

UNSEAL THE INDICTMENT

Amos 1:1-2; 2:6-8; 3:6-8, 3-15

Responsibility and accountability are two words that cause us to think about maturity. These ideas more or less embody the concept of maturity. These ideas communicate expectations that if we buy something, we must pay for it; if we break something we should fix it or replace it; and if we break the rules (commit sin) we will be penalized.

When we hear the word “sin,” we typically think about individuals. However, it is possible for entire nations to commit wrongs that bring judgement on the nation in much the same way sins of individuals bring judgement on themselves. The reality of **cause and consequence** is ever with us. Many people find that if they spend too much on borrowed money that they will be in deep financial problems. Even our government has discovered this fact. The *law of the harvest* eventually comes into play in that “as we sow, so shall we reap.” The nation of Israel found that God held them accountable in proportion to the blessing that He had given them. The Israelites were special people to God and they had neglected to live in accordance with their blessings. Before God sent judgement on His people He sent many messengers to warn them and to attempt to get them to repent.

Amos was a shepherd who lived in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. God called him to go to the Northern Kingdom of Israel and give his message there. We recognize him as a prophet; however, he was not a member of any recognized group of prophets during his day. For example, in the time of David, Nathan was recognized as a prophet and probably made a living by his office of a prophet. We don't have any professional prophets today but we do have professional evangelists. In the same way as Amos, there are others who are true evangelists that do not get paid for proclaiming the Good News. Sometimes we tend to listen more to a Billy Graham than to someone that we barely know preaching on a local radio station. Perhaps God chooses such people that are not well known to bring His messages to people because He wants people to accept the message on its own merit rather than on the charisma or personality of the person delivering the message.

Hear Ye! Hear Ye! – 1:1-2

¹ The words of Amos, who was among the shepherders from Tekoa, which he envisioned in visions concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake. ² He said, “The LORD roars from Zion And from Jerusalem He utters His voice; And the shepherds’ pasture grounds mourn, And the summit of Carmel dries up.” Amos 1:1-2 (NASB95)

It is apparent that some scribe penned the words that God gave to Amos regarding God’s judgment against all the nations in the middle east during the Eighth Century BC since the narrative is written in the third person. The script started out declaring this work to be the words of Amos and then clarified that these words were God’s words and that Amos was serving as God’s mouthpiece. On at least nine different occasions through this narrative we find words such as “thus saith the Lord” or “the Lord declares.”

Amos was very likely not a well-read Bible scholar but a tender of sheep from an area about twelve miles south of Jerusalem. God gave him insight (“he saw or envisioned”) into what was happening in that part of the world regarding sinful practices that were commonly accepted by the people as just a part of life. These practices would be classified today as social injustices in which the powerful would take advantage of the weak and the rich would get richer and the poor would become poorer.

The time frame is clearly preserved for us in that the kings of Judah and Israel were identified. Uzziah was king of Judah and he was treated quite well in the Scriptural accounts of his reign as being a good king. Yet, we see that even when there is a good, moral leader that injustices can continue among the people unless the problems are defined and corrected. Even in our own nation we have seen leadership in high place that was overtly immoral followed by leadership that would qualify as an excellent example of moral and upright living. In retrospect, we could not claim that the decline in morality of the nation was any worse during the time Clinton was in office than the time Bush was in office.

The seriousness of the messages that God had for the region was emphasized by the verbal picture of God roaring like a lion that was about to pounce on its prey. The picture that was painted was that even nature (the pastures and the mountain tops) cringes when God speaks with a roar. The implication was that if nature itself is impacted by what God says, then how much more so should people pay attention to the message from the Creator of the Universe.

God had a message for the nations of that region of the world. It covered Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab – these nations were condemned for their sins against Israel. The people of the Northern Kingdom could remember suffering because of border raids from these neighbors. It may have been similar to the attacks that are made on Israel today by the PLO forces. When Amos announced God's condemnation of these enemies of theirs, they could all agree and probably cheered.

Sinful Actions Are Evident – 2:6-8

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. Amos 2:6-8 (NASB95)

In the verses just before the declaration against Israel Amos started to hit a little closer to home when he talked about Judah's sins and God's displeasure. It was so easy for Judah and Israel to see the faults of others and so difficult to see their own faults. The style of the message regarding Judah was similar to what God had used for the heathen nations. “For three sins of Judah, even for four . . .” This phrase indicates the patience of God in dealing with all people. In the culture of that day the prevailing idea was that a person was extremely generous to tolerate someone doing something wrong to him. God was saying that He would be more patient than they expected or practiced with one another.

