

Prepare To Meet Your God! (The Book Of Amos) (Part One)

by John W. Ritenbaugh
Forerunner, May 1995

Part One

Preface

"The handwriting is on the wall" is a cliché that describes a situation where all the evidence points to an imminent climactic event. The saying originated when God judged the Babylonian Empire and found it wanting (Daniel 5). Babylon fell that very night! Though our nations may not fall this very night, there is no doubt we are being judged—and the outlook is grim.

Some feel we have reached a time in history that parallels the period just before the Flood. God recorded what conditions were like as Noah was building the ark: "Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5). What a horrifying thought! What danger and oppression must have lurked at every turn!

Yet Jesus predicts in a prophecy regarding the time of the end—the time we live in today, "But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be" (Matthew 24:37). In a larger, more general context, Jesus meant that, despite the dangerous, portentous events occurring all around them, people will be going about their normal routines without seriously considering the meaning of these events (verses 38-39). They will not take the time to wonder if these cataclysmic events are affecting them personally.

How about you? Even though we are living in momentous times, we are easily distracted from their importance by our high standard of living and convenient access to just about anything we desire. The nations of western Europe, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the United States are, for the most part, wallowing in unprecedented technological luxury. Much to our spiritual detriment, our lives are caught up in our possessions and keeping our noses above water economically.

But we must not allow this to happen any longer! Time and prophecy are relentlessly marching on. The book of Amos records an almost exact parallel account to what is happening in our day. It chronicles the social, political, economic, military and religious conditions and attitudes prevalent in ancient Israel in about 760 BC. This was about forty years before Assyria invaded and completely devastated the nation. So awesome was Israel's defeat that, as far as the world is concerned, her people disappeared from history! Today, they are known as the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel.

Amos is not a happy book to read. It does not contain the encouraging, soaring and hope-inspiring prophecies of Isaiah. No, Amos speaks of almost unending gloom and doom. This presents an interesting contrast when seen against Israel's surging power, wealth and influence. During the days of Amos' ministry, the nation was undergoing a burst of prosperity second only to Solomon's time. On the surface, it appeared that Israel's prosperity indicated God's pleasure; but Amos' words prove beyond any doubt that God was not pleased at all! He was *deadly* serious! If the people would not repent, they were doomed!

The Israelites did not repent. They suffered war, famine, pestilence and captivity as a result. Tens of thousands died. They learned the hard way that God means exactly what He says through His prophets (Amos 3:7).

Though Amos describes what was literally happening in ancient Israel, God intended the message for us, the physical and/or spiritual descendants of Israel. It was written to stir us to action, seeing that the times indicate Jesus Christ will return soon.

Amos clearly shows that our nations are headed along the same path to destruction as ancient Israel. There is still hope that we will turn around and avoid the wrath of God, but as each day passes, it becomes more unlikely. We have many lessons to learn, and we seem determined to learn them the hard way.

One of our main problems is that our focus is solely on ourselves and the things that we do. We judge a person based on how much wealth he can accumulate over a lifetime. It is a wrong standard. Even the world understands that money and possessions bring little satisfaction, yet we continue to pursue that kind of "success" as if that is all that matters. The great Creator never intended materialism to be the basis for abundant living.

We publish this booklet in the hope that the church member will be stirred to be astute enough spiritually to prevent himself from being ensnared in this seductive, self-centered trap. The basis of a truly abundant life is a *God-centered* life as shown through devotion to keeping the commandments, praying regularly, studying the Bible and sacrificing ourselves in service in family relationships and community responsibilities. God will look favorably upon the Christian who is doing these things.

We also hope that others will also be awakened to the impending crisis descending upon the modern nations of Israel. They are Laodicean—apathetic, self-absorbed, materialistic and spiritually asleep (Revelation 3:14-22)—and headed pell-mell and unheeding toward the prophesied Great Tribulation and Day of the Lord. But there is still time for individuals to wake up and return to God.

We must not allow this attractive and easily absorbed way of life to become our own. Avoiding it will require an ever-closer relationship with God and a discipline of our attitudes and conduct. God promises in Revelation 3:10 to provide a way of escape for His faithful, loving and enthusiastic children. Thus, we must yield to the urgent message given through His servant Amos.

Introduction

Has the world ever witnessed a time like this? Has any nation experienced such prosperity and strength, yet such turmoil, injustice and oppression as our nations have?

The answer to these questions is both yes and no. Yes, other nations have risen to power on the world scene, though none as spectacularly nor to such dizzying heights as America and the British Commonwealth. Yes, other nations have fallen from the peak of their power for the same reasons: The peoples' spiritual, moral and ethical disregard, irresponsibility and apathy. On the other hand, never in history has a nation's decline been so deep, so rapid, so extreme, so unnecessary and so clearly prophesied in the pages of the Bible.

Human nature has not changed. Mankind is no more sinful now than any other time in human history. With the rise of technology, though, man has the ability and opportunity to sin more frequently, to involve others in his sins more easily, and thus multiply the devastating effects of sin—all to a magnitude unparalleled in history.

No nations ever had less excuse for wallowing in a crisis of morality than have the Anglo-Saxon, English-speaking nations—the descendants of ancient Israel. In about a generation, we have collectively gone from exalting godly morality to complaining about its lack. What is ironic is that, individually, our actions border on being amoral. We once extolled and defended our foundational laws based on God's Word, and Christianity was by choice our national religion. But in our lifetimes we have seen both our founding principles and God's Word assailed relentlessly and often forgotten. Humanism—exalting man over God—has risen as our new religion to replace Christianity.

We have even less excuse because God has provided a record of a nation that took the same course. If we continue down that same path of moral decay, we will arrive at the same destination—national military defeat and captivity.

The book of Amos records God's assessment of ancient Israel's internal condition some forty years before she fell. The prophet was sent to warn the people and lead them to repentance, but they would not change. As punishment for her spiritual and moral decay, Israel was invaded by Assyria in 721 BC and crushed in a devastating war. The surviving Israelites were taken into captivity where they seemingly disappeared from the face of the earth. This was God's answer to their sin and rebellion!

