

Amos, the Courageous Prophet

Devotional Reading: Psalm 23

Background Scripture: Amos 1:1; 2:6–16; 3:1–15; 7:10–17

Amos 1:1

¹ The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa—the vision he saw concerning Israel two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of Israel.

Amos 2:11–12

¹¹ “I also raised up prophets from among your children and Nazirites from among your youths. Is this not true, people of Israel?” declares the LORD.

¹² “But you made the Nazirites drink wine and commanded the prophets not to prophesy.

Amos 3:7–8

⁷ Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets.

⁸ The lion has roared—
who will not fear?
The Sovereign LORD has spoken—
who can but prophesy?

Amos 7:10–15

¹⁰ Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent a message to Jeroboam king of Israel: “Amos is raising a conspiracy against you in the very heart of Israel. The land cannot bear all his words. ¹¹ For this is what Amos is saying:

“ ‘Jeroboam will die by the sword,
and Israel will surely go into exile,
away from their native land.’ ”

¹² Then Amaziah said to Amos, “Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there. ¹³ Don’t prophesy anymore at Bethel, because this is the king’s sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom.”

¹⁴ Amos answered Amaziah, “I was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. ¹⁵ But the LORD took me from tending the flock and said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’ ”

Key Text

“But the LORD took me from tending the flock and said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’ ”

—Amos 7:15

Introduction

A. Whose Words Will We Heed?

When I served in the church nursery, I both loved and hated building block towers with the kids. It was fun to see how tall we could build the towers, but it could be frustrating when my advice went ignored. I would often suggest, “Let’s make sure we build a big base.” However, my building buddies were more interested in reaching the sky as quickly as possible. I would be thinking about stability; my co-architects were more interested in originality. The result was always the same: the tower would come crashing down to shouts of glee. Maybe the point for the kids was to see it fall more than to build it tall, after all?

It fascinates me that while kids love imitating adults, they also love doing things their own way. The kids in the nursery did not want building advice; they wanted to take their own approach. Adults can easily adopt a similar mindset regarding various matters. We often assume that we are in the right and feel we don’t need anyone else’s input, so we ignore the voices and words of those who can offer guidance. The stakes are low when building block towers for children, but the stakes are much higher in real life. Whose words will we heed?

B. Lesson Context

The book of Amos is one of 12 entries in the section of the Bible known as the Minor Prophets. These books are not “minor” in message; they are “minor” only in length when compared with the “major” prophets of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

Amos preached in the northern kingdom of Israel in about 755 BC (see more on Amos 1:1, below). He ministered during a period of economic prosperity (3:15; 6:4–6). The national borders had been extended significantly through military campaigns (2 Kings 14:23–28). All this resulted in excessive pride and injustice among the people (Amos 6:8, 12–13).

Despite material wealth, the kingdom was in spiritual decline. The people practiced idolatrous worship at national shrines in the cities of Dan, Bethel, and Gilgal (Amos 4:4; 5:5, 26; 8:14;

The Testimony of Faithful Witnesses

Unit 2: Faithful Witnesses Model God’s Fidelity

Lessons 1–4

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the message Amos brought to Israel.
2. Compare the call and ministry of Amos to other prophets of Israel and Judah.
3. Propose a way to strengthen courage for giving witness to God’s justice.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Whose Words Will We Heed?
- B. Lesson Context

I. Setting (Amos 1:1)

- A. Who (v. 1a)
- B. When (v. 1b)

II. Sin (Amos 2:11–12)

- A. Raising Prophets (v. 11)
- B. Rejecting Leadership (v. 12)

III. Servants (Amos 3:7–8)

- A. Divine Plan (v. 7)
- B. Dutiful Proclamation (v. 8)

IV. Struggle (Amos 7:10–15)

- A. The Conspiracy (vv. 10–11)
- B. The Challenge (vv. 12–13)
Itching, Covering, or . . . What?
- C. The Charge (vv. 14–15)
When Plans Must Change

Conclusion

- A. Will We Listen?
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

compare 1 Kings 12:28–30). The people silenced voices that challenged their practices (Amos 2:11). Again, the question is: *Whose words will be heeded?*

I. Setting

(Amos 1:1)

A. Who (v. 1a)

1a. The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa—

This half-verse introduces the man *Amos*. Notice that he does not refer to himself as a prophet. Instead, he identifies as being *one of the shepherds of Tekoa*. This statement raises two interesting points. Tekoa is a small town in the southern kingdom of Judah, about 10 miles south of Jerusalem. However, Amos primarily preaches in the northern kingdom of Israel (Amos 3:9–15; 4:1–5; 5:1; 7:10–17) and only occasionally addresses the southern kingdom of Judah (2:4–5; 6:1).

