

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
June 7, 2015

Lesson Text: Amos 2:4-8

Lesson Title: Judgment on Israel and Judah

Introduction

The task of being an Old Testament prophet was not pleasant. No one likes to be the bearer of bad news. But God's people had departed from his standards of godly living; a voice from the Lord was needed.

During the middle or later half of the eighth century BC, there were some mighty prophets who prophesied to Israel and Judah. Isaiah and Micah prophesied to the southern kingdom of Judah: and Jonah, Hosea, and Amos prophesied to the northern kingdom of Israel. These prophets were God's representatives on the earth. They were simply vessels through which God revealed Himself.

One of the more interesting prophets was Amos. His name means "to carry a burden" or "to load." Unlike other prophets such as Isaiah and Hosea, Amos' father is not mentioned which suggests he was not from a prominent family. The prophet's hometown was the tiny village of "*Tekoa*" (Amos 1:1), located about ten miles south of Jerusalem. Amos was a shepherd and farmer who lived much of his life in isolation (Amos 7:14). He was not a prominent political or religious figure. He was however, one of a small group of prophets in Israel called by God to prophesy judgment on surrounding nations, specifically Israel and Judah.

Judgment on the land of Israel for its sin is the dominant theme of Amos' prophesy. Even the prophecies against Gentile nations in chapters 1-2 are a prelude to the main theme of judgment upon Israel. Amos 3-6 consists of five sermons on judgment; and chapters 7-9 contain five visions of judgment. In spite of all the focus on judgment, the book is not without hope. Amos believes that genuine repentance is possible so he calls for the people to repent and to live righteously (Amos 5:4-6, 14-15).

If you had been an Israelite listening to Amos preach, you would have liked what you were hearing up to this point. You can almost hear the crowd saying, "Amen" as Amos pronounced judgment on the heathen nations around Israel and Judah. However, God will not allow his own people to go unpunished.

Beginning in Amos 2, the prophet directs his preaching to Judah and Israel with a word of condemnation. Amos is at Bethel in the northern kingdom as he declares the charges and punishments to come.

Judgment upon Judah (Amos 2:4-5)

Since the division of the northern and southern kingdoms about 922 B.C., Judah (southern kingdom, 2 tribes) and Israel (northern kingdom, ten tribes) had an on again off again relationship. One day they were friends; the next day they were enemies. No doubt some people in each kingdom liked that type of relationship and did nothing to help it. Others desired to see the nation reunited as one and hoped for a day when the glories of David's kingdom would be realized again.

Verse 4

“Thus saith the LORD; For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because they have despised the law of the LORD, and have not kept his commandments, and their lies caused them to err, after the which their fathers have walked:

Amos charges “Judah,” the southern kingdom, from which he had come, with rejection of God's Law. He uses the same words, “For three transgressions of Judah, and for four” that he used in his prophecy against the Gentile nations (Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1). It is a way of saying sin has been multiplied upon sin or there has been multiple acts of sin. “Three” plus “four” equals seven. The number “seven” in scripture speaks of completeness. Amos' point is that “Judah's” sin has come to a point of completeness, fullness, or ripeness as far as God is concerned.

Amos does not emphasize one particular sin of Judah that has come to fullness but the complete rejection of God's law. “Because they have despised the law of the LORD, and have not kept his commandments” is referring to the spiritual and moral teachings of God. When “Judah” (southern kingdom) rejected or despised the law of God it opened up the floodgates for immorality. Instead of walking after God's ways, the people followed “lies.” The “lies” which “caused them to err” may well have been the false gods after which their fathers had walked.

The “law of the LORD” is important in the life of any nation. When God's “law” and “commandments” are rejected, then anything can happen. When there are no absolute standards; one man's ideas are as good as another. This leads to moral decay and the downfall of nations.

Christians are not intolerant or bigots when they insist that God's Word must be the basis for morality and human behavior. Any nation that violates God's “law” and disobeys His “commandments” will suffer the consequences of judgment. Man thinks he knows what is best, but time and eternity will reveal otherwise.

Verse 5

“But I will send a fire upon Judah, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem.”

After leveling the charge against Judah Amos announces the punishment. Judah will not escape the fiery destruction that is coming. Even “Jerusalem,” the Holy City, will be punished. God would “send a fire upon Judah.” “Fire” refers to the destruction of war. When Nebuchadnezzar came against the city of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., he burned her to the ground leaving only a pile of rubbish (2 Kings 24-25).

The punishment also involved the “palaces of Jerusalem” being “devoured.” The word “devour” speaks of the awesome destructive nature of God’s wrath (Amos 1:4, 7, 10, 12, 14; 2:2, 5). The word “devour” means “to slay” or “consume.” God is not just sending judgment, He is going to literally put the “palaces of Jerusalem” out of business. The “palaces of Jerusalem” refers to the royal palaces or seats of kingdom power. Not even the strongholds of government in Judah will be exempt from God’s hand of judgment.

Every manmade kingdom and government in the world that has rejected God’s law will one day be “devoured.” The “palaces” or “elevated places” where the influences and legislators meet and deny God’s law and moral absolutes will one day soon be “put out of business.”

Judgment upon Israel (Amos 2:6-8)

At last Amos comes to address Israel. This is where his message was headed from the beginning. His audience had agreed that the Gentile nations should be judged as well as Judah. Now Amos will proclaim coming judgment to the very heart of Israel. In reality, Israel had already passed judgment on herself by accepting Amos’ argument that the Gentile nations and Judah deserved judgment. Why should God punish others and let Israel slide?

Remember, Amos is delivering these messages in Bethel, the northern kingdom, the city where the king worshipped. That means Amos is hitting home with his message. Amos is no longer talking about the sins of the Moabites, Edomites, or Judah. He is now revealing the sins of the northern kingdom, Israel.

