



Sunday School Lesson
Amos 2:6-8; 5:18-27; 6:4-7
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The study of selected passages from the OT book of Amos targets those passages addressing the issue of poverty and wealth. The key ones are found in chapters two, five and six.



I. Context

This Old Testament document records the preaching ministry of the eight-century prophet Amos. As such, a discernible setting for his ministry is possible both from materials inside the document itself as well as from other ancient sources.

a. Historical

The historical time frame for the book is set in the first verse of chapter one with the introductory statement (NRSV): “The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of King Uzziah of Judah and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel, two years before the earthquake.” This was a rather common way in ancient writings for setting up a time reference. Since a system of time calculation using a calendar like we do didn’t exist in the ancient world, time references would commonly be cast against significant rulers and other important events. Amos’ ministry is set here as having taken place during the reigns of Uzziah in the southern kingdom of Judah (785-733 B.C.E.) and Jeroboam II in the northern kingdom of Israel (788-747 B.C.E.). The exact dating of the earthquake, also mentioned in Zech. 14:5, is unknown, but it evidently took place sometime during the common times of these two kings. The year

760 B.C.E. has been suggested from archaeological indications of an ancient earthquake in this region. The mention of the earthquake provides a backdrop to a later discussion in 9:1-6 that seemingly builds off the imagery of an earthquake.

Thus we are dealing with a relatively short period of time in the middle 700s B.C.E. during which this prophet delivered his message in ancient Hebrew oracles to the people of the northern kingdom. Most of these messages were delivered at [Bethel](#), a center of religious activity in the northern kingdom during this period. Bethel had a long history of religious activity reaching back to the patriarchs, as is summarized from the online [Easton's Dictionary of the Bible](#) article:

A place in Central Palestine, about 10 miles north of Jerusalem, at the head of the pass of Michmash and Ai. It was originally the royal Canaanite city of Luz (Genesis 28:19). The name Bethel was at first apparently given to the sanctuary in the neighbourhood of Luz, and was not given to the city itself till after its conquest by the tribe of Ephraim. When Abram entered Canaan he formed his second encampment between Bethel and Hai (Genesis 12:8); and on his return from Egypt he came back to it, and again "called upon the name of the Lord" (13:4). Here Jacob, on his way from Beersheba to Haran, had a vision of the angels of God ascending and descending on the ladder whose top reached unto heaven (28:10,19); and on his return he again visited this place, "where God talked with him" (35:1-15), and there he "built an altar, and called the place El-beth-el" (q.v.). To this second occasion of God's speaking with Jacob at Bethel, (Hosea 12:4,5) makes reference.

In troublous times the people went to Bethel to ask counsel of God (Judges 20:18,31; 21:2). Here the ark of the covenant was kept for a long time under the care of Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron (20:26-28). Here also Samuel held in rotation his court of justice (1 Samuel 7:16). It was included in Israel after the kingdom was divided, and it became one of the seats of the worship of the golden calf (1 Kings 12:28-33; 13:1). Hence the prophet Hosea (Hosea 4:15; 5:8; 10:5,8) calls it in contempt Beth-aven, i.e., "house of idols." Bethel remained an abode of priests even after the kingdom of Israel was desolated by the king of Assyria (2 Kings 17:28,29). At length all traces of the idolatries were extirpated by Josiah, king of Judah (2 Kings 23:15-18); and the place was still in existence after the Captivity (Ezra 2:28; Nehemiah 7:32). It has been identified with the ruins of Beitin, a small village amid extensive ruins some 9 miles south of Shiloh.

Amos himself resided in the small village of Tekoah in the southern kingdom, located about ten miles south of Jerusalem. Thus Amos was a 'southerner' who went north to preach to the 'northerners' his message of coming judgment. Also, he identified himself as a being a shepherd, and not as a part of the priests as is dramatically stated in 7:14-15 (NRSV): "14 Then Amos answered Amaziah, 'I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, 15 and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'" Although he disclaimed being a prophet, down through the subsequent centuries Amos has become known as the first of the great eighth-century Hebrew prophets. He marked a new direction for the prophetic tradition among the Hebrew people. Elijah and Elisha who preceded him addressed their messages to reigning monarchs, while Amos and those who would follow spoke directly to the people. Their messages took on a different thrust. Previous OT prophets focused on the personal failures of royalty and God's judgment of the rulers, but Amos began a tradition of addressing social issues and God's displeasure with injustices being done. Thirdly, for the first time in Hebrew history, the messages of Amos and later prophets were written down and eventually incorporated into complete documents. (See John Tullock, *The Old Testament Story*, p. 181, for details).

