

Amos 2:6-16

Setting the context

I want to start today's talk by reminding us of what we have learnt about Amos so far.

We know that Amos comes from the southern nation of Judah.

We know that the bulk of his prophecy is directed towards the northern nation of Israel.

We know that his prophecy is largely a prophecy of doom and devastating judgment.

We know that because of Amos 1:2 where Amos says:

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

Last week we looked at chapter 1 of Amos.

We saw Amos work his way through seven prophecies against seven nations that surrounded Israel.

He tells each of them that God is fed up with their behaviour.

And he promises each of them that God will come with the fire of judgment.

He will be the divine warrior, waging war on them.

The first six nations are nations that had no formal relationship with God.

Nevertheless, it is clear that God viewed them as having a relationship with him because they were part of his creation.

They lived in his world and therefore had obligations to act with common justice.

But they had brutalised and tortured and mistreated each other.

The seventh nation is the nation of Judah.

It is a nation that did have a formal relationship with God.

But they had broken that relationship by rejecting the law that governed that relationship.

They had also gone off after other gods, rather than worshipping the God with whom they had entered into relationship.

They had other Gods but him.

Now, what I want you to do as we begin tonight is to imagine that you are an Israelite.

Imagine that you live in the northern kingdom.

Imagine that you are listening to this prophecy.

And imagine how you would be feeling and thinking at this point.

My guess is that you would listen to the first six oracles and be saying to yourself,

Ah yes, those pagan nations are a clueless, godless, lot.

Look at their conduct.

Look at their barbarity.

Look at how they treat each other.

They deserve everything that is coming to them.

God will rightly judge them.

And then comes the oracle against your brother nation, Judah.

And it stirs up your natural nationalism and pride.

You find yourself agreeing with Amos.

Yes, the nation of Judah is faithless.

It always speaks so arrogantly against Israel in the north but it is rotten to the core.

It always condemns the north for its idolatry but it is idolatrous and disobedient to the core.

It deserves the heat of God's anger.

Can you see what I'm saying?

I think this prophecy is designed to create a sense of arrogance in Israel towards the other nations.

I think it is designed to create a sense of them being in the wrong and Israel being in the right.

It is designed to come as a surprise and shock.
And it is with this background that Amos utters his prophecy in Amos 2:6-16.
Let's look at what he has to say.

Amos 2:6-16

Structure

First, I want you to notice the structure.
The oracle falls into three sections.
First, there are the indictments.
There are seven of them listed in verses 6 to 8.
Second, there is the punishment.
It is introduced in verse 13.
And then seven aspects of it are outlined in verses 14-16.
And in the middle of the indictments and the punishment, God's actions toward Israel are listed.
There are five actions referred to in verses 9 to 12.

What's it all about?

Okay, so there's the broad structure.
Now let's look at the details of each section.

- **The indictments**

First, the indictments.
I need to say that there are difficulties with the Hebrew in these verses and some debate about what exactly is being referred to.
I don't think that these difficulties affect the general thrust of what is being said.
Let's have a look at each of them as the NIV presents them in verses 6 to 8.
Charge 1: They sell the righteous for silver.
The implication of this charge is that people are treated as commodities to be bought and sold.
Charge 2: They sell the needy for a pair of sandals.
Whatever this verse means, the implication is that the needy have been improperly manipulated by the wealthy for the benefit of the wealthy.
Charge 3: They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground.
The imagery here is one of treading on the head of someone as though you were treading on the dust underneath.
In other words, it is about treating them as nothing.
It is about denying their rights and abusing them as people.
Charge 4: They deny justice to the oppressed.
The image here is one of turning aside the rights of the underprivileged.
In other words, the rich and wealthy bully and oppress the underprivileged by depriving and blocking them from obtaining the privileges and prerogatives to which they are naturally entitled.
Charge 5: Father and son use the same girl and so profane God's holy name.
The word 'girl' here doesn't refer to a prostitute.
It is the normal word you use for a young woman.
The charge is that this young defenceless woman is being used and abused.
The abuse is being led by the father.
It is as though he is leading and instructing his son in the abuse.
Charge 6: They lie down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge.
In the world of the OT, there were strict laws to protect the poor.

One of them was that when you took properly in return for a loan, you never took a person's clothing.

Or, if you did, you had to return it by nightfall.

Here the wealthy are taking the garments of the poor.

And they add insult to injury by taking these garments and using them for cushions in their places of worship.

Charge 7: In the house of their god they drink wine taken as fines.

Notice the iron of this verse.

Here are the rich.

Instead of caring for the poor, they fine or tax them.