The sins of the heathen nations were atrocities they committed against their enemies. These were things so wrong that anyone would know they were wrong. The basic problem that Judah had was disobedience to God's laws. They despised God's laws and did not follow them.

God's expectation regarding His commandments has not changed just because we are living after the coming of the Messiah and His death for our salvation. If anything, we could be expected to be more able to be obedient because we also have the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit available to us. God did not condemn the heathen nations for failure to keep His laws. They did not even have His laws. The requirements for Judah were more stringent because they did know more. So it is with us, God requires much from those to whom He gives much. We cannot expect to live a victorious life apart from the abiding presence of God. We must abide in Him and He in us. The ONLY way that will happen is outlined for us in John 14:23 Jesus replied, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him,

and we will come to him and make our home with him.” Obedience is still important to God.

Amos was going to help the people see their own problems. He did not stop with the neighboring nations or even with Judah, but went on to pronounce God's judgement on them, also.

There were plenty of evil practices by Israel for which God could and would bring judgement on the people of Israel. The first charge involved perverting justice by bribing judges. The poor were being oppressed by those that could take advantage of them because of their wealth and/or position. If the rich could buy the judge, then the poor had no way to protect themselves.

The practices involved things such as selling someone into slavery or confiscating his property perhaps because he owed a small amount of money. Those that were greedy for property and material possessions would take every advantage of the poor and powerless. In some cases it could have been “legal” to do what they did, but God's people are not merely to “conform to the law,” but are to go beyond the law in the name of basic fairness and certainly in the name of love and generosity.

There were sins against people. God accused them of “panting after the dust on the head of the poor.” This could be a way of saying they were so hungry for land that they wanted the dirt that the poor person might have on his body.

There were also sins against the very character of God that He had revealed to them through the laws and commandments. Here we see another charge against the people of Israel involved their participation in a heathen religious practices. Many of the pagan religions were centered in fertility rites. The practice involved sexual immorality with temple prostitutes. Involvement in any form of pagan worship was and is a serious offence to God. Sexual immorality was also condemned by God. Many people today have no restraint when it comes to sexual practices. I have heard people make statements such as “A person shouldn't let his religion influence his sex life.” My answer to such foolishness is that there is nothing to separate us from the animals if we don't let our “religion” influence us in that area.

A third point of contention God had with Israel involved the practice of keeping the garment of a person in a pledge for a debt. The law forbade keeping of such pledges overnight since the person owing the debt would have no way to stay warm. Yet, those greedy for gain ignored this law.

The mention of “drinking the wine of the condemned” probably refers to wine that was confiscated from people that could not pay their debts. Those that confiscated it then used the wine in their religious practices. Such practice was not pleasing to God.

You've Been Warned – 3:6-8

⁶ If a trumpet is blown in a city will not the people tremble? If a calamity occurs in a city has not the LORD done it? ⁷ Surely the Lord GOD does nothing Unless He reveals His secret counsel To His servants the prophets. ⁸ A lion has roared! Who will not fear? The Lord GOD has spoken! Who can but prophesy? Amos 3:6-8 (NASB95)

After warning the entire nation (including both Judah and Israel) that God would hold them to a higher level of accountability since they were chosen and blessed by Him, Amos emphasized that actions have consequences and many times these consequences are very predictable. He asked a series of seven rhetorical questions that started out simply with common occurrences with which the people were familiar and went from the mundane to the foreboding. The first question was simple and regarding two people walking along a road. Unless they have agreed to walk together, then one will likely outpace the other one and they will be traveling

separately. The next question involved the action a lion takes when hunting. The lion doesn't roar until it is ready to pounce on the prey. The third question also involved a lion when he is eating what he has killed. The growling that is done indicates that he is eating and that other animals should stay away. The fourth and fifth questions involved the use of a trap or snare. Will a trap for a bird work if there is no bait and will a trap snap shut unless something triggers it to close? We pick up the sixth and seventh question in verse six. Trumpets were used to sound the alarm if a city was in danger. This would be like towns in the Midwest that sound sirens when a tornado is approaching. If the trumpet sounds or if the siren goes off, does it not get people's attention? Of course, it does. Then came the seventh question which was the heart of the matter for the point that Amos was trying to make with the people. If there are major disasters and problems that are being experienced by a nation, and, if it is true that God is in control of everything, do you not think that God is allowing (or even causing) these things to happen to get people's attention? Do people not recognize such disasters as "the trumpet sounding" or the "siren going off" to warn everyone of something worse that is coming? The following is a sampling of news items from the nightly news of the past week: "2012 warmest year ever for US, 2nd most 'extreme'." "Wake-up call: Chicago set to break snowless record." "Heat, high wind create 'catastrophic' fire condition in Australia." "Dry winter adds to drought fears in Corn Belt." We can add to this the investigation into the shooting at Aurora, Colorado and the Sandy Hook Elementary School. Pile on the Hurricanes Sandy and Katrina disasters, the wildfires in the western United States over the past several years and the continuing national debt and spending crisis of our nation and we have to wonder is everyone is totally deaf to the sounding of the trumpet and the sirens that are going off on an almost continuing basis?

