

# THE SINS OF THE NATIONS

*SERIES: THE CITY SET ON A HILL: LIVING AS THE PEOPLE OF GOD,  
REFLECTING THE HEART OF GOD*

**By Danny Hall**

The events of Hurricane Katrina and 9/11 are front-and-center in the minds of people in the US today. But while they are riveted home for us in our own national history, these kinds of problems happen over and over again across our world. They are indicative of a larger problem.

People interpret these kinds of events differently. Some people see them as God's judgment on our country—but they can't agree on why he's judging us. Some people see them merely as natural disasters, chance happenings that have nothing to do with God. People also try to interpret them politically, blaming certain parties for at least the manner in which they reacted to the events. Some have an us-versus-them attitude, particularly with regard to 9/11 remembrances. There is a great deal of confusion and national anxiety, if you will, over what to do with all this mess that has befallen us. The one thing we can conclude is that there is something terribly wrong with us.

The prophet Amos has a word that reinforces this conclusion and that I hope will give us a deeper understanding of the problem that we face. Reviewing briefly, in the last message

(Discovery Paper 4935) we observed that the message of Amos came at a time when the kingdom of Israel was divided. Amos 1:1 says, “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.” Amos was not a professional spokesperson for God, but just a farmer who probably owned a large herd of sheep and managed some shepherds. He was probably the equivalent of a small business owner today. But he was called out of his occupation in Judah and sent to neighboring Israel (they were brothers ethnically, but enemies politically) to speak God’s truth. God had been at work to redeem and rescue mankind, and he had called out Israel as a people for himself in order to show through them that there was a different way to live. But Israel had continually drawn farther and farther away from God and the things that were important to him.

Amos 1:2:

**He said:**

**“The LORD roars from Zion  
and thunders from Jerusalem;  
the pastures of the shepherds dry up,  
and the top of Carmel withers.”**

“There’s a word of judgment coming,” God says. The Lion is roaring! Things are not as they ought to be, and God is sending his prophet to speak about that.

The opening oracle that we'll look at in this message puts us in touch with an incredible, deep-seated problem that permeates all of humanity. Amos will deliver a series of oracles, the first of which is itself a series of eight judgments on respective countries. In this message we're going to read through the first seven judgments, and in the next message we'll pick up with the eighth, which contains the core idea of the whole book. There are a number of groups of seven in the book. (As I mentioned in the last message, the book of Amos has a highly stylized literary structure.) This series of judgments is an oddity in that it is seven plus one, which I'll comment on in a bit.

Beginning in verse 3, Amos begins to build a case, if you will, pinpointing a problem that exists in the nation of Israel, relating it to the problem that exists in the whole world. He paints a picture of the horror of life without God in these words of judgment against the nations that surrounded Israel.

## **A picture of life without God**

Verses 3-8:

**This is what the LORD says:**

**“For three sins of Damascus,**

**even for four, I will not turn back my wrath.**

**Because she threshed Gilead**

**with sledges having iron teeth,**

**I will send fire upon the house of Hazael**

**that will consume the fortresses of Ben-Hadad.**

**I will break down the gate of Damascus;**

**I will destroy the king who is in the Valley of Aven**

**and the one who holds the scepter in Beth Eden.**

**The people of Aram will go into exile to Kir,”**

**says the LORD.**

**This is what the LORD says:**

**“For three sins of Gaza,**

**even for four, I will not turn back my wrath.**

**Because she took captive whole communities**

**and sold them to Edom,**

**I will send fire upon the walls of Gaza**

**that will consume her fortresses.**

**I will destroy the king of Ashdod**

**and the one who holds the scepter in Ashkelon.**

**I will turn my hand against Ekron,**

**till the last of the Philistines is dead,”**

**says the Sovereign LORD.**

These judgments come in pairs, and the first pair sets the stage for us to see the horror of what these nations are doing. Beginning with Damascus, the capital city of Syria, which was located to the north and east of Israel, Amos lays out a picture of a country that is hungry to expand its borders and its economy at the expense of other countries. “She threshed Gilead with sledges having iron teeth....” This is a picture of absolute destruction. The nation of Syria, in an effort to grab a little bit more land for itself, totally laid waste to a neighboring people. Because of that, the judgment of God is coming.

