

AMOS

Passionate

Powerful

Colorful

Frightening

Hope for the faithful

Amos is a prophet of the Old Testament. He speaks God's word when many think that everything is fine, but it is not. Amos is called a minor prophet because it is a short book (only nine chapters), but his words are major and memorable.

In the 8th century B.C., God's chosen people are divided into two countries. Israel is in the north. Its capital is Samaria. The primary places of worship are Bethel and Dan. Judah in the south is ruled by descendants of King David. Jerusalem is the capital and the city of the temple.

Amos comes with God's Word to people who are pleased with their present situation. It is a time of relative prosperity and peace. The kingdom faces few perceived threats internally and externally. Amos is not a welcome messenger. God sends this farmer from Judah north to Bethel and Samaria, the power centers of Israel, when relations between the two counties are cordial but uneasy. (Even in peace, Israel usually felt defensive because they rejected Jerusalem as God's favored city and the only place for sacrifices.) He brings a word that not all is good. God's destruction will soon come because of greed, exploitation, ignoring the needy, materialism, self-centered indulgence, power seeking, hypocrisy, and other forms of immorality.

Once Amos begins speaking, the reaction is shock and anger. As long as Amos tells about the coming judgment on neighboring countries, he is allowed to proceed. When the warnings suddenly address the unacknowledged evil in Israel and the resulting punishment, the priest at Bethel expels him.

Amos does not back down. He was not a professional prophet with a position to protect or diplomatic relationships to cultivate. The fruit grower and shepherd came with a message from God. He roared that Israel had been judged and found wanting. Destruction is coming. Eventually comfort and restoration will come for the faithful remnant, but only after the rotten fruit is destroyed.

We, who live in an affluent society with many comforts and distractions that insulate us from God and others, need Amos. Different time, different place, and yet we are so much like the Israelites. Amos speaks many uncomfortable Words of God, but we need them if we are to be faithful in an unfaithful society.

Tips on reading Amos:

Most importantly, let the language roll over you. The sheer power of the language and emotion behind the words will come across. Quick readers will need to slow down to absorb the images.

Chapters one and two contain many names of surrounding countries and cities. They are unfamiliar to us, but were as familiar to the Israelites as Greensburg, Lower Burrell, Kittanning, Butler, Beaver Falls, Washington, and Monessen are to us. The warnings in these chapters are addressed to the communities that surround Israel just as these communities surround Pittsburgh. It is helpful to refer to a map of the Old Testament, especially one that identifies Israel and Judah as separate countries.

Amos uses colorful images. Roaring lions, scorpions in the wall, plumb lines, and rotten fruit are just a few. If an image is not immediately clear, begin by imaging what that experience is like. For example, escaping God's judgment is like running from lions only to find scorpions in the protection of your house. When you read Amos 8:1-3, stop and remember what rotting fruit is like. Some require a little knowledge. Why does Amos speak of "Cows of Bashan" in chapter four? Partly because Bashan was good pastureland with many cattle. Mostly because these women were as unaware and self-centered (greedy) as cows that just eat and eat. The more you know about cows, the stronger this image becomes. If you do not know what a carpenter's "plumb line" is, look it up in a dictionary when you read Amos 7:7-9. Try a Bible dictionary.