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Amos, Prophet of Justice

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Political stability and economic prosperity reigned in the divided kingdom. Uzziah ruled Judah while Jeroboam, the second, sat on Israel's throne. In the north city life flourished at Samaria, the capitol, and elsewhere. But materialism, immorality, and hedonism created an unrecognized but criminal insensitivity to God and man, especially the poor!

Out of the quiet, unpretentious setting of a small, southern Judean community came God's spokesman to Israel — Amos. Here is how his Old Testament book of prophecy begins: “Words of Amos who was one of the shepherds of Tekoa. The visions he had about Israel in the time of Uzziah king of Judah and of Jeroboam son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake. He said: Yahweh (Jehovah) roars from Zion, and makes his voice heard from Jerusalem; the shepherd's pastures mourn, and the crown of Carmel withers” (Amos 1:1, 2, Jerusalem Bible).

Amos faced a gigantic challenge in speaking effectively God's message to self-satisfied people. Throughout the book of Amos certain words and phrases appear and re-appear giving us some idea of the “soul burden” Amos carried for Israel. Listen to some of them: “outrage after outrage,” “spurned the Word of the Lord,” “idols have deceived them,” “grind the faces of the poor,” “force the humble out,” “oppression flourishes,” “have forgotten how to do right,” “violence and robbery,” “overwhelmed by disaster,” “defraud the poor,” “ride roughshod over the needy,” “pile up your sins,” “have made justice a bitter jest,” “integrity of no account,” “wilful crimes,” “ignore the poor,” and “days of menace.” Finally Amos speaks God's sentence on this kingdom ripened for destruction by her sin and indifference: “I will turn your feasts into funerals and your songs into dirges. I will put sackcloth upon every man's loins, and every man's head shall be shaved in mourning. I will make your mourning like the lament for an only son, and the end of it will be bitter despair” (Amos 8:10, Phillips). From these descriptive phrases picked at random from the book of Amos, we begin to see the task Amos faced as well as the need Israel had for his ministry of God's Word.

First, I want us to see that Amos' ministry concerned a vital Biblical theme whose practical expression was absent in Israel's national life—God's justice! When we talk about the justice of God we find ourselves in the midst of a discussion of the nature of God. Moses said of Him: “The Rock, his work is perfect; for all his ways are justice: a God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and right is he” (Deuteronomy 32:4). Earlier in Biblical history, Abraham appealed to God's nature as pure justice when pleading for a stay of Sodom's destruction. Here is Abraham's plea: “Far be it from thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from thee! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Genesis 18:25, RSV). The God we worship and serve this day is a thoroughly just being. His counsels are right, and when His Word is accepted in our lives, it creates righteousness.

That leads us to also observe that God's justice and righteousness are closely linked. His righteousness is the reason for the “rightness” of his judgments. Here is how the Psalmist says it: “Righteous art thou, O Jehovah, and upright are thy judgments” (Psalm 119:137). God “will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth,” Psalm 96:13 declares. There is an interesting passage in the thirty-seventh Psalm which reveals something of the relationship between God's justice and righteousness, and our obedience to Him. Listen! “For Jehovah loveth justice, and forsaketh not his saints; they are preserved for ever: but the seed of the wicked shall be cut off. The righteous shall inherit the land, and dwell therein for ever. The mouth of the righteous talketh of wisdom, and his tongue speaketh justice. The law of his God is in his heart; none of his steps shall slide” (Psalm 37:28-31).
This passage reveals God's love of "justice," that is, His blessing of the "righteous" man, which man is "righteous" because God's law is treasured in his heart and followed in his life. These same interrelationships among God's justice, man's righteousness, and God's law occur in Habakkuk 1:4, where we read: "Therefore the law is slacked, and justice doth never go forth; for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore justice goeth forth perverted" (Habakkuk 1:4). After looking at these relationships positively and negatively we conclude that "justice is a mode of action and righteousness a quality" (p. 201, Abraham J. Heschel, The Prophets.) Justice, thus conceived, regards specific relationships between man and God, and man and man. Righteousness, on the other hand, describes the state or condition resulting from justice.

How important it is for us then to remember that God considers or declares "just" the man who lives by His Word. This justice that man receives from God is contingent on all of man's conduct. According to the prophet Ezekiel: "But if a man be just, and do that which is lawful and right, (then follows a detailed account of various ethical and moral relationships, and finally we hear) and hath walked in my statutes, and hath kept mine ordinances, to deal truly; he is just, he shall surely live, saith the Lord Jehovah" (Ezekiel 18:5-9). What the prophet of God says here is that a obedient, ethical, moral, and spiritual life places man in a position where God declares him "just."

