

AMOS: God doesn't Play Favorites

by Ray C. Stedman

The message of Amos, one of the minor prophets of the Old Testament, is somewhat different from that of the rest of the prophets, and has been singled out as unique. The message of this book is basically to declare the impartiality of God. God plays no favorites. He makes no allowances for one person that he will not make for others as well. There is no such thing as being God's fair-haired boy. He does not give any more to one than he does to another, in accordance with the promises that he makes. Any who are willing to fulfill the conditions of the promises will find his blessing poured out upon them, regardless of who they are; and any who presume upon these conditions will find him sitting in judgment upon them and his Word condemning them no matter who they are. This is the message of Amos.

It is hard for us to believe that, isn't it? We are so conditioned to thinking that God reacts the way man does, and that if you get into his favor you can presume upon his goodness. Or we think that perhaps we can get by and not face the same kind of judgment that someone else will, or that we can win special positions, special privileges from God that no one else can have. Both extremes of this attitude are reflected in various groups and individuals from time to time.

The book of Amos, however, is a clear statement that God is not like this at all. Therefore, the message of this book can have the impact of a sudden fist in the face. If you really think that you are in a privileged position, especially with God, this book comes with brutal, shocking, breath-taking force. The tendency in human hearts is either to regard ourselves as favored individuals or the exact reverse – to say that we are such poor creatures and such miserable failures that God would never

look at us, that other people have all the right to God's favor. I think this tendency is universal among us. We are always saying to ourselves, "Why should this happen to me?" when tragedy strikes, or when someone else is honored, we say, "Why shouldn't it happen to me?"

I can't help but think of the story that a friend shared with me recently. It happened in New York City, during the time of the subway rush in the evening of a hot summer day. People were jamming into the subway cars as they were moving out of the station and each car was loaded to capacity. One man happened to be just the last man to push and jam his way inside of a car, and he stood facing the door. The doors closed and the car moved off. He stood there, packed against this door, pressed up against it with the awful push of humanity in the car. As it went down the tracks, waving and swaying, he began to feel a little sick. The further he went, the sicker he got, and just at the critical moment, the car came into a station and the door opened and he got sick all over the man standing on the platform right opposite him. But without anybody moving, the door suddenly closed and the car moved out of the station. The man on the platform stood there looking at himself, and then he shrugged his shoulders and said, "Why me?"

Now, when the prophet Amos came to the northern kingdom of Israel this was exactly the reaction he got. The people of that region looked upon him as though he had just vomited on them. They were disgusted with him. Their attitude was exactly that: Why us? Why not go someplace else? You can see this reflected in the biographical sketches that are given to us in this book.

The book opens with these words:

The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds [or herdsmen] of Tekoa which he saw concerning 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. {Amos 1:1 RSV}

That definitely dates this book and the prophet Amos as a contemporary of the prophet Hosea and also of Isaiah in the southern kingdom. He was one of the earliest of the prophetic writers. And the thing that marks this book is that he was not a trained prophet. He was a layman. Some suggest that since he called himself a herdsman, a cattleman – or, as it is translated here, “a shepherd” – he was the first of a long line of cowboy preachers. I don't know if that marked him with disfavor in the eyes of the people, but at any rate his message was not acceptable to them.

In Chapter 7 Amos adds another personal note. Here is the reaction to his message as he came to this northern kingdom:

Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent to Jeroboam king of Israel, saying, “Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said, ‘Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.’”
{Amos 7:10-11 RSV}

That was the burden of the prophet's message. God was going to exile Israel. God was going to judge the nation and the king.

And Amaziah said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there.” {Amos 7:12 RSV}

Amaziah says, “Don't come to us. God back to your home town. Go back to the country you came from and prophesy down there.”

“but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.” {Amos 7:13 RSV}

And sturdy, rugged Amos, with his country background and his bluntness said (Verse 14a):

“I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; ...”
{Amos 7:14b RSV}

That means, “I have not been to the school of the prophets.” He didn't mean that his father was not a prophet. He means that he had not been to the accepted school of the prophets.

“... but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees [a farmer], and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’” {Amos 7:14b-15 RSV}

Now you can see something of the opposition to the message of this man as he came declaring the burden of the Lord in the land of Israel in the northern kingdom. They found his message very hard to accept.

Amos went about delivering God's message in a very interesting way. If you had a map of Israel and could locate the countries that are mentioned here, and if you put Israel right in the center of the map, you would find that Amos is going around the boundaries of Israel in various directions, delivering a message concerning all the neighboring nations.

