



***Becoming Fully Devoted Followers  
by Studying the Followers Before Us***

**WEEK 23**

**AMOS**

**JUNE 4-9, 2007**

DAY	<i>THROUGH THE BIBLE</i>	ABBREVIATED STUDY
Monday	Amos 4-6, Psalm 111	Amos 1:1; 7:8-17, Psalm 111
Tuesday	Amos 7-9, Psalm 112	Amos 1:1-10; 2:4-12, Ps 112
Wednesday	2 Chron 16-20, Psalm 113	Amos 3:1-8, Psalm 113
Thursday	2 Chron 21-25, Psalm 114	Amos 5:11-24, Psalm 114
Friday	2 Chron 26-30, Psalm 115	Amos 9:7-15, Psalm 115



Connecting people to abundant life.



**READ**

Amos 1:1 and 7:8-17

Psalm 111

**REFLECT**

Amos left us a short book, but he represents several firsts in Israel. He is the first prophet who not only spoke his prophecies, but then wrote them down as well. He is the first prophet to speak against not just the king or other leaders, but against the nation as a whole. And he is the first prophet to announce that the Lord will in fact remove the nation from existence (the Northern Kingdom, “Israel,” not the Southern Kingdom, “Judah”).

The passages for today are those in the book of Amos that give us a glimpse of the life of the prophet. This is all the knowledge we have about Amos, but it yields some interesting facts. Amos has traditionally been thought of as a “lowly” shepherd, though recently scholars have suggested that the term describing him in 7:14 should be translated “sheep breeder,” suggesting a man of some wealth. That he also saw to the preparation of sycamore figs for market points to a diversified income. Amos then was a Judean of local importance, whose knowledge of the state of social and political affairs may have come from business contacts. His message, however, as he is very clear to explain, came only from the Lord.

It is surprising that this resident of Judah (Tekoa was six miles from Jerusalem) found his calling in preaching God’s word to the northern Kingdom. Apparently the problems of Israel were so pervasive that it was easier for a neighbor, a resident of Judah, to see their gravity. Certainly the fact that he was from “south of the border” sharpened the annoyance of the leaders of Israel; according to Amaziah the priest, Amos is not only preaching treason, but he is plying his trade as prophet at the cost of the “bread” of Israel. He should go be a burden on his own people. This barb by Amaziah is what gives us much of our information about Amos.

He responds that he is not a professional prophet – “not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet” – but a businessman who has received an extraordinary call from the Lord to preach this one message, at this one time, to this one audience.

Amaziah himself manifests many of the problems inherent in Israel. His concerns should be spiritual, but they seem mainly political, and his comments prejudicial. Surely all who have been reading the OT closely up to this point should cringe to hear Bethel described as a “sanctuary of the king” (7:13); properly it could only be a sanctuary of the Lord! Alternatively, Amos represents much of what is good and right in the history of God’s people. The life of the herdsman finds powerful precedent in Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and in Moses’ relearning of his heritage under Jethro. But most poignant is the power and dignity of Amos as an individual called by God, acting confidently according to conscience, risking career and perhaps life itself to speak what is true to the nation. He has forbears in Abraham, Joseph, David, Elijah, and many others. And his example of a layperson speaking as he must speak is itself a precursor to the ministry of Jesus, to the preaching of the Church, and even to the dignity of each human being called to shoulder the responsibilities of democracy.

**RESPOND**

Psalm 111:10 tells us that “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” What is meant is not terror, but our reverence for the Lord. The point is that spiritual insight is tied intimately to practical decisions (“wisdom”). This was the wellspring of Amos’ ministry, and it was the great and fatal lack in Israel. Surely this is one definition too of Christian growth, that our decisions derive more and more consistently from an acknowledgment of God’s loving will.

**PRAY**

Dear Lord, We thank you for the dignity we find in becoming Your daughters and sons. Please help us use those resources today to serve Your wisdom, as our Father, and to help spread the good news of Your loving care.

