

# Listen to God

God's judgment awaits all who ignore Him and His truth.

Imagine that you lived near six spacious parcels occupied by your neighbors. Your brother-in-law and sister live next door on the same parcel of land as you, but your other neighbors do all the things that make some people bad neighbors. Because they are so mean to others, you aren't really friends with them at all.

One day, you see state troopers pull up to a neighbor's house. After a few minutes, they emerge with your neighbor in handcuffs. You wonder what's going on, but you don't give it much thought. The next day, the troopers come for a second neighbor. They arrest another neighbor on the third day. Eventually, the troopers remove all six.

You feel a little bad, but it doesn't concern you a whole lot. To be honest, you're glad to be rid of them. The troopers do get your attention, though, when they come for your brother-in-law next door. You love your sister, and you tolerate her husband. But this one hits close to home because he's family. Slowly, it dawns on you that your time might be coming. Sure enough, the troopers eventually arrive at your door.

In the early chapters of Amos, God's prophet spoke against six neighbors of Samaria, Israel's Northern Kingdom. God announced that He was about to punish these nations for their sins (Amos 1:3–2:3). Next, Amos put Judah, Samaria's sibling to south, into his crosshairs (2:4-5), before confronting the residents of the Northern Kingdom for their own wrongdoing (vv. 6-16).

This session launches our study of the book of Amos. As God's mouthpiece, Amos was likely appalled by what he saw in the Northern Kingdom. The population was sharply divided between those with abundant resources and those who had little or nothing. But the wealthy had shown little regard for the needs of the poor around them. God's people had abandoned His law and gone their own way. As a result, He promised devastation and exile.

It's human nature to suppress disturbing information, but there are some messages we simply shouldn't ignore. God's message stands at the top of that list. In these opening chapters of Amos, God called His prophet to warn Israel about two stark realities: God will judge Israel, and that judgment would be based on how Israel treated her poor.

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## AMOS 1:1—2:16

Amos ministered during one of the most prosperous periods in the history of Israel and Judah. Uzziah/Azariah of Judah (792-740 BC) and Jeroboam II of Israel (793-753 BC) both reigned during a time of unprecedented economic and geographic expansion. In the south (Judah), Uzziah successfully waged war against the Philistines, received monetary tribute from the Ammonites, and rebuilt the port at Ezion-Geber. Meanwhile, in the north, Jeroboam recovered the cities of Hamath and Damascus (2 Kings 14:25-28). By conquering Syria's capital, he even blocked any potential Syrian invasion.

The geographic expansion restored the Jewish kingdoms to roughly the same area as David and Solomon ruled during the united monarchy's glory days and created more wealth. Into such unbridled euphoria stepped Amos, who bluntly prophesied that Jeroboam would die and Israel would go into exile (Amos 7:11). His words likely seemed unimaginable inside Israel; but historical accounts confirm that within four decades, Israel rapidly weakened and subsequently fell to Assyria in 722 BC.

Amos lived in a small military encampment in Judah called Tekoa, located about ten miles south of Jerusalem (2 Chron. 11:5-12). The book's first verse identified him as a sheep breeder (*noqed*). This is not the usual word for a shepherd, suggesting he may have held a managerial role over other shepherds. Later, Amos used a different word (*boqer*) to describe himself (Amos 7:14). This term is translated "herdsman" in the CSB.

Despite being a southerner, Amos primarily preached to people in Samaria. His prophecy is dated to "two years before the earthquake" (Amos. 1:1). He didn't elaborate on the specifics because his readers likely understood which earthquake he meant.

In Alaska, we have many earthquakes, but "the earthquake" occurred in 1964 and registered 9.2 on the Richter Scale. The same was true for the ancient Near East. Even three centuries after Amos, Zechariah alluded to this same event (Zech. 14:5). Modern archaeological evidence also reveals this powerful earthquake's widespread destruction. In addition, Amos's earthquake featured conspicuously in the judgment scenes in chapters 8–9.

Between 1:2 and 3:8, Amos pointed to eight oracles/burdens depicting God's judgment. The formulaic nature (X, X+1) for these oracles reveals a pattern of "three crimes, even four" that occurs elsewhere in the Bible (Prov. 30:18-19,21-23,29-31). If X is enough to warrant God's judgment, then X+1 is the last straw. This formula is repeated eight times, targeting eight nations with specific sins (Amos 1:3–2:16), including Judah and Israel.

# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## WRONGS REVIEWED (Amos 2:4-8)

People sometimes describe an “act of God” as a random event that causes damage or even death. But God’s judgment is never arbitrary. It is based on the actions of people. Amos specifically identified the sins of Israel and Judah as the cause of the Lord’s impending wrath.

### VERSE 4

**The LORD says: I will not relent from punishing Judah for three crimes, even four, because they have rejected the instruction of the LORD and have not kept his statutes. The lies that their ancestors followed have led them astray.**

Imagine a compass with Israel at its center. As God targeted Israel’s neighbors through Amos, He worked His way around that compass. At this point, one might imagine that Israel and Judah gave a hearty “amen” to these stinging indictments. But when Amos pointed a finger at Judah, Israel’s neighbor to the south, his listeners probably grew a little nervous.

There is no equivocation in God’s verdict: **I will not relent from punishing Judah.** (See this repeated expression in 1:3-13; 2:1-6). God was speaking through the prophet, and He promised to punish the nations for their abuses. But He would also punish His own people. The Hebrew word translated *relent* essentially means to turn or change course. Sometimes, it’s used positively of returning to a homeland or turning from sin. Here, though, God used a negative particle (translated *not*) to confirm that there would be no turning back.

Judah’s crime was different from the charges God leveled against other nations. As God’s chosen people, they had **rejected** (“despised,” KJV) His commands. The Hebrew word *torah* (“law,” ESV, KJV, NIV) is translated **instruction** in the CSB. In Deuteronomy, God gave the Torah to Israel and commanded the people to obey it (Deut. 28:58; 29:21; 32:46). So, while Israel’s pagan neighbors had committed crimes against others, God accused His people of rebelling against Him.

Rather than following God’s transcendent wisdom, the Jews relied on human accomplishment. Amos noted that the **lies** passed down to them generationally had **led them astray**. Instead of walking closely with their Creator and Sustainer, they followed the path of **ancestors** who had rejected God’s *instruction*—and suffered the consequences. The sinful patterns of Israel’s wilderness years still had a powerful hold on God’s people.

## VERSE 5

**Therefore, I will send fire against Judah, and it will consume the citadels of Jerusalem.**

Judah was about to experience the same judgment as her foreign neighbors. Amos used the phrase **I will send fire** (or something similar) in reference to seven different nations (1:4,7,10,12,14; 2:2,5). This particular fire was aimed at **Judah** and would **consume the citadels of Jerusalem**. A *citadel* was typically the most secure area of a city, either attached to the wall or located in the heart of the community. Governments might garrison troops there, and it was usually considered the last line of defense.

Later, Amos mentioned the citadels of Ashdod and Egypt, along with the mountains of Samaria. Rather than storing arms and housing soldiers, Amos emphasized that these nations collected violence and destruction. But God would tear down their strongholds and leave them desolate (Amos 3:11).

In 2012, I spent five months on an archaeological project in Jerusalem's City of David. While there, we excavated a huge stone installation that no one could identify. Years later, excavators solved the mystery. The massive stones were part of a citadel from the Maccabean era around 167 BC. The Greeks built this citadel to prevent Jews from rebelling against them. This was the kind of structure that could give people a sense of security, but it was also the kind of structure (and security) God promised to destroy.

## VERSE 6

**The LORD says: I will not relent from punishing Israel for three crimes, even four, because they sell a righteous person for silver and a needy person for a pair of sandals.**

Like walls closing in, Israel increasingly felt the discomfort of Amos's message. His seven oracles (or burdens) led up to the most important one, the oracle against Israel. It is the longest and most detailed of the burdens.

The context of verse 6 is debt slavery. The poor were in dire circumstances because they could not pay what they owed. Once debtors liquidated every asset, the wealthy forced them to serve as slaves. The poor were not considered property like in the chattel slavery of antebellum America, but the wealthy did take advantage of the less fortunate.