Gaza, or Philistia, the second of this opening pair, is said to have taken whole communities of people captive and sold them into slavery to Edom, probably in an economic and political alliance. God says judgment is headed their way.

In verses 9-12 Amos gives the second pair:

**This is what the LORD says:**

**“For three sins of Tyre,**

**even for four, I will not turn back my wrath.**

**Because she sold whole communities of captives to Edom,**

**disregarding a treaty of brotherhood,**

**I will send fire upon the walls of Tyre**

**that will consume her fortresses.”**

**This is what the LORD says:**

**“For three sins of Edom,**

**even for four, I will not turn back my wrath.**

**Because he pursued his brother with a sword,**

**stifling all compassion,**

**because his anger raged continually**

**and his fury flamed unchecked,**

**I will send fire upon Teman**

**that will consume the fortresses of Bozrah.”**

The city of Tyre was the capital city of Phoenicia, and the Phoenicians too were guilty of taking whole communities of people and selling them to Edom. The Edomites themselves are said to have been people of anger and rage, and they were the procurers of human slaves. But in this second pair of judgments another idea is introduced: the violation of brotherhood. Both the Phoenicians and the Edomites were guilty of this. Not even the bond of a shared bloodline, a sense of family, could trump the rage of greed, the lust for power and the accumulation of wealth and prestige and security, at the cost of others' lives. Once again God's judgment is going to fall.

A third pair of judgments follows in 1:13-2:3:

**This is what the LORD says:**

**“For three sins of Ammon,**

**even for four, I will not turn back my wrath.**

**Because he ripped open the pregnant women of Gilead**

**in order to extend his borders,**

**I will set fire to the walls of Rabbah**

**that will consume her fortresses**

**amid war cries on the day of battle,**

**amid violent winds on a stormy day.**

**Her king will go into exile,**

**he and his officials together,”**

**says the LORD.**

**This is what the LORD says:**

**“For three sins of Moab,**

**even for four, I will not turn back my wrath.**

**Because he burned, as if to lime,**

**the bones of Edom’s king,**

**I will send fire upon Moab**

**that will consume the fortresses of Kerioth.**

**Moab will go down in great tumult**

**amid war cries and the blast of the trumpet.**

**I will destroy her ruler**

**and kill all her officials with him,”**

**says the LORD.**

This is a picture of even more bizarre, graphic, disturbing displays of greed and power and lust. The Ammonites, in an effort to simply enlarge their borders, to increase their political power and economic base, were guilty of brutally slaughtering innocent women and children, of cutting out the unborn from the wombs of their mothers. This is an awful picture of total disregard for human life for the sake of economic and political gain.

The Moabites were guilty of burning the bones of Edom's king. This is an obscure reference. There was a lot of animosity between these two nations. In a military battle, the Moabites probably captured the king of Edom, and in a display of revenge and arrogance desecrated his bones, burned them to ashes and handled them with great disrespect for any sanctity of life. Some commentators think that they may have even plastered the walls of one of their buildings with the ashes of the king in an act of arrogance and revenge for past actions against them. Once again, the judgment of God is pronounced on this country and her leadership.

That brings us to the seventh judgment in 2:4-5:

**This is what the LORD says:**



**“For three sins of Judah,  
even for four, I will not turn back my wrath.  
Because they have rejected the law of the LORD  
and have not kept his decrees,  
because they have been led astray by false gods,  
the gods their ancestors followed,  
I will send fire upon Judah  
that will consume the fortresses of Jerusalem.”**

Now God turns his attention to Judah, the other part of the divided kingdom, which is centered in Jerusalem. Notice here that the way God describes them has shifted. He does not catalogue any atrocities that they have committed, but focuses on their rejection of the Law of God, Torah, to follow false gods, or lies. God tried to raise them up as a people to speak the truth of his glory and greatness among the nations, but Judah fell into a trap, neglected Torah and God, and was sucked into the teachings of the false gods in the nations surrounding them.

