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Group Bible Study

The priority of any Bible study is to seek to understand what the Bible is saying to the people to whom it was first written as well as to understand it for our particular day and generation. So, the top priority is first to understand the text and then to make it meaningful and relevant. Here are some pointers to help you as you study the Bible:

PRAY: *our preparation for any Bible study should begin and end with prayer. We need to ask God, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to guide us as we read the Bible and prepare for a study.*

ASK: *in order to understand the Bible properly, we need to keep in mind six important questions:*

1. Who is speaking?

Everything in the Bible was written by men who were inspired by God. Though every writer of the Bible was inspired by God, sometimes the writers record words which come from the hearts of evil men. So, dealing with the question "Who is speaking?" will help us to know whether the words we are reading are words that we should obey today.

2. Who is spoken to?

We need to realise that not every command that comes in the Bible is a command for us today. For example, the command by God to Noah to build an ark is obviously pertinent and relevant for Noah, but not for us.

3. When is the Bible writer speaking?

In answering this question, we will need to make a distinction between those who are living under the law and those who live under the guidelines and principles as outlined to us in the New Testament, the way of Christ. Therefore, the principles we see with regards to worship in the Old Testament have a relevance to us, but we need to read them in the light of the New Testament. It is always important to bear in mind that one part of the Bible can often help us to understand another part.

4. What type of language is the writer using?

The languages used are usually one of two types: either literal or figurative. Sometimes both will be mixed together in one passage – for example, Jesus is spoken of as the Lamb of God, which is clearly a figurative form of speech. However, he is also described as the one who

takes away the sin of the world, which is literally true for those who believe. So, Jesus was not an actual lamb, but he was the one who became the offering for our sins.

5. What are the conditions or circumstances in which this writing is given?

If we can get to grips with the particular circumstances the writer is facing when he writes, it helps us to understand what he is saying.

6. What is the context of the Bible passage?

Think about what has just been said and what is about to be said in the particular book of the Bible, as well as the context of the Bible passage within the whole of the Bible.

The Bible is indeed God's inspired word – it is his revelation to all mankind. So, in order for us to understand the Bible we must seek to study it properly. Only then can we "*correctly handle the word of truth*". And if we keep these six simple questions in mind as we prepare our study, we will find that we can indeed get to grips with God's word.

PLAN

For those who are preparing and leading a study, the following steps should prove helpful:

1. Try to break the passage into parts or sections so that you can clearly divide up the passage you are looking at.

2. Think about what you don't understand in the passage and therefore what others might not understand as well. What parts do you need to gain more background and information about? Be ready to deal with puzzles that people will ask you about. So, for example, when studying John 3, people might ask 'What is the kingdom of God?', 'What is a Pharisee?'. These are obvious things that people might need to have some more information about.

3. Having broken the passage up into sections, we then come to thinking about questions. You can use the questions that are in this book. However, you may want to write your own, which is of course perfectly all right. Questions can be one of three types.

- A **Understanding.** The first type of question should be aimed at trying to draw out our understanding of what the passage is saying.
- B **Significance.** Only once we have begun to understand the passage can we move on to questions that try to highlight the significance of the passage in the light of the particular book or letter, and of course against the backdrop of the whole Bible.
- C **Application.** Then we move on to questions which apply to the situations we are facing today.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

- Do make use of clergy and commentaries and other Christians who have a maturity which you can rely upon when you are seeking to tackle Bible passages.
- It will sometimes prove helpful to have more than one translation as this will give you some fresh insights into the verses which you are focusing on.
- As we come to study the Bible we need to keep in mind that all the books of the Bible have one great theme: that is God's plan to save mankind from his sins through Jesus Christ.
- Fundamentally, make sure that whatever you do, you seek to do it to honour and glorify God.

Let us not forget:

*"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful
for teaching, rebuking, correcting and
training in righteousness,
so that the man of God may be
thoroughly equipped for every good work."*

2 Timothy 3:16-17.

Amos: The Roar of the Lion - Introduction

'The LORD roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem... The lion has roared—who will not fear? The sovereign LORD has spoken—who can but prophesy?' (Amos 1.2; 3.8)

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Mrs Beaver explains to Lucy about the lion, Aslan. 'If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most, or else just silly.' 'Then he isn't safe?' said Lucy. 'Safe?' said Mrs Beaver; 'don't you hear what Mrs Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he is good. He's the King, I tell you.' (p89).

In the prophecy of Amos, the Lion is the Sovereign Lord (1.2, 3.8). He is far from safe. He is the God of all creation, and of all history, and when he speaks he is to be feared. The message that he sends through his prophet Amos is a fearful message for his people who have been ignoring him, and neglecting his ways.

He isn't safe. But he is good. He's the King, I tell you. We would do well to listen.

Amos: Who, Where, When, What?

Who

Amos was one of the first of the 'writing prophets', who have their books at the back of our Old Testament. The first verse of Amos tells us that he was one of the shepherds of Tekoa, in northern Judah. The only other information we have about Amos himself is in 7.14-15, where he encounters Amaziah the priest: here, it is emphasized that Amos was not one of the 'professional' prophets, who were in it for the money, nor a 'prophet of peace', who told people what they wanted to hear—but he was taken by God himself, who sent him to preach his message to Israel.

Where

Amos lived at the time after God's people had been divided—into 'Israel' in the north, and 'Judah' in the south. He came from the northern part of Judah, near the border with Israel—and was called to preach (primarily) judgement to Israel, at their shrine at Bethel. This would not have been an enviable calling: Imagine, for example, an Englishman being sent over the border to tell the Scots that their sin would soon be judged...

At the time of Amos, both Israel and Judah were enjoying a time of prosperity, unparalleled since Solomon's day. The people assumed this was a blessing from the Lord! They looked forward to the anticipated 'Day of the Lord' with relish, expecting him to subdue their enemies. Amos was sent to correct this complete misunderstanding. In fact, Israel was under the Lord's curse, because they had neglected his covenant—the rich and powerful had amassed great wealth at the expense of the poor; their worship was sometimes more like pagan magic; there was no justice; and morality was at a low ebb—and there was no way that the Lord would allow this to continue unchecked. What the people imagined was the start of a new 'golden age' was actually the beginning of terminal decline. Amos went to warn them of the disaster that was coming their way, and that it was their own fault. He was proved right, just a few years later, as Israel was conquered by Assyria.

