

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, we offer You this day, and everything within it; the good which inspires us, and the more difficult things that challenge us. Work through all we do and everything that happens to us to bring about peace and harmony in our lives, in the lives of others around us, and in the wider community we serve. Then, may we enjoy peace and harmony with You, our Lord and Saviour: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Church Unity

Pray today for those in every congregation of God's people, who strive to open our hearts and minds to be generous to people of other churches and denominations, for the sake of the Gospel.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for the Holy Spirit and His work of renewal within you
- Pray for God's blessing on our endeavours to reduce waste
- Pray that people will perceive how God is at work within world events

Meditation

Hear us, Lord Jesus, hear us:

We confess our faith so You will save us;
and we confess our sins so You will heal us.

We confess;

our faith in Jesus Christ who has died for us,
and our failure to trust in the love of the Lord.

We confess;

the Glory of God's Creation which surrounds us,
and our pollution of the planet on which we live.

We confess;

the healing presence of the Holy Spirit within,
and our doubts which tempt us to leave Your side.

We confess;

our gratitude for those who have led us to faith,
and our lack of zeal for mission and evangelism.

Hear us, Lord Jesus; hear us.

Bible Study - Amos 1:1-8

¹ The words of Amos, who was one of the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw in a vision regarding Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake.

² He declared: 'The LORD roars from Zion and shouts out from Jerusalem; the pasture lands of the shepherds languish, and the top of Carmel withers.'

³ This is what the LORD says: 'For three crimes of Damascus, and for four, I will not withdraw the punishment, because they have threshed Gilead with iron-toothed threshing sledges. ⁴ So I will send a fire upon the house of Hazael, and it will devour Ben-hadad's strongholds. ⁵ I will smash the gate-bar of Damascus, and hew down the one who rules in the Valley of Aven, and the one who holds the sceptre in Beth-eden; and the people of Syria will be exiled to Kir,' says the LORD.

⁶ This is what the LORD says: 'For three crimes of Gaza, and for four, I will not withdraw the punishment, because they carried into exile entire nations to hand them over to Edom. ⁷ So I will send a fire on the wall of Gaza, and it will consume her strongholds. ⁸ I will cut off the one

who rules in Ashdod, and the one who holds the sceptre in Ashkelon; My hand will be turned against Ekron until the last of the Philistines is dead,' says the Lord God.

Review

As we plunge into the world of the prophets of the eighth century BC, there is no question about the force and power of the language used by Amos. He delivered a furious message from the Lord, condemning the nations around Israel and Judah for heinous war crimes that were an affront to humanity and to God. All war is an affront to God and a tragedy for people, but Amos was told to speak these words because God had an important work to be done and an essential message to deliver, and as we read the book of Amos, we will find out what this is. There is far more to Amos the prophet than mere condemnation of war, and the beginning of the book which describes his work and records his words is important. It gives us just a small amount of information about the man; enough for us to build up a picture of what he was doing under the inspiration and guidance of the God in whom he believed. Later, we will find out why.

The first thing we find out about Amos is that He was a shepherd from Tekoa. This was a small town in the southern countryside of Judah, to the west of Jerusalem, so we may safely assume that Amos was Judean by nationality. At that time God's people were divided into two; the northern kingdom, called Israel with Samaria as its capital city, and southern kingdom, called Judah, with Jerusalem as its capital city. The first verse of Amos also gives us a good idea of when he prophesied, which was during the reign of Uzziah (of Judah) and of Jeroboam II (of Israel). We are told that the prophecies were given 'two years before the earthquake' (1:1) but we do not know when this was because there is no other record of it in either the Bible or anywhere else. However, this does indicate to us that the prophecies in Amos were all attached to one event in Amos' life, and as we find out later on in chapter 7 (7:10-14), this was the case. Amos, a southern Judean, had gone from Tekoa in the south to Bethel, one of the main religious centres of the northern kingdom, to prophesy against the sins of Israel!

If you think that this is a little too much for us to find simply from the first verse of Amos and a story from half way through (7:10-14), then the second verse of the book confirms the whole picture. Amos said; 'The LORD roars from Zion and shouts out from Jerusalem; the pasture lands of the shepherds languish, and the top of Carmel withers.' This sounds very poetic to us, but it is very specific. Zion was Jerusalem, so what Amos declared was a very strong vision of the Lord speaking with authority from the His holy city. He then said two things happened as a consequence; the pasture lands of the shepherds 'languish' and the top of Carmel 'withers'. The picture created here is of the Lord's voice roaring northwards from Jerusalem like a hot wind from the south, blowing firstly past the 'pasture lands' of the shepherds in Judea, and reaching to the very top of Israel, to the flat and agriculturally fertile plain of the top of Mount Carmel in the far north west of Israel! Amos' prophetic word was clear; God had something to say to His people in the northern lands of Israel, but they would have to hear it from Amos, a man from the south! Amos was walking into a very tense situation!

What happens next in the book of Amos is that we are presented with eight prophecies in a row, which take up most of the first two chapters. There is a reason for this sequence which will become clear as we go through it, but the first six of these (1:3-5, 6-8, 9-10, 11-12, 13-15 and 2:1-3) are all prophecies which berate the neighbouring regions or countries of Judah and Israel. The first two countries that feature in our reading today are Damascus, the capital city of Syria in the far north east, and Gaza, the region occupied by the Philistines in the far south east. Clearly, Amos knew of atrocities of war committed by both nations that were deeply offensive both to God and to people, but we have no record in Scripture of these events. In the end, though, the particular details do not matter, for as we will see in future studies, Amos was merely building up a picture to prepare us for his main message, yet to come.

The beginning of Amos' prophecy is colourful, but somewhat low-key. Rest assured, for the full force of his message is astonishing when he finally delivers it!

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group what you know about the breakup of the kingdom of Israel into Israel and Judah (read 1 Kings 12).
2. Have a look at a map of Old Testament Israel (from the time of David onwards) and discuss the location of the places mentioned in this text.
3. How important are the prophets to the message of God's Word in the Bible?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Clearly, this beginning of Amos' prophecy does not say much to us directly, but it does indicate that the Lord will choose whoever He wants in order to deliver His message. Amos was an ordinary shepherd, a man of lowly status in Judah, and God used Him eventually for a mighty work. We do not often recognise that Amos was one of the first prophets whose writings are recorded, so what happened to him and his message must have affected a considerable number of people. We must remember that God can often do something far greater than we ever think out of our efforts; and like Amos, we must be diligent to do God's will and faithful to see it through. The we will find that He has used us!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Think back through your life and consider who the Lord has used to bring His Word to you; He will have used all kinds of people. Now take time to pray and ask the Lord how your own life and witness affects other people around you. In what ways does the Lord use you to bring His message to others?*
- *Pray for those who have no confidence in themselves and find it hard to believe that they can be of value to anyone else. Pray that God will speak to them through people they trust to build them up in faith.*

Final Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, may we be completely filled with Your love; we need more and more of Your love to do more and more of Your work in the world, and without this love, we are nothing. May we be seen as people of love; not just of sentiment or passion, but of mercy and truth, so that we may witness to You faithfully within Your world: AMEN