But Israel was God's "chosen nation"! He rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 12:40-42) and made a covenant with them on Mount Sinai, giving them His laws and His way of life (Exodus 19-24). After their years of wandering in the wilderness, He established them in the land of promise (Joshua 11:16-23), and as they grew, He provided for them and protected them (Psalm 147).

No nation ever had God so near and so willing to help!

How far they must have fallen! What did the Israelites do to incur God's wrath? What was Israel like when God sent His servant Amos with a burdensome message of evaluation? How did God see the people's moral and ethical condition?

These are important questions, but for us in God's church, other questions are even *more* vital. Was Amos' message only for the ancient nation of Israel? Did God leave this account for our benefit also? Are there any parallels in Israel's decline and fall from which the church can learn?

At baptism we, like Israel, made a covenant with God. In Galatians 6:16 the church is even called "the Israel of God." The church exists in the world, and her members must not merely function but *grow* in the midst of free-falling moral and spiritual standards. Does Amos show any area of decline that we might see reflected in ourselves?

May Amos motivate us to turn to God and please Him—and thereby escape what is as sure to fall upon our nations as fell upon ancient Israel!

Amos' Approach

Amos writes primarily to or against Israel, but he approaches his primary subject like a bird of prey, circling overhead, effortlessly gliding in the sky searching for game, floating on the updrafts. The circle keeps getting smaller and smaller. Then—whoosh!—it dives for its victim.

Amos designed his prophecy exactly this way. Like an eagle, Amos starts in a wide circle, denouncing nations surrounding Israel—Syria, Philistia, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab and Judah—then he suddenly swoops down on Israel. He devotes a little over one chapter to these other nations but more than seven chapters to Israel.

Syria, Philistia and Tyre were part of Israel's political world, and Edom, Ammon and Moab were ethnic cousins. Judah was a brother. Notice Amos' method. He moves from associates to relatives, finally attacking Israel inside the house, the immediate family.

The prophet gets God's message across masterfully and powerfully. Imagine Amos going into Bethel or Samaria, two of Israel's chief cities, and to catch the attention of his audience, attacking Israel's enemies. He denounces the sins of the Syrians, Philistines, Tyrians, Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites and—yes—Israel's rivals to the south, the Jews! Soon they begin to agree eagerly with his pronouncements. "Give it to them, Amos! I always knew those people were rats!"

But they had been set up for the kill. As they point their fingers at their neighbors, Amos, like the eagle with talons bared, descends upon them for their own sins.

Conditions in Israel

After the Assyrians attacked and defeated Syria in 805 BC, they suddenly stopped their advance toward Palestine and returned to Assyria. This abrupt retreat unwittingly set the stage for a surge of Israelite wealth and power that had steadily waned following Solomon's reign. In the absence of foreign domination, Israel's prosperity and influence began to grow.

When Jeroboam II became king of Israel in 793 BC, he continued the governmental and religious systems that Jeroboam I (931-910 BC) had instituted. From God's perspective Jeroboam II was an evil king, but he was a capable administrator and military leader (II Kings 14:23-29). During the vacuum of power caused by the Assyrian withdrawal, he seized control of the lucrative trade routes that went through Israel. Coming from Babylon and Assyria, from Egypt and North Africa, from Syria and Asia Minor, these roads made Israel the crossroads of trade and commerce.

Because of the outrageous tolls Jeroboam II charged for merchants to travel on these Israelite-controlled trade routes, the nation's wealth and power began to rival that of Solomon's kingdom two centuries earlier. A similar surge in prosperity occurred in Judah under Uzziah (II Chronicles 26). Unlike any other pair of kings, Jeroboam and Uzziah restored Israel's boundaries to what they were under David and Solomon. Historian Leon J. Wood, in *A Survey of Israel's History* (p. 277), describes this period as, "the almost unprecedented prosperity of Jeroboam's rule."

But there were problems.

Rich and proud Israel! The nations sang Israel's praises and beat a path to her doors. As a whole, the people were well-fed, well-dressed, well-entertained. Politically and militarily, Israel was powerful

and influential, making alliances with other nations and extending her trade over all the known world. While the nation looked very impressive on the outside, the cancer of moral degeneracy was eating away at her spiritual core.

Biblical historian Charles F. Pfeiffer writes:

A rich merchant class developed and merchants and nobles alike built elaborate houses and revelled in the comforts which wealth made possible. The poor, however, did not share in the prosperity. . . . Society was divided between the dissolute rich and the embittered poor. (*Old Testament History*, p. 328)

When Amos looks at Israel, he confirms Pfeiffer's assessment: "I will destroy the winter house along with the summer house; the houses of ivory shall perish, and the great houses shall have an end," says the Lord" (Amos 3:15). Some of the people had so much wealth that they hardly knew what to do with it! These few wealthy Israelites were so rich that they owned not just one house, but two, three or four! Blinded by their riches, thinking God had prospered them for their righteousness, they ignored the terrible oppressions they were inflicting on the poor and weak. For this, God promises punishment.

Thus, Amos scathingly rebukes them:

- I will not turn away its punishment, because they sell the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of sandals. They pant after the dust of the earth which is on the head of the poor, and pervert the way of the humble. (Amos 2:6-7)
- Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, 'Bring wine, let us drink!' (Amos 4:1).
- Woe to you . . . who lie on beds of ivory, stretch out on your couches, eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall; who chant to the sound of stringed instruments, and invent for yourselves musical instruments like David; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint yourselves with the best ointments (Amos 6:3-6).

He describes a tremendously wealthy people. Men sought to make money at any price, no matter what the consequences to the "little guy." The derogatory term "cows of Bashan" describes the rich women who controlled Israelite families, making demands on their husbands to keep them in their accustomed lifestyle. Spoiled people living ostentatious lives, luxuriating in expensive materialism, satiating their flesh with wine and rich foods, they denied themselves nothing.

But how did they obtain such wealth? Property and legal rackets! Exploiting the poor! Shady business deals! The powerful and rich used the laws and the courts to their advantage against the weak and poor who could not afford legal assistance. The latter always came out on the short end of the deal.

