

## How can Social Injustice Affect our Worship?

Amos 1 & 2

Pastor Tom  
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This past summer, we had the opportunity to go visit family in Southern Ontario. One day, we drove into downtown Toronto to see a late afternoon Blue Jays game. We got there early so we were able to park quite close to the baseball stadium. I was pretty convinced that we were in a good spot to get out quickly after the game. Rush hour would be done. We were pretty close to a road that would get us back on the main highway. I thought we were set.

But I soon discovered how much of a rookie I am when it comes to downtown Toronto. The game ended around 7 PM. It took us about half an hour to get from our parking lot onto the road. So we decided we'd go deeper into downtown to get a little desert. We found the ice cream place and enjoyed some great ice cream.

It was now about 9 PM. I was sure that traffic would have cleared out. But when we got to the road, there was still heavy traffic. We'd see the traffic light in front of us turned green. But we would hardly move an inch.

What was going on? There was no accident ahead. All we saw were the red brake lights of people in front of us. We finally discovered what was happening. When a light 2 intersections ahead of us turned green, the people on our road went through the light. But from the side streets and alleys a whole bunch of other cars filled in the gap. So by the time our light turned green, these new cars obstructed any progress we could make to move across the intersection. There were 6 or 7 of these traffic lights before we could reach the highway. So our trip to downtown Toronto included a baseball game, some ice cream and lots of bonding time in the car because of the obstructions ahead of us.

Of course downtown Toronto is not the only place you experience obstructions in life. We face them at work, school or home. We can also face obstructions when we worship the Lord. I think many of us desire a connection with God through our worship.

But there are times when something obstructs our worship. Sometimes, that which obstructs is beyond our control. Other times, our own actions place a huge obstruction between us and God. Today we are going to discover a major contributor to obstruction of our worship.

We will find it in the little Old Testament prophetic book called Amos. He received a commission from God to preach to God's people about their lives and their worship. In his first message, we will discover this major obstacle to worship and what we must do to remove it from our lives by the power of God. So will you please find Amos in your

Bibles? Don't be afraid or embarrassed to look it up in the Table of Contents because its kind of hard to find. But once you do, we'll start in chapter 1, verse 1 and read the first 2 chapters.

### **Amos 1-2 (ESV)**

**1** The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake.

**2** And he said:

“The LORD roars from Zion  
and utters his voice from Jerusalem;  
the pastures of the shepherds mourn,  
and the top of Carmel withers.”

**3** Thus says the LORD:

“For three transgressions of Damascus,  
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment,  
because they have threshed Gilead  
with threshing sledges of iron.

**4** So I will send a fire upon the house of Hazael,  
and it shall devour the strongholds of Ben-hadad.

**5** I will break the gate-bar of Damascus,  
and cut off the inhabitants from the Valley of Aven,  
and him who holds the scepter from Beth-eden;  
and the people of Syria shall go into exile to Kir,”  
says the LORD.

**6** Thus says the LORD:

“For three transgressions of Gaza,  
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment,  
because they carried into exile a whole people  
to deliver them up to Edom.

**7** So I will send a fire upon the wall of Gaza,  
and it shall devour her strongholds.

**8** I will cut off the inhabitants from Ashdod,  
and him who holds the scepter from Ashkelon;  
I will turn my hand against Ekron,  
and the remnant of the Philistines shall perish,”  
says the Lord GOD.

<sup>9</sup>Thus says the LORD:

“For three transgressions of Tyre,  
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment,  
because they delivered up a whole people to Edom,  
and did not remember the covenant of brotherhood.

<sup>10</sup>So I will send a fire upon the wall of Tyre,  
and it shall devour her strongholds.”

<sup>11</sup>Thus says the LORD:

“For three transgressions of Edom,  
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment,  
because he pursued his brother with the sword  
and cast off all pity,  
and his anger tore perpetually,  
and he kept his wrath forever.

<sup>12</sup>So I will send a fire upon Teman,  
and it shall devour the strongholds of Bozrah.”

<sup>13</sup>Thus says the LORD:

“For three transgressions of the Ammonites,  
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment,  
because they have ripped open pregnant women in Gilead,  
that they might enlarge their border.

<sup>14</sup>So I will kindle a fire in the wall of Rabbah,  
and it shall devour her strongholds,  
with shouting on the day of battle,  
with a tempest in the day of the whirlwind;

<sup>15</sup>and their king shall go into exile,  
he and his princes together,”  
says the LORD.

**2** Thus says the LORD:

“For three transgressions of Moab,  
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment,  
because he burned to lime  
the bones of the king of Edom.