Because of the rarity of the underlying Hebrew word translated *shepherds*, his occupation is difficult to interpret. This word appears only one other time in the Bible, describing Meshah, king of Moab (2 Kings 3:4). The translation there is “raised sheep,” indicating a man of considerable means. The Hebrew term, therefore, seems to indicate not a poor shepherd but possibly a sheep breeder, likely with significant resources (see also Amos 7:14, below).

B. When (v. 1b)

1b. the vision he saw concerning Israel two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of Israel.

This half-verse locates Amos’s ministry during the reign of *Uzziah* the *king of Judah* in the eighth century BC. Amos adds a second historical marker: *two years before the earthquake*, also mentioned by the prophet Zechariah, who lived several decades later (Zechariah 14:5). Some have dated the earthquake to 760 BC. However, more important than the exact date is the image of an earthquake coming just two years after Amos’s preaching. At several points, Amos uses the imagery of an earthquake to describe God’s coming judgment (Amos 3:14–15; 6:11; 8:8; 9:1, 5, 9).

II. Sin

(Amos 2:11–12)

A. Raising Prophets (v. 11)

11a. “I also raised up prophets from among your children and Nazirites from among your youths.

God now speaks in the first person, highlighting two ways he has blessed and cared for Israel. In the two verses before this one, God references other blessings he has shown Israel (Amos 2:9–10).

The mention of *Nazirites* is somewhat surprising here, as they are not commonly cited as examples of God’s care. Instructions are given in Numbers 6:1–21 for those who wish to make “a vow of dedication to the Lord” as Nazirites. They are not to drink fermented beverages, cut their hair, consume anything that comes from a vine, or be in the presence of a dead body. Samson is known as a Nazirite (Judges 13:5, 7; 16:17), and another possible example of someone who may have taken the Nazirite vow is Samuel (1 Samuel 1:11).

There are likely two reasons why God identifies Nazirites in this context. First, their austere lifestyle stands in stark contrast to the luxurious yet sinful practices of oppression and injustice (see Amos 2:8; 4:1; 6:4–6). Second, the Nazirites had consecrated themselves to the Lord. Therefore, they contrast the people of Israel, who live in a manner that contradicts their confession of the Lord as their God.

11b. “Is this not true, people of Israel?” declares the LORD.

This rhetorical question proves that the Lord has guided the people with a succession of

How to Say It

Amaziah	Am-uh-zye-uh.
Bethel	Beth-ul.
Gilgal	Gil-gal (G as in get).
Jeroboam	Jair-uh-boe-um.
Joash	Jo-ash.
Meshah	Me-shuh.
Moab	Mo-ab.
Nazirites	Naz-ih-rites.
Uzziah	Uh-zye-uh.
Zechariah	Zek-uh-rye-uh.

prophets and has provided Nazirites as examples of consecration. The *people of Israel*, however, have abused or ignored them.

B. Rejecting Leadership (v. 12)

12. “But you made the Nazirites drink wine and commanded the prophets not to prophesy.”

In the previous verse, the Lord mentions the prophets before mentioning the Nazirites; in the verse before us, however, the order is reversed. This kind of structure is characteristic of Hebrew literature and serves as an aid to memorization.

Making *the Nazirites drink wine* was to tempt them to violate their vow of consecration (Numbers 6:2–4). To incite such a violation is no small thing! Likewise, silencing the prophets is also a serious matter. Throughout Israel’s history leading up to Amos’s time, many prophets had been silenced or ignored (1 Kings 18:4; 22:8–28; etc.). More will follow, and Amos himself will face similar experiences (Amos 7:10–16, below).

What Do You Think?

What might cause a community to reject or resist God’s messengers?

