

# **THE GOD WITH WHOM WE HAVE TO DO**

*SERIES: THE CITY SET ON A HILL:*

*LIVING AS THE PEOPLE OF GOD, REFLECTING THE HEART OF GOD*

**By Danny Hall**

Imagine a country that is very proud of its heritage. It sees itself as being favored by God in its storied history. It has an expanding economy, but the profits from that expansion are concentrated more and more in the hands of the favored few, and average citizens find it harder and harder to make ends meet. There's a growing resentment over this disparity. It seems that even in the courts, wealthier people are able to get a more favorable verdict than poorer people. The nation is worried about enemies that might have plans to attack or invade it, so there's ever more discourse about the borders. Religiously, its people are moving toward a more pluralistic, even syncretistic spirituality. While maintaining many of their religious practices, their faith seems to have less and less direct effect on how they live their lives.

Does this sound familiar? It sounds like the United States in the twenty-first century, doesn't it? But actually, what I've described is the nation of Israel in the time of the prophet Amos, in the eighth century B.C. The more things change, the more they stay the same. When people are living for other things besides the glory of God, societies and nations develop very similar patterns. Life always seems to move in a downward spiral. We're going to investigate some of that further in the course of this series.

Amos as a prophet of God was called to speak into a situation very much like ours today. If we listen to what God was saying to the nation of Israel through Amos so many centuries ago, we'll find we have much to learn that will challenge us.

Now, the book of Amos has a very negative tone. We may have to look long and hard to find rays of hope, but God does give them to us. My prayer for all of us in this study is that we would be willing to be vulnerable before the direction of God's Spirit, that we might be willing to be brought low where we need to be brought low, to have our eyes and hearts opened to what he is saying to us, to ask him where in our lives and in our church we are missing what he has for us. My prayer is that we will be able to explore that, allowing God's Spirit to deeply engage us.

In this message I'll introduce you to this book and to this man, to his message in general, to the times Amos lived in, to what he was trying to do. I want to chart a little bit of where we are headed, and then enlarge our vision just slightly to understand some foundational things about God that are undergirding this book, which will allow us then to engage with the prophetic word that he gives to us.

We're going to begin by looking at Amos 1:1, where we're given some important information that sets the stage.

## **Willing to speak the truth**

**The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa—what he saw concerning Israel two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of Israel.**

Let's explore this information. First of all, Amos does not identify himself as a prophet. He says he is "one of the shepherds of Tekoa." Now, God called some men, such as Elijah and Elisha, to be prophets to the nation their whole lives, but Amos was not in that category. He was called by God to step out of his normal occupation just for a season to speak God's truth into a very difficult situation. He says here he was a shepherd; later in the book he talks about his growing sycamore trees. This word for shepherd often means someone who oversees a group of shepherds. Given that and the references to his growing sycamore trees, we can conclude that Amos was probably from a farming family who owned some land and a fairly large herd of sheep. If that was the case, then Amos' family was perhaps middle- or upper-class. He had some stature in his society. As a businessman he would have had a broad view of the economic situation in his culture—the growing economic disparities and the unrest permeating the land. And he was obviously willing to hear the call of God.

Now, how many of us find ourselves in such a position? Most of us! Those of us who are on staff are concerned with the operations of the church and are often disengaged from the regular world. It's a wonderful and blessed calling to be a pastor, and I thank the Lord for it, but we do get removed from the normal flow of life. But you are right out there. Sometimes you may wonder, "What do I have to say? How can I speak for Christ and represent the kingdom of God?" But as

Amos did, you have a position of influence. You have insight into the world and the way it operates that might give you the ability to speak truth clearly in difficult situations.

Another fact we're given about Amos is that he was from Tekoa. Tekoa was a little village about ten miles outside of Jerusalem. That's important because it places Amos in the land of Judah.

Back in Israel's history the kingdom had divided. After the death of Solomon, his son Rehoboam had succeeded him as king, but he was weak, and the nation descended into chaos. Rehoboam listened to bad advice. His youthful indiscretion and poor judgment resulted in a coup, and the kingdom ended up splitting. Ten tribes joined together to form a separate nation that was called Israel, and the remaining two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, constituted a geographically smaller nation that was called Judah. Now, Judah had an up-and-down spiritual journey, if you will. It had good kings and bad kings. Often a king would rise who had a heart for God, and God would revive the nation, and it would draw close to God again, seeking and doing the right things. But Israel, the northern kingdom, born out of rebellion against not only Rehoboam and the monarchy, but also against God himself, never had a good king.

