

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
June 21, 2015

Lesson Text: Amos 6:4-8, 11-14
Lesson Title: Rebuked for Selfishness

Introduction

The nation of Israel always had a deep sense of pride because of her covenant relationship with the Lord and her unique position in the purposes of God. This pride, which should have been expressed in positive gratitude to God, had sadly resulted in selfishness and sinful self-indulgence. The people did not see the sinfulness of their ways. But the keen eyes of Amos were able to pierce the veneer which glossed over their sins. Amos saw their selfish indulgences in quite a different way.

At this stage of history God's chosen people should have been mature enough to avoid the slippery slope of selfishness. However, when peace and prosperity enters the picture selfishness is often the result. Too often blessings result in injustice and feelings of superiority rather than justice and humility. Such was the pattern of life in Israel to which Amos addressed.

Since the days of Amos things have changed very little. Our society is experiencing an enormous surge in selfishness. Selfishness is inherent in everyone. Every child is born with the assumption that the world revolves around him. Nearly the first word out of a child's mouth is *mine*. You do not have to teach a child how to be selfish; it comes naturally. Many people become adults physically but remain self-centered toddlers emotionally.

A Picture of Selfishness (Amos 6:4-7)

Amos 6 opens with the words, "*Woe to them that are at ease in Zion, and trust in the mountain of Samaria, which are named chief of the nations, to whom the house of Israel came.*" Amos recognized a relaxed atmosphere in the lives of the leading citizens in Samaria. They were so "*at ease*" as to be insensitive to the real dangers surrounding the nation. Because of their selfish living they had lulled themselves into a false sense of security. They placed their confidence in "*the mountain of Samaria,*" a place they thought was impregnable. We also have political, social, and religious mountains in our world today that we think are impregnable (Amos 3:15).

When people are obsessed with their own importance they are unable to understand the dangers in the world around them or when God is about to send judgment. They refuse to think about a time of calamity. They spend their

days focused on themselves and ignore God's call to justice. Amos preached to remind God's people that no matter how they tried to ignore the coming judgment it was sure to come. No amount of ignoring reality could change what God said would come to pass.

Verse 4-6

“That lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches, and eat the lambs out of the flock, and the calves out of the midst of the stall; That chant to the sound of the viol, and invent to themselves instruments of musick, like David; That drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the chief ointments: but they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph.”

Amos defended his message by revealing the depth of their life of ease. He described their extravagant luxuries which illustrated their heartless indifference to the needs of others. The leaders of the nation were literally paralyzed by ease. Keep in mind Amos was a shepherd and the items he mentions would most likely incur the wrath of other shepherds like him.

There is nothing sinful about “beds” and “couches,” or eating “lambs” and “calves.” There is nothing sinful about “the sound of the viol” and “instruments of musick.” Drinking “wine” and “anointing themselves” with perfume was not a sin. The sin is in the indulgences which characterized everything they did and possessed.

The people reclined while they dined. They ate choice meats previously reserved for royalty. They had squealing music that caused them to “chant.” Meaning they sang idle songs with no significance. They drank wine in “bowls,” not cups or glasses, which indicate substance abuse. It is also possible that these “bowls” were formally used in the Temple's religious ceremonies. They “anointed themselves with the chief ointments” means they perfumed themselves to promote their way of life. They wanted their aroma to send a message.

Amos carefully built toward his climax by contrasting what these leaders of the nation had been doing verses what they should have been doing. While indulged in all manner of extravagance, they were “not grieved for the affliction of Joseph.” The words “not grieved” means “they felt no pain.” Amos was implying that these men and women with all this luxury and extravagant living had a responsibility to be concerned about the moral ruin of Israel. It was their job to give serious thought to the needs of “Joseph,” or, the people and the coming judgment.

Verse 7

“Therefore now shall they go captive with the first that go captive, and the banquet of them that stretched themselves shall be removed.”

“Therefore” introduces the inevitable consequences upon those whom Amos called the “*chief of the nation*” (Amos 6:1). These individuals were the leaders of the nation, those on top politically and religiously. Amos’ message was, “they go captive with the first that go captive...” Since they were leading the nation in selfishness, extravagant living, and sinful indulgences, they would also lead the nation into captivity by “going captive with the first that go captive.” The once proud nobles would be humbled as they passed as “captives” through one village after another.

“The banquet of them that stretched themselves shall be removed” means the partying days are over for those who “stretched themselves” upon the couches. Judgment was “now.” They were much closer to judgment than any imagined. Amos’ message was fulfilled in his day. The northern kingdom was destroyed and led away into captivity.

A Punishment for Selfishness (Amos 6:8, 11-14)

Verse 8

“The Lord GOD hath sworn by himself, saith the LORD the God of hosts, I abhor the excellency of Jacob, and hate his palaces: therefore will I deliver up the city with all that is therein.”

