

Amos 6

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[0 : 00] Amos chapter 6. Woe to you who are complacent in Zion, and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria, you notable men of the foremost nation to whom the people of Israel come.

Go to Calna and look at it. Go from there to great Hamath, then go down to Gath in Philistia. Are they better off than your two kingdoms? Is their land larger than yours?

You put off the day of disaster and bring near a reign of terror. You lie on beds adorned with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves.

You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments. You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph. Therefore, you will be among the first to go into exile.

Your feasting and lounging will end. The sovereign Lord has sworn by himself. The Lord Almighty declares, I abhor the pride of Jacob and detest his fortresses.

[1 : 08] I will deliver up the city and everything in it. If ten people are left in one house, they too will die. And if the relative who comes to carry the bodies out of the house to burn them asks anyone who might be hiding there, is anyone else with you?

And he says, no. Then he will go on to say, hush, we must not mention the name of the Lord. For the Lord has given the command and he will smash the great house into pieces and the small house into bits.

Do horses run on the rocky crags? Does one plough the sea with oxen? But you have turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into bitterness.

You who rejoice in the conquest of Lodibar and say, did we not take Carnium by our own strength? For the Lord Almighty declares, I will stir up a nation against you, Israel, that I will oppress you all the way from Lebo Hamath to the valley of the Arabah.

Let's just pray as we sit. May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

[2 : 33] Amen. Well, it's a very challenging passage tonight, isn't it? There's really no chink of light in the darkness. This last month or more, we've been learning about Amos, who was called by God to be a prophet at a time when the people of God were living in a divided kingdom.

Amos himself lived in the southern area. He lived around Jerusalem. But he traveled north to Samaria to bring a message primarily to that northern kingdom.

But I think tonight, the most significant verse is probably the first one. There's very few first words. Woe to you who are complacent in Zion and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria.

The ESV puts it, those who are at ease in Zion. Our passage tonight is a word to the complacent. And it seems that complacency is not limited to the northern kingdom in Samaria, who were the main recipients of Amos' message, but includes the southern kingdom in Jerusalem, here called Zion.

[3 : 53] Now, for both kingdoms, everything seems to be going well, as we've heard in previous weeks. There's political stability. There's prosperity. People were complacent because of their religiosity, which made them at ease in Zion.

And they were complacent because of their military successes and of the strong walls and position of Samaria. But despite all that apparent success, comes those words, Woe to you who are complacent in Zion and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria.

But the message is even more focused than that. It's especially to the leaders in Samaria and Jerusalem. I do hope you've kept your Bibles open at page 922.

The next verse, the second half of the first verse goes on. You notable men of the foremost nation to whom the people of Israel come. I'm not sure that's how God saw them, but it's how they saw

themselves.

They saw themselves as the notable men of the foremost nation. And they saw themselves also as the people to whom the people of Israel come.

[5 : 16] We don't know why the people of Israel came to them particularly. But I think the problem was that when the people of Israel came, the leaders did little about it.

If they complained that prosperity was unequally shared, or whatever it was, it seems perhaps that their answer, the answer that the leaders gave, is in verse 2.

The leaders said, Go to Kalni and look at it. Go from there to great Hamath, and then go down to Gath in Philistia. Are they better off than your two kingdoms?

Is their land larger than yours? Certainly not, the leaders say. Samaria and Judah are bigger and better off even than Hamath the Great.

They're saying basically that these other places are worse off than we are. Don't bother us. It's an argument that always seems rather weak, I think, to compare ourselves with someone else and say, Well, you're doing better than they are, even if they're doing badly.

[6 : 23] And Amos says in verse 3, You put off the day of disaster and bring near a reign of terror. Now, of course, the leaders can't really put off the day of disaster.

All they can do is close their eyes and their hearts. They don't think about the coming judgment, and they bring near a reign of terror.

And I think the reign of terror is oppressive rule by the leaders. Amos says you don't think about the coming judgment. You just get on with ruling oppressively.

Tonight's word is a word to the complacent who don't see what's coming up soon and just suppress the people to make sure that they themselves are prosperous.

It's a word to the complacent and a word to the heartless. Verses 3 to 7 says, I think that there are real problems out there.

[7 : 32] 4 to 7. And you are partying. That's what Amos says to them. Verse 4. You lie on beds adorned with ivory and lounge on your couches.