God was calling Amos to speak for him to Israel, although Amos was from the kingdom of Judah. Ethnically the citizens of the two countries would have been brothers, but politically they were now separate. So not only was Amos called to leave his occupation and speak truth into a difficult situation, but he was asked to cross the border into Israel, to go to kinsmen who were enemies of his nation. In a wonderful section in chapter 7 where Amos reveals his heart a little more fully to us, they try to run him out of town. They criticize him, threaten him, and tell him to go back where he came from and keep his mouth shut.

Have you ever been in that kind of situation? Has God ever asked you, just an average person in love with him who wants to do the right thing, to speak truth into a difficult situation? Perhaps it was in a foreign environment, outside the comfort of the walls of the church, out there in the world where the battle was raging, so to speak. I love Amos so much because he was willing to hear the call of God, to step out of the comfort zone of his own environment, to be God's man in that moment and speak truth even in a difficult situation, no matter what the cost. Through him God will speak to us in this series.

Let me give you a bit more of the historical context.

## **Failure to hear**

We know that the two kings Amos mentions, Uzziah in Judah and Jeroboam in Israel, each reigned for a very long time, and their reigns overlapped. Amos was sent into Israel when it was under the rule of Jeroboam. In 2 Kings:14:23-27 these words are written about the reign of Jeroboam:

“In the fifteenth year of Amaziah son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel became king in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years. He did evil in the eyes of the LORD and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat [the king who originally led the ten northern tribes into

rebellion], which he had caused Israel to commit. He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, in accordance with the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hopher.

“The LORD had seen how bitterly everyone in Israel, whether slave or free, was suffering; there was no one to help them. And since the LORD had not said he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam son of Jehoash.”

Let me translate this. In the preceding years, the nation of Israel was oppressed and attacked by Syria, or Aram, one of their neighboring enemies. God removed his hand of protection. Things weren't going well, and there was a great deal of suffering in the nation. God was trying to get their attention. Over and over again, as we'll see in the book of Amos, God called them back to himself, but they refused to listen, even with the pressure of this foreign enemy. But God saw the suffering of his people, and in his compassion, he allowed Jeroboam, even though he was an evil king, to re-establish the borders. At that time the Syrians themselves had wars on different fronts. Their ability to control the newly gained territory in Israel was loosened. Israel retook the land and expanded their borders to what they were under Solomon, and they enjoyed a period of security because of Jeroboam's power. But rather than seeing this as a merciful gift from God, they continued to live without God. So the newfound prosperity from their enlarged borders translated into increased commerce in the hands of a few rich business owners who lived a life of much luxury and ease. Meanwhile the lower classes of people in Israel suffered more and more.

There is one more historical note from the opening verse in Amos, and that is his reference to preaching these sermons “two years before the earthquake.” They were collected in their current form afterward. Interestingly enough, there are references here and there in Amos, particularly in 8:8, to God’s shaking the earth in judgment. That was one of the ways God would seek to get their attention. The earthquake that occurred was strong enough that it was used as a historical reference. God was faithful to bring about the judgments that Amos prophesied as he wooed his people, but over and over again they turned a deaf ear.

Finally, let me say a word about the message of Amos itself. In form it is a highly stylized series of poetic oracles. There are seven major sections of oracles in the book, and they are arranged in such a way as to direct our attention to the focal point of 5:1-17, where God says, “Seek the LORD and live.” God’s desire for his people, even in this midst of incredible rebellion, gross exploitation of people, and hurtful living, was for repentance and healing. The book of Amos is a message of judgment, conviction, warning, calling to repentance, and promises that God’s covenant eventually will be fulfilled.

One of the beautiful things about Amos is that it’s filled with imagery. In 5:24, perhaps the most famous verse in the book, he says:

“But let justice roll on like a river,  
righteousness like a never-failing stream!”