The law of Moses forbid Jews from taking other Jews into slavery (Lev. 25:39-55). Instead, they were told to hire them as paid workers and to forgive their debts after six years (Ex. 21:1-2; Deut. 15:12-15). During the year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:8-17) this was to happen regardless of how long the slave had served. Israel disregarded these laws to the detriment of the poor.

To **sell a righteous person for silver and a needy person for a pair of sandals** referred to blatant extortion and exploitation. Readers should not gloss over the sheer exorbitance of the abuse. A person's life was worth the same as a pair of shoes. Sadly, this was probably no exaggeration. For example, 2 Kings 4:1-7 recounts a widow who appealed to Elisha because she feared her creditors would snatch her children away as collateral.

## VERSES 7-8

**They trample the heads of the poor on the dust of the ground and obstruct the path of the needy. A man and his father have sexual relations with the same girl, profaning my holy name. They stretch out beside every altar on garments taken as collateral, and in the house of their God they drink wine obtained through fines.**

Verse 7 confronts Israel's general oppression of the poor. Imagine a dry, dusty road. The more traffic, the finer the dust becomes. With every passing vehicle, a billowing plume of dust rises and then slowly dissipates. Such is the image here: **they trample the heads of the poor on the dust of the ground.** *Trample the heads* might be a military metaphor, but it could also describe dust that gets beaten finer and finer as people travel on it day by day. Like the dust on a country road, the poor vanish from sight. What's worse, Amos 8:4-6 depicts the wealthy as trampling the needy by dreaming up new ways to cheat them.

The rich did not just ignore the poor. They also would **obstruct the path of the needy.** Their actions actually blocked the downtrodden from improving their situation. Amos later spoke against those who took bribes and denied justice (Amos 5:12). One of the main institutions of ancient justice was the court, which often convened at the city gates. For the poor, though, the odds of receiving justice in these courts were stacked against them.

Jesus Himself warned against ignoring the poor (Matt. 25:42-43,46). Rejecting their cause or ignoring their situation was equivalent to rejecting and ignoring Him. As Jesus bluntly pointed out, those who dismiss the poor do so at their own peril.

Amos also targeted another form of abuse, when **a man and his father have sexual relations with the same girl.** This verse isn't just saying that every man was a womanizer or that the father and son resorted to the same village prostitute. This phrase probably referred to pagan cult prostitution (Amos 2:8). Canaanite worship included a fertility cult, and the priests who officiated these ceremonies designed sexual rituals to enhance the fertility of fields, herds, and family. Worshipers enacted the fertility rites through sacred prostitution at the shrines of their gods.

Like the practitioner of voodoo, who uses a pin and doll to impose suffering, the practitioner of sacred prostitution used ritual sex to guarantee fertility. But the sordid actions of God's people diminished His reputation, **profaning His holy name**. The Hebrew word rendered *profaning* can be translated as "defiling" or "polluting."

God said that the wealthy would **stretch out beside every altar on garments taken as collateral**. The poor could not pay, so they mortgaged everything, even the clothes off their backs. Meanwhile, Israel's elite reclined on these garments while participating in cult prostitution. This was a clear violation of conscience, but it also violated divine law, which said that a lender must return a person's collateral before sunset (Deut. 24:12-13).

As if taking poor people's clothes was not enough, the corrupt rich would also take food off their tables. Amos said the rich would **drink wine obtained through fines**. In places where water was not fit to drink, wine became a valuable commodity and was used to pay fines or debts.

Some suggest a different meaning of verses 7-8. In Hebrew, verse 7b literally says "go to" the same girl. This expression is used nowhere else in the Old Testament to refer to sex. So, it could refer to a religious social club, perhaps hosted by a young woman. At this "celebration," patrons would consume lavish amounts of food and drink at the poor's expense.

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## EXPLORE FURTHER

The article "The Scripture," found in the *Baptist Faith and Message (2000)*, states that Scripture "reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is . . . the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried." How does this ensure that God's judgment of people is true and never arbitrary?

## HISTORY RELIVED (Amos 2:9-11)

God reminded His people how He had rescued them from slavery and gave them a land of their own. But Israel was dishonoring those gifts. And even the prophets could not convince the people to return to God's ways.