- He begins first in Chapter 1 with Damascus. That is way up in the northeast section above Israel. He delivers to Damascus a message showing Israel how God has judged Damascus, especially for the people's cruelty.
- Then he moves way down on the west coast to the ancient land of Philistia, or what is called here the land of Gaza. And once again he reminds Israel that God has judged this land. Why? Because the people have participated in an active slave trade.
- Then he moves back up the coast to the land of Tyre, on the northwest side of Israel, and here he points out how God had judged this country because the people had broken their agreements.
- Then he moves on down to the far south of Israel to the land of Edom, the ancient country of Esau, and here he points out how God's judgment had fallen upon this nation because of the

people's unforgiving spirit and their implacable hatred of Israel.

- Then he moves back up the east side of Israel to the land of Ammon. (By the way, Ammon is now the country of Jordan and its capital is the capital of ancient Ammon.) Here he points out that God had judged this section of the country because of its cupidity, its greed, its hunger for land of others.
- Then south to Moab, still on the side of Israel, God had judged Moab, he says, because of its hatred against Israel.
- And then he comes to the southern kingdom, Judah itself, and in a brief reference points out that because Judah has despised God's Law, the judgment of God had fallen on it.
- At last he arrives right at the ten-kingdom northern nation of Israel, and here he announces that God is going to judge them for corruption and for injustice in their hearts.

As you read this account, you can see that the people of Israel were quite untroubled as long as Amos was talking about the other nations. They took this very complacently, more or less with the attitude, "Well, they got what was coming to them." But when the prophet moved home to zero in on Israel, the people got angry and said, "Why don't you go away and preach someplace else?" This is almost inevitably the result when preachers are faithful to the message of God. But the rest of the book focuses on this northern kingdom of Israel.

Beginning with Chapter 3 you have the prophet's words that God addressed to this nation. He begins by pointing out to them that they were a people who had a special, privileged position before God:

Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up out of the land of Egypt: {Amos 3:1 RSV}

They are waiting now for Amos' message. And he says,

**"You only have I known
of all the families of the earth;"
{Amos 3:2a RSV}**

That is what they wanted to hear. This was the sign that they were the privileged people of God, the chosen people. They were the ones of whom God himself had said that he had known of all the families of the earth. You can see them swelling with pride and arrogance as the prophet says this. Ah, but then comes the fist in the face, the hammer blow:

**" therefore I will punish you
for all your iniquities." {Amos 3:2b RSV}**

Now see their faces fall. You see, that which was the mark of their pride was the very reason God says they were peculiarly subject to judgment. Light creates responsibility. Privilege exposes to the keenest of judgment. And as these people had been called into such a relationship, they were also, therefore, subject to the severest and sternest forms of judgment.

Now, this is what Peter means in the New Testament when he says, "the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God," (1 Pet 4:17 RSV). It always begins there. God always starts with his people, and then he moves out to those round about them. The prophet's word is that because we are people of God, this does not mean that God's word does not sit in judgment on the wrong in our lives. On the contrary, it is all the more apt to be borne home to us.

Then Amos points out how close this special relationship with God is in Chapter 3:

**"Do two walk together,
unless they have made an appointment?"
{Amos 3:3 RSV}**

Or, as it is usually rendered, "Can two walk together unless they be agreed?" {KJV}. Here is God's walk with his people. And then his talk with them:

**"Surely the Lord God does nothing,
without revealing his secret
to his servants the prophets."
{Amos 3:7 RSV}**

These were the things that marked their peculiar relationship and privilege before God. They

walked with God. They talked with God. But for this reason, the prophet says, God is going to send judgment.

Then he announces what it is. Do you remember the story of the two golden calves that were erected by King Jeroboam in the cities of Bethel and Dan? (1 Ki 12:28). Israel was sent to worship there and the people called those calves Jehovah. And they worshipped and bowed down before those golden images. Now those two calves represented two basic ideas in Israel, for which God was perennially in judgment against the people. Furthermore, they are ideas which are prevalent among people today.

- Those golden calves, in that they were made of gold, represented the hunger of this people for material gain, the love of wealth, materialism – the god of gold.
- And because they were calves, or young bullocks, they were representative of the pagan gods of sex, the fertility gods of the nations round about them who worshipped the bull as a sign of fertility or sexual potency.

So the worship of these twin calves made of gold was essentially symbolic of the people's worship of materialism and sex. That sounds awfully modern, doesn't it?

And the prophet's word to this people was that because of this kind of worship, the nation of Assyria was being raised up by God to come sweeping down from the north to carry Israel away into captivity.

Now, in the patience of God it was almost two hundred years before that took place. Yet God announced it this early so that the people might have space to repent. And he declared that this was certain to come unless they turned to him. Even in this account the prophet shows how God had patiently tried to awaken them.