**READ**

Amos 1:1-10 and 2:4-12

Psalms 112

**REFLECT**

The book of Amos begins with six oracles to the nations surrounding Judah and Israel (1:1 – 2:3), followed by two similar prophecies addressed to Judah and Israel (2:4-16). This strikes us as unusual, and it is, although we need to remember the many times that the Lord has shown interest in and compassion towards Israel's neighbors (as in the healing of Naaman, to mention only one instance). Jeremiah too will have specific words for each of the nations, as an appendix to his address to Judea (chapters 46-51). What effect does this opening of Amos have on our understanding of his ministry?

The primary effect is to reaffirm that the God of Israel is also the God of the nations, and in fact Lord of the whole world. The Lord cares about what is happening in each nation; how much more will He care about the state of His chosen people? This is confirmed by the fact that Amos throughout the book actually never refers to "the God of Israel;" his characteristic title for God is "the Lord God of Hosts" (e.g., 4:13; 5:14). The effect is to "frame" the responsibility of Israel not in reference to some local deity who has a private and cozy relationship to Israel, but rather to the Lord of all power and authority whose glory is untouchable.

It is notable that the judgments God invokes against the surrounding nations are the result of what we would call crimes against humanity. Damascus has not only vanquished its enemy, but tortured them in the process. Gaza has been privy to the displacement of an entire people. Tyre has added to this sin that of violating the bonds of brotherhood. Edom chose to cultivate a policy of wrath where mutual respect was due. The Ammonites allowed revenge to desecrate motherhood itself. And the Moabites added insult to violence. In each case, the crimes were far from isolated; the reiterated phrase "for three transgressions...and for four, I will not revoke the punishment" implies that the depredations have

demonstrated a complete lack of contrition. God holds them accountable to these deeds, even though they have not received His law, purely on the basis of the human decency that is self-evident in human relationships and life. Self-evident, that is, unless hatred or self-interest blinds the perpetrators.

The oracles against Judah and Israel, on the other hand, have to do with their rejection of God's revealed Law, and indeed His very role as their Savior. Rejecting the Law (2:4) and its provisions (2:6-8), they are rejecting the very One who "brought you up from the land of Egypt" (2:10). Because He gave them the land ("It was I who destroyed the Amorite before them") the logical consequence of their rejection of Him is that He will take away the land.

As Christians living in a nation together with people of other religions, or no religion, we feel the double responsibility of knowing both the general humanity of God, and His more specific revealed will. I know in my case that I often pay attention more closely to the challenges I hear in the Word of God; sometimes this feels a bit privatized, as if I live in a closed and separated community. The video Betsy shared recently of Bono's challenge to the Church to begin to address the AIDS epidemic in Africa is a counter-example, awakening our responsibility to broadly humanitarian concerns, and thus glorifying the Lord, "the God of hosts."

**RESPOND**

Psalms 112 describes the righteous believer, the one who worships God freely and obeys Him readily. As far as the practical expression of that obedience, the psalm actually mentions only compassion (v.4) and generosity to the poor (v.9). Again we are reminded, as Amos would approve, that spirituality is practical, and, if healthy, finds its outlet in freely benefiting others.

**PRAY**

Lord, Thank You for the wonderful life that we have discovered in Your salvation. Thank you for the gifts of truth, and love, and peace. Help us to find today fresh ways to give out of what You have given us, concretely and practically.

- D.D.

**READ**

Amos 3:1-8

Psalms 113

**REFLECT**

Every true prophet has aroused antagonism. In this passage we see both why Amos prompted such opposition, and how he answered it.

The first two verses of chapter 3 are a unit in themselves. Many commentators find here the theme of the book of Amos. First, it is affirmed that this word is from the Lord Himself, the Lord who “knew” Israel, in distinction from all other nations (some translate it that He “chose” Israel, but the verb is actually “knew”). The emphasis is very much on the intimacy of the relationship in its depth and care. God has demonstrated the reality of this relationship, especially (but not solely) in the exodus from Egypt: He acted in an unforgettable way to show Israel their special place in His heart. Every Israelite in Amos’ time would have known this, and the phrases up to the first line of verse two would have been familiar, and very probably used regularly in worship. Hence the shock of the last line: “Therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.” It is as if we were to hear a preacher say, “The Lord is Glenskirk’s shepherd; therefore He’s coming after you.”

