Judgment on Israel and Judah

Bible Background • Amos 2:4–8
Printed Text • Amos 2:4–8
Devotional Reading • Psalm 75

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: REVIEW God’s judgment of Judah and Israel; ENCOURAGE sensitivity toward social injustice; and ADDRESS issues of injustice in our local and global communities.

In Focus

Tony had lived in his neighborhood for ten years. He tried to take an active role in helping the neighborhood be a safe and welcoming place. One afternoon while resting on his front porch, Tony’s neighbor Kodjo stopped by to chat. Kodjo was planning to rent a local storefront to sell furniture and antiques. However, Kodjo was a little uncomfortable with the contract that he had been asked to sign as a part of the lease agreement. English wasn’t Kodjo’s first language, so some of the contract wording was difficult to understand. Tony agreed to take a look at the lease paperwork. After reviewing Kodjo’s paperwork, Tony discovered that several of the rules in the lease were unusual and seemed to favor the landlord. He suspected that the landlord was trying to take advantage of Kodjo. Tony worked with Kodjo to renegotiate the lease so that the terms were reasonable. The following week, Kodjo happily reported that the landlord had agreed to the new terms. He thanked Tony with a big hug. “Thanks for looking out! You’re a true friend!”

In today’s lesson, we’ll learn about God’s view of injustice and discuss ways that we can fight social injustice in our own community.

Keep in Mind

“Thus saith the LORD; For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because they have despised the law of the LORD, and have not kept his commandments, and their lies caused them to err, after the which their fathers have walked” (Amos 2:4).
Focal Verses

KJV **Amos 2:4** Thus saith the LORD; For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because they have despised the law of the LORD, and have not kept his commandments, and their lies caused them to err, after the which their fathers have walked:

5 But I will send a fire upon Judah, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem.

6 Thus saith the LORD; For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because they sold the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of shoes;

7 That pant after the dust of the earth on the head of the poor, and turn aside the way of the meek: and a man and his father will go in unto the same maid, to profane my holy name:

8 And they lay themselves down upon clothes laid to pledge by every altar, and they drink the wine of the condemned in the house of their god.

NLT **Amos 2:4** This is what the LORD says: “The people of Judah have sinned again and again, and I will not let them go unpunished! They have rejected the instruction of the LORD, refusing to obey his decrees. They have been led astray by the same lies that deceived their ancestors.

5 So I will send down fire on Judah, and all the fortresses of Jerusalem will be destroyed.”

6 This is what the LORD says: “The people of Israel have sinned again and again, and I will not let them go unpunished! They sell honorable people for silver and poor people for a pair of sandals.

7 They trample helpless people in the dust and shove the oppressed out of the way. Both father and son sleep with the same woman, corrupting my holy name.

8 At their religious festivals, they lounge in clothing their debtors put up as security. In the house of their gods, they drink wine bought with unjust fines.”

The People, Places, and Times

**Tekoa.** Tekoa was a small village located west of the Dead Sea, ten miles from Jerusalem. Situated on a 2,700-foot hill, the city was at one point used as a lookout and defensive fortification. From Tekoa, one could look down across the Judean wilderness. However, it was most commonly known as a city of farmers and shepherds. The village still remains today, as Tekua, six miles south of Bethlehem. The city still contains large pastures upon which sheep and goats graze.

**Slavery in the Ancient Near East.** The concept of slavery depicted in the Old Testament is not the equivalent of the North Atlantic slave trade, although there are certain parallels between the two. Slavery was a customary practice throughout the ancient Near East. Individuals could be sold into slavery to repay a personal debt or a debt to society. In war, citizens of conquered countries were often made slaves. Mosaic Law governed how Israel was to treat
slaves, given the practice was already a custom in Near Eastern culture. These laws detailed how masters were to treat slaves humanely, and how slaves could be freed. For example, in Exodus 21:2–4, it is indicated that a Hebrew who sold himself to another Hebrew should be released after six years of service.