In the face of all the injustice, exploitation of the poor, and sinfulness that reigns in the country, there's a call from God for justice to stand out. Another word-picture is found in 7:8:

“And the LORD asked me, ‘What do you see, Amos?’

“‘A plumb line,’ I replied.

“Then the LORD said, ‘Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel; I will spare them no longer.’”

A plumb line drops down and lets you know how straight a wall is. This picture is given by God to say, “I have dropped the standard of my righteousness into your midst—how do the walls of the nation of Israel measure up? Are they straight, or are they askew?” Images like these fill this whole book, calling the Israelites back in many beautiful and poetic ways to understand how far they have moved away from their God.

What we're going to do in this series is begin to explore what that might mean for us. It's going to take us to some very difficult places. In the next two messages particularly, we're going to have to let God open us up and look at us to see how far we have gone astray, both as a nation and as the church, the people of God, the rightful heirs of Israel's role in the world to proclaim God's truth. We're going to plumb the depths of the hurtfulness and tragedy and horror of sin, and the hopefulness that comes only through Christ.



Before we do that, in order to be able to understand the book of Amos, we need to back up two steps to think about the underlying issues. The first thing we have to understand is God's covenant call of Israel, what it was that God intended for Israel, what he was doing all along. Underlying that, we have to understand God's heart in general. I want to take us to a couple of other Old Testament passages to remind us of these basic facts.

### **God's covenant call**

The first passage we'll look at is Genesis 12, all the way back at the beginning of the story of God's redemptive work. The first eleven chapters of Genesis are the introduction, if you will, to the story of redemption. The author of Genesis paints for us an enormously dark picture in three episodes: the creation story itself and its aftermath, the story of the flood of Noah, and the story of the tower of Babel. Each of these stories is punctuated by what seem to be boring genealogies, but the picture grows to show one big truth: God created human beings to live in fellowship with him, and they rebelled against that, and as they developed as people without God, they royally screwed everything up. But the subtext of that is that God loved his creation so much that he would do anything to redeem it, which is foreshadowed in certain places in those first eleven chapters.

In Genesis 12 we have the beginnings of God's actual work of redemption to bring back lost, fallen, broken humanity to himself. He chose one person, Abram, to be the beginning of the

conduit through which he would bless the world, and he called Abram out to follow him, to leave his country and his home. He says these words to him in Genesis chapter 12:2-3:

“I will make you into a great nation  
and I will bless you;  
I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing.  
I will bless those who bless you,  
and whoever curses you I will curse;  
and all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you.”

This covenant promise to Abram, repeated in similar forms over his life and then the lives of his sons, was the charter work of God toward redeeming the world. He intended to bless the nations through Abram and his seed. It would take many sermons to explore all the implications of this, but I want to draw your attention to two important facts in God’s call of Israel that began with the calling out of Abram. First, from the day that God called Abram and he obeyed and God began his work through him and his family, and then through his descendants and the building of the nation, they were a specially chosen people of God, drawn out from all of the other nations. In fact, when we get to Amos 3:2, and the spotlight of God’s attention turns to Israel’s sin, the first thing God says is, “I chose you from among all the nations.” God had a special covenant relationship with these people. He delivered them out of Egypt and established them in their own land, where they were to live in the midst of all the darkness of life without God. God said, “I

have chosen you to exhibit to the whole world what life with me can be.” God wanted to demonstrate his grace and love to everyone, specifically through his chosen people. But they didn’t take seriously this call to be a blessing, an example and conduit of God’s love and grace. Instead of embracing that role, they bartered it away in their selfishness, turning all that glory and privilege that was designed to be shared with the nations toward themselves. They became proud of what they had, to the point where they thought the facts that they were God’s chosen people and that they possessed Torah, the Law, meant that they were better than everybody else. They missed the beauty of their special relationship with God and indulged themselves in their own pursuits. By the time of Amos, already voice after voice and circumstance after circumstance had called them to repentance, called them back to the beauty of that special relationship, but they continued to turn a deaf ear, generation after generation.

