

Amos 2:6-16

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/amos/amos-2/amos-26-16/>

The LORD pronounces judgment on the inhabitants of Israel because they commit greed, unjust oppression, gross immorality, and idolatry.

After pronouncing judgment upon the southern kingdom of Judah, the LORD turned His attention to His main target, the northern kingdom of Israel. He said, *For three transgressions of Israel and for four I will not revoke its punishment.* Like Judah, Israel sinned greatly against the Suzerain (Ruler) God, by breaking their covenant with Him.

The Israelite condition during the time of Amos is worth noting here. In Amos's days, that is, under the leadership of King Jeroboam II (793–753), Israel enjoyed a period of political stability and economic prosperity. This was because the Assyrian king Adad-nirari III removed Syria as a political threat to Israel. Then Assyria quickly lost its power shortly afterward, while Egypt was declining. Thus Israel enjoyed a period of diminished threat from neighboring kingdoms. Israel used this period of prosperity to commit great sins against the LORD their God. They forgot the reality that it was the LORD, and following His righteous ways, that had allowed them to become prosperous.

Therefore, the LORD threatened to judge His covenant people through Amos' proclamations. Amos was giving them an opportunity to repent and return to following their covenant with God; to serve and respect one another, do justice to the needy, and love their neighbor as themselves.

In the end, the prophet Amos condemned Israel for four transgressions. First, Israel would be judged by God *because they sold the righteous for money and the needy for a pair of sandals.* The wealthy class in Israel was greedy. The Ten Commandments forbade envy, the root cause of exploitation of others. But rather than follow God's covenant, those with power exploited those who were vulnerable. The rich sold the poor into slavery in exchange for the money they owed, even though the amount owed was insignificant and could only cover the price *for a pair of sandals.* The desperately poor in Israel were righteous; that is, they were honest and could be trusted to repay their debts. But the rich were too greedy; they would not wait for the poor to repay them. Rather than taking care of others, loving them as they wanted to be loved, as required by their covenant with God, the rich Israelites had become exploiters, like the pagan nations.

Second, Israel would be punished because *they pant after the very dust of the earth on the head of the helpless.* This phrase is interesting, as it can be translated and understood several different ways; the word *pant* can also be translated as "trample." The idea is that Israelites are taking advantage of the helpless in their society. Such a mistreatment was so horrible that it was as if the oppressors were trampling on the heads of the poor. Moreover, the rich turned *aside the way of the humble*, meaning that they turned the humble away from justice by denying them a fair hearing before the court. Therefore, the wealthy class in Israel had committed unjust oppression as they considered the unfortunate people to be completely without value.

Third, Israel would be condemned because the LORD, through the prophet Amos, said, *a man and his father resort to the same girl in order to profane My holy name*. To profane means to treat something sacred with disrespect or irreverence. When those who are in covenant with God break His covenant, they profane His name. God gave His chosen people His covenantal laws, which would cause them to live in a manner serving one another, respecting one another, lifting up the poor and giving equal justice to the weak. By living in a manner where they loved their neighbor as themselves, they thereby pleased their Suzerain ruler as well as honoring His name among the nations.

In following God, Israel would accomplish their assigned task to be a priestly nation, showing that serving one another was a superior way to live, rather than the strong exploiting the weak. However, Israel did what was prohibited by the law, with men exploiting young women (Exodus 21:7–11; Leviticus 18:7–8). A man and his father would have illicit sexual relations with the same young woman, thus profaning God’s holy name, treating it as common and irrelevant.

Fourth, Israel would fall under God’s judgment because *on garments taken as pledges they stretched out beside every altar*. In Biblical times, taking a *pledge* was a common business practice. Someone would offer as collateral one of his garments, or a portion of his property as guarantee for a payment of a loan. Anyone offering a garment as collateral would likely be a very poor person. While the Old Testament allowed the practice, it condemned the abuse of it. It was intended as a means to allow provision for the poor without creating dependence. These laws were intended to provide a means for those down on their luck to recover, to get their feet back under them. This can be seen in this passage from Exodus:

“If you lend money to any of My people who are poor among you, you shall not be like a moneylender to him; you shall not charge him interest. If you ever take your neighbor’s garment as a pledge, you shall return it to him before the sun goes down. For that is his only covering, it is his garment for his skin. What will he sleep in? And it will be that when he cries to Me, I will hear, for I am gracious.”
(Exodus 22:25-27)

Further, God’s covenant as expressed in the Mosaic law specifically prohibits someone from entering the house of his neighbor to take his pledge, to repossess the collateral, they were to show respect to the borrower by standing outside and waiting for it to be given willingly (Deuteronomy 24:10). In fact, if the borrower was a poor Israelite, the lender was to return it to him each night so that he might “sleep in his cloak” (Deuteronomy 24:12–13). These statutes make clear that these provisions were a means to care for others while preserving their dignity, honoring their ability to labor and provide value to the community while earning their own keep.

However, during the time of the prophet Amos, the Israelites violated this biblical principle and *stretched out beside every altar on garments taken as pledges*. This means they were unlawfully retaining overnight the garments given by the poor as a pledge, as well as using them to sleep *beside every altar*. Presumably this means not only were the garments being used overnight, they were likely being used as a part of pagan activities with *every altar*. That could include performing sexually immoral acts on the garments, as illicit sexual activity was an integral part of pagan ritual.

God further charged them with having drunk *the wine of those who had been fined in the house of their God*. The wealthy were fining the poor by taking their garments as a pledge to repay a loan. The poor people would offer their garments as collateral, and the rich lenders would use the garment as something to sit or lie on to make themselves more comfortable as they drank *wine*. In the *house of their God* probably means that those drinking *wine* on the *fined* garments were drinking beside their idols, not at an altar for Yahweh. The wealthy were exploiting those whom they were commanded to serve by God, their Suzerain Ruler. Just as Jesus chastised the rulers of His day for not putting people above rules, and for gaming rules to justify satisfying their own lusts at the expense of others, so God here chastises the rulers of Israel for their corruption. Therefore, God's judgment on Israel was imminent.

Before concluding His indictment on Israel, the LORD references the past to remind Israel of some of His deeds to them to show them their ingratitude. He began by saying, *Yet it was I who destroyed the Amorite before them*. The term *Amorite* refers to the inhabitants of the land of Canaan before Israel occupied it. The LORD reminded Israel that He was the one who gave them victory over the Amorites, making the conquest possible for them. Although the Amorite king *was high like the height of cedars and strong as the oaks* (two massive trees in ancient Israel), he was destroyed by the invincible power of God. The LORD *even destroyed his fruit above and his root below*. The image is of a tree that has not just had its fruit picked, but has also been completely uprooted. That means, the LORD destroyed the *Amorite* completely.

The LORD also said to Israel, *It was I who brought you up from the land of Egypt, and I led you in the wilderness forty years that you might take possession of the land of the Amorite*. One of the most important events in Israel's life was their redemption from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 6, 19, and 20). The LORD alone redeemed the Israelites from bondage when they were in desperate need. God delivered Israel, carried them "on eagles' wings and brought" them to Himself (Exodus 19:4). Then God led them in the wilderness for forty years to bring them to the land of the Amorite, that is, the land of Canaan (Deuteronomy 8:2).

To top it all off, the LORD had given special individuals to Israel to lead His people to righteousness. As the LORD declared, *Then I raised up some of your sons to be prophets and some of your young men to be Nazirites. Is this not so, O sons of Israel?*"

The word *prophet* [in Hebrew, "nābî"] refers to someone receiving a special call from God to be God's spokesman. He was an authorized envoy for God with a message that originated with God, as indicated by the frequent prophetic formula "Thus says the LORD" (Jeremiah 11:3; Jeremiah 33:2; Isaiah 48:17). A Nazirite was an Israelite consecrated to the service of the LORD, under vows that he would abstain from alcohol, let his hair grow long, and avoid any contact with dead bodies (Numbers 6). Samson was commissioned to be a Nazirite (Judges 13:5-7).