They hate the one who rebukes in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks uprightly. . . . For I know your manifold transgressions and your mighty sins. You afflict the just and take bribes; you divert the poor from justice at the gate. (Amos 5:10, 12)

Israelites held their public meetings and court trials at the city gate where everyone could witness the proceedings. When rebuked for the way that they lived, for their social attitudes, for their immorality, for their lack of spirituality, the hedonistic Israelites would typically malign or assault their critic rather than repent. Bribery, obstruction of justice and attacks on law-abiding citizens were common occurrences.

Israelite Religion

Maybe their business practices were corrupt, but *surely* the religious sector of society upheld a high moral standard! What did Amos see when he observed the people's religious life?

- "Come to Bethel and transgress, at Gilgal multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days [margin, *years*]. Offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving with leaven, proclaim and announce the freewill offerings; for this you love, you children of Israel!" says the Lord God. (Amos 4:4-5)
- But do not seek Bethel, nor enter Gilgal, nor pass over to Beersheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into captivity, and Bethel shall come to nothing. Seek the Lord and live. (Amos 5:5-6)
- I hate, I despise your feast days, and I do not savor your sacred assemblies. Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them, nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings. Take away from Me the noise of your songs, for I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments. But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream. (Amos 5:21-24)

Because of their connection to Israel's past, Bethel, Gilgal and Beersheba all bore significant religious meaning to the common Israelite. Jeroboam I set up a golden calf at Bethel (I Kings 12:25-31), since the city had religious associations from the days of Jacob (Genesis 28:10-22; 35:1-7). Gilgal's significance sprang from Israel's entrance into Canaan after her forty years in the wilderness and the circumcision of her men there (Joshua 5:1-12). Beersheba had strong connections with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the nation's fathers (Genesis 21:22-34; 22:19; 26:32-33; 28:10).

Even so, Israelite religion displeased God on two counts. First, the Israelites of Amos' day were guilty of following the sin of Jeroboam I, combining the worship of the true God with that of idols. God hates idolatry (Exodus 20:1-6). Apparently, the people were thronging to these pagan shrines and punctiliously offering sacrifices. In all their religious fervor, however, their eyes were not upon the God of heaven. Their religious practice was not done in obedience to God as they claimed, but had been conceived in the mind of a man. In His denunciations of their religion, God tells them that their worship would do them no good because its foundations were in a source other than Himself.

Second, their religion was self-pleasing. Because of their careful observance of their form of worship, Israelites felt good about themselves, but they forgot their social responsibility. They failed to love their neighbors (Amos 8:4). Ritual sexual indulgence was common practice (Amos 2:7). Despite their sincerity, they abandoned all godly standards and values and despised authority and law (Amos 3:10).

Application to Our Time

What significance does Amos' prophecy have for us today? How deeply should we consider it? Amos is speaking to us just as much as he was speaking to ancient Israel—he might as well have been walking through Los Angeles or New York, London or Edinburgh, Sydney or Brisbane, Toronto or Montreal.

The indictments that he makes against Israel are indictments against sin, and "sin is a reproach to any people" (Proverbs 14:34). Thus, Amos speaks to any nation caught in the destructive grip of moral decay. What he says may not apply to every individual within these nations, but the principles certainly do apply to these societies in general.

Obviously, he addresses the problems he saw with his own eyes and speaks against the evils of his own time. But if we accept this view only, we miss the point. To feel the intended force of his message, we must understand that it is also addressed to us as individuals living in the nations of modern Israel. Like Amos, we live in times when morals and ethics are in full retreat, and the ramifications of that affects us all.

Yet even this is not close enough. Though what Amos says certainly applies to the world's nations, his message has its first and foremost audience as those of us whose "citizenship is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20). Amos speaks—indeed he shouts—to God's people, His church, the future Bride of Christ.

In the biblical sense, the church is the continuation of Old Testament Israel, which can be seen in the promise of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:31: "'Behold, the days are coming,' says the Lord, 'when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.'" When Jesus came and founded the church, beginning with His disciples, He showed that the New Covenant has been made with His disciples, the church of God: "In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me'" (I Corinthians 11:25).

As a part of the church of God, we are forerunners of the covenant that will eventually also be made with physical Israel. "For we [the church] are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh" (Philippians 3:3). As regenerated children of God, we are the true spiritual Jews or Israelites (John 4:22-24).

We are also the children of promise (Galatians 4:28-29) and Abraham's seed (Romans 9:6-8; Galatians 3:28-29). Of all mankind, we are the ones most directly involved in God's purpose. We are the ones most aware of and striving the hardest for the Kingdom of God. Because of this awesome calling as His New Covenant people, God had the Scriptures written for our benefit: "For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope" (Romans 15:4).

Paul also writes, "Now all these things happened to them [the Israelites] as examples, and they were written for our admonition, on whom the ends of the ages have come" (I Corinthians 10:11). As we saw earlier, the church is specifically named "the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16). God inspired the book of Amos so that in this end time His people, surrounded by materialism and worldly distractions unparalleled in human history, would not follow Israel's example.

In this booklet we will look into Israel's example, noting where it applies to our nations, the church and us as individuals. Amos' approach is very direct and difficult to expound verse by verse. Instead,

we have taken a thematic approach to this very vital warning message to God's people. Together, the following themes in Amos give us a complete picture of Israelite society, culture and religion, and demonstrate how they apply to us:

- The responsibilities of those who make a covenant with God.
- The fairness of God's judgment.
- The effects of sin upon a nation.
- The importance of true religion and holiness.
- The cancer of complacency and Laodiceanism.
- The terrible punishment for sin despite repeated warnings.
- The need for repentance and the promise of God's blessing.

The book of Amos is a stinging rebuke of a nation that has rejected and forgotten God. It is a stirring warning to all of the dangers of apostasy, rebellion and complacency. And we must *never* forget that Amos is speaking to us, the church of God, the Israel of God! He urgently warns us, "Prepare to meet your God!" and shows us how to do it.

Are we listening?

