

What's the Message – Lesson 65

We begin our study of Unit Five, Lessons from the Prophets.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. O Lord, we acknowledge that we have turned a deaf ear to the words of Your prophets and deserve to live with the consequences of our sins, and yet we pray that in Your grace You would hear our prayers and deliver us from our sins to glorify your name. Amen.

Dale, since this is the beginning of our study of the Prophets there are a couple of basic points we should establish right up front. First, for convenience, the Prophets have been categorized into two groups: the Major, and the Minor Prophets. This categorization is not based on their subject matter, content, or importance. It merely identifies the size of the book that bears their name, the amount or volume of their record. To keep it simple, it is big book and little book.

We should note here that the Minor Prophets particularly spoke to their own times, and it is important to see the applicability of their message to us in terms of the parallelism with our time.

Second, a prophet is described in the Old Testament as having two primary functions. Initially, he is a spokesman of God to his own time and circumstances. In contrast with our common idea, only secondarily is he a spokesman of God to portray the future, and to do so in terms of God's judgment and blessing. We will have more to say about the role of the prophets in our Study Aids.

The first prophet we want to study is Amos. The book of Amos is the oldest of the books in the Old Testament completely devoted to the life and preaching of a single prophet. The first verse of the book of Amos tells us some basic facts about this man. We read: *The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa (Tek o ah) – what he saw concerning Israel . . . when Uzziah (U zi ah) was king of Judah and Jeroboam the Second was king of Israel.*

The village of Tekoa was located in Judah near Bethlehem, but he was called by God to go north to Israel and preach His word there. And so Amos did, focusing his work primarily at the shrine of the golden calf that Jeroboam the First had installed at Bethel where the upper echelons of Israel worshiped. It was a time of prosperity for both the northern and southern kingdoms, but as we read in the Concordia Self Study Bible, it was also a time of idolatry, extravagant indulgence in luxurious living, immorality, corruption of judicial procedures and oppression of the poor.

Does that sound a bit like our own time and country? Can we relate to such a setting? Perhaps there was one big difference. Perhaps they were more smug than we, and felt secure they would receive the protection of God, because they were His “chosen people.” But other than these few basic facts, we know little about the person, Amos. So Teacher, what is the message that Amos preached, and how does it relate to us?

The message of Amos is a classical ethical protest against a society that has been corrupted by greed and exploitation, and yet hides behind the façade of a religion that has become only a mechanical ritual and is empty of any meaning. I will be citing the words of John Bright, from his book **The Kingdom of God**, extensively in this study.

He characterizes the message of Amos as follows: *The intent of Amos’ message, then, is plain – as plain as a blow in the face. Nor is there any need to argue that it is a relevant message in all ages; it is desperately relevant. It tells us what we need to hear; that a society that cares more for gain than for honor, for its living standard than for God, is sick to the death; that a church which has no rebuke for society, which demands lavish support before righteous behavior, is no true church but a sham of a church.*

Amos tells us that no amount of religious activity and loyalty to church can make a man’s conduct in human business and society of no concern to God, nor can a correct creed play substitute for the plain obedience to the divine will in all aspects of life. He tells us that a church which makes a

dichotomy between faith and ethics, to the point of making small insistence upon the latter, is under the judgment of God, along with the society of which it has become a part.

There is a second major point in the message of Amos, and it explains the covenant that God made with the Children of Israel in a way the people had forgotten or ignored. They were so confident that their position as the people of God was secure, there was no longer any responsibility on their part. But Amos saw it quite differently. He all but shouts at them in chapter 9, in verses 7 through 10 about what His judgment will be. Speaking again in the words of John Bright: *Election is for responsibility. With what logic, and yet a logic so hard for favored people to grasp, Amos reasons. He moves from plain premise to unheard of conclusion. This is the premise (from chapter 3, verse 2) “Only you have I chosen of all the families of the earth.” And this is the inexorable conclusion: “Wherefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities.” . . . In short, Israel is the people of God, but only as she keeps His law and exhibits His righteousness. Because Israel has not done so, but has egregiously violated the covenant brotherhood, Israel is no true people of God!”*

Does this indictment apply equally to us, too? It does not take much brainpower to understand that these ancient words of Amos are very relevant to us today. Again, in the words of John Bright:

It takes no skill, nor even a very sharp conscience, to point out that our society, like that of ancient Israel, is shot through with the crimes which Amos denounced: injustice and greed, immorality, pleasure-loving ease, and venality. Nor does one have to be a Cassandra to understand that these things are society’s sickness, for which a doctor’s bill will surely have to be paid. The indictment of Amos is an indictment of all societies, including our own.

However, we still protest, we are a Christian nation, and if we just get busy with more projects to serve God, surely He will protect us. But Professor Bright says this is blind thinking, and reminds us: *To this hope Amos speaks a resounding “No!” On the contrary, all societies are under the judgment of God’s order, and those that have been favored with the light doubly so! . . .* *Wherever men who have known of righteousness can speak only of their right to crowd for what they can get; . . .* *wherever men who have heard a higher calling grow soft in the enjoyment of the ease that money can buy – there is society under judgment. . . . Nor will it greatly matter to those who have to face it whether the barbaric tool of that judgment is Assyria – or the Taliban.*

Next time we will study the words of Hosea.