You're lazy. The word translated lounge might be translated sprawl. It's even used of overhanging stuff in the description of the tabernacle.

They're just flats, sort of, you know, lying over the edge of their couches. Not getting on with anything important. They're just lazy.

They do get up occasionally because they're greedy. Verse 4b. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves. It was a world where most people didn't eat much meat.

But the important people, they have splendid food. Prosperity was not well spread. They're lazy, greedy, unfocused.

[8 : 41] I don't know what you thought of verse 5. You strub away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments. Now, creativity is a good thing.

But I think the implication is that they put their creativity into simply strumming rather than running the country or meeting people's physical needs. Lazy, greedy, unfocused, and boozy.

Verse 6. You drink wine by the bowlful. Not the glass. The bowlful. And they're vain. You use the finest lotions.

We can picture them easily, can't we? In the palaces of Samaria. They're at ease. Complacent. But the real thing, their real problem is verse 6b.

You do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph. Now, it's hard to know how significant the choice of the word Joseph as a description of the people is.

[9 : 54] I mean, Amos could have used the word Israel and that would still have been true. You do not grieve over the ruin of Israel. But it may be that by referring to the ruin of Joseph, Amos may be thinking about how his brothers threw him into a pit.

You perhaps know the story in chapter 37 of Genesis. You know the story of Joseph and his amazing technicolor dream coat, to use the phrase from the musical.

And you know the story of his dreams. And so, the brothers did not love Joseph. And one day they saw him in the distance and they plotted to kill him.

Here comes that dreamer, they said to each other. Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams.

So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the ornate robe he was wearing, the technicolor dream coat, to use the words from the song, and they threw him, they took him and threw him into the cistern.

[11 : 11] And then verse 25 of chapter 37 of Genesis says, to the brothers, they still sold him.

And it may be that Amos' picture is that we're seeing the Israelite leaders not grieving over the ruin of Joseph.

The Israelite leaders are feasting and lounging while the poor suffered Joseph in the pit. And so verse 7 comes to pass.

You'll be among the first to go into exile. It's the third time that phrase, the word first has been used in the Hebrew. Notable men of the first of the nations they've used the first of the oils.

That's their vanity, their finest lotions. But in the end, the only thing they're really first at is being the first to go into exile.

[12 : 50] So our passage is a word to the complacent, it's a word to the heartless, and it's a word to the proud. Verse 8, The sovereign Lord has sworn by himself, the Lord Almighty, God Almighty declares, I abhor the pride of Jacob and detest his fortresses.

The word order in the Hebrew is perhaps significant. I abhor the pride of Jacob and his fortresses I detest. The emphasis seems to fall on the abhorrence and the testing.

Perhaps pride is the sin of Israel, which Amos is denouncing. If you look ahead to verse 13, it talks of you who rejoice in the conquest of Lodabar and say, did we not take Carnaim by our own strength?

That's what they say. They see these military victories. They say, we're doing really well. We're winners. And Amos is perhaps mocking them in the choice of Lodabar, whose meaning, as you can see from the bottom of the page, is nothing.

So the conquest of nothing may be rather a minor military victory. Whereas God's people are not to be proud, they're to be humble and to trust.

[14 : 22] I don't know what you made of verse 12 when you heard it read. Do horses run on the rocky crags? Does one plough the sea with oxen? Well, of course horses don't run on rocks.

It would destroy their hooves. You damage them. And you don't plough the sea with oxen because that's a real waste of time. The point is that the people to whom Amos is writing, these leaders, are pretty sensible when it comes to their use of their horses.

And they're pretty sensible when it comes to their agriculture. They plough the land, not the sea. But they're not sensible when it comes to justice.

Verse 12b, you have turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into bitterness. justice is something beautiful that God has given us and taught us about.

But they had no time for it. They preferred poison and bitterness. Last week we had that unpacked and I'm not going to go through it again.

[15 : 35] It talked about those who trample on the poor, take a bribe and turn aside the needy. and that challenging call to let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

For God cares about the poor and the needy. His justice is in many ways good news to our world. But these leaders had no time for it.

They picnicked while Joseph was in the pit. And so God says to them, I will deliver up the city and everything in it.

Verse 8c. Or verse 11, the Lord has given the command and he will smash the great house into pieces and the small house into bits.

So that means all the houses, big and small. Verses 9 and 10, look forward to the terrible destruction. If 10 people are left in one house, they too will die.