**Background**

The prophet Amos was born in the city of Tekoa. He prophesied in Israel around 750 B.C. He was not the descendant of prophets; rather he was from “among the herdman of Tekoa” (from Amos 1:1). He was a shepherd and also tended and gathered sycamore figs. He received his call to ministry while he was out in the pastures, with his sheep (Amos 7:14–15). His career as a shepherd and a common working man informed his view of the world and the way he communicated his prophetic message. He used images from nature and agriculture in his prophecies. Amos lived during an era of relative peace and prosperity. This prosperity led to an atmosphere of indulgent luxury, corrupt power, and moral depravity in Israel. Many had turned to the worship of idols and other gods. Some religious practices were still maintained; however, these had deteriorated into empty rituals. Israel’s religion didn’t have the intended impact on how they lived their lives.

The book of Amos begins with the prophet’s message of judgment to the nations surrounding Israel. Syria, Philistia, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab were each to be punished for their various sins. The Syrians were judged for being particularly barbaric in their dealings with conquered nations. Philistia treated its people as if they were a commodity, selling men, women, and children for nothing more than profit. Tyre was admonished for violating covenant agreements, and Edom for maintaining an angry rage against neighboring countries. In its unchecked desire to gain more land, Ammon had waged war on Gilead. And the Moabites desecrated a corpse, warranting God’s judgment on their nation. It was not unusual for a prophet of God to declare His judgment on the idolatrous nations surrounding Israel and Judah. However, Amos’ message to Israel also concerned the sins of God’s people as well. Judah and Israel were also to be held accountable for their sin.

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In Depth

1. Judah’s Sin and God’s Judgment (Amos 2:4–5)

   Amos delivers his message from the Lord, explaining the sins that Judah has committed. Judah’s sin is repetitive, a continual pattern of disobedience. Their sins are numerous and God’s patience with Judah has run out. In this regard, Judah is no different than the other nations that God has judged. The same pattern, “for three transgressions … and for four” used to judge pagan nations, is used here as well. However, Judah’s sin is different in that they had received God’s laws and chosen not to follow them. Rather than keeping His laws, they have “despised the law of the LORD.” The word translated “despised” in the KJV is the Hebrew word ma’as (mah-AHS), also meaning to reject or refuse. Judah knows what to do, but refuses to do it.

   Judah has chosen to follow in the lies and falsehoods of their ancestors. They have continued a historical pattern of preferring false teaching over the divine instruction provided to them. For their sin, Judah will be judged in the same manner as the surrounding pagan nations: They will be destroyed in warfare, consumed by fire.

2. Israel’s Sin (vv. 6–8)

   Amos completes his message with a stern rebuke of Israel. Israel’s spiritual climate has fallen to the point that they resemble the foreign nations around them. Their sin and rejection of God’s Law places them squarely in the company of nations that haven’t even received it. Again, the prophecy indicates an identical pattern of judgement: “For three transgressions… and for four.”

   The innocent and the poor are being abused in Israel. Though slavery is a customary practice, Amos speaks to the rigged and unjust practice of driving debtors to slavery for the sole purpose of benefiting the powerful and wealthy. Rather than being merciful and allowing them more time to repay, people are driven into slavery. For as little as the cost of a pair of sandals, the poor and innocent are dealt with harshly. Additionally the people are participating in ritual prostitution. Amos records that “a man and his father will go in unto the same maid” which is the result of religious prostitution and idol worship. Their lack of total allegiance to the one true God is connected to their blatant disregard for the weak and vulnerable.

   Israel’s sin is not merely negligent abuse. The innocent are actively being denied justice in the courts and are taken advantage of in the name of power and greed (v. 7). The poor, rather than being helped and protected, are pushed down even further. These practices have become commonplace in Israel.
Verse 8 further describes the indulgent and immoral behavior of the Israelites. It was common to give a coat as a pledge to repay a debt. However, garments given as a pledge were to be given back to debtors in the evening, to keep them warm at night (Exodus 22:26–27). Rather than returning these garments, the rich were seen wearing them in the temple. Similarly, wines used to pay debts to the state were stolen and used as drink or offerings in the temple.

Israel’s rejection of God’s Law has resulted in horrible abuses against its people. The majority of these involve the powerful using the system to benefit themselves and push down the needy and less powerful. They have perverted legitimate political and legal systems to enrich themselves.