The social issue that this lesson emphasizes is the abuse of poor Israelites by the wealthy. This theme in the book of Amos was delivered at a time of unparalleled prosperity in both the northern and southern kingdoms. The two kingdoms had reestablished their boundaries to match those during Solomon's time. The Assyrians had delivered a knockout blow to Syria in 801 BCE that had freed up both Jeroboam and Uzziah to reign during relative peaceful times, and Assyria had then entered into a period of weakness itself, which kept it from interfering into the affairs of the two Israelite kingdoms for several decades. Thus the Israelites entered into a period of stability and substantial material prosperity. But as Amos would point out, not everyone shared in this. As the old cliché goes, "the rich got richer and the poor got poorer." The abuse of the Israelite peasants by aristocracy incurred the wrath of God to such a degree that he sent first Amos, and then Hosea, to the northern kingdom to pronounce on them a coming [Day of the Lord](#) that would spell the end of the northern kingdom. In fact, with the Assyrian invasion of the northern kingdom in 722 B.C.E. Amos' prophecy was fulfilled and the northern kingdom ceased to exist.

The specific issue addressed by Amos needs some attention. The physical poverty of many Israelites during the divided kingdoms period was intensified by the abusive practices of the aristocratic segment of society. Robert Spender has a helpful summation in the online [Baker's Theological Dictionary of the Bible](#):

"The Pentateuch emphasizes equitable treatment for the poor. Justice was neither to be withheld from the poor (Exod 23:6) nor distorted because a person was poor (23:3; le 19:15). Such equity is illustrated by the collection of ransom money from rich and poor alike (Exod 30:15). As part of the covenant community the poor person was to be treated with respect (Deut 24:10-11) and supported, even economically, by other Israelites, since they were not to charge interest to the poor of their people (Exod 22:25; Lev 25:35-38).

Beyond direct legislation a number of institutions contained special provisions for the poor. Gleaning laws focused on the widow, fatherless, stranger, and poor (Lev 19:9-10; 23:22; Deut 24:19-22). During the Sabbatical year debts were to be canceled (Deut 15:1-9) and Jubilee provided release for Hebrews who had become servants through poverty (Lev 25:39-41,54). During these festivals the poor could eat freely of the produce of all of the fields (Exod 23:11; Lev 25:6-7, 12).

Further stipulations to aid the poor included the right of redemption from slavery by a blood relative (Lev 25:47-49), support from the third-year tithe (Deut 14:28-29), and special provisions regarding the guilt offerings. This latter law illustrates the relative nature of the concept of poverty. If someone cannot afford the normal atonement lamb he or she can bring two pigeons (Lev 5:7) but further consideration, (substituting one-tenth ephah of flour), is made for one who cannot afford even two pigeons (5:11). Clearly, the Law emphasized that poverty was no reason for exclusion from atonement and worship!

Motivation for such legislation was God's concern for the poor. God listened to the cry of the needy (Exod 22:27), blessed those who considered them (Deut 24:13,19), and held accountable those who oppressed them (Deut 24:15). The Lord based this position on his relationship with his people; he was their God (Lev 23:22) and had redeemed them from slavery (Deut 24:18)....

Amos is quite graphic in his portrayal of the oppression of the poor. The poor are bought and sold, trampled, crushed, oppressed, forced, and denied justice by those who are in a position to do otherwise. Their treatment is a striking example of the waywardness of God's people from the covenant obligations and their unique relationship with the Lord. Amos underscores this situation: "They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed" (2:6-7).

The emphasis of the prophetic invective fell upon the leaders. Instead of defending the poor and upholding the Law of God they took bribes and gifts to pervert justice (Isa 1:23). Neglecting the clear call of Scripture to provide for the poor, they passed unjust laws and deprived the poor of their rights (10:1-2; Jer 5:27-28), taking their goods and their land (Isa 3:13-15; 5:8). Isaiah accents their abuse: "What do you mean by crushing my people and grinding the faces of the poor?" (3:15). Yet the people were held accountable for their actions as well. Ezekiel, for example, reminded the people that they had joined with the leaders in such oppression (22:26-29) and pointed out the primary responsibility of the individual was to obey God (18:16-17).