Verse 6

“Thus saith the LORD; For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because they sold the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of shoes;”

Amos' charge against "Israel" opened with the same formula of words used against the Gentile nations and Judah: "For three transgressions of Israel, and for four." However, instead of choosing one offense to illustrate their transgression as he did with Judah, he selected four. These are recorded in verses 4-8. Because of these "transgressions," the Lord would "not turn away the punishment thereof." God would not change his mind or revoke the coming judgment.

The first charge was *corruption of justice*. The "righteous" most likely refers to those who were innocent. The "righteous" or innocent people in Israel were charged and found guilty of crimes by bribed judges. That is the meaning of "they sold the righteous for silver." Innocent people were "sold out" by corrupt judges and partial politicians. This "selling out" could have occurred in numerous ways. It could have actually been selling people into slavery or creditors paying off judges and officials to take advantage of innocent people.

In that day, the phrase, "and the poor for a pair of shoes," was a common proverbial saying which is similar to one of our expressions today about selling something "for nothing." Amos' point is the poor and innocent were never forgiven or assisted. Instead, they were taken advantage of by those in power.

Verse 7

"That pant after the dust of the earth on the head of the poor, and turn aside the way of the meek: and a man and his father will go in unto the same maid, to profane my holy name:"

The second charge was *oppression of the poor*. Having introduced the "poor" in verse 6, Amos expands upon the sins against those who have little or nothing. "That pant after the dust of the earth on the head of the poor" refers to the common practice of the poor throwing handfuls of dust over their head to show their misery. Amos says that the rich and powerful are so greedy they "pant" or enjoy seeing people in that type of misery. The Hebrew word for "pant" means "to covet or inhale." There were powerful people in Israel who actually rejoiced in seeing the misery of others. God will judge men and nations who profit financially and personally by keeping people in poverty and misery.

"Turn aside the way of the meek" points to those who placed hindrances in the way of the helpless but humble servants of God in order to defeat their purpose. The "meek" were the humble followers of the Lord. Amos is saying that for the "meek," there was no justice in the courts or anywhere in the land.

The third charge was *immorality in the name of the Lord*. "And a man and his father will go in unto the same maid, to profane my holy name." Amos had observed the people enter the places of worship with a "maid" or sacred

prostitute and attempt to worship. The Israelites had copied this form of worship from the Canaanites. Fathers and sons were having sexual intercourse with the same girl. Their actions were showing total disregard for their covenant relationship with the Lord and His commandments. How sad it must have been for Amos to see “fathers” and “sons” share in sexual relations with the same religious prostitute and consider it worship!

This third charge reveals how perverted life and worship had become for Israel. The same sins are openly and boldly committed today. Men and women living in open sexual relationships outside of marriage walk into churches and attempt to worship the God who condemns such lifestyles. Sexual relationship of men with men and women with women are common in society and even acceptable in many religious circles. This type of perverted lifestyles and abominable practices of worship was not tolerated in Amos’ day and God does not tolerate them today.

Verse 8

“And they lay themselves down upon clothes laid to pledge by every altar, and they drink the wine of the condemned in the house of their god.”

The fourth charge was *self-indulgence*. “And they lay themselves down upon clothes laid to pledge by every altar, and they drink the wine of the condemned in the house of their god.”

The Jews did not sit upright at their feasts and meals as we do today. They would lie on their side or lie down. When they lay down they would often lay upon a piece of clothing or garment. Amos is telling us that Israel had become so self-centered that they would take “clothes” taken from the people who owed them money and lay on those clothes in front of a pagan altar. They extorted from the poor and used what they took in false worship. They bought “wine” with the money received from fines and charges they leveled against the poor.

“God's Law placed restrictions on items which could be taken as collateral. Millstones were not to be taken since they were needed for grinding grain and thus were essential to sustaining life (Deuteronomy 24:6). The cloak of a poor man was not to be kept as a pledge overnight (Exodus 22:26-27; Deuteronomy 24:10-13; also note Job 22:6); a widow's garment could not be taken in pledge at all (Deuteronomy 24:17). Yet the people openly and flagrantly were lying down with the forbidden garments, going so far in their contempt for the Law as to spread them at the sacrificial feasts by every altar (cf. 1 Samuel 9:12-13).” (The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty.)

“By every altar” reveals that Israel had a multitude of “altars.” God had given Israel only one altar, and that was in the temple at Jerusalem. The “altar” was

that special place where the Israelite recognized God's presence and offered what God required. To bring a "widows garment" taken as collateral for a loan or "drink the wine of the condemned" at an "altar" and rejoice while they were doing it was the height of self-gratification and sin.

Conclusion

Although Amos lived more than 700 years before the time of Christ, his message is relevant today. However, there is one major difference. In our day the cry against injustice and oppression of the poor is based entirely on humanistic arguments: it is not fair, we are being overlooked, and we are entitled to what others have. But, with Amos, the point was the wickedness of the rich and those in power was a sin against God as well as against man. For humanitarian reasons, there is nothing wrong with wanting justice for the poor and those taken advantage of, but we need to remember that real change only comes from the inside out.

America will never be a nation of justice and equality through politics and social reform. For any real change to occur there must be genuine repentance for sin. It is sin when those in prominent and powerful positions take advantage of the poor and rejoice in their misery. It is sin when men and women engage in sexual relationships that God forbids. It is a sin to be self-indulgent.

Pray God will call anointed men like Amos who are willing to be spokesmen for truth and righteousness. Pray Christians will understand that God holds us accountable for how we treat others. Pray the secular message of tolerance in America will cease and that truth will once again be received.

Amen.