When

Amos 1.1 tells us that he prophesied during the reigns of Uzziah and Jeroboam. Both kings had long reigns, so Amos' ministry was some time in the first half of the eighth century BC. It says that his message is 'what he saw concerning Israel two years before the earthquake'. No one knows exactly when this earthquake happened, but this precise detail suggests that Amos delivered his message within a relatively short period of time.

What

The central character in the book of Amos is God. He is shown to be the God of history; the God of the whole of creation; and the God who speaks. The message is that *his justice is universal*. He will judge all the nations (1.2-2.5); but he will judge his own people too (2.6-9.10)—because of their favoured status, they would be held even more accountable than their neighbours.

The main thrust of Amos' message is towards the people of God. Although our situation is separated from that of Israel by thousands of years, we will find a real message for the church in what Amos had to say. We are the children of Abraham (Galatians 4.28), the circumcision (Philippians 3.3) and, indeed, the Israel of God (Galatians 6.16). While we will need to remember that our *context* is different to Amos' first hearers—especially in that we live after the death and resurrection of Jesus—*God himself does not change* (see Malachi 3.6 or Hebrews 13.8): we have much to learn of the things which please him, or

displease him. There are three particular warnings, which we will find recurring in Amos message:

1. In an world where we are easily impressed by status and by 'success', there is a stark reminder that privilege brings danger: those who have been called by God must not rest on their laurels and feel superior—but must take care to remember that ours is not a privilege that has been earned, but one which has been given generously. 'From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded' (Luke 12.48). We can probably all think of examples of churches falling away from God's ways by ignoring his words and his commands—and we need to be constantly careful to avoid falling into this trap ourselves. 'You only have I chosen from all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins' (Amos 3.2).

2. The Lord is after commitment, not history: It is no good for a sportsman to live on past glories, and expect to keep on getting picked for the team when he is no longer at his best. So, for the Christian, it is no good depending on what happened in the past, when God is calling for continued commitment to himself that is visible not only in worship but in lifestyle. 'Hate evil, love good...' (5.15); 'Away with the noise of your songs... but let justice roll on like a river...' (5.23-24).

3. God looks for true religion, which means hearing and receiving God's Word; and living lives of honesty, personal morality, and concern for the needy. Sunday religion is not enough: in fact, on its own, it is useless, dangerous, and repulsive to God. Amos forces us to think about not only what happens when we meet together, but about what happens when we exit the church door and go our separate ways.

So, the message of Amos is quite fearsome. It contains the roar of the Lion of Judah, who will one day pronounce judgement on history. It was hard for the prosperous Israelites to imagine that they would be judged like this, and, when the Assyrians came in 722BC, they were unprepared, and destroyed. And it is hard for many people in our own day, particularly in a country like Britain which, despite the credit crunch, remains full of comfort and wealth, to imagine that we will one day be called to account. The eighth century BC is not quite so distant, after all.

And, as we shall see, it ends with a glimpse of hope (9.11-15)... a hint of the great salvation that the Lord had in mind, even as he warned of the

danger that was facing the people of Israel. 'In the day I will restore David's tent. I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be.' (Amos 9.11). The Lion of Judah is Jesus—who is the lamb who sits on the throne (Revelation 5.5-6).

Helpful Books

There are many commentaries on Amos. Here are a couple of suggestions...

The best place to start would probably be with a good study Bible such as the *NIV Study Bible* or the *ESV Study Bible*; or with the section on Amos in the *New Bible Commentary*.

Alec Motyer, *The Message of Amos* (IVP 1974, The Bible Speaks Today series).

Really good basic introduction to the book—highly recommended for planning to lead studies.

Bob Fyall, *Teaching Amos* (Proclamation Trust/ Christian Focus Publications, 2006).

This is primarily a preacher's guide, but it is really clear and concise, and not too long. I've used Fyall's suggestions for dividing up Amos into seven studies.

David Allan Hubbard, *Joel and Amos* (IVP, Tyndale Commentaries, 1989)

This one gives a bit more detail on theology and other technical stuff, if you want to go a bit deeper.

Study One: The Awesome God

Amos 1.1-2.16

'Everyone has a right to their own opinion', as we are so often told. And most people have their own opinion about God; and much of it is not complimentary. But as we read through Amos in the coming weeks, and particularly in this first study, we will find this question turned around. The people of Israel, 2750 years ago; and the people of the world today, had opinions about God. But the question that matters is this: What does *God* think about *you*?

When I lived in South Africa, there seemed to be at least one story each year of some tourists who had decided to get out of their car in the middle of a game park. Sometimes they would survive, and sometimes they would not. Lions are highly dangerous, powerful animals—you don't just go strolling up to one to give it a pat. Amos' prophecy begins with the terrifying words, 'The Lord roars from Zion, and thunders from Jerusalem' (1.2). And after his prophecy against the nations of the world is recorded, Amos says, 'The Lion has roared. Who will not fear?' (3.8). God is no lion behind the bars of a zoo—but a free, roaring lion, who is on the attack in these verses.

Amos chapters 1-2 is a brilliant speech, well-crafted and full of great rhetoric. It starts off from 1.3 with the Lord's judgment on Israel's neighbours. These are the places which surround Israel: Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab. They are Israel's enemies. It's a reminder that the Lord is the ruler and judge of the *whole* world, including those peoples who don't acknowledge him.

No doubt Amos' hearers would have cheered every new judgement that they heard. God's judging Damascus? Hooray! Gaza? Serves them right! It would have reinforced their complacent idea that all was well, that God was on their side—now, look, he's starting to deal with our enemies.

They would probably have continued to cheer with the judgement on Judah, in 2.4. Judah? Those arrogant southerners, who think they've got it all, just because they have Jerusalem and the temple! Ha! What do they know? Now God is judging them too. Hooray, again!