This issue raised the matter of God's righteousness and justice, and would become a frequent theme for the Hebrew prophets for the next several centuries. One of the ramifications of God's holiness was and is His expectation of His people behaving in holiness. A major implication of holy living is the fair and just treatment of other people, especially those who are the more helpless and vulnerable in society. For Amos, this meant both individual actions and community actions through its business, governmental and religious structures.

b. Literary

The way the book is organized has been helpfully summarized by Rabbi Ehud ben Zvi in *The Jewish Study Bible* (pp. 1176f.): "The basic structure of the book is unambiguous. It includes a superscription or title that serves as an introduction (1.1), a clear motto that communicates one of the most significant messages of the book (1.2), and a series of prophetic readings of which the last two encapsulate much of the book. The Lord announces a severe, future punishment for the condemned nation, then an ideal and plentiful future to follow the deserved punishment (9.7-15). The series of prophetic readings begins with announcements of judgment against the nations, including Judah and Israel (1.3.-2.16) and continues with reports of prophetic speeches and visions of the fate of Israel, along with a biographical vignette in 7:10-17."

The three passages emphasized in the Formations lesson plan are 2:6-8; 5:18-27; 6:4-7. Because each passage has a different context, we will treat the specific literary context for each passage as the

introductory discussion for each scripture text.

II. Message

These three passages address three aspects of Amos' pronouncement of doom on the northern kingdom in large part because of their social injustice.

a. Oracle of Judgment, 2:6-8

NASB	NRSV	NLT
6 Thus says the LORD, "For three transgressions of Israel and for four I will not revoke its punishment, Because they sell the righteous for money And the needy for a pair of sandals. 7 "These who pant after the very dust of the earth on the head of the helpless Also turn aside the way of the humble; And a man and his father resort to the same girl In order to profane My holy name. 8 "On garments taken as pledges they stretch out beside every altar, And in the house of their God they drink the wine of those who have been fined.	6 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 sandals — 7 they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way; father and son go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned; 8 they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed.	6 This is what the LORD says: "The people of Israel have sinned again and again, and I will not forget it. I will not let them go unpunished any longer! They have perverted justice by selling honest people for silver and poor people for a pair of sandals. 7 They trample helpless people in the dust and deny justice to those who are oppressed. Both father and son sleep with the same woman, corrupting my holy name. 8 At their religious festivals, they lounge around in clothing stolen from their debtors. In the house of their god, they present offerings of wine purchased with stolen money.

Comments:

This first passage stands as a part of the first oracle (1:3-2:16) in which divine judgment is pronounced on the surrounding nations and comes to a climax with Amos' thundering declarations against Israel itself. This is the first instance of such a pattern in the Old Testament, but what Amos did here became a frequently repeated pattern in a large number of subsequent prophetic books in the OT. His declaration against Israel is found in 2:6-16. Our passage is the initial part of that section.

The passage begins with a declaration that God will not alter His plan of punishing Israel. This judgment is established and will happen without failure. The summary reason is in verse six and is expressed clearly in the NLT: "The people of Israel have sinned again and again." What follows is a listing of offenses by Israel that serve as the basis of God's judgment of the nation. The central issue here relates to the debtor court system.

(1) Their treatment of the poor is listed (vv. 6b-7, NLT): "They have perverted justice by selling honest people for silver and poor people for a pair of sandals. They trample helpless people in the dust and deny justice to those who are oppressed." Amos accuses the people of having corrupted the court system so that the poor were mere pawns to be used and abused at will. The poor are identified as 'the righteous,' 'the needy,' 'the poor,' and 'the afflicted.' Honest people in financial trouble wound up being sold as slaves; these needy ones were sold for as little a debt as the price of a part of sandals; the poor had no recourse through the justice

system functioning at that time since the courts would just ‘trample them into the dust.’”

(2) The young girl, sold into slavery most likely as a part of the debtor system, is not only sexually abused by the young son in the household, but also by the father as well. God was deeply offended by such practices.