Now what Amos as a great preacher has done in this oracle is draw a circle around a target. If you map out the seven nations that he’s identified here, you see they encircled Israel. He started up in Syria, and then went down to Philistia and Phoenicia, and over to Edom and Moab and Ammon, and finally to Judah, which completes the circle. I think there is a wonderful sermonic device going on here. Amos is trying to get the attention of the nation Israel. I can just hear them now: “Yes! Preach it, brother! You’re right, those Edomites are evil! Those Phoenicians are awful!” And so on. His listeners see the map being drawn, the circle finishing with Judah, their

physical kinsmen who are now their enemies, and you can just hear them saying, “Amen!” to every single one of them. With that seventh judgment Amos finishes the point of the sinfulness of all these nations. Then as we’ll see in the next message, having drawn the bulls eye, Israel, he’s going to focus on them. Amos is preparing them to hear his core message.

What Amos has done for Israel, and for us, I suggest, is describe what life without God looks like: ever-deepening cycles of evil, lust for power, a me-versus-them attitude, and a solidifying of one’s own safety and comfort at the expense of others. Perhaps more than any other writer of Scripture, the Minor Prophets, sent by God to speak the truth to the nations of Israel and Judah at a time of indifference toward God and great calamity, declare that life without God is evil and destructive and that it always descends deeper and deeper into sinful, awful, destructive behavior.

This theme is recorded throughout Scripture. In Psalm 1:1, which Scott Grant shared with us earlier this year (Discovery Paper 4927), the psalmist writes:

“Blessed is the man  
who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked  
or stand in the way of sinners  
or sit in the seat of mockers.”

Notice the progression: when people begin to live without God and listen to the voices of those who are evil, it starts them on a path that takes them farther and farther away from God, so that

eventually they're living the way sinners live, and then finally they're sitting in the seat of scoffers who defy God.

The New-Testament counterpart to the message of the opening oracle of Amos is Romans 1. There Paul describes the downward spiral of people and societies who choose to live without God. Listen to these words (verses 28-32):

“Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.”

Pounding home characteristic after characteristic, Paul says the same thing that Amos does: life without God is destructive.

## **Cutthroat competition**

How can we bring this home to where we live? How can we take in the tragedy of sinfulness and its destruction? My attention has been riveted on the problem of sin as it has developed in my own heart and as I see it in our society at large. I've been reading over and over again a couple of books by Donald Miller, *Blue like Jazz* and *Searching for God Knows What*. In *Searching for God Knows What*, he has several chapters that describe the pain and ravages of sin. I've read little in my life that compares to his analysis of the tragedy of what happens in life without God. He has some metaphors and some ways of looking at things that have been helpful.

Let me back up for a moment. We as human beings were created in the image of God. We were created to have fellowship with God. The only Person who can name us, who understands who we are, and who gives us a sense of worth and place is the God who created us and who invites us into relationship with himself. But what happened on that fateful day when we chose to rebel against God was that this very relationship with God was taken away.

If we were designed to gain our sense of purpose from our connection with God himself, what happens when that is lost? In a powerful description of the tragedy of the Garden of Eden, Miller writes about Adam and Eve:

“And this feeling, this feeling must have been so much more painful for Adam and Eve, this feeling of having an infinite amount of love pouring through their lives, and then it's suddenly gone....I wondered at how terrible it must have felt, at the fear of no longer feeling God, at the ache of emptiness and the sudden and horrifying awareness of self.” (1)

If there is no longer a God in my life who tells me who I am and what I'm worth, who invites me to live for his purposes, in relationship with him, then where do I go to fill the hole that was created by this awful awareness of myself in all my inadequacy? Miller suggests a metaphor that I want to share with you. He recalls a learning experience in his youth called values-clarification (2). In one exercise they were told to suppose there's a lifeboat that will hold only so many people. In the boat are perhaps a lawyer, a doctor, a homeless person, and a garbage collector—different kinds of people who represent society. The lifeboat is sinking, and they're going to have to get rid of somebody. How are they to decide who gets thrown out of the boat and who gets to stay?