Digging Deeper

How can we remain open to hearing God’s voice and following his will?

III. Servants

(Amos 3:7–8)

A. Divine Plan (v. 7)

7. Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets.

God’s track record shows that he gives people many chances to repent before his holy nature requires retributive and corrective action (2 Peter 3:9). In Old Testament times, he voices those opportunities either personally, through an angel, or through *his servants the prophets* (2 Kings 17:13; Jeremiah 7:25; 25:4; etc.). In New Testament times, he conveys those opportunities through his Son (Hebrews 1:1–2). Offenders in either era try to stop that message by silencing the messengers (examples: Jeremiah 38:6; Acts 4:18).

What Do You Think?

Why does God choose to work through human messengers?

Digging Deeper

What does this reveal about his character and his relationship with humanity?

B. Dutiful Proclamation (v. 8)

8. The lion has roared—who will not fear? The Sovereign LORD has spoken—who can but prophesy?

The emphasis of this verse is on the inevitability of the Lord’s word of judgment. Lions typically roar after they have captured prey, not before (Amos 3:4). Thus, the image of a roaring *lion* associated with the Lord’s speech is a terrifying prediction of impending judgment. *Who will not fear*, indeed!

This word imagery reflects the Lord’s roar described in Amos 1:2, which occurs right before a series of accusations directed at the surrounding nations, as well as Judah and Israel.

IV. Struggle

(Amos 7:10–15)

In Amos 7:1–9 (not in our printed text), the Lord shows Amos three visions of judgment on the northern kingdom of Israel. After each of the first two, Amos intercedes, and the Lord relents. After the third vision, however, the Lord leaves no room for intercession; he will indeed destroy the religious sites where Israel worshiped pagan deities (compare Amos 3:14; 4:4–5; 5:4–6). The Lord promises, “With my sword I will rise against the house of Jeroboam” (7:9). Judgment is coming.

A. The Conspiracy (vv. 10–11)

10. Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent a message to Jeroboam king of Israel: “Amos is raising a conspiracy against you in the very heart of Israel. The land cannot bear all his words.”

It’s dangerous to challenge vested interests! Yet that is exactly what Amos has been doing. As a result, one member of the vested interests—

Amaziah the priest of Bethel—now feels threatened enough to report his concerns to the *king of Israel*.

Throughout the book of Amos, tension has been building between God’s sending of prophets and Israel’s response (or lack of response) to them (Amos 1:1–2; 2:11; 3:1–8). This tension comes to a head here in 7:10–17 in a battle of credentials. The verse now before us documents the first part of the war of words between Amaziah and *Amos*.

After the nation of Israel split in 930 BC, Bethel emerged as a key sanctuary. The first king of the northern kingdom—whose name was also Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:1–24)—chose Bethel as an alternative to Jerusalem as a place of worship (12:26–33). Bethel is strategically located about 10 miles north of Jerusalem. The numerous times that Amos mentions Bethel by name speaks to its level of idolatry (Amos 3:14; 4:4–5; 5:5–6; 7:13).

11. For this is what Amos is saying: “Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land.”

Prophets often introduced divine speech with the phrase, “This is what the Lord says.” Amos himself uses the phrase more than a dozen times (Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6; 3:11, 12; 5:3, 4, 16; 7:17). In this context, Amaziah mocks Amos by reporting *For this is what Amos is saying*, insinuating that Amos is just making things up.

What Do You Think?

How can we ensure that our commitment to God takes precedence over cultural or societal loyalties?

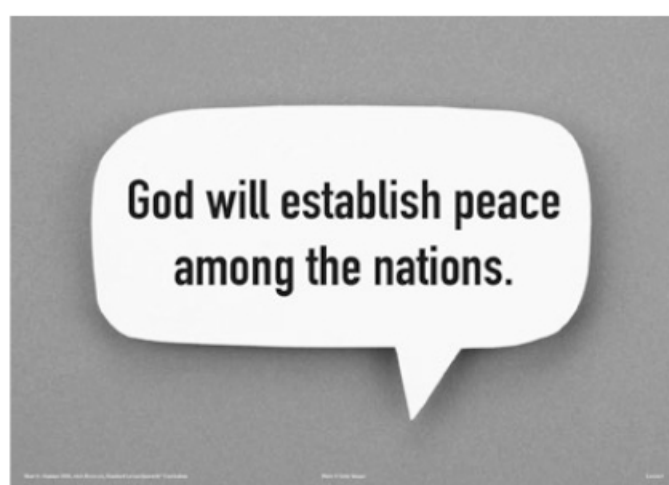
Digging Deeper

How can we cultivate a posture of openness to God’s Word, even when it challenges our comfort or assumptions?

