

# BIBLE CHALLENGE

## A 2 week study of the books of Amos and Hosea

We turn now to the message of two prophets whose careers were in the north at about this time, Amos and Hosea. Unlike Elijah and Elisha, whose words were often accompanied by miraculous, powerful deeds, the remainder of the Old Testament prophets relied primarily on the power that comes from speaking God's word.

We begin reading the message of the prophet Amos who spoke to the northern kingdom of Israel at a time when that kingdom was experiencing relative prosperity. Amos' message is sharply focused on social justice and how the people's religious rituals were simply a means to cover up their indifference to the needs of other people. Amos insists that worship is hollow if it is not intimately connected to a commitment to seek justice for the poor and aid those who are oppressed and in need. While Amos' message is harsh and holds nothing back, perhaps Amos has much to say to us today.

We will move on to another prophet, Hosea, who also preached to the northern kingdom. Hosea's theme has less to do with the demand for justice which inflames Amos, and instead focuses on the issue of a person's relationship with God and the temptation to infidelity in that relationship.

Monday:

Read Amos 1:1, 7:10-16

What to look for:

- These are the biographical notes Amos provides us about himself.
- 1:1 – he is from Tekoa, a town in Judah (the southern kingdom), but is called to preach at Bethel, in the north (7:13).
- A sycamore tree was a tree that bore a small fruit like a fig. Amos was a common man, a worker who tended trees and sheep.
- Note the priest Amaziah's attitude concerning the temple at Bethel in 7:13. He calls it the *king's* sanctuary, not *God's* sanctuary.

Tuesday:

Read Amos 1:3-4, 6, 9, 11, 13, 2:1, 4-8

What to look for:

- To get his listeners involved with his message, Amos begins by describing all the things wrong with Israel's neighbors. Damascus has been committing atrocities in war, Gaza has been involved in

the trading of slaves, Edom has brutalized even its own people, Judah has rejected the law of the Lord. As his listeners no doubt cheered him on, Amos then turned his attention to Israel (2:6). It might be similar to Amos saying in our presence, "For your evil Al Kaida, this is what God is going to do. And for your evil Iran, and North Korea, because of what you have done, God is going to execute judgment on you." And just as we're all saying, "You go, God. They deserve it", Amos says, "And now for you and your sins, America." You might begin to see why Amos was not very popular.

- Note the issues that Amos is raising in 2:6-8. In their wealth they are ignoring the needs of the poor and treating them unjustly (2:6-7), they are engaging in cultic prostitution (vs. 7 – "father and son..."), they are literally taking the shirt off the backs of the oppressed (2:8).

Wednesday:

Read Amos 4:1-13

What to look for:

- Remember that Amos is preaching in Bethel (7:13), which is the place the first Jereboam had set up golden calves when the north separated from the south (1 Kings 12 – week 18). It is the central place of worship in the north, as the temple in Jerusalem is for Judah, the southern kingdom.
- Vs. 4-5 should be read as satire, as a sarcastic parody of a call to worship. They are missing the point of their worship. Their worship is empty because they care nothing for the poor (vs. 1). The result is certain: they will be dragged from their comfortable homes into exile as if they were caught on the end of a fishhook (vs. 2 and 3)
- Note the refrain repeated in vs. 6, 8, 9, 10, 11. God has kept his promises and tried everything imaginable to get the people to return to him, but there has been no response.

Thursday:

Read Amos 5:4-7, 11-15, 21-24

What to look for:

- Amos expresses to the people what the Lord's desire is, what is in the Lord's heart for them: God desires that they would seek him, for in seeking him they will live. But they refuse, their desires are not for the Lord but for wealth and comfort even when it comes at the expense of others.
- Amos is astounded by the level of indifference to the poor that the people of Israel are capable of.
- Vs 21-24 are key: the people are going to offer all manner of sacrifices, they are very careful to observe all the appropriate religious feasts and festivals and practice all the correct religious rituals, and yet none of it translates into how they treat others, particularly the poor. They think that if they follow all the rituals correctly they can buy God off by their religious behavior. But all

this wonderful religiosity means nothing to God if there is no justice that accompanies it.

- Likely the people weren't brazenly mistreating the poor as much as they were allowing their own lifestyles to dictate the economic circumstances under which others would be forced to live. But they would make up for it by going to church. How might the lifestyle choices that we as Americans make (or feel entitled to) dictate that others in the world must remain poor? How might our choices be similar to those of the people in Amos' day?
- Vs. 24 – This is what God really wants. This is the truest worship.

