



Amos and the Just Society *A Bible Study Series*

STUDY 2 »

“Eat and Drink for Tomorrow We . . . ?”

The Process

THESE RESOURCES ARE PRIMARILY FOR GROUP LEADERS. You may select study segments based on your particular setting and the time you have available. If you are working with a younger group, it may be better to conduct the activity at the beginning of your session. Other groups may focus better using a video clip or imagining themselves as part of the real-life story. Older groups may be less engaged by the illustrations and activities and prefer to skip straight to the Bible Study and Going Deeper materials. We hope that these resources are helpful to you in investigating these challenging issues. Feel free to copy any of the material that would be useful as handouts for your group.

Historical Background and the Person of Amos

AMOS WAS A PROPHET TO THE NORTHERN KINGDOM of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II (c. 786 – 746 B.C.), which makes him one of the earliest prophets to which an entire biblical book is devoted. “Amos” literally means “burden” or “burden bearer,” which provides an interesting metaphor of his prophetic message. He seems to have grown up in rural areas and, unlike other prophets, had no prior association with the religious or political structures of the day.

Israel at the time of Amos was enjoying an almost unparalleled period of prosperity. The ancient Near East was in a power vacuum and there were no great nations pressuring Israel. Consequently Israel, and Judah to the south, were able to expand their borders almost back to those of Solomon's era. On the surface, everything appeared to be going well. There was wealth and political stability, and religious activity appeared to be at an all-time high. But the prophets of this era were not so impressed. They lamented the decay at the heart of Israelite society, and painted a verbal picture of great social injustice, personal immorality, and spiritual dysfunction.

The Point

WEALTH CAN BE SOMETHING OF A TRAP – it is possible to get so comfortable and at ease that it becomes hard to see some of the real issues that are tearing apart our society and our world. Or worse still, we cease to care. In this second study, Amos warns us that sometimes a comfortable and easy lifestyle is as much a cause for lament as a life marked by difficulty and turmoil.

Getting Started

ASK: Who owns a pair of glasses? What kind of glasses are they?

Observe how people respond. Do they name the brand of their frames, or do they say that their glasses are bi-focal, or tri-focal, or lenses to correct their shortsightedness, etc.?

ASK: What is the most expensive part of your glasses, the frames or the lenses? Do frames help you see better, or look better? Can certain frames actually make you see *less* clearly? What is more important – looking good in a pair of glasses or being able to see clearly?

SAY: Glasses help those who have trouble with their vision to see more clearly. You can spend as much money as you like on frames so that they look better, sit more comfortably, etc., but if you don't have the right lenses to correct your vision, then the glasses are worthless. This study is going to look at wealth and how we can use our money in ways that blind us to what is going on in society – and stop us from seeing what is really going on.

Illustrating the Point

MOVIE: SCHINDLER'S LIST (DVD 0:40:03 – 0:46:06)

Oskar Schindler is a German businessman who takes full advantage of World War II to make money. His factory uses cheap Jewish labor from the local concentration camps to keep it running. But after a period of time, Schindler begins to develop compassion for the Jewish people. Realizing that his factory is a safe haven, he employs 1,100 people to keep them out of the gas chambers, sending himself into bankruptcy in the

process. This clip captures a scene near the end of the war. Schindler has saved 1,100 people from death and is now himself hunted. But as he escapes, all he can think of are all the people he could not save. He looks at his clothes, car, and jewelry from a completely different perspective. The money that bought these things could have kept more people alive and thus become of infinitely greater worth.

REAL LIFE: THE PAIN OF A FATHER'S ABSENCE

Aida Xhika adores her father, but he is absent from her life for five to seven months of the year, working outside their home country of Albania. Aida isn't alone in this hard situation. Many of her classmates have mothers or fathers who must work abroad to support their families who remain in Albania. Hundreds of thousands of Albanian adults make dangerous journeys over international borders, sometimes on foot or in speedboats, to work illegally in countries like Greece and Italy. If they didn't do so, they and their families would perish. "Here [in Albania] there are just no jobs, no economic prospects," says Aida's father, Besnik.

Aida's story is typical of the stories World Vision staff see and hear every day in rural villages across Albania. "Albanians love their country and are dedicated to their families. That so many are forced to live in this way to survive is tragic," says Chalon Lee, director of World Vision Albania. "We ache with these people at these long and terrible separations and we work with them to provide alternatives, viable sources of income like raising poultry and fruit-tree and crop production."

Breaking Open the Word: *Amos 6:1-7*

- » Look closely at verses 4-6a. What kind of scene is Amos looking at?
- » Imagine verses 4-6a are photographs your friend brings to school or work. As you look through the photos and the people in them, what would you assume is going on?
- » Who has been invited to this party?
- » What kind of people are they?
- » What are their characteristics?
- » What does Amos mean by "woe" or "alas" (verse 1)?
- » How is Amos feeling about these people and the scene he is viewing?
- » What does it mean to "not [be] grieved over the ruin of Joseph"?
- » Is it a crime to have a party?
- » Can the accusation in this passage be leveled at Christians or the church today?

Amos 6:1-7 is a "woe" oracle, one of two such oracles in the Book of Amos (see also 5:18-27). "Woe" (or "alas") is a pronouncement of lament, a statement of grief concerning a particular situation. It is expressing not so much anger as deep-seated sorrow and anguish.

This oracle of Amos gives us insight into the way a certain group of Israelites were living.

They were people who had a certain amount of power and prestige, reasonable wealth, and admiration from others who aspired to their level of privilege.