And then they use the money gained to buy wine which they consume in the presence of God.

However, notice what Amos says.

He talks about 'the house of *their* god'.

In other words, this is not the real God, but a god of their own creation.

So, there are the indictments.

I want you to notice that the charges here are different to those levelled against the preceding nations.

The first six nations were indicted because of their conduct in war.

The nation of Judah was indicted because of its failure in religion.

But the indictments that are listed here are very different.

They are social sins.

The guilt of Israel lies within the everyday oppressive behaviour of citizens toward each other.

And these sins fly in the face of their religious and covenantal commitments.

They are moral and ethical sins committed with a high hand.

This is demonstrated in the fact that they often have religious connections.

- The punishment

Let's now have a look at the punishment.

You may remember that I told you a couple of weeks ago that this time in Israel was marked by expansion and wealth.

It was a time when Israel gloried in its king and his army.

Well, the punishment hits at this very point of boasting.

God uses an imagery of wealth – a cart loaded with grain – and turns it on its head.

God will use the cart to crush Israel.

And then he announces seven punishments that affect the army, Israel's great symbol of strength.

Punishment 1: The swift will not escape.

Punishment 2: The strong will not muster their strength.

Punishment 3: The warrior will not save his life.

Punishment 4: The archer will not stand his ground,

Punishment 5: The fleet-footed soldier will not get away,

Punishment 6: The horseman will not save his life.

Punishment 7: Even the bravest warriors will flee naked on that day,"

- The Kindnesses of God

But now let's move on to the middle verses.

You see, the middle verses list the great kindnesses of God towards his people.

God tells about how he destroyed the great Amorites that had occupied the Promised Land before Israel.

He tells how God rescued his people out of Egypt and guided them through the wilderness.

He tells how he gave them godly leaders in prophets and Nazirites.

He challenges the people to deny his generosity.
And then he tells them how they just shut their eyes to God's generosity by corrupting their godly leadership just as they had used and abused the poor.
The point of these verses is clear.
God had been a God of generosity and kindness.
He had poured out this generosity and kindness upon his people.
But they had not responded with generosity and kindness.
Instead, they had seen God's generosity and kindness and turned to abuse the needy and the poor.
God's attitude to the needy and disadvantaged is seen in his generosity and kindness toward Israel.
Israel's attitude to the needy and disadvantaged is seen in their stinginess, their abuse, and their mistreatment of the poor of their society.

Saving Private Ryan

I guess that a number of you have seen the movie, *Saving Private Ryan*.
The picture tells the story of a chain of events in the closing days of the second world war.
The invasion at Normandy has taken place and succeeded.
However, there is a certain private Ryan whose life is at risk.
Three of his brothers have been killed in combat during the war and he is the only son left in one particular family.
A decision is made by General George C. Marshall to send a special group to rescue him at all costs.
The rescuers are led by Captain John Miller.
A number of the men lose their lives.
Eventually, Captain Miller himself lies dying.
Private Ryan comes to him in the closing moments of his life.
With his parting breath, Ryan whispers in his ear,
James, earn this!
Earn it!

James Ryan is left standing before the dead man.
He ages before the camera.
Many years have passed.
Ryan is now an old man standing in a sea of crosses.
He stops at one cross, the one that marks the grave of the man who died to rescue him.
He gets down on his knees and speaks toward the grave and says:

My family is with me today.
They wanted to come with me.
To be honest with you, I wasn't sure how I'd feel coming back here.
Every day I think about what you said to me that day on the bridge.
I've tried to live my life the best I could.
I hope that was enough.
I hope that at least in your eyes, I've earned what all of you have done for me.

At this point, his wife joins him before the grave.
Together they look at the grave.
And Ryan turns to his wife and says,
Tell me I've lived a good life.
Tell me I'm a good man.

She turns and looks him squarely in the eye with amazement and says to him,
You are!

Now there are some things in the sentiment of these scenes where parallels to the Christian message don't work as well as they might.

For example, the idea of earning someone's death on your behalf isn't Christian. However, there is something that I think does travel well in a Christian context. You see, what happens in this story is that a relationship is formed between Ryan and Miller. There are elements of obligation in that relationship. Captain Miller is somewhat obliged to save Ryan. And Ryan also feels an obligation to respond to Miller's sacrifice by living a good life. However, it is clear from the movie that there is something much deeper than formal obligation here. Ryan has watched Miller die for him. He has grasped the core of what this man did. He has grasped the extraordinary kindness of this man's deeds towards him. And he has sought in life to replicate that kindness. He has sought to replicate what Miller did for him in how he lives for the family that Miller enabled to come into existence. He has been a good father and a good husband. Like Miller, he has been a good man. This is what God's complaint is about in Amos. He is aggrieved. He is aggrieved, not so much because Israel has not followed the law. He is aggrieved because they have not grasped what came before the law. He is aggrieved because they have not grasped God's great kindness toward them in their need. And they have not reflected that great kindness in kindness and generosity toward the disadvantaged and needy. Instead, they have abused the needy and poor. They have used them as fodder and tools and objects of oppression and abuse. There are times when they have not strictly broken any laws. But this is not the point. The point is that they have broken the core of the law. They have not loved as they have been loved. They have not been kind as they have had kindness shown to them. They have not been like the God they profess to know.