The Responsibility of the Covenant People

The basis of God's accusation and judgment against the people of Israel is their special relationship. "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities" (Amos 3:2). From the beginning of His dealings with them, God has stressed their higher responsibility because of their knowledge of Him (Deuteronomy 4:5-10).

As used in Amos 3:2, *known* can be cognitive, involving the thinking process, or it can be relational, indicating experience with someone else. The word is used in this latter sense in Genesis 4:1: "Adam knew Eve his wife." He had an intimate, caring relationship with her. So with God. Of all the world's nations, He had been intimate only with Israel, watching over and caring for her in a very personal way (Ezekiel 16:1-14). Israel was so dear to Him that He called her "the apple of His eye" (Deuteronomy 32:10)!

Yet, whether they realized it or not, the people God cared for so much came to devalue their calling, their special status (Deuteronomy 7:6). As time passed, they perverted it into a doctrine of divine favoritism. We can see this in two historical examples:

- In Jeremiah's day (c. 600 BC), the Jews took great pride and security from the fact that they lived in the presence of the Temple (Jeremiah 7:1-15).
- Centuries later during Jesus' lifetime, the Jews believed that their physical descent from Abraham procured God's favor (John 8:31-40).

In practice, this attitude caused the Israelites to live as if they were not accountable for their individual actions.

"Are we not God's people?" they said in justification. As such, were they not protected from their enemies and subsidized into prosperity? God had fought for them before, and they assumed He

always would. They forgot that with privilege comes responsibility. They forgot that God is no respecter of persons (Acts 10:34; see James 2:1-13). He would judge them against the same righteous standards by which He denounces the Gentiles in Amos 1:3-2:3.

Though guilty of things similar to the Gentiles, they would be held *more* responsible because of their special relationship with God. In fact, as the covenant people with a responsibility to be a light to the nations around them (Deuteronomy 28:9-10), they faced an even stricter judgment than their neighbors to whom the eternal God had never been revealed.

An Intimate Relationship

At first, Amos addresses Judah and Israel separately. However, Amos 3:1-2 ties them together by accusing "the whole family" of iniquities. *Israel*, the name given to Jacob in Genesis 32:28, covers all the people who made a covenant with God at Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:1-8). Israel and Judah are often both meant by the single name *Israel*.

But *Israel* is more than the name of a nation. Like a code name, it is the name of God's true church, which Paul called "the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16). The church, too, is a body of people who made a covenant with God. Though the actual events that Amos describes took place in physical Israel, the warning is also very much addressed to the church today.

Like the children of Israel, God has an intimate relationship with those whom He has spiritually brought forth. We can see that He had an intimate relationship with the patriarchs, such as Abraham and Jacob, and with the prophets—in fact, with Jeremiah even before he was born! "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you; and I ordained you a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5).

This is not metaphorical. God desires an intimate, family relationship with each one of us. He asks to be called "our Father in heaven" (Matthew 6:9). His firstborn Son is our Elder Brother (Matthew 12:50), and we are God's sons and daughters (II Corinthians 6:18). As close as relationships are within a family, so are the relationships between God and His children.

So, what can we learn from ancient Israel's example as His chosen people? *Privilege brings peril*. Amos' message is that the closer we are to God, the closer the scrutiny and the stricter the judgment. Judgment starts with those who make a covenant with Him: "For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?" (I Peter 4:17). Ezekiel 9:3-6 and Revelation 11:1-2 illustrate this principle. As the people and temple of God, we are evaluated first and most closely to determine if we measure up to the standards of righteousness that God has revealed to us.

Refusing the Revelation

Unlike the judgments of the Gentiles (Amos 1:3-2:3), Amos indicts Judah for breaking His commandments, specifically lying.

Thus says the Lord: "For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment, because they have despised the law of the Lord, and have not kept His commandments. Their lies lead them astray, lies after which their fathers walked. But I will send a fire upon Judah, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem." (Amos 2:4-5)

Judah's despising of God's law and Israel's commanding the prophets to stop preaching His Word (Amos 2:12) reflect exactly the same moral condition: Both refused the voice of God as spoken through His prophets. *What God intended to be their privilege through revelation of Himself and His law had turned out to be their central peril.* It is another way of saying, "To whom much is given, from him much will be required" (Luke 12:48).

Modern Israel—the Anglo-Saxon nations of America, the British Commonwealth and northwestern Europe—is rejecting God's way of life today just as ancient Israel did. It is this proud attitude that spiritual Israel, God's church, is fighting. God will not accept any excuse for failing to live His way of life (Hebrews 6:4-6) *because when He reveals it, He also provides the power to **live** it.*

God makes the promise that He will never give us a trial that is too great and will always provide a way of escape (I Corinthians 10:13). He wants to see if we love His truth and will follow His instructions. And if we need help to do what He has revealed to us to be His way, He will endow us with the abilities to fulfill it (II Corinthians 3:4-6).

As God destroyed the Amorites and Egyptians to deliver Israel (Amos 2:9-10), He will also deliver us no matter that the odds are against us. We cannot overcome human nature, Satan and this evil world without the help of God. We need to seek God and ask for the gifts we need to overcome, grow and produce the fruit of a godly way of life (Luke 11:9-13; James 1:5).

A Warning to the Individual

Despising truth is an inward attitude that outwardly reveals itself in immorality, and this is the condition God found in ancient Israel. The people had become complacent about His revelation to them. They zealously sought after knowledge—even religious knowledge—but they did not really love the truth (Romans 10:2-3). This was reflected in their immorality; if they had loved God's truth, they would have been living it, and God would have had no cause for judgment.

In this information age, we accumulate mounds of data—regarding ethics, solutions to social ills and the like—yet our morals decline. Intelligent, educated individuals have written many Bible commentaries, but they still refuse to keep the Sabbath or Holy Days. They write that Christmas and Easter have pagan origins and are not commanded in the Bible, but they still observe them. They do not love God's truth enough to change. This was Israel's problem, and it could be ours if we are not careful.

