

Amos 3:3 – 6:14 (1/21/17: Trumpday)

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1. The negative events that are prophesied in these chapters of Amos are brought on by, in part, issues of poverty and wealth. One issue is oppression of the poor (e.g., 4:1, 5:12). Another issue seems to be living an extravagant lifestyle (e.g., 3:15, 6:4). These are quite different, and we likely have quite different reactions to them. Discuss.

2. Background on the Cows of Bashan (4:1): In his 2011 commentary on Amos, T. J. Betts states (pp. 71-72) “The region that was called Bashan during the time of Amos is located east of the sea of Galilee about 37 miles east to Mt. Bashan, which is on the edge of the Arabian desert . . . Baly describes the region as ‘wide open plains between 1600 and 2300 feet in height, and magnificently fertile’ . . . During biblical times, Bashan served as a ‘breadbasket’ for Israel, with wheat the primary crop. Given the agrarian culture of Israel and instances where comparisons to the best qualities of livestock and produce should appear as positive expressions, the expression ‘cows of Bashan’ should probably be understood as an expression pertaining to luxury and privileged circumstances and not a negative reference to women’s weight or actual appearance”.

In *The Good of Affluence: Seeking God in a Culture of Wealth*, John Schneider states (p. 94) “One of the harshest passages in the Bible is Amos’ speech to the women of Northern Israel, who apparently are occupied with building fine resort homes on Mount Samaria. These women are not the perpetrators, but Amos accuses them too, of oppressing and crushing the poor. Their behavior implicates them in the evil-doing of others . . . even though they are not agents of the evil, the wives of these men are nonetheless implicated in it, and God will bring devastation upon them too”.

In *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity*, Ron Sider states (p. 108-110) “Neglect of the biblical teaching on structural injustice or institutionalized evil is one of the most deadly omissions in many parts of the church today. Christians frequently restrict ethics to a narrow class of ‘personal’ sins”. Sider turns to Amos and other OT prophets to support the position that people not directly involved in creating injustice or who have little contact with the poor can still be held accountable. He uses the “cows of Bashan” passage as an example. He thinks participation in social evil is just as displeasing to God as participating in personal evil. He gives some older examples -- slavery and child labor -- of institutionalized, structural evils; he also mentions the following more modern examples: living in segregated communities, owning stock in companies that exploit the poor, not paying employees a fair wage, voting for a racist, and participation in a company that carelessly pollutes the environment. He says “Unfair systems and oppressive structures are an abomination to God, and ‘social sin’ is the correct phrase to categorize them. Furthermore, as we understand their evil, we have a moral obligation to do all God wants us to do to change them. If we do not, we sin. That is the clear implication of Amos’ harsh attack on the wealth women of his day. Do you agree or disagree with the personal/structural sin distinction? Do you agree/disagree with

Sider's statements about sinning through participation in structural sin? What are other modern day examples of this (beyond those provided by Sider)?

3. In 6:4-7 Amos prophesies that some of the first people to go into exile (v. 7) will be those who lie on luxurious furniture, dine on expensive food, drink lots of wine, and use expensive lotions. Verse 1 suggests that these are also people who are complacent in and feel secure because of their wealth. In Gary Smith's 2001 commentary on Amos (pp. 347-8), he asks, regarding these verses, "Does this mean that believers today must buy old pine furniture instead of new oak pieces, or that a wedding party for your daughter should serve only crackers and cheese plus a wedding cake? Is it wrong to have a Christian Businessman's luncheon at an expensive hotel, or is it an immoral demonstration of dependence on wealth to buy your wife a larger diamond ring for your fiftieth wedding anniversary? There is no single answer to questions on wealth because so much depends on the attitude people have toward the way they use their money." What is the attitude that Smith refers to? And, is it the wealth or the complacency (or both) that is the key here?

4a. In 4:6-11, it seems that God is bringing bad things into people's lives in order to get their attention and have them return to Him (note the repeated "yet you have not returned to me, declared the Lord"). In Smith's 2001 commentary on Amos (p. 306), he states the following: "Why does God send troubles? When one hears about people losing their business in a tornado, farmers having their crops destroyed by a flood, or the burning of homes in a wild forest fire, it is hard to understand why these things happen. In the end, few people in the church today can ever fully know the reasons for these kinds of events. But Amos records five cases (4:6-11) where God himself planned and brought disasters on his people for a specific purpose. These verses emphasize that God was and still is sovereignly in control over nature (rain, wind, and heat), animals (locusts), and historical events (wars). These 'natural disasters' are really 'acts of God' that do not just happen by the chance blowing of high-pressure weather systems or accidental political mistakes. Believers need to see the presence of God's hand in the circumstances that surround them. This does not mean that every problem is caused by God, for Job 1-2 indicates that Satan is hard at work trying to tear down believers, and evil people have freedom to sin. Nevertheless, God can use evil deeds to bring glory to himself and growth in the hearts of his people. His purposes may sometimes be unknown, but his acts can be a means of bringing people to their knees." How are we to interpret positive or negative events? Does God personally punish us for our misdeeds? Does God bring bad things into your life in order to get your attention and have you return to Him? Are we to try to discern which bad things are from God and which are not?

4b. In *Nailed It: 365 Devotions for Angry or Worn-out People*, Anne Kennedy (p. 304) comments on Amos 3:6. Here are excerpts from Kennedy: "If a disaster falls upon a city, is God to blame? God certainly knew about it before the beginning of time. I, the modern reader, back slowly and uneasily away. God knowing the exact moment the bad thing was going to happen means he could have prevented it. This being so, it is not at all a wrong response, when a terrible thing happens, to immediately begin asking 'Why would God let this happen?' Everybody asks this. And they should, whether they believe in God or not. But, having asked the question, do not be

too caught up in looking for an answer. Really, what matters is how a person asks this question. When there's an earthquake, or a war, or the rising of the flood waters, you can cry out 'Why God!' either in anger and rage – which, unsurprisingly, is the wrong way – or you can fall on your face and ask it in humility and repentance and sorrow. Because everything that happens, both good and bad, is meant to turn you back to God, to make you walk closer to him, not have you run further away. Yes, you can know that he did it, that it's under his realm and that he's the one you should ask about it. But, make it a real ask, not an angry accusation." Discuss.

5. In a sermon on Amos, Tim Keller states that when we typically think of helping the poor, we think of charity. However, when God addressed helping the poor in Scripture (especially, but not only, in the OT prophets such as Amos), He refers to it in terms of justice. So, if we have resources and don't share, we think of it as "stingy", but God refers to it as "unjust". In the same sermon, Keller talks about passion for action toward justice as a sign that a person is saved by grace. If one knows that one is a sinner saved by grace, one will show a heart for and action on behalf of the poor (think Matthew 25:35-36: "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat . . . I needed clothes and you clothed me"). This is NOT to say that the way to a relationship with God is to do good things for the poor, instead it is to say that the way to tell if one has a relationship with God is to see if one has compassion and is doing something for the poor. Keller urges us to remember that we were poor and Jesus felt compassion on us and came to Earth to save us; He hates injustice so much that he came to the world to make injustice just. If we see and truly understand this, we'll do the same. Thoughts?

Bonus: In the same sermon on Amos, Tim Keller notes that in his famous "I have a dream" speech, MLK Jr quoted Amos 5:24 (NASB). Here is the quote from the speech, in context: "There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, 'When will you be satisfied?' We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their self-hood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating: 'For Whites Only'. We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until 'justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream'.