Friday:

Read Amos 6:4-8, 7:10-17

What to look for:

- Amos' warning is simple: Sin, in the form of empty worship that does not treat the poor with justice and ignores those who are victims of oppression, will lead to exile from the land.
- Amos doesn't relent, does he? He never lets you up for air. And the people don't like it – they start to complain, "We don't really like your preaching very much. You should maybe go someplace else and preach."
- Amos is clear (vs. 17) that no amount of empty religious ritual is going to save Israel. As long as they fail to repent, judgment is certain and devastation is coming.

Monday:

Hosea is an emotional book in which Hosea acts out the relationship between God and his people by marrying a prostitute who refuses to be faithful. As we feel a bit of Hosea's frustration and suffering love we begin to hear behind it God's own anguished love toward his wayward people.

Read Hosea 1: 1-9

What to look for:

- Note 1:2 – Hosea's life is going to be a parable of God's relationship with Israel. God's relationship with Israel is like a marriage, a very particular and exclusive one. "I am the Lord your God and you shall have no other gods before me" is what God said in the opening lines of the Ten Commandments. But the people in the northern kingdom have been repeatedly violating that relationship by worshipping other gods, namely the Canaanite gods, the Ba'als. On a personal level, Hosea's life will mirror what is going on between God and his people. Hosea marries a prostitute, one with many lovers, as a way of reflecting what it is like for God to be in a covenant relationship with a people who keep going after many other lovers – many other gods.
- Gomer bears three children, each of which is given a symbolic name: Jezreel (vs 3), whose name is that of a valley, a

battleground, where God will bring an end to the kingdom; Lo-Ruhamah, which means, “not pitied”, and Lo-Ammi meaning “not my people”. The names of these children become a warning; the people have been unfaithful so God is going to abandon them.

Tuesday:

Read Hosea 2

What to look for:

- This chapter is a plea from God for repentance and a promise of a relationship. God will go to most any lengths to preserve the relationship. These verses express the deepest desires of God's heart – God wants this marriage to work, God wants to hear words of love from his people, Israel.
- Vs 5 – The mother going after lovers is Israel going after the Ba'als. So what is God going to do? He will try to stop her (vs. 6), so that (vs.7) she will repent and turn back to him, her first husband. She will realize she was better off with him.
- Vs. 16 – this is what God is after, this is what God wants to hear. And this (vs 17-18) is what God will do.
- Vs 21-23 are a play on words. Remember the names of the three children from yesterdays reading? The name “Jezreel” literally means “to sew”. God is saying if the people don't repent and turn to him Jezreel will become a battlefield where they will be destroyed. But if they turn to God, then the battlefield will become a sewn field, a fertile field and they will be blessed in their relationship with him. Furthermore, the literal translation of vs. 23 is that God will have pity on “not pitied”, and “not my people” will become his people.

Wednesday:

Read Hosea 3

What to look for:

- God's emotions toward his people are on display for all to see. This is the first time in the scriptures that God's covenant with his people is described in terms of a marriage relationship.
- Gomer, Hosea's wife, has apparently wandered off and become a slave (vs. 2). God's instructions to Hosea are pure grace: Go, buy her back, and forgive her... “show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another...”
- Can you sense the suffering of God's heart, the awful shame of a wounded lover? Can you sense the depth of God's longing for his people?

Thursday:

Read Hosea 5:12-6:7

What to look for:

- 5:12 sheds light on God's threats in 5:14-16. These are the words of a rejected lover, of one who has given his all to the one he loves only to be spurned and rejected. God is not unaffected by his people's rejection. These are God's visceral emotions.
- 6:1-3 are Israel's shallow and empty promises of return. It almost sounds as if Israel is in effect saying, "Let's turn back to God until the heat's off. Then we can do what we want again."
- Note the poignancy of God's words in 6:4. God is throwing up his hands in near futility and complete anguish, saying, "What am I going to do with you?"
- Note again God's statement of what he is looking for from his people in 6:6 – an authentic relationship rather than a placating ritual.

Friday:

Read Hosea 11

What to look for:

- Note God's shifting moods in this chapter: "I'm going to destroy them" (vs.5-7), "No, I'm not", (vs. 8). These might seem to be irrational mood swings from a steady, stable God, unless you read them as typical for a lover who has loved desperately only to be rejected time and again. This is a God of passion and fury and tears and love.
- The story of Hosea is the story of God and what it is like to love someone so deeply only to get nothing in return. Yet, amazingly, God still desires to stick with Israel. God longs to love, not to punish, and so he will continue to suffer in the hope that someday she will return to him. But God will not force his people to love him.

Does Israel repent and return to her first love? No. Not after Elijah's warnings. Not because of what Elisha said. Not in response to Amos' preaching. Not after Hosea's pleading. So, now go back to 2 Kings to finish the story of Israel.