B. The Challenge (vv. 12–13)

12. Then Amaziah said to Amos, “Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there.”

Some commentators suggest that *Amaziah* slights *Amos* by calling him a *seer* and not a prophet. However, this interpretation is unlikely since the terms



Visual for Lesson 4. Display this visual as you ask, “Where do you notice God’s work of peace among the nations?”

often appear together in descriptions (example: 2 Samuel 24:11). The word *seer* is the older of the two words (1 Samuel 9:9). Since Amaziah doesn’t acknowledge God to be the source of Amos’s teaching, the use of the word *seer* here is likely sarcastic.

By referring to eating *bread*, Amaziah may imply that Amos prophesies simply for financial gain (compare Micah 3:11; Acts 16:16–20; 2 Corinthians 2:17; 1 Timothy 6:5).

13. “Don’t prophesy anymore at Bethel, because this is the king’s sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom.”

Bethel is Amaziah’s domain, and he does not want further interference from Amos. He invokes the authority of the king twice.

The most important aspect of both Amaziah’s report to Jeroboam and his challenge to Amos is the absence of any mention of God. Amaziah does not challenge Amos’s interpretation of God’s message or his role as a divine spokesperson. He does not contradict Amos’s accusations of sin. Instead, Amaziah is interested only in countering threats to the vested interests.

Itching, Covering, or . . . What?

Brian grew up in a dysfunctional family, which led to a rebellious phase during his teenage years. Drugs and alcohol became frequent vices for him and his friends. His grandmother noticed the troubling changes in his life and tried to take the boy under her wing. She warned him that if

he continued making poor decisions, he would face severe consequences of his own doing. She wanted better for him, but he ignored her warnings. Before long, her predictions came true.

Nobody likes delivering a message of doom, let alone receiving one. It's often easier to surround ourselves with people who tell us what we *want* to hear rather than what we *need* to hear. The apostle Paul refers to this practice as having "itching ears" (2 Timothy 4:3). To refuse to listen and heed can also be likened to the stoning of Stephen when his detractors "covered their ears" to avoid hearing the truth (Acts 7:57; compare Zechariah 7:11). Amaziah did not want to hear the "minority opinion" of Amos's prophecy of coming destruction. What he failed to understand was that Amos spoke God's words, and God's words always come true.

—L. M. W.

C. The Charge (vv. 14–15)

14. Amos answered Amaziah, "I was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees."

We now come to the second part of the war of words between *Amos* and *Amaziah*. Amos begins his response by clarifying his occupation. By denying that he is *the son of a prophet*, Amos denies that he comes from a prophetic school, such as we see in 1 Samuel 19:18–21 and 2 Kings 2:3; 4:38; 6:1–2; 9:1. This could imply that he speaks freely and is not beholden to any particular group or person in the giving of his message.

Amos has the background of a farmer. The word translated *shepherd* here differs from the term translated that way in Amos 1:1, and it is quite rare; this verse is the only instance in the Old Testament where the underlying Hebrew word appears. The underlying word used in the Septuagint, the ancient Greek version, is also quite rare. Our best interpretation suggests that it refers to someone who cares for livestock. Therefore, the combination of these two rare terms may indicate that Amos was a businessman.

His additional work as one who takes *care of sycamore-fig trees* adds to his résumé. Trees bearing figs were common in the region during antiq-

uity (1 Kings 10:27; 1 Chronicles 27:28; Luke 19:4). Amos does not need to prophesy for financial gain; he already has his own vocation.

What Do You Think?

How does Amos's claim in verse 14 illustrate God's ability to call and use anyone, regardless of their background or profession?

Digging Deeper

In what ways does this idea challenge conventional ideas about leadership or ministry?