The reason for Amos's lament comes in the second half of verse 6 – “you are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph.” When Amos looks around Israelite society of the day (that is, “Joseph”¹), he sees much to be concerned about. As we have seen, justice and righteousness do not characterize this society (see Study 1) – it has become a “ruin.” But these people, who are comfortable and at ease in their opulence, are either in ignorance of what is really going on or remain indifferent and unmoved. Either way, they have become people whose lifestyle is cause for lament.

¹It is believed that many descendants of Joseph lived in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which is where Amos's message was delivered.

- » Are there times when you are so concerned about making your own life comfortable and secure that you are not grieved about other people's lives being in ruins?

Going Deeper: Wealth or Sacrilege?

IT IS SOMETIMES ARGUED THAT AMOS is not concerned as much with the revelry or even the apparent wealth depicted in the oracle, but rather the irreverent and blasphemous atmosphere in which the revelry is set. What do you think?

- » Amos 6:4-6a contains (at least) five suggestions of wealth and opulence. Can you identify them?
- » There are also at least three hints of sacrilege, that is, abuse of that which is sacred and holy amidst the revelry. Can you identify these?
- » What conclusions can you draw about this unholy mixture of secular and sacred?

THE ORACLE SUGGESTS THAT THESE NOTABLES of Israel should be grieving the state of their people, not partying. Is Amos lamenting over these people because of their ignorance, their apathy, or both?

- » Who is “the house of Israel” (verse 1)?
- » What relationship does “the house of Israel” have with these partygoers? How does the text suggest that the partygoers are in relative positions of power and privilege?
- » How does verse 3 describe the way these partygoers exercise their power? (Compare with other verses in Amos such as 2:6-8; 5:10-13.)
- » Although it seems difficult to reach a conclusive decision, do you think the partygoers are ignorant, apathetic, or both? Which is worse?
- » Can you identify any aspects of ignorance or apathy in your own life? What can you do to change this?
- » Are ease and security such bad things? Are they wrong in and of themselves? Discuss.
- » The two words that Amos used for “ease” and “security” (or “comfort” or “complacency”) are found elsewhere in the Bible. Look up these texts to see what they have to say.

(Note: sometimes the word is translated differently, i.e. *secure*, *proud*, *insolent*, etc.)

Deuteronomy 33:12 (NIV, *secure*)

Psalms 16:8-9 (NIV, *secure*)

Psalms 123:3-4 (NIV, *proud*)

Proverbs 1:33 (NIV, *at ease*)

Isaiah 37:28-29 (NIV, *insolence*)

Jeremiah 30:10 (NIV, *security*)

Ease and security appear to be part of God's ultimate plan for everybody – but here in Amos and elsewhere (e.g., Isaiah and Proverbs) they also describe a life that God laments over. What makes the difference?

Isaiah chapter 32 provides a clearer picture. In verses 9-14, Isaiah pronounces judgment on those who are feeling complacent and secure – once again the prophet says that now is the time to lament and grieve (verse 11, “sackcloth”; verse 12, “beat your breasts”). But then things change in verses 15-18; Isaiah describes a new era that will be marked by quietness, confidence (ease/comfort, verse 17), and security (verse 18).

- » Why is this new era different?
- » What characterizes it as different from all that has gone before?

Isaiah teaches us that when the Spirit of God comes and justice and righteousness once again characterize society, then ease and security follow. To put it another way, ease and security are always out of place when justice and righteousness are absent.

Activity

YOU WILL NEED: One 5-gallon or 10-gallon bucket for each group. Find a water source about 10 minutes' walk from your venue where buckets can be filled. You may want to make a map to explain where the water source is.

SAY: We can take water for granted. In our country, we can turn on a tap and water comes out, but in many countries people must walk for miles to the nearest water source, which may not even provide clean and safe water. This activity is about experiencing what that might be like by trekking to get some water.

Form people into groups of four, giving each group one bucket, then send them off to fill it. For more fun, you could prepare multiple water sources and award prizes for the group that returns fastest with the most water still in their bucket.

Discuss the following questions:

- » How much water do you use each day (for washing, drinking, cooking, etc.)? On average, a toilet uses 1.5 to 2.5 gallons on a full flush, and the average five-minute shower uses 15 to 25 gallons of water. If you had only this bucket of water for all your daily needs, how much would you use and for what purpose(s)?

- » How would you feel if you had to perform the same trek every day?
- » Make various comparisons between the bucket and daily life. For example: How many taps do you have in your house? How many trips would you need to make to meet your current water usage?

Prayer Thoughts

- » Thank God for all the good things and people in your life that give you reason to celebrate.
- » Ask God to help you grieve when it is time to grieve, and celebrate when it is time to celebrate.
- » Ask God to fill you with his Spirit so that the things that grieve his heart will grieve your heart as well.
- » Ask God to open your eyes to see more clearly the injustice in this world.

Adapted from resources created by World Vision Australia.

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About World Vision

WORLD VISION is a Christian humanitarian organization dedicated to working with children, families, and their communities worldwide to reach their full potential by tackling the causes of poverty and injustice. Motivated by our faith in Jesus Christ, World Vision serves alongside the poor and oppressed as a demonstration of God's unconditional love for all people.

We envision a world where each child experiences "fullness of life" as described in John 10:10. We know this can be achieved only by addressing the problems of poverty and injustice in a holistic way. World Vision is unique in bringing 60 years of experience in three key areas to help children and families thrive: emergency relief, long-term development, and advocacy. We bring our skills across many areas of expertise to each community where we work, enabling us to support children's physical, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

About World Vision Resources

ENDING GLOBAL POVERTY and injustice begins with education: understanding the magnitude and causes of poverty, its impact on human dignity, and our connection to those in need around the world.

World Vision Resources is the publishing ministry of World Vision. World Vision Resources educates Christians about global poverty, inspires them to respond, and equips them with innovative resources to make a difference in the world.



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