The Suzerain God gave *prophets and Nazirites* to His covenant people as leaders so that they might be guided in all truth. It was the duty of these leaders to lead by example, to serve others, to love their neighbors, to see justice done for the poor and powerless. Yet Israel *made the Nazirites drink wine*, corrupting their commission, *and commanded the prophets saying, 'You shall not prophesy!'* The Israelites corrupted these offices, so that there was no moral leadership. They did not want to hear God's word, nor follow His ways. They were in full

rebellion against the covenant they had entered into with their Suzerain Ruler. Therefore, God's judgment was unavoidable as a matter of contract. An example of this occurrence is set forth in Amos 7:12-13, when Amaziah the priest of Bethel commanded Amos to no longer prophesy in Bethel, because Amos' prophecy was not favorable to Jeroboam, king of Israel.

To explain the imminent nature of His judgment, the LORD began with a call to *Behold* what He was about to say. This draws serious and important attention to His words. The LORD said, *Behold, I am weighted down beneath you as a wagon is weighted down when filled with sheaves.* Israel's sin was a heavy burden on God, weighing Him down like a cart sagging under a heavy load. This makes sense, since God judged the pagan nations for their exploitive behavior by displacing them with Israel. Now those who were called by His name had also become exploitive. Therefore, God must act and judge Israel. It is required by the covenant as well as by the principle of equality (Deuteronomy 4:23-27).

As a result of God's judgment on Israel, *flight* would *perish from the swift*, meaning that even people who were fast runners would not escape God's judgment, and *the stalwart* or the hardworking men in Israel would *not strengthen* their *power*. No one would have any remaining *power* to resist God's judgment.

During God's judgment *the mighty man* would not be able to do anything to *save his life*; *he who grasps the bow* (the archer) would *not stand his ground*. God also said that *the swift of foot* (like a fast running soldier) would *not escape*, nor would *he who rides the horse* (the horseman) *save his life*. Finally, the LORD declared that *even the bravest among the warriors would flee naked in that day*. Such a judgment would be thorough and complete, as indicated by these seven descriptive statements (vv. Amos 2:14–16), where God indicted the leaders of Israel for exploiting the weak. In God's judgement, everyone who thought they were strong will themselves become helpless; the exploiters will themselves be exploited.

Under the reign of Hoshea, Israel fell to Assyria in 722 BC. The Assyrian king Shalmaneser V "captured Samaria and carried Israel away into exile to Assyria, and settled them in Halah and Habor, on the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes" (2 Kgs. 17:6). Alternatively, foreign groups were resettled in Samaria, "from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath and Sepharvaim" (2 Kgs. 17:24). The resulting peoples became the Samaritans. During New Testament times the Jews (from Judea) would not interact with Samaritans because they were mixed ethnicity, only being partially Jewish, and their religious practice clashed with that of the Jews.

Biblical Text

⁶ Thus says the Lord,

"For three transgressions of Israel and for four

I will not revoke its *punishment*,

Because they sell the righteous for money

And the needy for a pair of sandals.

⁷ "These who pant after the *very* dust of the earth on the head of the helpless

Also turn aside the way of the humble;

And a man and his father resort to the same girl

In order to profane My holy name.

**⁸“On garments taken as pledges they stretch out beside every altar,
And in the house of their God they drink the wine of those who have been fined.**

**⁹“Yet it was I who destroyed the Amorite before them,
Though his height *was* like the height of cedars
And he *was* strong as the oaks;
I even destroyed his fruit above and his root below.**

**¹⁰“It was I who brought you up from the land of Egypt,
And I led you in the wilderness forty years
That you might take possession of the land of the Amorite.**

**¹¹“Then I raised up some of your sons to be prophets
And some of your young men to be Nazirites.
Is this not so, O sons of Israel?” declares the Lord.**

**¹²“But you made the Nazirites drink wine,
And you commanded the prophets saying, ‘You shall not prophesy!’**

**¹³“Behold, I am weighted down beneath you
As a wagon is weighted down when filled with sheaves.**

**¹⁴“Flight will perish from the swift,
And the stalwart will not strengthen his power,
Nor the mighty man save his life.**

**¹⁵“He who grasps the bow will not stand *his ground*,
The swift of foot will not escape,
Nor will he who rides the horse save his life.**

¹⁶“Even the bravest among the warriors will flee naked in that day,” declares the Lord.