When Plans Must Change

The year 2020 brought significant and unexpected changes to my family. Our oldest daughter was planning to attend Bible college on a scholarship, and we were preparing to launch her, our first child, into adulthood. In the midst of those preparations, the Christian college where my husband and I worked closed its doors forever. As a result, both of us found ourselves out of jobs, and our daughter's scholarship vanished. We had to switch gears quickly; we were both looking for work at a time when all organizations had stopped hiring due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I took a chance and applied to a competitive residency program for hospital chaplaincy. I did not have all the right qualifications. After submitting my application, I learned that the deadline had already passed. However, God worked behind the scenes, and I was accepted into the program.

This opportunity shifted my life onto a new path that focused on ministry. Despite the challenges of navigating such an abrupt change, I quickly realized that I would love my new career and sensed that God was using me in this role. He transformed a difficult situation and changed my life.

Amos also seemed to have his life well planned. He owned sheep, goats, and orchards. He knew what he would be doing for the rest of his life. Then, God stepped in and changed his plans. When God changes your plans—and he surely will, in some way—how will you respond? Will you resist, or will you embrace the change as an

opportunity for greater service to the kingdom of God?
—L. M. W.

15. “But the LORD took me from tending the flock and said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’ ”

Amos is not eager to be a prophet. He is not looking for an opportunity to speak out against Amaziah, Jeroboam, or the *people* of northern *Israel*. God took the initiative and asked Amos to *Go* and speak. This idea is supported by Amos 7:14, where Amos clearly states that his motivation for prophesying was not for financial gain.

Additionally, it is important to note that Amos is not a political operative or rabble-rouser. Rather, he is a divine spokesperson. This heightens the seriousness of Amaziah’s resistance to Amos. Amaziah opposes not merely an individual prophet or even a school of prophets; he opposes the Lord, Israel’s God. As Amaziah functions as a representative of his king and the nation of northern Israel, their rejection of Amos’s messages is essentially a rejection of God’s message.

What Do You Think?

How should we respond when we sense a call from God, even if it feels beyond our abilities?

Digging Deeper

What questions can you ask to help you discern God’s call?

Conclusion

A. Will We Listen?

The message of Amos went unheeded. Soon after his ministry ended, Assyria began to make incursions into the territory of Israel and its neighboring regions. Less than 40 years later, in 722 BC, northern Israel would fall and be exiled (2 Kings 17). As with the message of other prophets, the choice was between only two courses: either repent or die. Nearly all the prophets had their message rejected, the prominent exception being Jonah (see Jonah 3).

Because of their nation’s relative prosperity and religious fervor, Jeroboam and Amaziah assumed that God was on their side. Amos challenged this

assumption, warned of judgment, encouraged repentance, and offered hope for the future.

To say that we read the words of God in the book of Amos seems obvious. After all, we read the prophecies with the advantage of hindsight; we see the prophecies fulfilled. But at the time the prophecies were given, it was a challenge to determine who was speaking the truth. That challenge still exists today, which is why Jesus warns his followers against false teachers (Matthew 7:15; 24:24). We do well to examine the teaching we hear in light of what Scripture says (compare Revelation 22:18–19).

The book of Amos offers another method for distinguishing a teacher of truth from a teacher of fiction. That method is to examine motivation—what’s in it for the teacher? When we compare Amos’s motivations with those of Amaziah, we see polar opposites. When Amos spoke against the religious, economic, and political status quo, he was risking his life by questioning Israel’s assumption that God was happy with their behaviors and beliefs. To speak against a holy place in antiquity was to invite the death penalty (example: Jeremiah 26:1–15). On the other hand, Amaziah’s perceived risk was an upset of the status quo, in which he had a vested interest. The New Testament witnesses to the same concern (2 Corinthians 2:17; 4:1–2).

For modern readers, the account of Amos also encourages us to reflect on how we hear the word of God today. Are we willing to listen? Will we accept God’s challenge? Are we so committed to our religious, economic, and political status quo that we become unwilling to give an ear to anything that questions it? The fact that God speaks is a sign of God’s grace. He wants to communicate with us. Will we have ears to hear?

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, help us be open to your challenge and quick to repent of sin. Give us ears to hear your words and hearts committed to obeying. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Listen to the Lord’s words of challenge,
“Repent and obey.”