Shouts of objection must have greeted his words; and in the next six verses we hear Amos responding to them, and at the same time sharpening the message even further. In seven epigrams Amos asks pointed questions about the way life works, starting with a benign example and working through more violent images toward the theological implication. Two men consulting together speaks of a common agenda. A lion roars when he’s upon his prey, not when he’s stalking it, nor when he’s eating it. Traps spring only when they are meant to. The blast of a trumpet (think, the ringing of a fire bell) causes a shiver in all who hear it. Then Amos launches into the theological: is not God just as clearly the Lord of all events? Is He not especially the Lord that discloses His will

and His love to His people? If all the above is true, how can we doubt His desire and His ability to speak, and to get His message across to us?

Across the pattern of this questioning Amos drops some more subtle implications. First, Israel needs to realize they are in God’s grip as surely as the lion has seized its prey. Second, the ups and downs of Israel’s welfare do need to be understood in relation to God’s will; going to the Lord in time of calamity needs to be the first resort of the people of God, and not the last resort. Third, the opportunity to know God’s will is a precious privilege of Israel, and should be as natural an idea to God’s people as two men consulting each other at the water cooler.

It’s probably true that society goes through cycles of being open to hearing from God, or the supernatural in general, and then of assuming that He won’t speak, or shouldn’t, or can’t. Our society today is complex enough that we can probably see all of these assumptions at work simultaneously. Neither openness or closedness ensures true spiritual life. But God does indeed speak into our lives, and I for one am glad that our leaders are bold in affirming it, and in encouraging us to listen.

**RESPOND**

Psalms 113 affirms both the high glory of God, and His readiness to be with those who need Him most, in the humblest of circumstances. As Christians we know He actually gave Himself to be born, to live in poverty, to die, all for the sake of communicating His love effectively to us. He is God with us, now, as we read, and meditate, and pray. God is with us.

**PRAY**

Dear Lord, Thank You for Your presence, and for Your love in getting across to us both the affirmations we live to hear, and the challenges we need to hear in order to live for You.

- D.D.

**READ**

Amos 5:11-24

Psalm 114

**REFLECT**

The complaint of the Lord against Israel in the time of Amos had several facets. We have already noted the fundamental spiritual problem, namely, Israel's abandonment of a living relationship with the Lord. But Amos spends much more time decrying the resulting patterns of injustice and hypocrisy, as we see in today's passage. Amos' most passionate preaching was against exploitation of the poor by the rich that was the result of the polarization of wealth and poverty in the larger cities. But he also spoke passionately against the over-the-top religious celebrations that helped people to forget, rather than to face, the spiritual problems of the nation.

Amos prophesied during the height of the reign of Jeroboam II, about 40 years before the conquest of the Israel by the Assyrians (721 BC). We read that in his long 41-year reign, Jeroboam did much to reestablish the strength and territory of the Northern Kingdom (2 Kings 14:23-25) – a false dawn before the coming of night. This helps us understand the flush of wealth that Amos observed among an elite group, as well as the over-optimistic worship services: private and national prosperity, whether or not it was accompanied by obedience, was taken as the sign of God's favor.

Wealth brought problems. In our passage for today Amos exposes the exorbitant rents and gifts of tribute exacted by the landlords, calling to mind some of the offenses in basic humanity denounced in the surrounding nations (Day 2). In his famous "cows of Bashan" passage (4:1-3) Amos also disparages the society as idle, self-indulgent, and entertainment-oriented – condemning these as directly related to exploitation of the poor. His words are among the harshest in Scripture that call God's people to come to grips with the fundamental obligations of human justice. We also feel the harshness, because the abuses he catalogs are so much with us in our day.

But the religious climate also had its problems. In his successes, the king apparently took over the religion of Israel as his own pet project, so that celebrations and worship services became a glorification of Israel and the king rather than of the Lord God. God's response? "I hate, I reject your festivals!... I will not even look at your peace offerings!" (5:21-23) Far from being swayed by what happened in the worship of Israel, the Lord's attention was firmly focused on the processes of civil rights: instead of the noise of songs and harps, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (5:24) Equitable social policies, rather than impressive worship, was the service that the Lord required of Israel.