<sup>2</sup>So I will send a fire upon Moab,  
and it shall devour the strongholds of Kerioth,

and Moab shall die amid uproar,  
amid shouting and the sound of the trumpet;

<sup>3</sup> I will cut off the ruler from its midst,  
and will kill all its princes with him,"  
says the LORD.

<sup>4</sup> Thus says the LORD:

"For three transgressions of Judah,  
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment,  
because they have rejected the law of the LORD,  
and have not kept his statutes,  
but their lies have led them astray,  
those after which their fathers walked.

<sup>5</sup> So I will send a fire upon Judah,  
and it shall devour the strongholds of Jerusalem."

<sup>6</sup> 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—

<sup>7</sup> those who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth  
and turn aside the way of the afflicted;

a man and his father go in to the same girl,  
so that my holy name is profaned;

<sup>8</sup> they lay themselves down beside every altar  
on garments taken in pledge,  
and in the house of their God they drink  
the wine of those who have been fined.

<sup>9</sup> "Yet it was I who destroyed the Amorite before them,  
whose height was like the height of the cedars  
and who was as strong as the oaks;

I destroyed his fruit above  
and his roots beneath.

<sup>10</sup> Also it was I who brought you up out of the land of Egypt  
and led you forty years in the wilderness,  
to possess the land of the Amorite.

<sup>11</sup> And I raised up some of your sons for prophets,

and some of your young men for Nazirites.

Is it not indeed so, O people of Israel?"

declares the LORD.

<sup>12</sup> "But you made the Nazirites drink wine,  
and commanded the prophets,  
saying, 'You shall not prophesy.'

<sup>13</sup> "Behold, I will press you down in your place,  
as a cart full of sheaves presses down.

<sup>14</sup> Flight shall perish from the swift,  
and the strong shall not retain his strength,  
nor shall the mighty save his life;

<sup>15</sup> he who handles the bow shall not stand,  
and he who is swift of foot shall not save himself,  
nor shall he who rides the horse save his life;

<sup>16</sup> and he who is stout of heart among the mighty  
shall flee away naked in that day,"

declares the LORD.

### **Who was Amos and to whom did he speak?**

The first verse into this little book gives us crucial information to understand it. It reveals the prophet's name, occupation and hometown along with the time period in which he spoke. "The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa which he saw concerning Israel." So we meet Amos and were told he was among the shepherds of Tekoa. This village was about 10 kilometers south of Bethlehem and 20 kilometers south of Jerusalem. That meant, Amos came from a nation called Judah at that time. Now Judah used to be part of the greater nation of Israel. But after King Solomon died, his son decided to rule with an iron fist. So 10 out of 12 of the Israelites tribes or provinces separated from him and formed a nation in the north called Israel. Solomon's son continued to reign over 2 southern tribes in a nation called Judah. That's where Amos came from.

But look at who this message was directed towards. "The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa which he saw *concerning Israel.*" So Amos, from Judah in the south, had a message for Israel in the north. The text tells us he was among the shepherds. But most of your Bibles will have a little footnote attached to the word shepherds. At the bottom of your page it will give you the alternative translation of sheep breeders. If that is the correct translation, then Amos was not some poor shepherd sitting on a hill tending a flock for a rancher. He was a rancher or someone in

charge of multiple shepherds who tended his flocks. There are references later on in the book that point to this as the more likely profession of Amos.

**So Amos was a sheep breeder from the southern kingdom of Judah with a message for the people of the northern kingdom of Israel.**

The rest of verse 1 gives us the time frame when Amos delivered this message – “in the days of Uzziah king of Judah and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel. Now those names mean little to most of us. But they enable us to gain some context. When both of these kings were in power, the big superpower of the region, Assyria, had some significant internal problems that weakened her. This meant that other kingdoms flourished especially Israel. So Amos would be preaching to a people experiencing prosperity. But there’s one more marker. “2 years before the earthquake”. A significant earthquake hit the region during the reign of Uzziah. It’s referred to in other parts of the Bible like Zechariah 14:5. Earthquakes were often viewed as signs of judgment from God. So, placing this information here would immediately remind the readers of the time period and that Amos’ message was soon followed by this earthquake.

So we get a hint here of the kind of message Amos will deliver. But then Verse 2 confirms it. “And he said, ‘The Lord roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds mourn, and the top of Carmel withers.’” So the Lord will roar. Lions roar when they set out to hunt. The Lord roars!

But notice from where He roars. “The Lord roars *from Zion* and utters his voice *from Jerusalem*.” Zion was the mount or hill in Jerusalem upon which Solomon’s temple had been built. So this message came from the Lord’s house of worship in Jerusalem in the southern kingdom. Amos will preach this to northerners.