But even then, Amos isn't quite finished. The people of Israel are about to get the shock of their lives. Imagine going to a public execution—there's a group of criminals about to be hanged, and a crowd has gathered to watch. Everyone cheers as each name is read out, and a new man is led to the gallows. There's a pause... and then the next name is read out: and it's yours! It's hard to overestimate the horror and anger at what Amos was saying, as he turned to Israel itself.

So, our passage has two main parts to its description of God's judgment: **Judgment on the world**; and **Judgment on God's people**.

Judgment on the world.

How comfortable are you with the idea of a God who judges? It's not a popular idea today. 'It's not fair', people say. 'Surely a good God would give people a chance.' The point here is that God *has* given all these people a chance—many chances, in fact. 'For three sins of Edom, even for four...' (1.9) etc. We are reminded in these verses of two key things about God's character—he is a God of mercy, and a God of judgement. They are not opposites: his lion's roar of judgement comes only after a long time when he has waited, patiently, mercifully, for people to stop their sin and turn to his ways.

Notice the emphasis again and again, that this is not just Amos making wild predictions—no, this is God himself, with his uncomfortable message: 'This is what the Lord says...' (1.3,6,9,11,13 etc). In fact, there is a pattern to each of the judgements in these two chapters: first, there is the affirmation that this is God speaking; second, the reasons for his anger, and the comprehensive nature of the sin in each country 'for three sins... even for four'; third, the punishment; and then another reminder that this comes from God himself.

And when we look at the crimes of these nations, they are not only pretty sickening, but horrifyingly familiar. What does 'threshing Gilead with sledges of iron teeth' (1.3) involve? Cruelty? Torture? Laying waste? Then there's selling people as slaves—including women and children (1.6). Going back on international treaties (1.9). Violence out of control (1.11). And with Ammon, and Moab, it's just plain disgusting.

Thank goodness the world is not like that today... Except that this is all too familiar, isn't it? Talk to the people of Rwanda, Sudan, Afghanistan, Burma—to prisoners, to refugees, to countries who ignore international

laws. Amos 1 and 2 is a wake-up call to anyone who wants to believe the Star Trek myth—that the human race is inexorably getting better, making progress, working towards a freer world of peace and harmony. As someone has said, the doctrine of original sin is the only philosophy that is validated by each and every century of human history.

If you've ever watched the news and wondered what God is doing about all the awful suffering and cruelty, Amos points to the answer. God *does* see. He *is* watching. In his mercy, he is waiting—but for three sins, even for four, he will not turn back his wrath. He *will* take action. Right and wrong *do* matter to him, the God of justice. Of course, as Christians, this reminds us that in his mercy, he came to earth himself to take the full force of his own judgement, and to bring peace. But this only makes the call to the nations to acknowledge him the more urgent.

Judgement on God's People.

What is at the root of all the things we do wrong—of all the mistakes we make? It is also at the root of God's judgement on his own people: on Judah, and on Israel. What has Judah done wrong? 'They have rejected the law of the Lord and have not kept his decrees.' (2.4). They had the greatest of privileges—God had revealed himself to them—and they had ignored him, wilfully. They decided that, actually, they would rather make their own decisions instead of listening to God's. What a challenge for the church! How easy it is for us to stand in judgement over God's Word, instead of living in obedience to what he has said.

And then, in 2.6-12, which is worth studying carefully, we find Israel. Amos reminds them of all that the Lord has done for them—and of the ways in which they have just ignored him. Many of the things that are listed in verses 6-12 are specifically governed by Israel's laws, which have just been ignored. See, for example, Exodus 21.1-7 (slavery), Exodus 21.9 (the rights of a concubine), Exodus 22.26 (garments taken in pledge), Deuteronomy 16.18-20 (judicial impartiality). Our God simply hates all of this injustice—we'll pick up more on this theme in later chapters.

Their lives were full of evil—and they preferred to listen to the voice of culture rather than the voice of God: 'You have commanded the prophets not to prophesy' (2.12), is kind of like saying, 'Shut up God, we don't want to hear it.'

Study Questions

1. What sort of picture of God are we given in 1.2? How do we relate and reconcile this with our images of Jesus?
2. Make a list of the reasons for God's anger with Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab (perhaps by dividing up the group). What do we learn here about the kinds of things that the Lord hates? What might God have to say to the nations today? Where might his anger be directed? How would Britain fare against the roar of the lion?
3. If God is the Lord of all the nations, how do these chapters give us authority for mission?
4. Read 2.4-12 again. What had God done for his people in the past? How had they reacted? What has he done for *us*? Are our lives a better response than those of the people of Israel? How can we make sure that we take the social and ethical implications of the gospel seriously?
5. The people of Israel would have been shocked at their inclusion in God's coming judgement, described in 2.13-16. How seriously do we take the reality of God's judgement of the lives we live? How might we live differently if we did take it seriously?
6. Amos 1 and 2 may feel unremittably depressing! But what aspects of these chapters remind us to be thankful for Christ, who is the Lion of Judah and the lamb who was slain? (this is a good question to keep asking as we study Amos).

Study Two: If God is against us...

Amos 3.1-15

Romans 8.31 has famously encouraged Christians down the ages: 'If God is for us, who can be against us?' In Amos 3.1, we get the depressing reverse: What if God is against us?

We all hate things that are not fair, don't we? The child who is told to go to bed early says 'it's not fair!' The cricketer who is given out caught behind when the ball only flicked his pad feels the same (but can't say anything, of course!). More seriously, the inmate who didn't do the crime, or the family whose son has been murdered, cry out for justice.

Amos 3 is the beginning of several chapters of judgement against Israel. God knows that the people thought they were alright, they'd done nothing wrong, and they had nothing to fear. But he makes it clear, through his prophet, that his judgement is entirely **fair** (1-2), as well as being **inevitable** (3-8), and **all-encompassing** (9-15).