Because of the emphasis on social ills, Amos has long been a basic text for the agenda of social transformation that has been characteristic of the liberal wing of the Church. It should not be overlooked, however, that Amos undergirds the social agenda with the personal knowledge of God and commitment to Him, that is more characteristic of the conservative Christians of our day. We might say that Amos successfully condemns all branches of the Church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Or we might prefer to put it (as I would) that Amos still gives all Christians sharp and urgent reasons to reconsider again today what it means, when we say that we serve the Lord.

**RESPOND**

Psalm 114 celebrates the sheer miracle of the Exodus, and of the Lord's provision for Israel. The last line celebrates the "turning of flint into a fountain of water," as Moses struck the rock and water flowed. Many preachers have seen here a foreshadowing of the ministry of Jesus in our lives as the living water, flowing like a fountain from within us (John 7:37-39) – a great miracle indeed, as the hardness of Israel's hearts testifies.

**PRAY**

Dear Lord, Thank You for the wonderful agenda You have prepared for us as the Church and as members of the Body. Help us to be sensitive today to the human needs around us, and ready to extend the cup of cold water in Jesus' name.

- D.D.

**READ**

Amos 9: 7-15

Psalms 115

**REFLECT**

The prophecy of Amos has been unrelenting up to this point. He has been unwavering in his insistence on the complete destruction that is coming upon the Northern Kingdom of Israel. He has set the fate of this break-away nation in parallel with fate of the Gentile nations, whose evil has roused God's implacable wrath. Now at the end of the book we find some words of hope. The question that many readers ask is, is Amos now taking it all back? Is he softening his stance?

The key to grasping Amos' final words is again to remind ourselves of the difference, in his time, between "Israel" and "Judah." "Israel" was one of the names of Jacob., and it came to be the name of the nation of 12 tribes that followed Moses out of Egypt. Then after the reign of Solomon the nation split, as 10 tribes broke away to become the Northern Kingdom, leaving only the tribe of Judah in the South, governed by the descendants of David. The North somewhat arrogantly took the name "Israel," and the South took the name of "Judah" (known as "Judea" in New Testament times). So Amos' prophecies against "Israel" are warnings to an upstart nation that has abundantly proved itself to be an illegitimate offspring of the covenant of God. On the other hand, Amos' words of hope are directed to two groups of people: the faithful that still live within the North (even though the nation itself will fall); and the kingdom itself of the South, which inherits the promise of an "eternal throne" for the house of David. Judgment for sin will fall, but these will be saved, "though as through fire" (to borrow Paul's words, 1 Cor 3:15).

Let's bring that insight into a close reading of our text. God first clarifies Israel's status as a "mere" nation, and at the same time His

status as sovereign Lord of all the nations (v.7). As such, His eyes are on "the sinful kingdom" (that is, whatever kingdom is sinful) to judge it; Israel ("Jacob") enjoys the exception of not being eliminated as a people, though they will lose national sovereignty (v.8). The "sieve" mentioned in verse 9 is one that allowed good grain to fall through, leaving larger pebbles and other trash in the sieve; the promise is that "not one [worthless] pebble" will escape the judgment of God; the sinners among Israel will get their due (v.10). But the "fallen booth of David," on the other hand, will be restored, and rich blessings will follow as God fulfills His promise to David's lineage (11-15).

Amos thus clarifies the difference between nations on the one hand, and God's plan on the other. Nations are tools for His larger plan, but the plan itself has to do with a salvation that will eventually come through one particular family of Judah. His commitment is to no nation, but only to His plan for the salvation of the world.

**RESPOND**

Amos helps us to understand that the best patriots are those who are ready, in their love of their country, to maintain a clear-eyed perspective on national strengths and weaknesses. (See also Psalm 115:1-3.) The USA is not the Kingdom of God. But God has always been able to make use of the USA in powerful ways, despite its shortcomings, to further the cause of His Kingdom. Our daily prayers, and our involvement in worthwhile civic and national movements, will help keep that tool sharpened for the good things of God.

**PRAY**

Lord of the nations, we pray for Your guidance for our nation and its leaders. We pray too for Your presence with us today, as we would wish to learn fresh our responsibilities as Christians and as Americans in this corner of our wonderful country.

- D.D.