In Chapter 4 we read of five different times when God had sent something to wake them up, to make them think, to jar them, to arrest them, and stop them in their downward course. He says:

**“I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities,
and lack of bread in all your places [i.e. famine],**

yet you did not return to me,”
{Amos 4:6 RSV}

**“And I also withheld the rain from you ...
I would send rain upon one city,
and send no rain upon another city,**
{Amos 4:7a RSV}

God was deliberately spacing the rain so that there would be an awareness that this was the divine hand.

“... yet you did not return to me,
{Amos 4:8b RSV}

**“I smote you with blight and mildew;
I laid waste your gardens ...
yet you did not return to me.”**
{Amos 4:9a RSV}
{Amos 4:9c RSV}

**“I sent among you a pestilence after the
manner of Egypt;
I slew your young men with the sword;
I carried away your horses; ...
yet you did not return to me,”**
{Amos 4:10a RSV}
{Amos 4:10c RSV}

**“I overthrew some of you,
as when God overthrew Sodom and Go-
morrah ... [that is, by volcanic action,
burning and so on] yet you did not return to me.”**
{Amos 4:11a RSV}
{Amos 4:11c RSV}

Again and again God says this. Here is an indication that God often sends things into our lives to shake us up, to awaken us. I have seen this happen so many times. Visiting someone in the hospital who has gone through some accident, I have often found that even though nothing directly indicated that this was perhaps a judgment of God, it was taken by the individual, and rightly so, as a warning or shaking up, as if God were saying, “Look now. Stop and think about where you are going and what is happening to you.” For God, in great patience, is constantly trying to make us see things the way they really are.

And then as the prophet moves on he puts his finger on the very thing that is wrong:

**Therefore because you trample upon the
poor
and take from him exactions of wheat,**

**you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not dwell in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.
For I knew how many are your transgressions,
and how great are your sins –
you who afflict the righteous, who take a
bribe,
and turn aside the needy in the gate.
Therefore he who is prudent will keep silent
in such a time;
{Amos 5:11-13a RSV}**

Now this is the reason this book is so loved by the liberal; Amos is called the prophet of social justice, the man who demanded that man treat their fellow-man rightly. Liberals love this book because of these thundering pronouncements against the social evils of Amos' day – and rightly so. God is always disturbed by social injustices. But what the liberals seem to miss in this book is Amos' appeal to these people. He doesn't just say to them, "Now stop doing these things." He does say that, but that isn't all he says. It is how to stop doing these things that is the important message, and you will find it plainly given twice in Chapter 5:

**For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel:
"Seek me and live." {Amos 5:4 RSV}**

"Don't go to Bethel. Don't go to those golden calves. Seek me and live."

**Seek the Lord and live,
lest he break out like fire in the house of
Joseph. {Amos 5:6a RSV}**

What is the answer to the wandering heart? The answer isn't just to clean up your life. It is to come back to God. It is to repent and to think again. Turn. Come back to the Lord of your salvation. Call upon him. Ask him to set you back on your feet and straighten out your life. That is the answer. That is always God's appeal. Come back into a relationship with one who loves and in patience tries to awaken us and bring us back to himself.

Now, the nation evidently went on resisting the appeal of the prophet, so he addresses two particular messages to these people, aimed at the two ex-

treme views among the people of Israel. They are almost contradictory views. First he says:

**Woe to those who desire the day of the
Lord! {Amos 5:18a RSV}**

And to the other group, he says:

**"Woe to those who are at ease in Zion,"
{Amos 6:1a RSV}**

Now here are two quite distinct views among the people. There were those whom we might call the pious hypocrites who first came under the judgment of God. "Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord!" What does this mean? Well, you see, there were some people who were going about saying, "Oh, isn't this a terrible day. Oh, God is so hard. Things are so terrible." They were wringing their hands, appearing to be mourning, and going through all kinds of rituals and religious ceremonies and saying, "Oh, there is no hope for anything. Oh, if God would only come at last! Oh, would that the day of the Lord would come. Would that we could go home to be in heaven." Did you ever hear that? And the prophet thunders: "Woe to you that desire the day of the Lord."

Amos says, "Do you know what that day will be like? Do you have any idea what you are saying? Why," he says, "it is darkness, not light. It is as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him; or he went into the house and leaned a hand against the wall and a snake bit him. You talk about the day of the Lord. Why, you don't know what you are talking about! Woe to you." And God says,

**"... I despise your feasts,
and I take no delight in your [religious
activities] solemn assemblies, {Amos
5:21 RSV}
your burnt offerings, ...{Amos 5:22 RSV}
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
... the melody of your harps ...
{Amos 5:23 RSV}
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an everflowing
stream." {Amos 5:24 RSV}**

Do we ever get away from this? God desires truth in the inward parts, in the center of life – not outward conformity. God sees through that sham and pretense without the slightest difficulty and it doesn't impress him when we go through religious

activity: "Thou desirest truth in the inward being;" (Psa 51:6 RSV).