Because God has revealed His truth to us, each individual Christian has a responsibility to conform to it and grow. A greater diversity of distractions compete for our time and attention than at any other time in the history of mankind. If we are not extremely careful, and if we lose our sense of urgency, we will gradually lose our understanding of what is true and what is not. Our ability to distinguish between right and wrong will become blurred. We must make sure that God, His Word and His way are always first in our lives.

Christ said that if we keep the truth, the truth in turn will keep us free (John 8:31-36). If we live it, the revealed truth of God will protect us from sinking back into slavery to sin. But first we must love the truth we have been given. Humanly, we pursue what we love. God wants a father-child or teacher-student relationship with us. If we do not love truth, and if we do not pursue it and God Himself, we will seriously undermine our relationship with Him, and He could interpret our attitude as despising His truth.

Love of the truth comes from God through His Holy Spirit and must be nourished through our response to it. We must not only *learn it* but also *apply it* in our lives. This will make the difference between being saved and perishing (II Thessalonians 2:9-12).

Rejecting God

Law in Amos 2:4 refers to instruction, not legislation and its enforcement. From a verb that means "to throw," its root describes casting lots or throwing dice. When lots or dice were cast, God revealed His will in the way they landed (Proverbs 16:33; see Leviticus 16:8-10; Acts 1:26). At times lots were used in making judgments in criminal cases in which God's will needed to be ascertained (Joshua 7:13-25). Thus, by setting a legal precedent, the casting of lots served to give instruction in other cases in which the same basic principles of behavior were involved. God's will—His law—was taught to His people through the casting of lots.

This instruction process implies a teacher-student relationship. When the Israelites rejected God's instruction contained in His law, they rejected the Instructor as well. Their relationship with Him quickly deteriorated.

Commandment means "to engrave or cut into stone," suggesting its permanence and immutability in contrast to temporary and changeable lies. The law comes from an unchangeable, righteous and pure God in contrast to fickle and iniquitous men.

Judah's despising of God's law and revelation of Himself was internal—from the heart (Psalm 78:37; 81:11-12; Jeremiah 5:23). The personal and social failures Amos records are evidence that the people had rejected the truth. So it is with us: God wants to change our hearts so He can change our actions and turn around our lives.

In every area of life, Israel perverted the truth of God to accommodate the ideas of men. In the final tally, they loved lies rather than the revelation of God (II Thessalonians 2:11-12). Thus Amos says that God's people despised His law. They made the mistake of devaluing their calling and considered it common. Believing they were God's elect, they thought they were irrevocably saved. With this attitude it was only a matter of time before spiritual and moral complacency set in. As the church of God, we cannot allow ourselves to slip into this attitude because we, too, would fall into immorality.

If that occurs, God *must* pass judgment because His justice is the same for everybody (Colossians 3:25; I Peter 1:17). God's laws govern the people on the outside as well as the people on the inside. No matter what makes Israel or the church distinctly different, His judgment is always righteous. When God could not change Israel's immorality through His prophets, He had to punish them. So will He punish an apostate church.

It is easy to see why this book is written to the end-time church. The people of America and the British Commonwealth are already in the moral and spiritual condition of the people of Israel and Judah in the time of Amos. Members of God's church come out of such a world. Just as Israel's privileged position became a curse, so will it be for the Christian who ultimately rejects his calling (Hebrews 6:4).

God's Verdict

"Behold, I am weighed down by you, as a cart that is weighed down that is full of sheaves. Therefore flight shall perish from the swift, the strong shall not strengthen his power, nor shall the mighty deliver himself; he shall not stand who handles the bow, the swift of foot shall not deliver himself, nor shall he who rides a horse deliver himself. The most courageous men of might shall flee naked in that day," says the Lord. (Amos 2:13-16)

The wording of verse 13 provides two possibilities. The first is that God, in exasperation, refuses to carry His people any longer, as one might put down a burden that is too heavy. The second possibility pictures a heavily loaded cart with a broken wheel that carves deep ruts in the road and throws its occupants into ditches. The context implies that the heavy load is the crushing burden of sins that impede Israel from staying on "the straight and narrow" (Matthew 7:14).

This second meaning seems to fit the best, as He proceeds to foretell Israel's destruction. Israel had reached the end of her greatest period of prosperity since the time of Solomon. The nation was rich, powerful and well-armed, proud in her might, abilities, wisdom, wealth, strategic advantages and courage. Who could stand against Israel? But God thunders the warning that all the nation's natural abilities (Amos 2:14), acquired skills (verse 15) and outstanding qualities (verse 16) would not help her.

Men see the strength of a nation in its wealth, population, armaments, technology and knowledge. But where does God look? "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people" (Proverbs 14:34). The Bible reveals that *the cause of the rise and fall of nations is moral and spiritual*. As Amos shows, no nation can rely on its strength, power and wealth to save it from the devastating effects of moral decay. Moral, ethical and spiritual problems cannot be resolved by money, strength of arms, "Star Wars" projects, social programs, intelligence or humanitarian goodwill.

Since Israel had forfeited her privileged status, God promised to destroy her as He destroyed the Amorites and the Egyptians (Amos 2:9-10; 4:10, 12). The people of Israel had gone so far that God expected no repentance from them. Like Ecclesiastes 3, Amos shows there is a time of opportunity and a time when opportunity is gone. Evidently, Israel's opportunity to repent had faded away. It was too late!

As He had fought their battles *for* them in the past, now God would fight *against* them. Whatever their courage or expertise, nothing would go in their favor. The things that had formerly given Israel strength in war would be turned against them.

A Ray of Hope

Notice, however, that a ray of hope still exists:

And I will bring a sword against you that will execute the vengeance of My covenant; when you are gathered together within your cities I will send pestilence among you; and you shall be delivered into the hand of the enemy But for their sake I will remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God: I am the Lord. (Leviticus 26:25, 45)

God will remember His covenant because He is a jealous God (Exodus 20:5). Because He does not want His name to be profaned in any way, He is very concerned about those who bear it (Exodus 20:7). The covenant people, Israel, had profaned His name by their conduct among the other nations. Because God is holy and righteous, what He proclaimed to do against the heathen in the first chapter of Amos, He will also do to Israel—a people who had forsaken their covenant with Him.

