

Amos 3-4:3 • A Prophetic Lawsuit

Introduction

One of the few doctrinal concepts which nearly every generation of Israelite has firmly grasped is their special selection as God's people. So at the time of Amos' message in the previous chapters, many if not most, might have automatically categorized Amos as a false prophet on the ground that he was claiming God was going to destroy the very thing He had called; therefore a follow-up explanation through Amos was critical in order to justify what may have appeared to be a paradox of God's Word and will. The people had rejected God's ways (Amos 2:6-8) and forgotten His grace (Amos 2:9-12), so the fact of His selection of them would not exclude, as they assumed, from being judged for their actions. Much of what is presented in the following chapters is worded in what we might call a "prophetic lawsuit". Chapter 3 begins an extensive discussion of Israel first focusing on her present, then in chapter 4 on her past, and then her future in chapter 5. It will be a progressive discussion which begins with the current circumstances first.

¹Hear this word which the LORD has spoken against you, sons of Israel, against the entire family which He brought up from the land of Egypt:

²"You only have I chosen among all the families of the earth; Therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities."

[Read v.1-2]

Q: Why might these opening verses sound like an indictment?

A: "Hear this word...spoken against you" is followed up with "I will punish you".

Q: What is the significance of not just designating the "sons of Israel", but "the entire family brought up from the land of Egypt"?

A: Because of the division into two kingdoms, the Northern Kingdom is often called "Israel" and the Southern Kingdom is often called "Judah". In the previous chapter, God issued separate messages to Israel and Judah, but this message is for them both.

Q: What might God be establishing as a reminder for both kingdoms?

A: That they are not only still members of the same family, having all descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, which should be a greater concern to them than their current division.

Point: Man often puts into place divisions or categories which do not conform to God's viewpoint. For instance, God sees ethnic mankind as ultimately belonging to one of three major branches coming through the three sons of Noah, and that through the seventy nations immediately associated with them. (Interestingly enough, secular genetics has recently established that everyone on earth is connected to one of three major originating people groups.) In order to interpret God's Word correctly, we need to view mankind the way God views them as revealed through Scripture, not to mention remember our true family affiliations.

Q: But how is this designation of "families" carried even further? Why connect it all the way back to the Exodus from Egypt?

A: This refers to God's calling of Israel to be His Chosen People. In other words, this is a kind of historical reminder to remind them that they have entered into a covenant relationship with God which obligates both parties respectively. In this case, they have not held up their end, but from the very beginning, God certainly has not failed to do so.

Q: Why might it be significant that punishment is going to be exacted for "iniquities"? Why is this term used instead of "sins" or "transgressions"?

A: While "sin" is falling short of the standard and "transgression" means to rebel from the standard, "iniquity" carries with it the meaning to twist the standard. In other words, it is not an outright rejection or dismissal of God's Word, but a human effort to redefine it so as to justify one's behavior and lifestyle. They know what it is, but proceed to twist it to suit themselves.

Application: God's chosen find themselves well down the path of **deception** when they are no longer obedient to the plain **truth** of God's Word, but engaging in an effort to redefine the **terms** of the **agreement**, so to speak.

³Do two men walk together unless they have made an appointment?
⁴Does a lion roar in the forest when he has no prey?
Does a young lion growl from his den unless he has captured something?
⁵Does a bird fall into a trap on the ground when there is no bait in it?
Does a trap spring up from the earth when it captures nothing at all?
⁶If a trumpet is blown in a city will not the people tremble?
If a calamity occurs in a city has not the LORD done it?

[Read v.3-6]

Q: What do all these examples have in common as a teaching device?

A: They are all examples of “cause and effect”. Beginning with examples from the natural world, they transition to God’s working to establish the fact that “if” such-and-such is found, “then” such-and-such is going to result.

Q: What is the purpose of each of these three pairs of questions citing a case of cause and effect?

A: To emphasize God’s warning and consequences.

Q: What is the first pair of questions in v.4 concerning the lion describing?

A: A lion seeking food is completely silent while pursuing his prey until overcoming it. Nothing is heard until it is too late.

Point: Soon the Lord will bring judgment through Assyria, a time when the roaring is fast approaching.

Q: What is the second pair of questions in v.5 concerning the trap describing?

A: A bird fooled by the bait of a trap.

Point: Sin prevented God’s people from recognizing the consequences of their false pursuits.

Q: What is particularly powerful about the second question of this pair?

A: It’s a way of stating that God’s people have been caught in the act, otherwise the trap would have never sprung at all.

Q: What is the third pair of questions in v.6 concerning the city describing?