### VERSE 9

**Yet I destroyed the Amorite as Israel advanced; his height was like the cedars, and he was as sturdy as the oaks; I destroyed his fruit above and his roots beneath.**

Verses 9-11 reveal an abrupt, yet personal, reflection on Israel's history. God, using the emphatic pronoun **I**, spoke directly through Amos to recap the origins of His chosen people in plain and simple terms. More than anything, He was making clear that Israel's behavior offended Him.

God had done so much for His children. He had destroyed the Amorites (v. 9), brought Israel out of Egypt (v. 10), and raised up their children (v. 11). Yet, Israel responded by committing all kinds of evil. As a result, God was incensed! This passage is similar to Hosea 11:1-5, where God recounted all that He had lovingly done for Israel, only to see that love spurned.

Ancient Canaan was not a nation *per se*, but a loose collection of ethnically diverse city-states. **Amorite** was a catch-all term for people living in the hill country of Canaan prior to Israel's arrival (Num. 13). In Genesis 15:13-16, God promised Abraham that after 400 years of slavery, his descendants would return to Canaan, once the iniquity of the Amorites had reached its full measure. Then, He would judge them and give Israel the promised land. Amos suggested that the Israelites were behaving like the Amorites and that God would drive them out just as He had their enemies centuries before.

Amos used the language of trees and roots to not only describe the strength of the Amorites, but also their demise. The Canaanites were as tall as **cedars** and **sturdy as the oaks**. But they could not stand before God's power. In destroying their **fruit above and his roots beneath**, God demonstrated complete judgment. While the books of Hosea (Hose. 9:16) and Job (Job 18:16) both lean into this imagery, the clearest parallel may be Malachi's account of a coming fire that would burn up the roots and branches of the wicked (Mal. 4:1; see also Amos 1:4,7,10,14; 2:2,5).

## VERSES 10-11

**And I brought you from the land of Egypt and led you forty years in the wilderness in order to possess the land of the Amorite. I raised up some of your sons as prophets and some of your young men as Nazirites. Is this not the case, Israelites? This is the LORD's declaration.**

Under the Lord's direction, Moses led Israel out of slavery in the **land of Egypt**. Then, for **forty years in the wilderness**, God provided food for His people, revealed the law to them, and delivered them from their enemies. When Israel ultimately entered Canaan, they took the **land of the Amorite** because God drove those tribes out.

Some suggest a role reversal here. The oppressed became the oppressor. God drove the Amorites out of the land so these former slaves could have a home. Yet, the Israelites became as bad or worse than the people who had

preceded them, piling abuse upon abuse. So, the tables would be turned. Just as Israel drove out the Amorites, another nation would force Israel from the land and into exile because of sin.

Particularly during the monarchy, God had **raised up some of your sons as prophets**. He had called people to proclaim His message to His holy nation. Israel's own children had made commitments of consecration to God. Even today, it makes some parents uneasy when their children sense a call from God to enter the ministry or to serve God overseas.

God also called **young men as Nazirites**. Numbers 6:2-21 describes the vow of *Nazirites*. Participants promised to abstain from alcohol, refused to cut their hair, and avoided contact with the dead until the oath was complete. The men even shaved their heads, offering their hair as a sacrifice to God (Num. 6:18). Incidentally, it is important to avoid confusing a Nazirite with a Nazarene. The first was primarily an Old Testament term, while the second referred to a person from New Testament village of Nazareth (like Jesus).

When God asked, **Is this not the case, Israelites?** He was not trying to gain information. This rhetorical question was intended to prod His people to think and, more importantly, to respond. It is similar to when God asked Adam, "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9) or when He asked Job, "Where were you when I established the earth?" (Job 38:4) He knew the answer, but He challenged humans to consider their responses carefully and to act appropriately.

**This is the LORD's declaration** also appears in verse 16. It is a common expression used in every prophetic book except Jonah and Habakkuk, which are more narrative and conversational, respectively. In other prophetic works, though, this refrain emphasized that a prophet's message was not of human origin. It came directly from God.

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## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article "Nazirite" on page 1149 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What kinds of Nazirite vows are mentioned in Scripture? Why would God refer to the Nazirite vow in Amos? What does this mean for us today?

