world.

The verb used here is a verb that is used elsewhere in the Old Testament to describe the activities of bears and other animals as they tear apart human beings.

But here it is human beings who rip open the bellies of pregnant women.

And the justification is territorial expansion.

For the sake of extending borders, heinous sins are committed.

It may be part and parcel of ancient warfare, but Amos regards it as a brutal act of savage and unforgivable cruelty committed against defenceless human beings.

And notice that this prophecy

But rape and torture of women has been used throughout human history.

Acts of cruelty towards women and children in war are common.

Such things have been used thoroughly in the last century.

Such cruelty is still being used this very day.

- Against Moab (2:1-3)

Prophecy Number 6 is against Moab.

The focus of this prophecy is on 2:1.

There we are told that God's anger will be vented against Moab because 'he burned, as if to lime, the bones of Edom's king'.

It appears as though there are a few elements to this indictment.

At its core, the charge is one of desecrating a human corpse.

The phrase 'burnt to lime' might simply mean the total destruction of the corpse.

Or it may mean that the bones of the Edomite king were burnt in order to obtain lime for the purposes of plastering or using in a whitewash.

In other words, it may mean calcifying human skeletons in order to acquire lime.

Again, the point Amos wants to make is that the Moabites have shown total disregard for human dignity.

They have callously acted to mistreat fellow human beings.

- Against Judah (2:4-5)

And this brings us to the final prophecy – prophecy Number 7, against Judah.

This prophecy is the first prophecy to refer to the law of God.

You see, where every other nation or people had an obligation towards God because they were the creation of God, this nation had an additional obligation.

This nation was God's chosen people.

They had been redeemed by God.

They had a covenant of redemption as well.

And in that covenant, they had obligations to hear and obey his word.

They had obligations to have no other gods but him.

And their history has left these obligations shattered.

Loyalty to God has been replaced by a spurning of his teachings.

And in place of affection for him there is affection for other gods and a returning to the gods of their ancestors.

A summary of the argument

So, there is the prophecy of Amos against the nations.

What I want to do now is to see if I can summarise what I think God is saying through Amos in this prophecies.

But before we do this, I want to make sure that I've made myself clear.

You see, what I want you to notice is that except in one possible case, the sins that are indicted here are not sins against the people of God.

They are sins against God or sins against human beings.

And it is this that begins my summary of what we learn from Amos.

So, here are my six points:

1. All human beings are in a relationship with God.

Amos is clear, isn't he?

As far as he is concerned, all human beings are in a relationship with God.

My view is that they are related to God because they are the creation of God.

2. All humans are accountable to God.

The second point is that all humans are accountable to God.

This is clear through all these prophecies, isn't it?

It doesn't matter if you are God's chosen people or any other nation or individual.

The prophecies make clear that God not only looks at the actions of whole nations and holds them accountable.

He also looks at individuals and holds them accountable.

And so, particular rulers are singled out because they let their nations do particular actions.

3. All humans know what is good and bad.

The Old Testament, the New Testament, and a number of non-Christian philosophers and thinkers have indicated that we humans know what is good and bad.

The Bible makes clear that we know this because God has placed this sense within us.

As Paul says in Romans 2:16, we have consciences that accuse or defend us.

4. All humans are inclined toward bad (even if their sinfulness does not reach the depths here).

What I have attempted to show today is that the sins committed in the time of Amos are not unusual sins.

The nature of the sins that are committed in the days of Amos are still common today.

And the Bible is clear that they are common because the nature of humans has not changed.

Humans long to be independent of God.

They long to live life their own way with out God.

They don't love God with all their hearts, soul, strength, and mind.

And they don't love their neighbour as themselves.

Even if we don't do some of the gross things outlined in these verses, we still act as self-willed, self-centred people.

Our attitudes and the thoughts of our hearts and minds betray that we are like this.

Our attitudes to our neighbours betray that we are like this.

5. God is long suffering, but will not hold off forever.

One of the functions of the phrase 'For three sins, even for four...' is that it indicates that God has held off judgment to some extent.

And the rest of the Old Testament confirms this.

He not only allows his own nation to go on though they are so sinful.

He sometimes allows other godless nations to go on though they are sinful.

But these verses are clear, we cannot push God forever.

He will not hold off his judgment forever.

6. God speaks in Amos and promises that rebels will be punished.

Amos is clear that eventually God's longsuffering will end.

Amos and the Old Testament promises that sin must be punished.
It indicates that God will wage divine warfare against sin and sinners.
He is a moral and holy God and cannot allow sin to be left unpunished.

A postscript from the New Testament

The New Testament agrees with everything that Amos says.

But the New Testament also spells out two extra points that are implied in the Old Testament.

7. God has provided a way for humans to be reconciled and forgiven and restored to relationship with God.

The New Testament tells us that God has sent Jesus into the world.

Jesus enables us to be forgiven.

He enables us to be justified rather than condemned.

He enables us to be reconciled to God.

I want you to turn to 2 Corinthians 5:16-21.

¹⁶ So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. [2 Corinthians 5:16-21, NIV]

Look at verse 19.

8. God calls upon people everywhere to repent and trust in Jesus.

The message of the Christian gospel is clear.

God calls upon people everywhere, no matter who they are or where they come from or what they have done.

And he calls upon them to repent and trust in Jesus.

And he promises that when they do, he will give them amnesty.

He will give them eternal life.

He will give the life that is eternal in quality and quantity.

He will be to them a welcoming father rather than a divine man of war.

There will be peace rather than the fire of judgment.

So, I want to close with 2 Corinthians 5:20b-21.

We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.