Fair

The gifts that God gives to us are not simply there for us to say, 'thanks very much', and sit back complacently. We are to respond to his great salvation by turning our whole lives towards him. This is what Israel has not done. The people have not seen that much is expected of them to whom so much was given. The second half of v2 is really striking—it's not what we expect after the first part of the verse. But it says—'look, it's fair—you were chosen, and you've responded by ignoring my ways' (as we saw in the last study)—'so it's only right that you face the music now.'

Inevitable

Verses 3-8 are full of warning to repent—and imagery that points to the inevitability of the Lord's judgment. There is a pause between warning and judgment in each of verses 4, 5 and 6. When the lion roars, he hasn't caught his prey yet—but he is about to: we know who the lion is by now; and, 'when he growls in his den', it's too late! Better listen to the roar and react, fast. The Lord's threats are not idle.

In v5, if there's nothing to catch, does a trap spring? Of course not—again, the warning is clear—if you get caught, it's because you've done something to spring the trap!

And in v6, the sound of a trumpet is a warning that a city is under attack. And then a reminder that, when the city falls, it's God who is behind it—he is sovereign.

V3 seems odd and incomplete compared to 4, 5 and 6. Where is its second half? The 'two walking together' are Israel and the Lord, in their special relationship. The fact that the next three verses move from warning of disaster to its actual coming suggest that this is also what will happen to Israel in her relationship with God—unless her response is immediate, and radical. Verses 7-8 give the answer: the lion has roared, the Lord has revealed his plan. Shout it out now, with trembling!

As in the first study, we find an unexpected call to mission in the midst of these Old Testament words of judgement. If God has revealed the inevitability of his coming judgement to his people—that's us—as he has, in Christ: are we not trembling at its seriousness? And are we not 'prophesying'? i.e. urgently passing on the warning?

All-encompassing

'It's a good story, there's only three things wrong with it: the beginning, the middle and the end.' So goes the comprehensive slating of an author's piece of work. And the slating of Israel's behaviour is similarly all-encompassing in verses 9-15: 'Your relationships have broken down, there's no evidence of holiness, and you're worship's rubbish'—that's about the size of it! Verses 9-10 describe the breakdown in relationships in Israel; in 11-12, at least a piece of an ear can be recognised as belonging to a sheep—but all there is in Israel is the evidence of luxury and complacency, couches and beds—where is their holiness as the people of God? And in 13-15, the places of worship are a disgrace, full of empty rituals that make no difference to life.

[Ashdod and Egypt are two of Israel's historical enemies—the picture in v9 is of the people there looking over Samaria (Israel's capital) and being shocked at the behaviour of God's own people.]

Study Questions

1. Read v1-2. What kind of privileges do we have as God's people? What kind of responsibilities?
2. Read v3-6. How would it affect our lives if we took seriously the idea that it really is the Lord who is at work behind all of history?
3. Read v7-8. God revealed his judgement in advance to Israel. What two responses are appropriate (v8)? What has God revealed to us about his plans for his people and for the world now? What should our responses be?
4. Read v9-15. Israel were judged for their broken and oppressive relationships, their worldliness and their empty worship which was little more than ritual. How does this judgement challenge the church today?
5. Israel has lost its distinctiveness as God's people. Is the church distinctive in our society today, or compromised? Where does this challenge hit home for us most? In what areas are we most in danger?
6. If we are called to announce God's judgement today, how do we make sure we don't slip from his judgement to our own judgementalism (bearing in mind the popularity of slinging Matthew 7.1 at Christians).

Study Three: Prepare to meet your God

Amos 4.1-13

We like to put notices on church notice boards. Things like 'Jesus Christ is risen: Worship him here.' How about taking a different approach: 'Come to church this Sunday and SIN!' I wonder how you would feel about having *that* emblazoned on our notice board.

The people of Israel may have been immoral and complacent in their lifestyle, but they made sure they kept up the worship rituals at their shrines, like Bethel and Gilgal—but they were just paying lip-service to the Lord, and no more. And he saw straight through them. With another of his great rhetorical flourishes (following 2.6, and 3.2, for example), Amos does it again in 4.4, and sends the shock levels through the roof. 'Go to Bethel and...' what? Go to Bethel and make sure you've covered your back with God? Go to Gilgal and make a sacrifice to the Lord? No! 'Go to Bethel and sin; go to Gilgal and sin yet more...'

It's safe to say he would have had a few hecklers to deal with in his ministry—it was no easy job!

The useless worship of the Israelites is highlighted in v4-5. Why is it useless? They bring their sacrifices and their offerings—and then they brag and boast about them! These are also the same people who have shown no care for the needy—you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy, and say to your husbands, "Bring us some drinks!" (v1); and people who, in v6-11, have simply failed to see what the Lord has been doing amongst them.

The whole chapter leads up to verses 12 and 13. The people may not have met with God—but he is coming to meet with them (12); and v13 is an example of true worship, recognising God for who he is, as opposed to the false worship the people have been offering him.

One way of understanding the chapter as a whole would be to look at the different ways in which Israel had failed the Lord:

1. **A failure of compassion** (1-3)

Bashan was a rich area of Israel, full of cattle; where the self-indulgent rich ignored the needs of the poor. The warning here is of the danger of self-centredness. Indulgence and oppression are two sides of the same

coin—where people are only concerned with their own wants and comforts, they will have no time for others. *There is a warning here for us about what to avoid; and also a clue about how are priorities ought to be ordered instead!*

V2-3 outline the severe punishment that is coming to these selfish people, as they are led into exile. This kind of oppression will not prosper for ever in God's world. He swears this 'by his holiness' (v2): this is no angry rant from Amos, but a clear message of God's view of the situation.

2. **A failure of worship** (4-5)

What was wrong with their worship? Three things, at least. First, it was more about praising themselves than praising God, as they bragged and boasted, looking for glory in what they were doing. We must not miss the impact of this today, in a culture where image and presentation is everything, and the temptation is to want to make everything we do as 'attractive' as possible. Fyall notes, 'Reading advertisements in church newspapers for ministers, it would seem that every church in the land is friendly, supportive and eager to move forward in mission. Why then is contemporary Britain such a spiritual wasteland?' (p72)

The second thing wrong with their worship was that it ignored God's Word—they 'burned leavened bread as a thank offering'—ignoring what God has said in Leviticus 2.11 and 7.11-14.