A Christian Perspective

The Christian impact of what Amos says is clear, isn't it?

Amos and Christ

Firstly, we need to recognise that Jesus echoes much of the criticism given by Amos. Jesus tells the Jewish people of his day that although they might have been great lawkeepers, they had forgotten the heart of the law. In Matthew 5 he tells them that at the core of the commandments is love. And so, while a person may not have actually murdered, it is possible that they have hated their neighbour. While they may have not committed adultery, they have virtually done it in their minds when they have looked on someone with lust. In Matthew 9 he tells them that God is after mercy not legal requirements of sacrifice. In Mark 7 he talks about using what look to be godly traditions to avoid having to adequately care for your parents. In Mark 12, one of the Jewish religious teachers asks him about the most important commandment. ²⁹ *"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all*

your mind and with all your strength.’³¹ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” [Mark 12:29-31, NIV]

Jesus is clear, being God’s person is not about keeping the letter of the law. God’s person will want to do this. But they will not be motivated by duty to keep the law. They will be motivated by the relationship that has been won for them through God’s great kindness and mercy. They will grasp the core of what God has done for them. And so they will work at reflecting this in the way that they think and act. Like God, they will be people of mercy and kindness.

Amos and Christian faith

But let’s think a bit more about elsewhere in the New Testament. You see, it is clear that the New Testament people pick up what Jesus says. And so we find that people like Paul talk about the core of Christian faith being about love. Take a look at Romans 13:8-10.

Paul says:

⁸ Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. ⁹ The commandments, “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” ¹⁰ Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law. [Romans 13:8-10, NIV]

Paul then gives a number of examples of how this works in the rest of chapter 13 and in chapter 14. John talks about the same sort of thing in 1 John.

Let’s have a look at 1 John 2:7-11.

⁷ Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard. ⁸ Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.

⁹ Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. ¹⁰ Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. ¹¹ But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him. [1 John 2:7-11, NIV]

Can you see what John is saying?

He is saying that although the Old Testament law told people to love God and their neighbour. He is saying that this old command still stands. However, he is saying that there is something new about the love command in the New Testament. And I take it that the new thing is that we have seen it lived out in what Jesus did on the cross. We have seen how great the Father’s love is for us that he should send his only son into the world to die as a human being. We have seen the great kindness of God. Not the kindness of bringing us out of Egypt. Not the kindness of destroying the Amorites and giving us the promised land. No, God has shown us an even greater kindness. He has acted in such a manner that he has fulfilled the deepest wishes of the Old Testament saints. He has given us a new covenant where he forgives our wickedness and remembers our sins no more (Jeremiah 31:31-34). He has made us his people. He has made us his children. He has drawn us into his very presence with love and kindness.

And it is here that the rubber hits the road.

You see, we have looked into the very core of God's being and found this most extraordinary love and grace and kindness.

But with greater revelation comes greater obligation.

We must love as we have been loved.

And if we do not, then surely we have not understood God's love for us.

This is what John means in verses 9 to 11:

⁹ Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. ¹⁰ Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. ¹¹ But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him. [1 John 2:9-11, NIV]

Brothers and sisters, let me urge you to hear what Amos and Jesus and Paul and John are saying. God doesn't want duty from us.

He wants us to understand what motivates and drives him.

And he wants us then to be filled with the same sort of compassion and mercy.

He want us to act towards each other as he has acted towards us.

He doesn't want a mean heartedness that treats each other as an obligation.

He doesn't want our love to be systematic and legal.

He wants our love to flow from a heart that has experienced his love.

A heart that overflows with generosity and kindness and love, just as his does.

This is what we are to be with everyone we meet.

This is what we are to be in our life with each other.

We are to be people who reflect great love because we have been loved with a great love.

We are to be known by our love.

Brothers and sisters, let me close with the words of 1 John 4:7-12.

⁷ Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. [1 John 4:7-12, NIV]

[Note: An additional application of this passage might be to reflect on the steward of Matthew 18 who sees God's generosity but is mean to his fellow steward.]