Isaiah writes that Jerusalem, symbolizing all the tribes of Israel, will receive double for her sins because of her privileged position under the covenant (Isaiah 40:2). God will punish Israel for her failure to live up to her responsibilities within the covenant.

God's punishment, though, is never an end in itself, nor does He punish in wild anger or frustration. Rather, He punishes in the best way and at the best time to bring individuals to repentance. He has not forgotten His promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but He will correct their descendants so that He can eventually save His people and give them the promises. The process will be painful but also effective; Israel *will* come to repentance (Romans 11:25-29).

Reflecting on the history of the British Commonwealth and America in the last two hundred years, we see two nations quickly rising to prominence along with unparalleled accomplishments. The British produced a great empire far out of proportion to their population, native wealth and abilities. Through her commercial power, the United States became the single richest nation that has ever existed. American influence has since exceeded even that of Britain, making English the universal language of business and politics.

Thousands of academic, scientific and engineering breakthroughs and inventions have sprung from British and American individuals, discoveries which greatly affected the rest of this world. Such power and influence have made both nations feel they have an unlimited reservoir of natural ability and wealth. They even feel a kind of invincibility.

Amos warns ancient Israel and her modern descendants, however, that no nation is so great that it can stand without God. He makes and unmakes nations (II Chronicles 20:6; Daniel 4:17; Acts 17:26). Their rise or fall is largely dependent upon His purpose for them and their significance in prophecy (e.g. Jeremiah 12:14-17; 25:15-32). If their moral and ethical foundation has eroded, the natural process of strong nations displacing weaker ones will take place (Leviticus 18:28; 20:22). It is this process that God often uses to punish His people for apostasy and immorality.

But though God punishes, there is always the hope of repentance and restitution:

"Behold, the days are coming," says the Lord, "when the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him who sows seed; the mountains shall drip with sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. I will bring back the captives of My people Israel; they shall build the waste cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink wine from them; they shall also make gardens and eat fruit from them. I will plant them in their land, and no longer shall they be pulled up from the land I have given them," says the Lord your God. (Amos 9:13-15)

Central to both the punishment and the restitution is loving and living the truth of God. This is the responsibility of those who have made a covenant with Him, whether the Old or the New Covenant. It is our part of the deal—a small part really, but a difficult one that must be kept (Matthew 7:13-14). If we do not keep it, God must correct us.

But if we keep our part of the agreement, we will reap the benefits that flow with God keeping His. He promises good health (Exodus 15:26), prosperity (Malachi 3:8-12), children (Psalm 127:3-5), security (Psalm 46) and many other blessings besides His greatest gift, eternal life in His Kingdom (John 17:1-3; Romans 6:23)!

Amos, the Man

Those who critically examine the Bible unanimously agree that Amos wrote the book that bears his name. Some researchers feel that some minor material may have been inserted later by an editor, but few doubt that a Jewish man named Amos was the author.

The prophet hailed from Tekoa, a small town about thirteen miles south of Jerusalem in the Wilderness of Judah. Since he was not from a large cosmopolitan city like Jerusalem or Samaria, Amos, shaped by his rural experiences, had a clearer perspective of the evils that he saw as he walked through the cities of Israel. While the Israelites accepted their lifestyle as normal, the prophet recognized it as a perversion and an abomination to God. *Amos* means "burden-bearer," and his message to Israel, one of continuous judgment and denunciation, was indeed a heavy burden.

Because of the distrust between the two peoples, it is ironic that God sent a Jew to warn the Israelites of their impending judgment. God obviously sent the best man available to do the job, though he was not a formally trained prophet. "I was no prophet, nor was I a son of a prophet," he explains, "but I was a herdsman and a tender of sycamore fruit. Then the Lord took me as I followed the flock and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to My people Israel'" (Amos 7:14-15).

Amos was more than "just a shepherd." In Amos 1:1 the Hebrew word *noqed* indicates a keeper or raiser of sheep or goats (see II Kings 3:4), though it is often rendered as "shepherd." In Amos 7:14 "herdsman" (*bowker*) refers to large cattle. God inspired two different words to show that he was a breeder of sheep (and maybe of cattle), supplying others with stock, and possibly developing and refining the breeds. Some of Amos' land may have also been set aside as a sycamore-fig orchard. His ranch seems to have been small enough that he was personally involved in its operation, though he also seems to have been successful enough to take time off to preach in Israel.

Judging from the book's language and style, Amos was also well educated. Scholars judge his use of language as particularly expressive, vivid and forceful. Far from being an illiterate shepherd, the prophet was a man of refinement and substance, aware of past events and current conditions in Israel and Judah, as well as in the surrounding nations.

Amos wrote at a very significant time in Israel's history (Amos 1:1). Both kings Jeroboam II of Israel (793-753 BC) and Uzziah of Judah (791-739 BC) enjoyed long and prosperous reigns. His prophecy can be dated before 750 BC, since Uzziah's son, Jotham (750-731 BC), who reigned as co-regent with his father for eleven years, is not mentioned.

The phrase "two years before the earthquake" helps to narrow the book's date. Archeological findings unearthed at Hazor in northern Palestine show that an unusually strong earthquake occurred about 760 BC. If so, Amos prophesied in about 762 BC. The phrase seems to limit his prophesying to this particular year, suggesting that his prophetic activity was very short.

Many historians have concluded that 722 BC—forty years later—was when Assyria marched on Israel. Beginning with Amos' warning message, God in His mercy provided His people with a forty-year period of trial and testing during which they could repent. History records, however, that Samaria fell and her survivors were dragged into captivity in 718 BC.

Tradition holds that Amos died a violent death at the hands of Jeroboam II, but no historical records have confirmed this claim. However, the prophet left a powerful message of warning and urgency that still rings with truth and fervor.