But there’s another piece of history that makes the Lord’s roar from Zion more significant. When the 10 northern tribes of Israel separated from the 2 southern tribes, they had a problem. The nation’s house of worship was located in Jerusalem in the south. But the northern king did not want his people going into the southern kingdom to worship. So he had 2 new worship centers built way up north in Dan and fairly close to Jerusalem at Bethel. The northern Israelites were supposed to go worship there. Their king proclaimed that the Lord also spoke from these shrines. But here the Lord roars from Zion in Jerusalem implying that the Lord did not dwell in alternative worship locations. So we see already there is something wrong with the Israelites worship. The last phrase of verse 2 informs us that this message will be tough. In

fact as the Lord roars the pastures will mourn or dry up and the top of one of Israel's lushest mountains, Carmel, withers.

So it's like the Lord's message going out will be so severe that it will be like a scorching wind.

So in just 2 short verses, we have learned the name, profession and home town of the speaker. We have learned about his listeners – the citizens of the northern kingdom of Israel. We've learned the time this message was given – a time of prosperity, greed and alternative worship. And we've learned the type of message coming – a scorching one from the Lord.

I recognize the last thing that many of you need today is to be scorched by a tough message from the Lord. But even when the Lord has tough words, they are necessary words. These words can also bring reassurance, comfort and encouragement as we hear Him declare His sovereign authority over those who have done wrong. So would you pray and ask the Lord to help you hear what He wants to bring you today.

Amos first directs his message to nations surrounding Israel. He follows an introductory formula for each one. "For three transgressions and for four, I will not revoke punishment." So it's like he's saying "for three or four transgressions or wrongdoings, I am going to bring punishment on so and so nation." So we would expect that he would list 3 or 4 sins for each nation.

So let's see what he does. He starts with **Damascus** in verses 3-5 at the northeast or upper right hand of Israel. He says "I will not revoke punishment because they have threshed Gilead with threshing sledges of iron." The Lord charges Damascus with treating the citizens of Gilead with **brutal cruelty**. Gilead was a part of Israel just below Damascus. Perhaps in some border skirmish, the Damascus army had treated people so harshly it was like they laid the people down and ran a heavy sled over them. But notice, Amos only mentions one transgression of Damascus.

Then the Lord declares how He will punish. He would send fire upon the house of the king. He would devour their strongholds. He would break the gates which were critical in a city's defence. So the Lord promises to humble Damascus and bring her to her knees.

Amos follows this pattern with each nation. He brings up **Gaza** next; a Philistine city to the southwest or bottom left of Israel. He also mentions three transgressions and four but then only describes one. "They carried into exile a whole people to deliver them up to Edom." So the Philistines were **trafficking of slaves**. It seems that they went into a village

and enslaved the people. Then they sell them to the nation of Edom. He pronounces a very similar judgment – fire; destruction of strongholds, people and leaders humbled and overthrown.

Next is **Tyre** – an island like fortress to the northwest or upper left of Israel. This nation was once an ally of Israel during the time of Solomon. But their crime also involved slavery. Verse 9 – “They delivered up a whole people to Edom and did not remember the covenant of brotherhood.” The nation of Tyre **enslaved a group of people** and since they bordered Israel, the slaves could have come from Israel. The Lord pronounces judgment of fire and devouring of strongholds.

The pattern repeats four more times. Edom to the far south is condemned for ruthless, persistent, angry treatment of their brothers. Ammon to the east is condemned for assault on the unborn. Moab to the east is condemned for burning the bones of a deceased king. And Judah to the south is condemned for disobeying the Lord’s statutes. In most cases only 1 transgression is listed even though the Lord says there were three or four major ones.

Now if you’re an Israelite, all of these judgments and condemnation are good news! The prophet has just condemned all the surrounding nations for transgressions. You’re scot free. But there is another way to look at what Amos was doing.

Damascus to the northeast. Gaza to the southwest. Tyre to the northwest. Edom to the southeast. Ammon and Moab to the east. Judah to the south. They form the complete borders of Israel. So is Amos saying everyone that surrounds Israel has transgressed against the Lord but you’re okay Israel? No. He’s just touched on each nation surrounding Israel mentioning just one transgression. But they all form the outer circle of the main target or bullseye – Israel.

Instead of escaping God’s wrath, **Israel** discovers that they are His main target. Chapter 2, verse 6 – Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel and for four, I will not revoke punishment. But this time, he actually does list 3 and then a fourth transgression.

1 – They sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals. So they **enslaved people for a very small debt**. It could be that they were owed a pair of sandals. But instead of showing grace and allowing their debtor to pay back the sandals, they had them sold into slavery.

2 – Verse 7 – They trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and turn aside the way of the afflicted.