## JUDGMENT RECKONED (Amos 2:12-16)

Rather than responding to God's messengers with repentance, the Israelites tried to silence the prophets. This only added to their guilt and further provoked God's anger. In response, the Lord's punishment would be swift and complete.

## VERSES 12-13

**But you made the Nazirites drink wine and commanded the prophets, “Do not prophesy.” Look, I am about to crush you in your place as a wagon crushes when full of grain.**

God’s judgment against His own people continued, but the message shifted from His actions (I destroyed, I brought, I raised) to the actions of God’s people. The Nazirites and the prophets were part of a long line of people who had tried to set Israel straight. **But you** indicates their mission had failed because Israel refused God’s correction. Instead, the people had gone in the opposite direction, actively working to silence these critics. They pressured the Nazirites to break their vows and commanded the prophets to stop preaching. (See also Isa. 30:10-11.)

Amos vividly illustrated our human capacity to stifle those who confront us about our sin. Imagine a **wagon** filled with grain. The excessive weight flattens everything in its path. That is the image God used when He promised to **crush you in your place**. The word translated *crush* occurs only here in the Old Testament. Since the people refused to have pity on the poor, God would personally support their cause. He would stand for the weaker members of society (Deut. 10:18; Pss. 35:10; 140:12).

## VERSES 14-15

**Escape will fail the swift, the strong one will not maintain his strength, and the warrior will not save his life. The archer will not stand his ground, the one who is swift of foot will not save himself, and the one riding a horse will not save his life.**

In the broader context of Amos 1–2, the eight oracles are steeped in the language of ancient warfare. Significantly, verses 14–16 contain seven nouns describing military specialists who will fall before God: **the swift, the strong one, and the warrior** in verse 14; **the archer, the swift of foot, and the one riding a horse** in verse 15; and the “most courageous” in verse 16. Such a list of powerful military assets is unique to Amos, but piling up these seven categories of combatants essentially says, “No matter who you are, you cannot outrun or overpower the Lord.” Speed, strength, and determination are important in many battles, but they would never be enough to rescue Israel from the imminent judgment of God.

Paired with the list of warriors in verses 14–15 is the repeated negative **will not**. The strong *will not maintain his strength*, the warrior *will not save his life*, the archer *will not stand his ground*, the swift of foot *will not save himself*, and the one riding on a horse *will not save his life*.

These verses present a vivid description of a devastating military defeat. How unimaginable an utter collapse must have seemed to Israel during Jeroboam II's prosperous reign! But within four decades of Amos's oracle, Israel's capital city of Samaria would fall to the Assyrians in 722 BC.

Hosea, Amos's closest prophetic contemporary, mentioned Assyria by name nine times. Amos, however, never mentioned Assyria directly. Still, it is clear that both prophets were foretelling the same invasion. The Assyrians would not attack simply because of their military might. They would serve as instruments of God's judgment, chosen by Him to punish the people of Israel for their sin.

## VERSE 16

### **Even the most courageous of the warriors will flee naked on that day — this is the LORD's declaration.**

The eight burdens close with the ultimate picture of shame, as even the most hardened warriors **will flee naked**. Isaiah's prophecy against Egypt and Cush employs similar imagery (Isa. 20:4).

The expression **on that day** would have caught hearers' attention. Old Testament prophets often spoke about the day of the Lord, a time when God's judgment would prevail. It wasn't just an apocalyptic event at the end of time. It referred to a season of unprecedented misery, humiliation, and defeat, rooted in a historical context and brought about by disobedience. Amos 5:18-20 speaks of this event as a day of darkness and not light.

*On that day* depicts the certainty of God's judgment. Hebrews 9:27-28 says there are two appointments people will never avoid: death and judgment. But the anonymous writer also included the good news of the gospel because the Messiah will "bring salvation to those who are waiting for him."

**This is the LORD's declaration** emphasizes again that this was no human message. Amos was speaking God's words to His people.

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## EXPLORE FURTHER

As a prayer activity for this lesson, read the focal verses back to God. Ask Him to help you identify the emotions that this passage stirs in your heart and to understand why you feel that way. Ask Him to help you see areas where you have turned from Him and to give you the courage to repent and follow Him with all your heart.