[16 : 45] And if the relative who comes to carry the bodies out of the house to burn them asks anyone who might be hiding there, is anyone else with you? And he says, no. Then he will go on to say, hush, we must not mention the name of the Lord.

It seems that this house, like all the others, is in ruins. Maybe there's a plague, which is the reason why burning the bodies is the best option. We're not told why they shouldn't mention the Lord's name, but maybe that would invoke his presence and lead to further death.

So what is that challenging word to us tonight? God is speaking to political and religious leaders, what we would call leaders in church and state.

But I don't think I'm speaking to political leaders this evening. They're not here, as far as I know. More practical is how these words address church leaders.

Well, first I thought about the leaders of our big denominations. And I thought, no, they're not complacent. They may have faults, but complacency isn't one of them.

[18:03] I mean, they're only too aware that congregations are slipping away. And anyway, they're not present tonight, so I'm not really speaking to them. And then I wondered about us.

I thought, well, we have a large and growing congregation. I look out across you this evening and rejoice. My brother-in-law came to see me one Sunday not that long ago.

Sadly, he didn't come to the service. He turned up afterwards and just looked in at the back and he said, wow, I wish our congregation was like yours. And I had to be careful how I responded to that in my heart.

As we look out at the church, do we grieve over the ruin of Joseph? Do we grieve over brothers and sisters in collapsing small churches?

Is there something we should do? Should we do more to help by exporting people? Or what about people who are hard done by?

[19:08] The poor, people who experience bitterness rather than the fruit of righteousness? I guess the challenge is to look out there at a world for us to respond to.

I'm not saying that we are complacent, heartless, or proud. We might think about how we respond to that challenge of the ruin of Joseph.

maybe our response will be church planting. Or maybe our mini-denomination, the Anglican Convocation in Europe, is our response.

We're sharing our expertise through synods. We're caring for small groups of Christians who are in the pit. maybe our response to the ruin of Joseph is to send out mission partners here and abroad. Maybe there are other ways in which we address a challenging world. Maybe our how do we respond to those who feel that justice has passed them by?

[20:28] I know some of us are vigorous supporters of the city mission and that's wonderful. Some of us are vigorous supporters of Tear Fund and that's how we care for people in the further away.

All those things are good. And particularly for our leaders who really don't think laziness is a problem. But let's just take the passage as a warning it's written to specific people.

We can only see how we feel it applies to us. Because the passage we do know that the northern kingdom didn't turn from its complacency heartlessness or pride.

It was utterly destroyed. Verse 14 came to pass for the Lord God Almighty declares I will stir up a nation against you Israel that will oppress you all the way from Lebo Hamath to the valley of the Arabah.

I was reading a commentary and Alec Mateer put it like this when they saw Samaria in ruins in 722 BC when mothers had been bereaved of children husbands of wives when there were many orphans that they ask why the Syrians did it said some and that's verse 14 we've just looked at God did it said others I will deliver up the city verse 8 and they were right too our leaders did it was the opinion of yet more and they too were right pride did it said Amos and that was the most realistic of all appraisals of the enemy of the people this is a very challenging passage and yet there's a note of hope at the end of the book restoration new wine rebuilding but I'm not going to go there tonight and you'll be glad I'm not but hang in there because we will get to the end of the book but here's another thought that though

[22:54] Samaria perished because its leaders were heartless proud and complacent uncaring about the plight of ordinary people around them we do rejoice that God sent a leader for his people who was none of those things Jesus left the comfort of heaven to take the nature of a servant he didn't come to be like the brothers who disposed of Joseph but actually he came to be like Joseph he was the one who allowed others to dispose of him and indeed kill him in order that he could give them life as Joseph said at the end of Genesis as for you you meant evil against me but God meant it for good to bring it about that many people should be kept alive as they are today we rejoice that God came down to us in the pit and to bring us life the challenge is not just to picnic beside the pit and let others vanish but tonight to rejoice in Jesus and his coming amongst us and to go and attempt to follow him for we ask it in his name let's pray father we thank you that you've given us so much we do experience but most of us experience much prosperity most of us rejoice in so many gifts and we look out round us and we see the ruin of Joseph nearby in other parts of the world we confess our own sins of neglect and we thank you that despite our many sins you came amongst us

Lord Jesus came down into the pit to lift us up and we come to you tonight amen praying Thank you.