And thirdly, their worship was 'self-satisfying rather than God-glorifying' (Fyall again, p72): '...for this is what you love to do, says the LORD.' Again, we face the challenge, as we ask ourselves how much of our preferences in worship are about pleasing ourselves, and doing things which we enjoy. *It would be a useful exercise to examine our own attitudes and practices in worship in the light of what displeased the Lord here.*

3. **A failure to see God at work** (6-11)

In this section, the Lord reminds his people of all that he has done in their sight—that *it was him* who provides food, who sends or withholds rain; him who is Lord over all aspects of creation—sickness, famine, war: yet in all these things, the people haven't even recognised him at work. Repeatedly, 'yet you have not returned to me, declares the LORD.'

Amos' point is that each one of these 'natural' events is there as a reminder to the people to return to the Lord—his judgements are not pointless. But the people of God have gone so far downhill that they are

unrecognisable as his—they are compared with Egypt, who defied the Lord, and with Sodom and Gomorrah, famous for their evil behaviour.

The Lord is a God who is committed to his people—his judgements are there to bring repentance—he wants the relationship restored, to snatch the burning stick from the fire (v11).

Of course, Britain cannot be compared to Israel in one sense—we are not the chosen nation of God. But think of the privileges we have enjoyed for so long: there is so much to thank God for. What would he say to us now?

And so, because of all these things, in v12-13 it is a fearful thing for Israel to have to prepare to meet the God they have tried to ignore for so long. Look at v13—his almighty greatness cannot be ignored forever.

Study Questions

1. This is a chapter full of righteous condemnation. But what is the positive picture we can form from it by implication? What does God look for in terms of his people's attitudes, towards themselves, towards others, and towards him? Do our priorities need to change at all?

2. What might the Lord have to say about our corporate worship in Moulton? Would he be complementary? What about our individual attitudes as we come to worship? How can we ensure that we do not 'Come to church and sin'?

3. Clearly v6-11 are not a mandate for us to assume that everything that happens in the world today is the result of a direct intervention from God. But what sort of reminders do we see every day of the fact that the Lord is still at work in the midst of his creation—and how should we react?

4. The refrain, 'yet you have not returned to me' (in 6-11) is reminiscent of the response of the wicked tenants to the landowners servants in Jesus' parable of in Matthew 21.33-44. What are the consequences of continuing to reject God's messengers, and ultimately his son? How do these passages in Amos and Matthew help us to understand that the Lord is *both* a God of judgement and of mercy?

How prepared were the Israelites to meet the Lord (v12)? How do you feel about preparing to meet him? (and how does this reinforce the value of our Christian faith?)

5. How does this chapter enlarge our picture of God (especially in v12-13, but elsewhere too)? Turn your reflections into praise and worship!

Study Four: Stop being religious!

Amos 5.1-27

Have you ever imagined what your own funeral will be like? I know that might sound a bit morbid—but imagine if you could actually be a spectator at your own funeral—what a strange experience, to watch, and hear, all that is going on! That is pretty much what is happening in the opening verses of Amos 5—Amos is giving Israel a glimpse into her own future, as he sings her funeral lament.

Sometimes it is claimed that Amos is an angry book. But a more accurate description would be that it is a *sad* book. From chapter 3 onwards, the focus is not so much on God's judgement itself, but on the *explanation* of his judgement—it's a desperate warning from the Lord who loves his people so much, and hates to be rejected by them. Israel's confidence is falsely placed in its worship practices—but they are simply playing at meetings, while their accompanying lifestyle lacks reverence for God and his word, lacks compassion, and has become detached from the real world.

So, in v1-3, Amos laments for the death of Israel (remember, he was doing this at a time when Israel was still prosperous—he must have felt pretty exposed and mocked as he faithfully passed on God's word while, no doubt, people laughed at him); and in v16-17 he describes the awful scene at the funeral itself.

At the centre of the chapter, and, in many ways, of the book of Amos, lies the warning about 'The Day of the Lord' (18-20). In Israel's mind, this was something to look forward to: they assumed a time was coming when the other nations would be defeated, but they would be fine, because *they were God's people*. Amos is there to remind them that the coming of the Lord is a terrible thing if you are not prepared. For disobedient and unfaithful Israel, the Day of the Lord meant exile to Assyria; but it also prefigures the final Day of the Lord, when the whole of his creation will stand before him to face his judgement.

The two big themes of the chapter are ***the true worship of God*** and ***the justice that flows from it***.

'Seek the Lord and live' (v6) says Amos—the shock is that it's not at shrines like Bethel and Gilgal where he may be found—Israel's worship there was empty, as we saw in chapter 4. Real evidence of seeking the Lord must be seen in the lives of his people, and their sense of justice—but look at the litany of disaster in v10-13, which ignores the compassionate laws that God had previously given his people.

What Amos said was shocking—that the people must seek the Lord, but that he was not to be found in their religion, which was empty. The answer comes in v14—God can only be found by seeking good, and maintaining justice. Without accompanying justice in public life (in 'the courts'—the commercial, social, and judicial life of the country), the worship had no value.

Verses 21-25 are a comprehensive and detailed rejection by God of the people's religious practice. This is not because it was idolatry—the worship that is described is exactly what was expected of Israel, i.e. praise and prayer, festivals and sacrifices. Instead, it's a rejection of any worship when the worshippers are completely failing to live by the standards of the covenant.

We should note that he is not criticising their 'sincerity', or saying that 'their hearts were wrong' as they worshipped. Amos is not vague like that, he is specific—it is their *lives* which are wrong. Orthodox worship is unacceptable to God when the worshippers simply walk out of the door and deny him by their lifestyle. A real understanding of who God is and what he is like cannot leave his people unchanged—if it does, they haven't really 'got it'.