This means **they practiced legal injustice against the poor**. The rich would take the poor to court and find some technicality to win their case or block any appeal for justice.

3 – Second half of verse 7 – a father and a son go into the same girl so that my holy name is profaned. This is some sort of **sexual mistreatment of a vulnerable female**. Maybe they both abused a servant girl or someone too vulnerable and powerless to object. But the wickedness had so spread through the family that both father and son participated in it.

4 – **They flaunted their oppression of the poor as they worshipped**. We are given two examples of this. They lay down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge. “Now one way a poor person could pay their debt was to give their garment as pledge”. The outer garment was a vital piece of clothing for a poor person. It serve as his clothes during the day and his blanket at night. But he could give it as pledge while he went to gather up payment for the debt owed. But the person who held the cloak in pledge was not allowed to keep it overnight according to God’s law. But these Israelites kept the garments and even brought them to some sort of worship gathering where there was an altar. There, they would lie down on these garments.

“In the house of their god, they drink the wine of those who have been fined”. So a poor person might have to pay a fine. One way you could pay was in wine. The people Amos condemns took this “fine wine” or wine accumulated as payment for fine and brought it into some place of worship to “their god,” not the true living God. There they engaged in something that looks a lot more like pagan worship than worship of the one true God.

Then the Lord reminds them of how He cared for them as HE brought them through the wilderness. But their response was to shut down his prophets and get the religious devotees in their country to compromise their standards. So the Lord announces his punishment. He will also strip them down so that they flee in terror and become completely vulnerable as a nation.

So what do all these offenses have in common? Brutal cruelty, selling into slavery, breaking a covenant with brothers, angry torment of brothers, attack on the unborn, dishonoring a dead body, disobeying the Lord’s commands, taking advantage of those in vulnerable situations like poverty, debt and powerlessness? They are all forms of injustice

**What is a MAJOR OBSTACLE to appropriately worshipping God?**

**Injustice hinders worship and provokes God's wrath.** The attitude and lifestyle of injustice adopted by the Israelites bled into their worship. They had already gotten off to a bad start by setting up alternative worship centers. This indicated that convenience was more important to them than any self-sacrifice required to go and worship in the temple. But their acceptance of oppression, abuse and trivializing the debts of others resulted in perverted worship. They didn't even realize that such worship was an affront to our holy God.

Now we might be reading or listening to this and agreeing with God's verdict especially against Israel. We might also conclude that nothing here applies to us. After all, we haven't participated in the slave trade. We haven't attacked the unborn or shown disrespect to a body or treated others with brutal cruelty. We haven't taken a poor person to court so we can lord it over them or take everything they have. Maybe we haven't participated in any of these obvious forms of injustice.

But before we excuse ourselves, we need to consider how these might show up in our lives. Might we support or buy from businesses that rule their employees with brutal cruelty in other nations? Social media can be used as a brutally cruel tool to embarrass or humiliate someone. Maybe some of you have been on the receiving end of social media cruelty. Or you've been bullied or pressured by someone who pounces on some area of vulnerability in your life. Are we ignoring the ongoing assault on the unborn in our society through abortion? Might we support or watch media that sexually exploits women or promotes it? Some of us might have treated family members with brutal cruelty through our words. Or like Edom, we have treated a brother or sister with perpetual anger. We dare not quickly absolve ourselves of the sin of injustice. Harboring or cultivating such attitudes hinders our worship and brings God's wrath.

But I also hope that as we went through this passage, you are encouraged by God's action. God sees all injustice. God will call to account all injustice everywhere. Bible commentators think some of the injustices exposed here happened maybe 100 years before Amos. Yet God has not forgotten them. He will not let them go. He calls them to account. He is Lord over the nations. His wrath will be visited on all those who committed injustice and never repented for it. If you have been on the receiving end of injustice, God sees that and will act on it.

But we do need to acknowledge the potential or the reality of our participation in the sin of injustice. So I've come up with a little pattern of prayer that I hope helps us work through this.

- Father God, my injustice (sin) hinders my worship of You and provokes Your wrath.
  - So will you open my eyes to any injustice that I have done or participated in?

- I confess and acknowledge my participation in these sins.
- Yet you sent Jesus to rescue me by enduring Your wrath on the cross for my injustice.
  - I praise you for initiating my rescue before I was even born.
- Yet, to be rescued, I must trust my life to Jesus and His saving work.
  - So Lord Jesus, I trust my life to you for the first time or
  - I return to you again and thank you that my salvation is founded on You and your work.
- Thank you God that I am forgiven, protected, adopted into Your family and have received the Holy Spirit.
- Now by Your Spirit's power, help me to do God-centered justice and worship in a way that pleases You.