(3) The outer garments of the poor taken as pledge of repayment of debts were being kept by the wealthy in direct violation of the Legal Code in Ex. 22:26-27 and used as blankets for the wealthy picnicking in outer courts of the temple. Also, wine put up as collateral by poor farmers was drunk in the temple by the wealthy.

The picture graphically painted by Amos is of a prosperous society whose binging on things led them to ignore and even to target the helpless of their society. No wonder Amos began his prophecy in 1:2 with “the Lord roars from Zion...”

What can we learn from this? Clearly this OT passage reminds us pointedly that God cares deeply about poor people. When our country turns away from serious efforts to provide them justice and a way to live life free from want and need, then our country is in very hot water with Almighty God. The spiraling cycles of increasing poverty in the U.S. over the past few years should sound an alarm that we as a nation are walking away from God’s path and into the same dangerous waters that the northern Israelite kingdom found itself in during Amos’ day. For us as Christians with the model of Christ’s love and commitment to the poor described in the gospels, there should be even greater urgency to address these wrongs.

b. The Day of the Lord, 5:18-27

NASB	NRSV	NLT
18 Alas, you who are longing for the day of the LORD, For what purpose <i>will</i> the day of the LORD <i>be</i> to you? It <i>will be</i> darkness and not light; 19 As when a man flees from a lion And a bear meets him, Or goes home, leans his hand against the wall And a snake bites him. 20 <i>Will</i> not the day of the LORD <i>be</i> darkness instead of light, Even gloom with no brightness in it? 21 “I hate, I reject your festivals, Nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies. 22 “Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept <i>them</i> ; And I will not <i>even</i> look at the peace offerings of your fatlings. 23 “Take away from Me the noise of your songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps.	18 Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light; 19 as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. 20 Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? 21 I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. 22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. 23 Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody	18 How terrible it will be for you who say, “If only the day of the LORD were here! For then the LORD would rescue us from all our enemies.” But you have no idea what you are wishing for. That day will not bring light and prosperity, but darkness and disaster. 19 In that day you will be like a man who runs from a lion – only to meet a bear. After escaping the bear, he leans his hand against a wall in his house – and is bitten by a snake. 20 Yes, the day of the LORD will be a dark and hopeless day, without a ray of joy or hope. 21 “I hate all your show and pretense – the hypocrisy of your religious festivals and solemn assemblies. 22 I will not accept your burnt offerings and grain offerings. I won’t even notice all your choice peace offerings. 23 Away with your hymns of

24 "But let justice roll down like waters
And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
25 "Did you present Me with sacrifices and grain offerings in the wilderness for forty years, O house of Israel? 26 "You also carried along Sikkuth your king and Kiyun, your images, the star of your gods which you made for yourselves. 27 "Therefore, I will make you go into exile beyond Damascus," says the LORD, whose name is the God of hosts.

of your harps.
24 But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
25 Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? 26 You shall take up Sakkuth your king, and Kaiwan your star-god, your images, which you made for yourselves; 27 therefore I will take you into exile beyond Damascus, says the Lord, whose name is the God of hosts.

praise!
They are only noise to my ears.
I will not listen to your music, no matter how lovely it is.
24 Instead, I want to see a mighty flood of justice, a river of righteous living that will never run dry.
25 "Was it to me you were bringing sacrifices and offerings during the forty years in the wilderness, Israel? 26 No, your real interest was in your pagan gods – Sakkuth your king god and Kaiwan your star god – the images you yourselves made. 27 So I will send you into exile, to a land east of Damascus," says the LORD, whose name is God Almighty.

Comments:

Wow! What a powerful declaration here! The context here is the second major oracle section (3:1-6:14) that contains three subsections, each introduced by the admonition "Hear this word..." (3:1; 4:1; 5:1). In this third subsection Amos began with a lament over the destroyed house of Israel as he could foresee it after divine judgment (5:1-17). This was followed by a lengthy discourse on the [Day of the Lord](#). 6:1-14 warned those who were living comfortably as though nothing was about to happen.