In v26, though, there is a hint that, in places at least, Israel was actually beginning to worship other gods too. 'The gods of Assyria occupied the hearts of Israel long before the armies of Assyria occupied its streets and towns' (Motyer, 136). If we start to give in to the priorities of our culture, there is a clear danger that we will soon be overrun by it, as Israel would be a few short years later—as v27 makes clear, Assyrian religion will take you to Assyria.

In summary, Israel was more concerned with the external correctness of its worship, than with its object and focus. So it was natural that this turned out not to be worship of the Lord at all. They began to worship

other gods—and this was clear for all to see in the corrupt life of the nation.

Study Questions

1. What should we learn from Israel's complacency about the coming Day of the Lord, in v21-25? What does it mean for us to 'keep watch', as in Matthew 24.42-44, when Jesus speaks of another Day of the Lord?

2. In the middle of his judgement against Israel, Amos breaks off to praise the Lord who is sovereign (8-9), and the contrast is striking! What do we learn about God in these verses?

3. Verses like v3 and v15 contain hints of hope. What are they? What does this tell us about the accuracy and fairness of God's justice? How can we hold on to such hope?

4. The people of Israel spoke and acted in God's name, but their lives and relationships were inconsistent with his holiness. What does real seeking of the Lord look like in practice (also in the light of what Jesus said in Matthew 7.21-23?) Do our lives show evidence that we are people who seek the Lord?

5. 'Away with the noise of your songs!... But let justice roll on like a river...' (23-24). This was a common concern for the prophets: look up Hosea 6.6, Micah 6.7, 1 Samuel 15.22; and also Matthew 23.23. What might it look like for Christians like us to combine a desire for true worship of our living God with a thirst for his justice? How seriously do we take the call for God's people to live lives which proclaim his sense of compassion and justice? What might this look like in practice?

6. Israel were obsessed with the externals of worship, but failed to focus on its object. What are the externals of religion that Christians can become focused on at the expense of remaining clear about the true God whom we worship?

Study Five: Stop being complacent (or Where is your security?)

Amos 6.1-14

One for the Star Wars fans out there. When the rebels gather to mount their attack on the imperial forces (in the original film), what hope do they have? They are few, and their enemy is mighty. But their enemy has a weakness—the imperial ships might be able to outgun and outrun the rebel fleet; and the Death Star appears almighty and impregnable—but all of this leads to *complacency*: after all, how can they lose? And by the time the flaw is identified, it is too late: Red Five is on his way in and the Death Star is doomed...

Amos 6 is about *complacency*, and about where we put our *security*. In the eighth century BC, Israel was a complacent place. We've already seen how their religion was a sham. Here we see where they think their security lies, and it's not in the Lord. It's in their *military success* (v1-2, 13); and in their *material prosperity* (4-7). And it's all going to come crashing down.

Military success

'Woe to you who are complacent in Zion, and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria' (v1). The recent successes under Jeroboam II (in 2 Kings 14.23-25) had led to a sense of safety. The secure borders of Israel had led to the people believing in their own myths, that they could survive all on their own. That were forgetting that they were 'the foremost nation'— i.e. the people chosen by God, and so they ought to be depending humbly on him, not on themselves. Their complacency made them blind to the quietly growing threat from Assyria (see v14!).

The challenge for the church comes when we remember how easy it is for *us* to judge our strength and security according to human standards. What makes a successful church? Is it one with plush facilities, a successful programme, and impressive leaders? Or is it something altogether less attractive, by human standards at least?

For Israel, their complacency will be followed by a 'reign of terror' (v3).

Material prosperity

If it wasn't so terrible, we could almost laugh at Amos' descriptions of Israel's excess and self-satisfaction, in v4-7: 'You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches... You strum away on your harps... You drink wine by the bowlful...' It's a picture of careless hedonism, a kingdom that has lost the plot and will soon be in big trouble (v7).

The reference to David is ironic though—they thought that they could be like Israel's great king, just by playing his instrument. In a country with many who were poor, the rich and powerful enjoy lavish lifestyles, and simply don't care. Their complacency makes them blind. And it remains true that there is danger for anyone who loses touch with the Living God who has spoken through his Word.

The Coming Judgement

But in v8-14, the coming judgement is announced—a complete reversal of all that the relaxed, complacent Israelite elite was expecting. The fact that both the message and the disaster come from the Lord himself is emphasised (v8)—and the contrast between the luxury of 4-6 and the devastation of 9-11 is terrible. Finally, in v11-14, the coming invasion is declared.

Study Questions

1. What kinds of attitudes are described in v1-6 (and 13)? What do these verses tell us about the priorities of the people in Israel?
2. What can we learn about the character of God from v8-14?
3. The people of Amos' day put their trust in their own strength—and lived lives that were little different to the people of nations that didn't know the Lord. What dangers are there for Christians today to get sucked in to a culture of hedonism and self-satisfaction? Where might this lead? How would *our* contemporaries *notice* that we are different, because we trust in the Living God?
4. Where *should* Israel's security have been? Contrast the complacency of Israel with the source of security for the man of God in Psalm 1.1-3. (We might also consider the contrast in Matthew 7.24-27). How can we ensure that our foundations are secure, and our roots are watered (to mix the two metaphors!)?
5. How can we avoid judging the success of the church according to human standards? In what areas might we need to avoid becoming complacent about our own success and security?

Study Six: Seeing things as they really are

Amos 7.1-8.14

[This is a long passage. If we had had an extra week in home groups, this would have been two studies. It's worth reading through the whole lot so we don't lose the flow of all that Amos has to say. However, for the sake of manageability, it may be better to focus the study itself primarily on chapter 7.]

In a wealthy and prosperous society, it is easy to imagine that there is no danger; easy to pretend that what we can see is all that there is. 'There's probably no God: now stop worrying and enjoy your life', as the atheist bus campaign in London recently declared. In Israel, it wasn't that the people thought there was *no* God—but that they underestimated him, ignored his holiness and his laws, forgot their promises to be his people, and relied on their own cleverness and success.