The certainty of the coming judgment was again vouched by reference to an oath taken by God. The fact that God “hath sworn by himself” (literally “by his soul”) pointed to the authority of his own character as proof of fulfillment. The reason for such strong language was God’s abhorrence of “the excellency of Jacob.” The word “excellency” means “pride” or “arrogance.” “Jacob,” or Israel, had a deep-seated pride based on her mistaken sense of security and selfish indifference to her spiritual condition. She thought she was somehow exempt from punishment because of who she was.

God “abhorred” that kind of pride. “Abhor” means “to puff at” or “loathe.” God said, “I hate his palaces.” Their “palaces” were places of corruption and storehouses of the wealth and material possessions they had plundered from the poor. Just as God hated the meaninglessness of Israel’s worship, he hated the proud attitude of the nation. It was upon this basis that God said, “Therefore will I deliver up the city with all that is therein.” God would hand over everything in their proud city to the enemy. Whether Amos meant he would “deliver” them to an enemy or to some form of pestilence is not clear. The following verses suggest it may have been a combination of both.

If you want to know God’s attitude toward the present-day degrading music, re-defining of marriage, illicit sex, alcohol consumption, and self-centered living,

He makes it very clear. God says, “I abhor it,” and “I hate it.” Our world may accept it, endorse it, tolerate it, and participate in it, but God “hates” it!

Verse 11

“For, behold, the LORD commandeth, and he will smite the great house with breaches, and the little house with clefts.”

The words of this verse complete Amos’ prophecy of verse 8 that God would deliver up the entire city of Samaria. God’s command and punishment is certain. Both the “great house” and the “little house” will be destroyed. God will smite the “great house with breaches,” or into ruins, and the “little house with clefts,” or into fragments.

The “great house” refers to those in high places while the “little house” are those in low places or places of insignificance. Amos’ message is the high and low, the great and small, all are going into captivity. Amos does not mention how the houses will be destroyed, but the certainty and severity of it is clearly established.

Verse 12-13

“Shall horses run upon the rock? will one plow there with oxen? for ye have turned judgment into gall, and the fruit of righteousness into hemlock: Ye which rejoice in a thing of nought, which say, Have we not taken to us horns by our own strength?”

Amos brings his message to closure with a sobering declaration. “Horses” do not run upon rocks. “Oxen” do not plow upon rocks. It would be absurd to think they would. Common sense tells us that is not possible. Trying to ride a horse on a rocky jagged edge or attempt to plow oxen on a rock is ridiculous. Amos’ point... common sense teaches us not to ride a horse on a jagged edge or attempt to plow rocks with oxen, then why are God’s people destroying their own judicial system? Israel’s exercise of justice was as absurd as running horses on rocks or plowing rocks with oxen.

They had “turned judgment into gall, and the fruit of righteousness into hemlock” (Amos 5:7). “Gall” was poisonous. “Hemlock” was a small plant with a bitter juice. “Justice” had been turned into poison and “righteousness” had become bitter. They had taken the “justice” God had established and the “righteousness” He had demanded and turned it into bitter poison.

“Ye which rejoice in a thing of nought, which say, Have we not taken to us horns by our strength” seems to indicate that Israel was rejoicing in some recent military victory. This could also reference the military strength of King

Jeroboam II in which Israel was trusting. “Horns” are a symbol of power and strength.

Amos did not share their enthusiasm. Their “rejoicing” seemed to indicate that the military victories came from their own strength.

Verse 14

“But, behold, I will raise up against you a nation, O house of Israel, saith the LORD the God of hosts; and they shall afflict you from the entering in of Hemath unto the river of the wilderness.”

Time was quickly running out for Israel when Amos reminded the people that God had said, “I will raise up against you a nation, O house of Israel...” Amos did not name the nation here, but he was specific that it was “a nation” whom God had chosen as the instrument of Israel’s punishment.

God is “the LORD the God of hosts.” Literally, “the LORD the God of hosts” means, “Lord of armies.” The Lord of armies would raise up “a nation” to come against Israel and “they shall afflict you from the entering in of Hemath unto the river of the wilderness.” “Hemath” was the chief city of Samaria. The coming enemy would afflict Israel from all the way in Syria. “Unto the river of the wilderness” is referring to the river of Arabah on the other side of the Jordan River which flowed into the Dead Sea. God is saying, “Through the whole extent of your land this enemy will come down from the north.” This enemy was the king of Assyria.

Conclusion

The words of Amos and the spiritual condition of Israel should speak to our generation. The similarities are too obvious to deny. What was true for Israel is still true for us. *“Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall”* (Proverbs 16:18).

When we live selfishly we may gain what we crave so intensely, but the price will be incredibly high. If you must compromise your morality, honesty, and integrity, as Israel did, is it really worth it?

Is America “at ease in Zion?” Is your church “at ease in Zion?” Are you “at ease in Zion?” If so, remember God will intervene at some point. Before He does, cry out for forgiveness, repent, and return to the Lord.

Amen.