The Judgment of God

"The Lord roars from Zion, and utters His voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds mourn, and the top of Carmel withers" (Amos 1:2). In the wild a lion roars just as it is about to pounce on its prey. Symbolically and metaphorically, the roar of a lion or the crack of thunder shows the imminent intervention of God in human affairs (I Samuel 2:10; Isaiah 29:6; 31:4; Hosea 11:9-11; Revelation 16:18).

In the mid-eighth century BC when Amos preached, Israel's economic base was largely in agriculture, but a drought had begun to destabilize that foundation. The pastures had already begun to feel the effects of God's roaring, as had Carmel, the most verdant part of Israel, and incidentally, the supposed stronghold of Baal. Amos proclaims that the drought is the result of God's judgment.

The prophet uses this drought to illustrate that God is not an absentee landlord. He governs His creation (Psalm 104; Matthew 6:26) and knows everything that happens in it (Psalm 139; Matthew 10:29). He has neither abdicated nor delegated these responsibilities. If calamity strikes, God is involved in some way, possibly executing judgment.

A Lion Has Roared!

"A lion has roared" (Amos 3:8) concludes the section that began with "The Lord roars from Zion" (Amos 1:2). The Lord, "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" (Revelation 5:5), has roared against Israel to take heed. When a lion roars, anyone within hearing distance should change the direction of his path, especially if the lion is *very* close!

Amos 3:3-6 contains seven consecutive questions. After the first one (verse 3), the remaining three pairs of questions consist of a sequence of "before" and "after" illustrations:

- When a lion roars (verse 4), he is warning others of his presence—there is still time to escape. When a young lion cries out of his den, however, he is content because he has killed and eaten. It is too late to escape.
- Birds cannot fall into a snare when there is no trap (verse 5), but the trap always springs when one walks into it.
- The trumpet warns of danger coming (verse 6), but it cannot sound if the watchman is already dead and the city has been taken.

The Lord has done what He warned He would do. While the threat is being made, one can still escape, but once judgment begins, it is too late.

When a lion sees his prey, he will try to kill it. When the divine Lion roars, the people need to shake off their complacency because *His roar means He is about to spring into action!* He means what He says about living His way of life, and He follows through when we depart from it.

Some people, like birds, unwittingly stumble into trouble. Oblivious to everything around them, they fall into traps, like being swindled by con men or crafty deceivers. God's people are often just like birds, unsuspectingly going to their destruction, unmindful of the dangers around them. In other words, God is warning: "Don't be a birdbrain!" We must think about the direction that we are heading. In His mercy, God always warns His people of coming calamity, either through His prophets (Amos 3:7) or through escalating disasters that lead to His ultimate judgment.

Unlike the other six questions, Amos 3:3 stands alone without a second question following it: "Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?" It pictures a couple who have arranged to meet and do something together; they have a date. In the language of the Bible, this agreement is a covenant. God considered His covenant with Israel to be a marriage (Isaiah 54:5; Jeremiah 3:8, 14). Could the silent second question be: "Can a marriage be restored if the bill of divorce has already been issued?"

God chose to withdraw Himself from Israel because He realized He had nothing in common with her. They could not walk together any longer. But in Amos' day, the divorce was not yet final; reconciliation between God and His people was still possible.

But there came a point in Israel's history that it was too late. The die had been cast. Repentance was no longer possible. The trumpet blew, the trap sprang, the lion pounced.

Through Amos, God is warning our nations today that similar, devastating calamities lie just ahead, and escape from them is still possible. As yet, the lion has not pounced—it is not too late.

Is God Fair?

Before Amos gives specific reasons for God's judgment on Israel, he explains His judgment on the surrounding nations in Amos 1:3-2:3. Some may question God's punishment of nations to whom He has not revealed Himself. But God's response is that every human being knows—to one degree or another—what is moral and immoral (Romans 2:14-15). Abimelech, a pagan king of the Philistines, knew that it was wrong to commit sexual immorality (Genesis 26:10). In like manner, God holds these surrounding nations guilty.

Man has learned to silence the voice of his conscience (Romans 1:18), which has led to his sinking into total depravity (verses 20-32). Though God does not hold man accountable for understanding every detail of Him and His way, God does judge him for suppressing the knowledge of Him that he does have.

God does not unfairly accuse anyone. When He judges the Gentile nations as guilty, He does it with good cause. David writes poetically in Psalm 19:1-4 that man has ample evidence in the creation to conclude that a great and awesome Creator God exists. In Lystra, Paul and Barnabas preached that God witnesses to the Gentiles through the many things He provides for them (Acts 14:12-17). Paul writes similarly in Romans 1:19: "What may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has

shown it to them." If he follows his conscience, man should bow down in reverence and awe to his Maker. Instead, mankind has worshiped things that God has made.

Impartial Judgment

God's impartial judgment is important to this book. The nations around Israel in 760 BC had one negative common denominator: They had no revelation of God or His law, no priests or prophets from God. Yet Amos shows them as nations under judgment. Even without special revelation, they had a moral responsibility to God and to one another.

They were accountable to God to be good *men*, not depraved animals. He does not hold them responsible for their horrible and erroneous religious ideas, but He judges them for what they did or failed to do to other men. No human being can escape the obligation to be *humanly* moral as God intended, not even the Gentiles. Though God has never dealt directly with them, they know enough of His moral standards to be accountable to God.

If God requires this of men who have no revelation of Him, what does He require of us? The sobering fact is that we are held accountable for our relationship with both God *and* man. This underlines our need to listen to Amos.

The Father has given Christ "authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man" (John 5:27). The Son executes judgment because He fully realizes the perfection of God's purpose for humanity. Only He embodies the law and its perfect fulfillment. How will this work in His judgment of us?

God judges us for failing to be righteous men and women, not God beings. Jesus lived as a perfectly righteous human, so He knows how difficult it can be. Therefore, He can truly be a merciful Judge and High Priest.

"And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your sojourning here in fear" (I Peter 1:17). Whether he is a Gentile or Israelite, heathen or Christian, one who turns to God will be judged by Him without partiality.