Following the seven questions, Amos then declared a truth that is still in effect even today. God warns us by his prophets before judgment falls upon a nation. He sent people like Amos, Hosea, Joel, and Isaiah to interpret the warning signs that were happening and our nation has had many who have related "natural disasters" to God's judgment upon our nation and these who have spoken out have been dismissed and ridiculed and ignored. This is a sign of the insanity of our times. Just as Amos asked an eighth question of who would not be afraid if they were walking in the woods and they heard a lion roar, we can ask a similar question of our time. Who cannot but have grave concerns for our nation and even the entire world as we see what is happening all around us of the impending judgment that is coming upon the world? The answers to both questions are only those who are blind and deaf, or those who are asleep or those who are totally ignorant or insane would not fear and have serious concerns.

Getting this down on a personal or individual basis, we can look at the ninth question in Amos' list. How can we, who recognize what is happening, avoid telling others what is going on? Can we justify not declaring the truth to those who will listen when the evidence is so clear to us and appears to be so obscure to so many others?

Accountability Comes Knocking – 3:13-15

¹³ "Hear and testify against the house of Jacob," Declares the Lord GOD, the God of hosts. ¹⁴ "For on the day that I punish Israel's transgressions, I will also punish the altars of Bethel; The horns of the altar will be cut off And they will fall to the ground. ¹⁵ "I will also smite the winter house together with the summer house; The houses of ivory will also perish And the great houses will come to an end," Declares the LORD. Amos 3:13-15 (NASB95)

Beginning in verse nine of chapter 3, Amos started addressing the surrounding pagan nations telling them check out what was happening in Samaria and to get their input as to what was developing with regard to the judgment God was going to bring upon the house of Jacob.

The imperative in verse 13 to hear and testify against the house of Jacob was intended to show that even the heathens who did not have the benefit of God's Laws and God's commandments could recognize that Israel had committed great sin. This is similar to having the Islamists point out that America is a decadent society with all the perversions that we tolerate such as use and abuse of alcohol, homosexuality, abortion, rampant divorce, public nudity, etc. Some practices are against what are considered to be natural laws that should be innate in our humanity. We have managed to ignore all these in addition to all the specific laws and principles that come with our Judeo-Christian heritage. It is bad when we have to hear words from someone like Jeremiah Wright that many of the disasters that are happening to our nations are God's judgments on our sinful practices.

The mention of the altars of Bethel was a reference to the false religious practices that had lead to the downfall of the nation. If a society or culture is based on false premises, the culture will be corrupt. Part of the coming judgment would address the root cause of the problem. Those who practiced pagan religions believed that if they could grab hold of the horns of the altar that the god of that altar would protect them. Amos warned them that the horns of those altars (represented the power of the god) would be cut off and such powerless deities would not provide any help when judgment came.

The many social injustices of that day allowed the rich and powerful to grow at the expense of the less fortunate and, as a consequence, the effects of God's judgment would affect them more than the general populace. Those who have a lot, have a lot to lose when destruction comes.

We think it seems a little strange that God would punish His Chosen people even before He would punish the heathen for the same offense. It should not seem strange in that a parent will chastise his own child and not his neighbor's child. God chastised Israel precisely because they **were** special to Him. God's election and calling of people are not a reward for living a good life – God does not owe us anything, but He elected us for the purpose of drawing other people to His blessing. The basis for His election is His love. We, too, must keep in mind the lessons of Amos' prophecy: Sin brings serious consequences, we need to examine our lives for sins and repent of them, and we should always keep in mind that we have been saved by God's grace and not on our merit. It is important for each of us to support those who bring God's word to us and those who are an example of a higher calling. Finally, we can be confident that trials and testings that God allows to come our way are there because He loves us and wants to perfect us so that we are transformed into the image of His Son, Jesus.

God's indictment of Judah and Israel by the prophet Amos gives us insight into His expectations for us both individually and as a nation.