Other facets of God's nature associated with His justice include His grace and mercy. In two distinct Old Testament passages we see this. "Gracious is Jehovah, and righteous; yea, our God is a merciful," reads the one hundred sixteenth Psalm (verse 5). And Isaiah declares. "And therefore will Jehovah wait, that he may be gracious unto you; and therefore will he be exalted, that he may have mercy upon you; blessed are all they that wait for him" (Isaiah 30:18).

God's justice should never be viewed as a cold, static, impersonal concept. His justice is expressed in a personal relationship that arises between Himself and every obedient individual. In Isaiah's words, to "follow after righteousness," is to "seek Jehovah" (Isaiah 51:1). The man who accepts God's ordinances in every area of his thought and conduct (Ezekiel 18:5-9), who treasures God's law in his heart is thus declared "just" and "righteous" (Psalm 27: 26-31). "Justice" speaks of God's covenant with His people and is "the fulfillment of the demands of that relationship."

But the problem Amos faced in Israel was the failure of God's people to understand that His justice had to be reflected in all their conduct. Fair weights and measures in their commercial activities (Leviticus 19:35; 36; Deuteronomy 25:13-16); concern for one's neighbor (Jeremiah 7:6; Exodus 23:6-9); and truthfulness in courts of law (Exodus 23:6-9) were a few of the many areas of everyday life where Israel was commanded to express God's justice. Only in this manner, living this kind of sensitive, benevolent, truthful, honest life, could the Israelite hope to secure the land Jehovah had given him (Jeremiah 7:5-7). God's demand for justice in their human relationships was grounded in His Deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage: "And a sojourner shalt thou not oppress: for ye know the heart of a sojourner, seeing ye were sojourners in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 23:9).

But no expression of God's justice compares with that revealed in Jesus Christ. Every Old Testament association with the concept of justice, every meaning and implication attached to this divine attribute was ultimately and most strikingly demonstrated in Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul writes: "But now apart from the law a righteousness of God hath been manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; of God through faith in Jesus Christ unto all them that believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:21-23). Christ, according to this passage, is the Key to God's justice and righteousness in every obedient life. His sacrificial death clarified, once and for all, God's grace and mercy available to all who will respond as He instructs. I remember Paul's poignant words: "Him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf; that we might become the righteousness of God in him" (II Corinthians 5:21).

Amos, however, faced a highly discouraging situation in Israel. The nation had definitely forgotten God's justice. But it did not take the rough, plain-spoken prophet of God long to get to the point. "Ye who turn justice to wormwood, and cast down righteousness to the earth," he charged Israel (Amos 5:7). "Ye have turned justice into gall, and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood," he fearlessly declared (Amos 6:12).

Israel's rejection of the justice of God in the people's hearts and in their daily lives occurred for at least eight reasons, Amos says. First, the nation's materialism and sensualism drove justice from her midst. Extravagant houses (3:11, 12, 15) greedy, dishonest merchants (8:4-6), lustful, domineering women (4:1), and lascivious men (2:6) greeted the prophet everywhere he turned. These were not conditions in which God would be remembered and certainly these were not times that testified to the presence of God's justice. No wonder Amos spoke in these terms: "Hear ye this word which I take up for a lamentation over you, O house of Israel. The virgin of Israel is fallen, she shall no more rise: she is cast down upon her land; there is none to raise her up" (Amos 5:1, 2).

But there were other reasons for the absence of God's justice in the lives of Israel's citizens. Their rejection of Jehovah's law (Amos 2:4, 5); their oppression of the needy (Amos 2:6, 7; 5:11; 8:4-6); the dishonesty of their judges and the rank perjury in the courts (Amos 5:12, 15); lack of any moral absolutes and open crime (Amos 3:9, 10); thoroughgoing selfishness (Amos 4:4, 5); and the nation's pride of power (Amos 3:15; 6:1, 13) all screamed of a rejection of God, the denial of His justice, and the complete repudiation of God as a directing principle in individual and national life.

Probably the saddest cause of this overwhelming injustice in Israel was the nation's unwillingness to take advice or listen to counsel. This spirit opposed every word Amos spoke. The prophets first asked the people God's punishment of Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab, and Judah. Then they could better appreciate God's coming judgment on them (Amos 1:2-8). But nobody was interested!