A: The warning system of an approaching enemy or potential catastrophe.

Point: God’s people had been ignoring the many prophets sounding an alarm to them.

Application: Take each of these three points in reverse to understand the overall picture of what has taken place:

(1) They **ignored** God’s Word through the prophets,

(2) their **sin** induced them to become **entangled** in the wrong things, and finally

(3) they were **incapable** of seeing the fast approaching **judgment** of God.

Can you see the parallel to what is presently taking place among God’s people today?

[Read v.7-8]

⁷Surely the Lord GOD does nothing Unless He reveals His secret counsel To His servants the prophets.
⁸A lion has roared! Who will not fear?
The Lord GOD has spoken! Who can but prophesy?

Q: What is revealed here as to the pre-qualification which leads to God’s calling someone as a prophet?

A: “His servants”.

Point: True prophets are first and foremost faithful servants. God will never entrust the authority of His Word to someone who is not putting into practice the entire Word He has already given. A sure proof of a false prophet is an unfaithful lifestyle.

Q: What seems ironic about the fact that God “reveals His secret counsel”?

A: It is not really “secret” from everyone.

¹⁸“But who has stood in the council of the LORD,
That he should see and hear His word?
Who has given heed to His word and listened?...”

²⁰The anger of the LORD will not turn back
Until He has performed and carried out the purposes of His heart;
In the last days you will clearly understand it. — Jeremiah 23:18, 20

⁹Proclaim on the citadels in Ashdod and on the citadels in the land of Egypt and say, “Assemble yourselves on the mountains of Samaria and see the great tumults within her and the oppressions in her midst. ¹⁰But they do not know how to do what is right,” declares the LORD, “these who hoard up violence and devastation in their citadels.”

¹¹Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD,

“An enemy, even one surrounding the land,
Will pull down your strength from you
And your citadels will be looted.”

¹²Thus says the LORD,
“Just as the shepherd snatches from the lion’s mouth a couple of legs or a piece of an ear,
So will the sons of Israel dwelling in Samaria be snatched away—
With the corner of a bed and the cover of a couch!

¹³Hear and testify against the house of Jacob,”
Declares the Lord GOD, the God of hosts.

¹⁴“For on the day that I punish Israel’s transgressions,
I will also punish the altars of Bethel;
The horns of the altar will be cut off
And they will fall to the ground.

¹⁵I will also smite the winter house together with the summer house;
The houses of ivory will also perish

Q: What is Amos dramatically stating in comparing a lion’s roar to God speaking?

A: As a true prophet of the Lord, Amos cannot remain silent. As someone personally faithful to God’s Word, he had to speak out regardless of the current circumstances.

³But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation. — 1 Corinthians 14:3

Application: A prophet is like an **evangelist** to God’s people, calling them **back** to that which they should have been **obedient** to in the first place.

[Read v.9-11]

Q: How does the use of “proclaim” connect with the previous verses?

A: The “*secret counsel*” revealed by God to His prophets will be fulfilled in the most public way possible.

Q: What exactly is a “citadel”?

A: It is a royal complex which is usually fortified and can be alternately translated as “palace”. It is the ultimate integration of both power and wealth over its immediate area of influence and its physical construction reflects what its occupants think about themselves.

Q: What does Ashdod represent, and why would this serve as a powerful picture to Israel when combined with Egypt?

A: Ashdod represents Philistia. Egypt and the Philistines have been two of the most powerful and consistent enemies of Israel throughout its entire history. Scripturally speaking, Israel’s faithfulness was supposed to be God’s witness to Egypt and Philistia; now God’s judgment of Israel’s apostasy would serve as a witness to them instead.

Q: How does the repeated mention of “citadels” serve to reveal a greater spiritual problem?

A: Instead of trusting God, they relied on “*your strength*”. It speaks to their trusting in their own power and riches as personified by their earthly fortresses.

Application: When God’s people are no longer a right and proper **testimony** of God’s Word and ways, their visible public **judgment** will be.

[Read v.12-15]

Q: Who is now being specifically addressed?

A: Both “*the sons of Israel dwelling in Samaria*” (v.12) and the reference to “*the altars of Bethel*” (v.14) indicate this is directed at the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Q: Why might Amos’ audience find hope in this illustration of recovering just a few remaining pieces of a lion’s kill?

A: It mirrors an aspect of the Mosaic Law wherein such pieces serve to make a case for restoration of the remnant.