God's Judgment of the Nations

The Hebraic formula, "For three transgressions of [a nation], and for four," is a way of showing that a matter has been looked into thoroughly and a complete list of sins has been made. It could also be described as accounting for a nation's sins and exhibiting the worst ones. God concentrates on the fourth transgression, a sin that epitomizes each nation's iniquities.

God's judgment of **Syria** (Amos 1:3-5) focuses on her use of total war—take no prisoners and leave nothing productive. Amos says to them: "War or no war, you had no right to treat people like that!" It is barbarism, and even in war people must be treated honorably and well.

The accusation against the cities of **Philistia** (verses 6-8) shifts from the battleground to the marketplace. Other parts of the Bible indicate that they took a large number of Israelites captive; they sold a whole nation into slavery for profit (II Chronicles 21:16-17; Joel 3:1-6). Amos reminds them that human welfare is more important than commercial profit.

God's judgment on **Tyre** (verses 9-10) is similar to that of Philistia. As greedy for gain as the people of Gaza, the Tyrians breached an agreement between Solomon and Hiram to secure it. When one enters into an agreement with another and does not follow through with its terms, to God it is the same as breaking one's word to a brother. God allows one to break a covenant *only* if keeping it will cause further sin. The pledged word of Tyre, however, was always negotiable, depending on her self-interest.

Edom, already implicated with Gaza and Tyre in slave trading, is now directly accused of bitter enmity against Israel (verses 11-12). Esau's descendants (Genesis 36:1, 9) never forgave Jacob for stealing the blessing and the birthright. They let their anger smolder within them—blowing it into a flame every now and then lest it die—and it broke out in unreasonable acts of aggression against Israel. This is perhaps the worse sin because hatred concealed in the heart is a transgression without fear and a candidate for the unpardonable sin.

The people of **Ammon** are guilty of wanton cruelty against the helpless, the expectant mother and the unborn child (verses 13-15). God is the defender of the helpless and the weak (Psalm 68:5). Pure and undefiled religion is to show kindness, warmth and generosity and to care for the widow and the orphan in their affliction (James 1:27).

Next, Amos exposes **Moab's** major transgression, the result of a long-burning feud between Moab and Edom (Amos 2:1-3). Out of spite and anger the Moabites dug up the bones of a long-dead Edomite king and threw them into a fire. This is another example of taking advantage of someone who is weak and defenseless. Can a corpse fight back? The principle here is that every sin has a boomerang. God noticed the sin, burning the bones of the king of Edom, and promised to avenge it (Deuteronomy 32:35).

In one way or another, these Gentile nations took vengeance in retaliation for injustices that they believed other nations committed against them. God promises to judge their barbarity, but He does not say *when*. Many years may pass before He takes action because His overriding goal is repentance and a change in character.

He will execute proper judgment—true justice, and it is our responsibility to have faith in that. Fifty years passed before God avenged the deprecating acts of Hazael, king of Syria, against Gilead (Amos 1:3; II Kings 10:32-33). God waited for the right time and place to act. But He did act with a punishment from which He will not turn back (II Kings 13:22-25). When He decides to act, He acts!

When He says that He knows our sitting down and rising up (Psalm 139:2), He is not speaking metaphorically. He is involved with His people. We must learn that sometimes God may not take action within our lifetime, but when He says, "I will repay" (Romans 12:19; Deuteronomy 32:35), He means it!

Eye for an Eye

What kind of justice does God dispense? Is it based on a so-called cruel Old Testament law? The "Christian" churches of this world say that Jesus came to do away with that law. Preposterous! Without law as a foundation, there can be no justice. Jesus explicitly says, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17).

Some think that Jesus condemns the Old Testament system of justice in Matthew 5:38-40. However, He is correcting, not nullifying, an abuse of the eye-for-an-eye principle, which the Romans called *Lex Talionis*. The Jews of His day were advocating it for settling personal disputes. In effect, each person was taking justice into his own hands, and Jesus says that was not His intent when He gave it to their forefathers.

Considered by many to be barbaric and primitive, the eye-for-an-eye principle is, on the contrary, the basis for God's system of judgment, of civil law, for ruling a nation (Exodus 21:22-25; Leviticus 24:19-20). *It has its foundation in equal justice as provided by equal payment for damage done.* God established this principle so that a judge could be merciful in evaluating the circumstances of the crime and render a fair and just decision in cases of sin against other men.

This does not mean that if A bloodies B's nose, then B has to punch A in the nose in return. *Lex Talionis* requires commensurate payment for damage done, punishment fitting the crime. It is the basis for evenhanded justice, demanding fair compensation for damages. As implemented in God's law, *Lex Talionis* was enforced with a system of fines—with the money paid to the injured party, not to the state (e.g. Exodus 21:22, 28-32).

Though it was to be the basic law, a judge had the power to give mercy. For instance, if he determined that B really goaded A into punching his nose, he was free to show mercy along with the payment required. In His judgment of us, God does the same. When we deserve death because of sin, God shows us mercy by allowing Christ's blood to cover our transgressions. He has decided to forgo the strict application of the eye-for-an-eye principle and extend mercy.

Amos tells Israel that it is too late. The people had gone too far. They had refused correction and warning too often. As God's retribution for rejecting His revelation to them of His way of life, the prophet warns that an invading foe was coming against Israel (Amos 3:11; 6:14; 8:2-3). In actuality, this is the eye-for-an-eye principle brought to bear against the whole nation.

Israel Ignores Correction

God's people were very busy making money, accumulating things and practicing their religion. But God was also very busy—sending famines, droughts, blights, locusts, epidemics, warfare and possibly earthquakes in judgment for their unrighteousness (Amos 4:6-11). He hoped that they would heed these "minor" warnings before He sent the rod of His anger against them (Isaiah 10:5).

Rain fell on one part of the country and not on another. When it rained, it rained too much, causing floods. In other places just enough rain fell to deceive the people into feeling a sense of hope—that it was not so bad after all.

We see this in the United States. Natural disasters—insurance companies call them "acts of God"—are growing more frequent and more intense, killing many and causing billions of dollars in damage. Floods ravaged the Midwest in 1993, while drought killed crops in other areas. After a year or so of good rainfall, California fell back into drought