Well, then there was another group that said, "We are not concerned about these things. Let's eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die. Let's have as good a time as we can and make the most of life; let's enjoy it to the full while we can." And the prophet says, "Woe to those who are at ease in Zion," {Amos 6:1a RSV}.

Amos asks, "How can you be so restful when the nation is so restless? How can you content yourselves with riches and wealth and the good things of life when people are lying in distress outside in the streets and judgment is taken away from your courts?" So there comes this powerful message:

**"Woe to those who lie upon beds of ivory,
and stretch themselves upon their
couches,
and eat lambs from the flock,
and calves from the midst of the stall;
who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
[in the midst of the threatening judgment
of God.]" {Amos 6:4-5a RSV}**

These are the two extreme groups. As Amos goes on, he shows in a series of visions that were given to him that the nation is rapidly ripening for judgment. At last there comes the final scene, almost always pictured by the prophets – a scene of beauty, peace, and glory. It reveals what God wants and, therefore, why God is angry at hypocrisy. Listen to these words:

**"In that day I will raise up
the booth of David that is fallen
and repair its breaches,
and raise up its ruins,
and rebuild it as in the days of old."
{Amos 9:11 RSV}**

Do you remember where that is quoted in the New Testament? In the first council at Jerusalem, in Acts 15, when they were wondering whether God would save the Gentiles without the Law of Moses, James stood up and quoted this verse from Amos: "The prophets," he said, "have declared that God is going to send his grace out to the Gentiles," and he quoted this verse (see, Acts 15:15-18). God's word was that he would raise up the tabernacle or the booth of David which had fallen, and repair its

breaches. That is a picture of the coming of Christ, representing the house of David. And in the raising up of the Lord Jesus, the word was to go out to all the peoples. God would bless the world through him,

**"that they may possess the remnant of
Edom
and all the nations [all the Gentiles] who
are called by my name,"
says the Lord who does this.
{Amos 9:12 RSV}**

Then comes this beautiful scene:

**"Behold, the days are coming," says the
Lord,
"when the plowman shall overtake the
reaper
and the treader of grapes him who sows
the seed;
the mountains shall drip sweet wine,
and all the hills shall flow with it.
I will restore the fortunes of my people Is-
rael,
and they shall rebuild the ruined cities
and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and drink their
wine,
and they shall make gardens and eat their
fruit.
I will plant them upon their land,
and they shall never again be plucked up
out of the land which I have given them,"
says the Lord your God.
{Amos 9:13-15 RSV}**

That is a picture, of course, of the millennial days when Israel shall at last be restored to the land, never to be removed again.

Now then, why is God so angry with this people?

- If cruelty makes him angry, it is because his heart is so set upon kindness toward man.
- If oppression stirs his wrath, it is because he wants men to live in love and peace.
- If pain inflicted upon others brings judgment from God, it is because his heart is set upon happiness and the well-being of humanity.

The message of this book is that God is relentless when he begins to deal with man. He will not make peace. He will not compromise:

- When he begins to deal with a nation, he insists on absolute values.
- When he begins to deal with an individual, he deals with absolute values.
 - Just the fact that we are Christians does not mean that we escape the condemnation of the judgment of the Word of God in those areas where we are attempting to compromise.
 - Just because we have been Christians for 40 years doesn't change the relentlessness of the Word of God as it searches and probes our hearts and lives. God doesn't change.

The word of this prophet is that we are dealing with a God of righteousness and of unbending, inflexible zeal who will not compromise in any way, and yet, our God is a God of patience and of love. The marvelous undertone of this book, as through all the prophets, is that of the outpouring of the love of God's heart moving toward the well-being and the happiness of humanity, breaking out every now and then into beautiful forms of expression.

Undergirding the whole book is the promise at last to bring Israel – and likewise all the people of God – into the day when man shall live in peace and joy, with blessings to fill the hearts of men. What a message of the impartiality of God's grace this is!

Prayer:

Father, we thank you for this look at yourself. We thank you that you are a God who does not change; you are absolutely without shadow or turning. When we deal with you Lord, we deal with one who is faithful to us. What joy this gives us as we find in our own hearts a hunger to be made pure, to be made right before you, to stop at nothing so that we might be what you want us to be. And yet, Lord, how this strikes terror also into our hearts in those moments when we are tempted to compromise, to water down the truth, to deceive ourselves, to think that perhaps we can get by just this once and you won't notice. Lord, teach us that your eye is ever upon us, not merely to search us out as a policeman, not merely to haunt us and to hound us, but to bless us and to remove us from that which is harmful to us and hurts us, and to heal us and restore us in grace. We thank you in Christ's name. Amen.

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