The last three chapters of Amos are a little different—they are full of *visions*—things that Amos saw, that were revealed to him by the Lord in pictures. And like other parts of the Bible where visions are recorded, these visions give us a glimpse of *what is really happening* in the universe. Chapter 7 gets us to ask two questions:

Who is really in control? (7.1-9)

There are several things to note here:

'This is what the Sovereign LORD showed me.' (1,4,7). These judgements, of locusts, of fire, and by plumb-line, are all sent by God—they are under his control.

It seems strange at first that the locusts and fire 'will not happen', because 'the LORD relented', but that there is no such escape from the third vision of judgement. But there is a difference—the first two judgements are visions of total destruction (look at v2a and 4!). Why does the LORD relent? He is saying that judgement is clearly coming—we have seen that often in Amos—but *nothing on earth will be allowed to completely wipe out his people*. This is the same God who promised Abraham that *all* nations would be blessed *through his people*; the same God who promised King David that his descendents would sit on the throne *forever*. If Israel were obliterated, God would have broken these promises.

When the third judgement comes, Amos does not protest (v7-9). A plumb-line is a measure according to which God will judge. It is not indiscriminate, like locusts, or fire—only the crooked walls get knocked down. What we have in these verses is a picture of a holy God who judges because he is true to his character and his promises; but because he is like this, his judgement will be fair, and he will not forget his determination to save his people, and to save the world through them. We can begin to see here how God can be both merciful and just at the same time—and, from this side of the BC/AD divide, we can see another glimpse of Christ, who would enable all of this to be worked out.

It's also amazing how bold Amos is in prayer in this passage—begging God to relent—but then keeping quiet in v7-9. It's worth considering how Amos knows what to pray, and when to pray; and also how God chooses not to work alone, but also through the prayers of his people.

Who speaks the truth? (7.10-17)

It's not easy to hear the truth when our society is full of people who don't believe it. It's even harder to stand firm when it makes us stand out, and opens us up to ridicule. That's what Amos had to do.

The second half of chapter 7 contrasts one who will listen to, and speak the truth (Amos) even when it's costly, with one who will not (Amaziah). You may remember that one of the shrines that God hated so much was at Bethel—Amaziah was its priest, and he had a vested interest in rejecting Amos' message of judgement!

He is basically telling Amos to shut up and go home. But Amos just tells him, 'look, it wasn't my idea—I was just a shepherd—but the LORD took me...' And so he faithfully sticks to his guns.

It's painful to speak out a message that people don't want to hear. And even more so to do it in a place where it will cause the most anger. 'Don't prophesy at Bethel! Go and do it somewhere else!' That's what Amaziah is saying to Amos. But, as the property programmes always tell us, location does matter! It's far more effective and poignant for Amos to take his message to the place where it needs to be heard. And *we need to be out there in the world too*, with the message that God has given us—the gospel, which is a bit like Amos' message—it's full of judgement, and it's full of mercy (because our hope is in the only person who could

really stand up straight against the plumb-line: Jesus). It's no good just coming to church to talk about Jesus, is it? Most people won't hear—particularly the people who most need to.

A famine of the Word of God (chapter 8)

Here, the coming judgement is vividly shown in the picture of Israel as a basket of fruit ripe for eating. Verses 4-6 describe an awful parody of life in God's presence, under his rule. With God at the centre of life, everything else falls into place—relationships, work, leisure; but with God ignored, worship becomes a drag, and common life is characterised by oppression and injustice, as we've seen in earlier chapters.

The results are shown in v7-14. The people will be held accountable for what they have done. This time, there is a terrible added element, though, in v11-14. The culmination of the judgement will be a *famine of the Word of God*. Continual rejection of what God says, results in the withdrawal of his Word: and the people will be left desperate for it.

Study Questions

1. What does it mean for God to be the 'Sovereign LORD' (v1,4,7).
2. What is the difference between judgement by plumb-line and judgement by fire or locusts (1-9)? What is the plumb-line, or measure, against which people will still be judged? How can we be sure that we will not be a crooked wall when we stand before the Lord?
3. What can we learn about prayer from the way in which Amos prays in v2 and v5—and how he keeps quiet in v8-9? Jesus told his disciples 'I will do whatever you ask in my name' (John 14.13); how does Amos model this approach to prayer, and how can we imitate him, and obey Jesus, in our prayer lives?
4. Amos was not a trained prophet—he was a shepherd, taken by God and used to proclaim his message. What kind of challenge is this to us, particularly those of us who feel that we are 'ordinary'?
5. In what sense are we called to be prophets today? What is our message? How is it similar/ different to what Amos was sent to say? Where do we need to take it? What are the challenges we might face in doing this?
6. Amaziah didn't want to listen to what God said (7.16,17). What about us? Are we also good at filtering out the messages we don't want to hear? What parts of God's Word do you find difficult to accept? When have you actually had to change something about your life because of what God has said?
7. A 'famine of hearing the words of the LORD' is a terrible thing. Do we take the privilege of feeding on the Word of God for granted? Is there any danger of famine today? How can we make sure that we are not left hungry and starving?

Study seven: Through judgement to hope

Amos 9.1-15

When he was in office, President Roosevelt apparently had a little ritual for times when the affairs of state were weighing heavily upon him. He would go out onto the White House lawn with a friend last thing at night. There, looking up into the night sky, he would identify a small, hazy patch of light near the lower left-hand corner of the Great Square of Pegasus, and he would say, 'There is the spiral galaxy of Andromeda, as large as the Milky Way. It is one of 100 million galaxies. It is 100 million light years away, and it contains 100 million stars, each as large as our sun, or larger.' And then he would add, 'Now I think we feel small enough. Let's turn in.'

Reflecting on the greatness and majesty of our creator God should give us an even greater sense of reality and perspective on life. And that is what we find ourselves doing in this final chapter of Amos, in which the prophet sees a vision of God himself standing to judge; in which we are shown a little more of what God is like (5-6); and which closes with a reminder that he is the *God who speaks*, the *Lord of history*, and the *Lord of creation* (11-15).