¹²“But if it is actually stolen from him, he shall make restitution to its owner. ¹³If it is all torn to pieces, let him bring it as evidence; he shall not make restitution for what has been torn to pieces. — Exodus 22:12-13

Point: The defeat which is coming as a result of God’s judgment will not leave anything usable from the present environment. The complete destruction of the citadels compared to scraps recovered from a lion’s mouth correspond to the dramatic change God will bring about because of His people steadfast refusal to change.

And the great houses will come to an end,
Declares the LORD.

Q: How does the illustration to the bed and couch relate to that of the lion?

A: They both refer to only mere scraps surviving, very small and partial remnants. Just as only a leg or piece of an ear is far from the whole and cannot be reconstructed into what was lost, so is just the corner of a bed or couch. God is not providing the opportunity to return to this life of sin.

Q: Whereas political and financial security was the focus previously, to what is this expanded in v.14?

A: The religious security they have artificially manufactured by their “iniquities” (v.2), Bethel being one of the place where false worship was established still attempting to use the appearance and terms of the things of God.

Q: To what is v.15 speaking by these various types of houses?

A: They’re representative of one’s social status, particularly those who have elevated themselves above the rest one way or another.

Q: What is the dramatic progression of God’s soon-to-be-realized judgments?

1. “Snatched away” (v.12)—in reference to their wealth and self-reliance.
2. “Punish” (v.14)—in reference to their spiritual apostasy.
3. “Smite” (v.15)—in reference to their social status.

Application: The **judgment** of God’s people is required when their **devotion** to the things of this world matches not just their **elevation** of self above all others, but a corresponding **apostasy** from the faith.

[Read 4:1-3]

¹Hear 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 now, that we may drink!”

²The Lord GOD has sworn by His holiness,
“Behold, the days are coming upon you
When they will take you away with meat hooks,
And the last of you with fish hooks.

³You will go out through breaches in the walls,
Each one straight before her,
And you will be cast to Harmon,”
declares the LORD.

Q: What and where is Bashan?

A: It is that part of Israel located to the east of the Jordan River near the Yarmuk River which was known for beautiful oaks (Is. 2:13; Eze. 27:6), good pastures (Jer. 50:19; Micah 7:14) and exceptional cattle (Dt. 32:14; Ps. 22:2; Eze. 39:18). It is a symbol of agricultural fertility which by ancient standards would have been considered a visible sign of wealth and prosperity.

Point: When compared to what has been stated previously, this is addressing the fact that it was commonly thought that one’s health, wealth and status were a reflection of a right spiritual condition, when in fact it is not, especially if it has been obtained by transgressing God’s Word and ways to obtain them.

Q: How is this describing the final stage of God’s judgment?

A: This is the destruction of what we might call the cultured elite, those who have elevated their status and material lifestyle at the expense of others.

Q: How does this connect to the previous section’s reference to those with both a “winter house” and a “summer house” or “houses of ivory”?

A: It is explaining how this came about not by honest, hard work, but because of their contra-biblical behavior to “oppress” and “crush” both “the poor” and “the needy”.

Q: How do we know that they are invested in a worldly lifestyle?

A: Their command, “Bring now, that we may drink!” is referring to a lifestyle of indulging the flesh, even flaunting it in the presence of “the poor” and “the needy”.

Q: What is the meaning of the “hooks” in v.2?

A: It is describing in the terms and methods of the day the way that those who elevated themselves will be ultimately humiliated in the course of judgment.

Q: What is the greater meaning of going out “through breaches in the walls”?

A: The earthly protection afforded by their individual city-palaces is destroyed—in other words, that which they trusted in for protection in this life crumbles, and they are taken into captivity as they suffer the loss of everything in this life.

Q: What and where is “Harmon”?

A: The specific location is currently unknown, but because this name is based on the Hebrew word for “palace”, it may be more important as a wordplay to describe how those once in their own palaces will become slaves in another’s palace.

Application: While God holds His people **accountable** for their worship and service, the proof of their spiritual condition is measured by their **treatment of others**. Just as each nation has been indicted by God for their **treatment of others**, the same standard is equally important for His people.

Overall Application

¹For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. ²For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty, ³how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, ⁴God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will. — Hebrews 2:1-4

We are supposed to learn the right lesson not just from the historical example of Israel, but every generation of believer before us. Amos sounds very familiar to us because of how closely it aligns to what is taking place among God’s people yet again at present:

- To what degree might we be ignoring the whole counsel of God’s Word? How might that dull our ability to hear and understand what is truly taking place not just overall prophetically, but within us individually?
- To what degree have we allowed sin to entangle us in the things of the world? How might that dull our ability to see and understand the consequences of where they inevitably lead?
- To what degree have we closed our mind to the inevitability of God’s judgment for such willful deafness and blindness to His Word and ways?