**Search the Scriptures**

1. What conditions do you think contributed to Judah’s rejection of God’s Law and reliance on the false teaching of their ancestors (Amos 2:4)?

2. The poor are sold into slavery for what amounted to the cost of a pair of sandals. Do you think greed motivated the actions of the wealthy? What other evil rationale may have driven their actions (v. 6)?

**Discuss the Meaning**

1. Judah and Israel looked just like the other nations, despite having received God’s Law and being His chosen people. Can you cite modern-day examples of God’s people resembling non-believers?

2. God’s judgment of Israel centered on its treatment of the innocent, poor, and oppressed. How do you feel today’s Christian church is doing in comparison?

**Lesson in Our Society**

The powerful and wealthy in Israel used legitimate political and legal systems to enrich themselves and hold down the less fortunate. A parallel to this type of behavior is the modern-day practice of predatory lending in America. Predatory lending occurs when wealthy banking institutions provide loans under terms that are misleading or abusive. Often the loan terms make it impossible for a borrower to repay the loan or make the required payments. This results in the debtor losing land, money, or property to the bank. The poor and less educated are often the primary targets of such lending practices. Rather than taking advantage of the less fortunate, God calls us to minister to those who need help (Matthew 25:34–36).
Make It Happen

As a nation and as the church, when it comes to social injustice, we often point the finger at others. Prayerfully make a list of the ways our nation and the church contribute to social injustice. Commit to practicing justice in these areas of life as an individual.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

**Amos 2:4–8**

4 Thus saith the LORD; For three transgressions of Judah and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because they have despised the law of the LORD, and have not kept his commandments, and their lies caused them to err, after the which their fathers have walked.

By moving from neighboring nations on to Judah, Amos begins to zero in on the goal of prophesying against Israel. His hearers would have heard the repeated phrase “for three transgressions and for four” with anticipation of who Amos would condemn next. Judah is condemned for rejecting the Law of God and for idolatry. Although the actual word “idolatry” is not mentioned, we can infer this from the reference to lies (Heb. *kazav, kah-ZAHV*) making them err. The word “lies” is often used in reference to idols or anything that gives them false hope (*Psalm 4:2; Ezekiel 13:6*). The idols of the nations only lead people into deception. The sin of idolatry is also alluded to with the phrase “after the which their fathers have walked.” “Walking after” is often used in reference to idol worship or following the commands and statutes of Yahweh (*Deuteronomy 8:19; Jeremiah 8:2*). It is obvious Amos is referring to the former since he has already stated that Judah has “despised” (Heb. *ma’as, mah-AHS*) God’s Law.

This oracle against Judah stands out from the prophetic oracles against the other nations because Judah is closest to Israel and Judah’s sins are of a covenantal nature, not just crimes...
against humanity. They are indicted for their breach of covenant with God by going after idols. This is something that God does not take lightly with His covenant people.

5 But I will send a fire upon Judah, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem.

Amos announces that Judah’s sins will not go unpunished. The Lord will send a fire on Judah and the palaces (Heb. 'armon, ar-MONE) of Jerusalem. Most likely, Amos is referring to the citadels and strongholds that made up the king’s palace and temple complex, since this word for “palace” can also mean citadel or fortress. The word comes from a root meaning high and lofty. These high and lofty places would be brought down by fire. This happened in 586 B.C. when Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army defeated Jerusalem through siege.

6 Thus saith the LORD; For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because they sold the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of shoes.

Now Amos turns his prophetic gaze toward Israel. As Amos prophesied against the other nations like Tyre, Edom, Moab, and Judah, Israel must have savored and enjoyed hearing their neighbors’ condemnation. Now it was their turn. The Lord would not be partial but would judge fairly. If the other nations received prophetic pronouncements of judgment, then Israel would receive judgment as well.