It makes most sense to study the passage in two halves, *judgement* and *hope*, although the two turn out to be closely connected. (Although some have suggested that the last five verses can't have been part of Amos' original message because they are so much more hopeful, this shows a lack of understanding of how God is faithful in bringing new hope *through* judgement—because he is righteous and just, his people have a certain hope that he will not forget his promises).

Judgement (1-10)

You can run, but you can't hide (1-4). This section is full of approaching menace, and reads like the script for a movie trailer; you can imagine it being read by James Earl Jones. The point from chapter 7 is reinforced, that God's judgement is inescapable and inevitable—he hasn't abandoned his world and exited stage left, just leaving people to get on with whatever they want to do. He *will* judge. The question for Israel, and for people today is, what are they going to do about it? What, indeed, are we going to do about it? The worst thing is just to bury our heads in the sand.

No diplomatic immunity (5-8)

The people of Israel thought they would be safe because they were God's chosen people, they were the ones with the right religion—and this is a challenge for Christians too. But look where God is standing in v1—right by the altar, in the place at the heart of their religious worship, bringing judgement. Being religious will not help them. There are warnings here for any people who have created impressive buildings, or other outward trappings of religion, and started to believe in *them*, rather than fearing God himself.

Verses 5 and 6 remind us of God's greatness, and should ensure a more healthy perspective—wishful thinking is washed away in the face of the reality of the LORD Almighty. There is no diplomatic or religious immunity—not even for God's chosen people. V7 would have been pretty shocking—he guides *all* the nations, not just Israel—and his own people are not exempt from his judgement (remember Amos 3.2). And for us too, it's a timely warning not to rest on our laurels; it's no good for me to simply look back at the time when I became a Christian, and think that I don't need to hear Jesus and obey him *now*.

A careful judgement (8b-10)

The shafts of light start to break through the clouds at the end of v8: '...yet I will not totally destroy...' There is hope for a faithful remnant. As we saw with the plumb-line in chapter 7, God will not destroy indiscriminately, but will make a distinction between those who are found guilty and those who are not—he will 'sieve' the house of Israel. There is an unspoken question implied here, though—how will anyone avoid being found to be one of the 'sinners' (v10)?

You may have heard of the general in the American civil war, whose famous last words, as he popped his head out from behind the barricades, were apparently, 'They couldn't hit an elephant at this dist...' Once again, v10 warns the *complacent*—those who think they are fine just because of their religion or their nationality: '...those who say, "Disaster will not overtake or meet us"'.

Hope (11-15)

There hasn't been a lot of obvious hope in Amos, has there, at least on the surface? Mostly judgement. And throughout the book, there is a growing sense of this judgement being inevitable. Israel were called to

be God's people, and he made a covenant with them—but, since they have failed to stick to the covenant and failed to live according to God's laws, it's not surprising that judgement is coming. This, after all, is what God promised would happen way back in Deuteronomy 28. *But this is actually great news!* It might not sound like it, but it shows that God is always faithful to what he has promised—and so he will also surely stick to the first promise he made, back in Genesis 12, when he said to Abraham, 'I will bless you', and 'you will be a blessing', and 'all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.' The assurance of God's faithfulness in judgement brings with it an assurance of God's faithfulness in salvation too.

Hope for the nations (11-12)

These verses may sound familiar, as they are quoted by the apostle James in Acts 15 as evidence that salvation in Jesus is for everyone, whether they are Jewish or not. And even as Amos looks ahead to a terrible time of judgement, he can see beyond it to the great salvation that will come out of it... 'and all the nations that bear my name...'

Hope eternal (13-15)

These final verses look forward to a great harvest, days of plenty, and of rescue from exile. They show clearly that God's judgement in Amos is not random, or vicious, or pointless—but the way through which great blessing and mercy will come. We constantly need to remember the cross, where God stepped in to take judgement upon himself, as we read about his anger at his people in this book.

These verses are full of significant biblical imagery. *Gardens; Land:* the ultimate symbol of permanence and security; *Vineyards and New Wine:* Israel is described as God's vineyard in several places in the Old Testament; and of course, much later, the one true Israelite who was faithful to the covenant said to his followers, 'I am the vine and you are the branches' (John 15). And then one of his followers, Paul, wrote about Gentile believers, in Romans 11, as branches grafted into the vine, concluding, 'and so all Israel will be saved' (Romans 11.26)—and when he says, all Israel, he means *everyone* who is joined on to Jesus, the true vine in God's vineyard. So these last few verses of Amos are rich in the imagery of hope for all nations, and for all creation.

And the last verse is a beautiful way to end, full of *eternal* promise and hope: 'I will plant Israel in her own land, never again to be uprooted from

the land I have given them.' And we know it will happen, we are given reason to depend on it: '... says the LORD your God.'

Study Questions

1. Reflect on verses 1-6. What sort of picture of God is painted here? How does the urgency and vividness of these verses challenge us to mission?
2. To fully understand the final judgement of God, we need to read Amos' warnings in the light of what would happen hundreds of years later, in the New Testament. How can anyone survive the sieving in v9-10? What are the grounds on which God will judge who is a sinner and who is sinless?
3. How can the same God promise judgement and hope alongside one another in this one chapter? How is our eternal hope closely bound up with the righteous judgement, and the faithfulness, of our promise-keeping God? What should our reaction be to these things?
4. What do the final five verses of Amos say about God? In particular, what can we see about his role in history (11-12), his vision for creation (13-15), and his revelation of himself (12,13,15)?
5. Why is 'restoring David's fallen tent so important?' How will that be good for the nations (11-12). It may help to read Acts 15.6-21, which quotes from these verses in Amos.
6. What clues to these final verses give us about the shape of Christian hope? What words could we use to describe the wonderful eternity that we have to look forward to?
7. In Amos 3.8, we are reminded that the correct responses to the roar of the Lion, are to fear him, and to prophesy about him. How has our reading of Amos challenged us to do these things (bearing in mind the identity of the Lion of Judah in Revelation 5.5-6)? What other verses from Amos will you take away from our studies as a challenge, or an encouragement?