Miller suggests that life without God is like that lifeboat experience, that what we are doing is trying to justify why we should stay in the boat. Without God to tell us what we're worth, we look for everyone else to say we're valuable. So I will go to great lengths to get others to say I'm worth keeping. I'll do things to impress them, make alliances with those I consider to be stronger, and dissociate myself from the weak who might be more vulnerable to being thrown out of the boat. Miller remarks how this permeates our thinking at all levels. Take the way we think about sports teams. When my team wins, I say, "We won!" When they lose, I say, "They lost." We want to associate with winners and dissociate from losers, because we're trying to get everyone else to say we're valuable. And that aching hole in our heart that only God can fill, we try to fill with pleasure, achievement, and God knows what, so that, if only for a moment, the ache will go away, and in some way we can justify ourselves and our existence to others. So we

live in an enormously competitive environment where everything is calculated in terms of what kind of threat someone is to me, and how I can gain the advantage. This is life without God.

Even on the national level we compete against other nations for resources and evaluate everything on the basis of threat and security. It is true that evil exists and it must be restrained, but how much international policy across the world is based on the lifeboat mentality? How do we justify our existence, how do we protect ourselves from the threats of nations who would throw us out of the boat, disrupt our sense of security?

The horrors that are described in Amos that turn our stomachs—pregnant women having their babies cut out for the sake of gaining a few acres of real estate, wholesale trafficking in people for economic gain and advantage—those horrors seem distant, but that is life without God, and you and I see it every day, if we're honest. The ravages and pain and power of sin are all around us. On the fourth anniversary of 9/11, there are all kinds of explanations about what happened and why it happened and what we ought to do about it. But we must see clearly in this text in Amos where we stand as one of the nations. The US is not the chosen people of God. In the next message we're going to examine what it means to be the people of God in the midst of the nations, and what God is calling us to be and to do and how we might have missed it. But here as we look at the sins of the nations and the ravages of sinfulness across our globe and in our hearts, we must understand that as a nation we're right alongside the others.

Now, one of the problems we have as evangelicals is not that we claim that we have sin in our nation. Our problem as evangelicals is that we want to narrowly define what that sinfulness is in

ways that make us feel morally superior. So we define unrighteousness in our country as things like abortion and sexual issues so that we can maintain areas where we as believers feel morally superior. But a careful reading of Amos as we move forward is going to enlarge our sense of what unrighteousness looks like in a people and even in the people of God. The single greatest issue for the people of God is how they treat the marginalized and hurting people of their society. You and I have to be willing to face the overwhelming, powerful, devastating effect of sin in our own hearts, in our country, and in our world. It's tragic, horrible. Sin is killing and will continue to kill person after person, no matter how we sanitize it and call it something else.

Let me quote one final story from Miller's book.

“I happened to see Larry King interview Billy Graham shortly after the shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. I had read an article the previous month about violent video games and their effects on the minds of children, desensitizing them to the act of killing. Larry King asked Billy Graham what was wrong with the world, and how such a thing as Columbine could happen. I knew, because Billy Graham was an educated man, he had read the same article I had read, and I began calculating his answer for him, that violence begets violence, that we live in a culture desensitized to the beauty of human life and the sanctity of creation. But Billy Graham did not blame video games. Billy Graham looked Larry King in the eye and said, *‘Thousands of years ago, a young couple in love lived in a garden called Eden, and God placed a tree in the*

*Garden, and told them not to eat from the tree....'* And I knew in my soul he was right." (3)

We have to be heartbroken by the way sin is ravaging people's lives. Our world is fractured. And there is no hope apart from the God who created us and names us and gives us our sense of who we are. It is glorious and marvelous that in Christ, God is rescuing people! But if we are not fully broken by the absolute calamity, the awful tragedy, of sin, I fear we will continue to paste over it with religious activity and protect ourselves within the walls of our churches.

Amos, in his efforts to draw the attention of the people of God to their own role in this, paints a picture of a world without God that is sick, decaying, dying, destructive. That's the world we live in. That's the world in which the power of the transforming gospel of Jesus Christ alone is adequate, and a relationship with God through Christ alone is able. We preach that message not because we want to demonstrate some sort of religious or moral superiority, but because we are heartbroken by the ravages of sin. That is my prayer for your heart and mine.

## **Notes**

1. Donald Miller, *Searching for God Knows What*, © 2004, Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, TN. P. 73.
2. Miller, pp. 105-118.



3. Miller, p. 90.

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Amos 1:2-2:5

Second Message

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