Initially Amos spoke to those who falsely looked forward to the Day of the Lord. In their minds it would bring about total destruction of all their enemies and allow them to prosper even further. Instead, declared Amos, it would be a horrible day for these Israelites. When the Assyrians came in 722 BCE and overran the northern kingdom, those still living then perhaps realized some of what Amos was alluding to here. Ancient Assyria was one of the most brutal empires to ever exist in human history. Their policy was largely that of extermination of all enemies. Once they crushed Israel, it never again came back to life as an identifiable nation.

The other emphasis of this passage has to do with the Israelites' worship. With stinging rebuke Amos declared that God had no interest in their worship. Why? Largely because it had become the conscience salve to cover up their injustices and abuse of the peasants. They were flagrantly disregarding divine law and then coming to worship God as though every thing was okay. God wanted nothing whatsoever to do with that kind of worship from His people. Verses 25-27 remind them of the similar patterns in their history during the wilderness wanderings and that God had punished their forefathers then. Now He was going to punish them by a captivity beyond the Syrian capital of Damascus, an allusion to the Assyrians from whom the modern Iraqis in the northern part of Iraq have descended.

The lesson for us here? It should be fairly clear. A sinful life-style and authentic worship just don't go together. It's like trying to mix oil and water. The New Testament typically labels this hypocrisy and also soundly condemns it. But there's more here to ponder. Amos is mostly speaking collectively, rather than individually, to the people of the northern kingdom. Our individualistic American society makes us inclined to read these passages with an individualistic assumption and then ignore or miss the collective aspect. For Amos the nation as a whole needed to get its act together. God was holding the nation accountable collectively. Because of that everyone in the nation had an obligation to do everything in their power not just to turn around their own individual lives, but to also make certain that this repentance and return to justice permeated society as a whole. In other words, we haven't done what we need to here by merely getting our own lives back on track. We also have obligation before God to push our society toward getting its act together spiritually and socially as well.

c. Living High on the Hog, 6:4-7

NASB	NRSV	NLT
4 Those who recline on beds of ivory And sprawl on their couches, And eat lambs from the flock And calves from the midst of the stall,	4 Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall;	4 How terrible it will be for you who sprawl on ivory beds surrounded with luxury, eating the meat of tender lambs and choice calves.
5 Who improvise to the sound of the harp, And like David have composed songs for themselves,	5 who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music;	5 You sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and you fancy yourselves to be great musicians, as King David was.
6 Who drink wine from sacrificial bowls While they anoint themselves with the finest of oils, Yet they have not grieved over the ruin of Joseph.	6 who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!	6 You drink wine by the bowlful, and you perfume yourselves with exotic fragrances, caring nothing at all that your nation is going to ruin.
7 Therefore, they will now go into exile at the head of the exiles, And the sprawlers' banqueting will pass away.	7 Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.	7 Therefore, you will be the first to be led away as captives. Suddenly, all your revelry will end.

Comments:

From the context described in relation to the preceding passage we sense the continuing thunderous message of Amos to the people of the northern kingdom. As the third subsection (6:1-14) in the second cycle of oracles (3:1-6:14), these verses come in the middle of a series of Woes pronounced on the people of the northern kingdom. The first set (6:1-3) attacked the wealthy who depended on their military fortifications and might to protect them from all enemies. The second set (6:4-7) continues that attack by focusing on their false sense of security that led to an excessive style of living. The third section (6:8-14) recounts the determination of the Lord to bring these people down with a crushing blow.

Our passage concentrates on the excessive life-style of the aristocratic element in Israel. It is a picture of extravagant living that stands as an offense to God. The great tragedy is that this way of living took place while many poor people were in desperate need and also in part was made possible by the injustices against the poor by these wealthy people. But for Amos all this was doing was increasing the fire of God's wrath that would pour out upon them within a few decades after Amos delivered his message.

Another very important contextual implication is that this excessive life-style was based on a completely false sense of security from their enemies. They were certain that the combination of their military might and their churchgoing was a guarantee of divine protection from all enemies. But this was a recipe for disaster for the nation.

The worst possible combination is to mix religion and wealth into an excessive, extravagant life-style. Particularly, if this grows out of and feeds social injustice. The northern kingdom lost sight of what Moses had declared in the Exodus about them being a covenant people who were to care as deeply for one another as God did, and who were to passionately seek the holiness of God in their own living. By abandoning that they doomed themselves and their nation. Neither God nor His standards have changed since Amos first proclaimed this message nearly three thousand years ago.