When we get to the pointed message that God has for Israel in Amos, we need to ask ourselves whether we are falling into any of the traps that they did. God’s heart was broken because their role as a light in the world had been cast aside. For it is the call of God’s people not only to enjoy the beauty of a personal relationship with him, but to bless others, to demonstrate the glory of God’s transforming grace in Christ. So the question that roars out of Amos to you and me is, besides enjoying the blessings of a personal relationship with Christ, as the people of God, filled with the Spirit, called by the very blood of Christ himself, are we standing as a light to the nations, or are we more focused on what’s in it for us?

Behind God’s calling of his covenant people is his very heart.

## **The heart of God**

There are so many passages in the Scriptures that speak of God's nature of love and redemptive caring, but I want to turn to a passage in Exodus 34. I love these powerful verses, especially because of the context in which God speaks. I personally believe Exodus 32 and 33 are two of the most important chapters in all of Scripture. They tell the story of the making of the golden calf and the aftermath of it. God has used that story over and over again in my own life to remind me of what matters. We don't have time to explore all of it here. But in brief, the nation of Israel was delivered miraculously out of Egypt, fed miraculously, and guided miraculously on the way. Out in the desert when Moses had gone up on the mountain to receive the wonderful, gracious gift of Torah, the Law, that covenant explanation of who God was and what his relationship with his people would be, he was gone too long for the people, and they grew restless. In a bizarre, crazy episode, they talked Aaron into fashioning a golden calf so they could have something to worship. Of course, Moses came down and saw this, and in his anger he broke the tablets on which God had inscribed the Law. There was a wonderful, intense interchange between God and Moses, and Moses and the people, the end of which was that God decided not to wipe them off the face of the earth on the spot, but to relent and call them once again to follow him and be his people. Then God took Moses back up on the mountain to give him the Law again, since Moses had smashed the first tablets. We drop right into the middle of that, and here's what the Lord says in Exodus 34:6-7:

“And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, ‘The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.’”

This passage is a wonderful display of God’s heart. There’s something important in the structure of verse 7. The word “thousands” is grammatically parallel to the words “third and fourth generation.” There’s an omitted word that helps us understand what he means. We should read it, “thousands of generations.” What God is saying is, “Yes, I am holy and righteous and just, and wickedness and rebellion against me will not go unpunished; in fact, the residue of that sinfulness can be passed down to the third and fourth generations. But in contrast to that, overwhelmingly, my heart is full of compassion and graciousness. I am slow to anger. I abound in lovingkindness, forgiveness, and faithfulness to *thousands of generations*.” The impact of that contrast is that it is the heart of God to redeem. He cannot do that at the expense of his righteousness and holiness, and he cannot do that to people who remain rebellious against him. But it is his heart to transform and rescue from the ravages of sin.

When we get into the passages of the next two messages, I hope we will be crushed by the tragedy of sin. What sin reaps in our world is horrendous. The human wreckage, the destroyed families, the destroyed individuals, the crazy way that nations operate in this world—life without God is ruinous. Our hearts ought to be broken over it. But into the midst of that, God speaks compassion, love, and forgiveness. That is precisely why, in the book of Amos, God is so

upset—what Israel is doing is ruining his plans to rescue the world! They’re throwing away the role they were to play in that. They’re consumed with themselves and acting just like everybody else. God wants so much to rescue and redeem both his people and all the nations that his heart is broken and angry at how lightly they take it.

In conclusion, our understanding of the book of Amos begins with understanding the heart of God. The God of the universe is holy and righteous, but he is a God of compassion and forgiveness who wants to redeem people. Late in the New Testament, Peter writes in 2 Peter 3:9, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” It is the heart of God to take broken, ruined lives, and rescue them. He is so full of that compassion and love for us that he is calling out a people for himself in a covenant relationship with him to be light to the nations, so that people can see that there is a different way to live besides self-indulgence and the ruinous track that will put you on. So he speaks words that are difficult and pointed to the nations in general but to the people of God in particular, because he’s calling us to be light in a world that desperately needs light, and he wants to love the world through us. He’s willing to speak very strongly to us so that we won’t miss it.

I hope that you will pray that God will give you a spirit of vulnerability toward his Spirit, that he might work deeply in you, searching who you are as his child, that you might embrace his covenant love for you and his covenant mission for you to be his light in this world. If you do that, you’re going to see God do some great things through this word in Amos.

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Amos 1:1

First Message

Danny Hall

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