Amos repeats the same prophetic formula “for three transgressions of Israel, and for four.” This is an acknowledgment of God’s patience toward their sin. Adding “for four” show that God is at His limit and cannot restrain His punishment for their wrongdoing. This wrongdoing manifested itself in selling “the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of shoes.” The word “righteous” (Heb. tsaddiq, tsahd-DEEK) here may be used in a legal sense, referencing those who are religiously upright. It could also be referring to those sold into slavery for a debt. Mosaic law reveals that God calls for civil and religious uprightness. Both meanings could be in view here. A pair of sandals could be referring to land transfer (see Ruth 4) or a very small, insignificant debt. In addition, Amos is using a Hebrew literary form called parallelism which aligns two closely related ideas in order to challenge the audience to consider the relationship. In this case, both the righteous and the poor are objects of the same verb (sell). Amos is not saying that one must be poor to be righteous, but he is acknowledging that fact that it is the wealthy who are using their excess of power corruptly in order to further oppress those who are already vulnerable. Even if some of the righteous are not poor financially by selling
them for silver, those in power are subjecting them to the same destitution as the poor. Amos is pointing out how the Israelites are devaluing human life.

7 That pant after the dust of the earth on the head of the poor, and turn aside the way of the meek: and a man and his father will go in unto the same maid, to profane my holy name.

Israel is accused of having little or no regard for the poor. The word “pant” (Heb. sha’af, shah-AHF) is often rendered “swallow up” or “trample.” The actual verb in the Hebrew text means to pant or gasp, but translations often read with the Greek (Septuagint) which understood a different verb (a homonym that is spelled differently; Heb. shof, SHOHF, to bruise, snatch someone’s heel). To trample or force to the ground makes more sense with the phrases “the head of the poor” and “on the dust of the earth.” However, both the Hebrew and the Greek indicate a lot of force pressing the poor into submission. They trample the head of the poor into the earth, meaning they provide no means for the poor to better themselves. Instead, Israel is accused of wanting the poor to remain poor for their own benefit and personal gain. They also push the meek or afflicted out of the way and do not give alms or financial, social, or physical assistance.

In addition, many are participating in ritual or religious prostitution. This is what is meant by “father and son go in unto the same maid” The scope of corruption includes whole households. Such acts profane, defile, or stain the Lord’s holy name. The Hebrew word khalal (khah-LAHL) expresses the hideous act of desecrating that which belongs to God. It is making unholy that which is deemed holy. The Israelites are particularly accused of defiling the Lord’s name through religious and social sins.

8 And they lay themselves down upon clothes laid to pledge by every altar, and they drink the wine of the condemned in the house of their god.

Amos continues to show how Israel has sinned. They are accused of laying “themselves down upon clothes laid to pledge by every altar.” Their sexual immorality and injustice (v. 7) is connected to their religious sin and unfaithfulness to their covenant with God. Part of their idolatrous practices is to worship through sexual acts. Their crime is even more serious, as they commit these acts on clothes that have been taken as collateral for a loan. The law stated that these garments (usually the outer garments or cloaks) were to be returned for the night (Exodus 22:26). Instead they were kept to be used for shameful acts. The perpetrators also drank wine, which was paid for by “unjust fines” (NLT). It is not clear whether these fines are unjust taxes or part of the tithe to the “house of their god.” During this time, ancient Israel had set up shrines
and temples to replace the temple of Yahweh at Jerusalem. At these shrines, Yahweh was represented as a bull, which was also the representation of Baal. It is not surprising that because of this syncretistic mix of ideas, their worship was also patterned after the worship of Baal to include orgiastic rituals.

**Say It Correctly**

Devour. di-VOW-er.

Profane. pro-FAYN.

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**Daily Bible Readings**

**MONDAY**

I Will Judge with Equity

*(Psalm 75)*

**TUESDAY**

I Will Press You Down

*(Amos 2:9–16)*

**WEDNESDAY**

I Will Punish Your Iniquities

*(Amos 3:1–8)*

**THURSDAY**

I Will Punish Your Transgressions

*(Amos 3:9–15)*

**FRIDAY**

Judgment is Surely Coming

*(Amos 4:1–6)*
SATURDAY

You Did Not Return to Me

(Amos 4:7–13)

SUNDAY

I Will Not Revoke Punishment

(Amos 2:4–8)