He asked Israel to look at what was happening in nature: famine, drought, plant disease, insects, and pestilence abounded (Amos 4:6-10). "What does all this mean?" Amos kept asking Israel. But there came no answer!

Things were in such bad shape in the nation that the wise, the understanding, "the prudent," to use Amos' words, were advised to "keep silence in such a time; for it is an evil time" (Amos 5:13). The religious and political establishment of Israel repudiated Amos with the priests taking the lead in demanding the prophet's deportation (Amos 8:10-13). Religious folk sometimes do strange things; especially when their professional positions are at stake!

But Amos joined the ranks of some of the world's strongest men—the prophets of God. "Then answered Amos, and said to Amaziah, I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son (in other words, "I've got no heritage to guard and no position to protect."); but I was a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees: and Jehovah took me from following the flock, and Jehovah said unto me,
Go, prophesy unto my people Israel. Now therefore hear thou the word of Jehovah..." (Amos 7:14, 15).

What Amos preached to Israel, and what he speaks so clearly to us this day, is that God's justice is perverted only with dire consequences.

The first thing we have got to learn, according to Amos, is that God is in control at all times! "Shall the trumpet be blown in a city, and the people not be afraid? Shall evil befal a city, and Jehovah hath not done it?" (Amos 3:6). Furthermore, we must come to realize, Amos says, that God's word is sure and certain! "The lion hath roared; who will not fear? The Lord Jehovah hath spoken; who can but prophesy?" (Amos 3:8).

With that preface the prophet fearlessly foretells Israel's destruction (Amos 3:11-15); her captivity by a foreign power (Amos 5:27; 7:17); the judgment of God on her (Amos 7:7-9); and the certain punishment of all evil and unjust men (Amos 9:1-4).

Therefore, the prophet concludes, stop attempting to fool God with your hypocritical sacrifices. God says: "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I will not accept them; neither will I regard the peace-offerings of your fat beasts" (Amos 5:21, 22). Their wickedness, rebellion, and injustice made all such sacrifices an abomination (Proverbs 17:5, 15; Micah 6:6-8). Above all, their failure to heed God's word in their personal lives rendered even the most zealous attempts at formal worship totally unacceptable before God (Jeremiah 6:16-20).

What can Israel, or for that matter, what can we do? God's prophet of justice is not without God's answer! "Prepare to meet thy God, 0 Israel," he pleads (Amos 4:12). Paul said the same thing in the New Testament at Athens: "The times of ignorance therefore God overlooked; but now he commandeth men that they should everywhere repent; inasmuch as he hath appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead" (Acts 17:30, 31).

But Amos had more to say as he directed Israel back to God. "Seek good, and not evil, that ye may live; and so Jehovah, the God of hosts, will be with you, as ye say. Hate the evil, and love the good, and establish justice in the gate: it may be that Jehovah, the God of hosts, will be gracious unto the remnant of Joseph" (Amos 5:14, 15). Later, in the same chapter, he adds: "But let justice roll down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream" (Amos 5:24).

How glorious and gracious our God is! His grace is now fully expressed in Jesus Christ, our salvation assured in Christ's sacrifice (Titus 2:11-14). God actualized His love and mercy in concrete everyday terms by the life Christ lived, and the death He died (John 3:16; I John 4:9, 10). And because of His life and death you and I can live on the level to which God raises us in Christ (Ephesians 2:1-5). When the Apostle Paul says that the righteousness of God has been manifested he is saying that each one of us listening right now can know the justice, the righteousness, the life, and the power of God—through our obedience to Jesus Christ (Romans 3:21-25).

Amos says to Israel, "the captivity will not last" (Amos 9:11-15). Peace, quietness, and confidence will reappear when God's justice returns (Isaiah 32:16-18). God will be glorified and honored in your just and loving relationships with your fellow man.

Won't you believe in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God (John 3:36) and the Lord of your life (Romans 10:9, 10)? If so, you certainly want to honor His directions for you: repent of your sins (Luke 13:3); tell others you believe in Him (Matthew 10:32, 33); and obey Him in baptism—the baptism that brings His blood into contact with your soul freeing you from all guilt and granting you the life of God (Hebrews 9:22; John 19:32-34; Romans 6:4-6). With Amos and me will you pray: "Let justice roll down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream."

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