

# Prophecies of a Fig Pincher

## PART 1: JUDGMENT (AMOS 5:1-9)

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It is a great blessing to be together this morning, on this first Lord's Day of a new year! We do plan on partaking of the Lord's Supper together right after we study the word of God, so if you need the elements for the Supper, those are available in the entryway, right inside the front door. And then, following the Lord's Supper, we plan on singing several songs together before we dismiss [for class].

As we begin, we do want to make sure we communicate God's plan of salvation as clearly as possible. We sinned, but God made a way for us to be forgiven of our sins by sending his only Son as a substitute, as a sacrifice. He offered himself up on the cross, he was buried, but he was raised up on the third day. In response, we hear and believe that good news, we turn away from sin, we confess Jesus as being the Son of God, and then we allow ourselves to be buried with him in baptism, an immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins. At that point, the Christian life begins, and we spend the rest of our time on this earth living for him.

And we do have some good news to share this morning, and I believe this one has at least some small connection to us here in Madison. This is from a congregation in Grenada. Grenada, by the way, is one of the world's leading exporters of nutmeg. Years ago, we had a member, Ann Victor, from Grenada. While she was here, a hurricane came through and ripped the roof off of the church building down there, and as I remember it, we helped in a significant way to replace that roof. About a week ago, we got an update online saying, "Heaven rejoices! Just after our Bible studies last night, our God...added another soul to His kingdom. Please join with us as we welcome our new sister Cindyanne Atz to the body. To God be the glory." I doubt we will ever meet Cindyanne in this life, but we do look forward to meeting her in the next. And we share this by way of reminder: What she has done on the beach in the dark in Grenada, you can do this morning, right here in this building. If you would like to study together, please call or text or pull me aside after worship.

This morning, we are assembled together in a fairly large city, a capital city. In terms of education and technology, we are fairly advanced. We have some interesting career paths represented in this room. Even as a congregation, the service is going out over the Internet, several are listening on the phone (that is really, really cool). We do our giving online, our banks are automatically mailing checks, we give to the Lord by swiping here and there on our phones (that also is really, really cool). We have the projector and PowerPoint for our singing, we have the ability to project scripture on the wall up here (any verse, in any number of translations). Our air is heated and cooled and filtered. In a sense, we have it together. Now, I want us to imagine that as we leave this

morning, we're feeling pretty good about worship today. We are enjoying our fellowship together. But as we leave this building, there's a guy standing outside, and he obviously doesn't fit in, at all. He's dressed like a farmer. Maybe he's wearing jeans, and boots, and an old Carhart jacket. And not only that, but when he speaks, he speaks with a southern accent. And so, we realize right away that he is not from around here. And as we leave this building, he actually starts yelling at us; and his message is, "Everything you all have done in there today is completely offensive to God; in fact, because you are so sinful on the inside, God told me to tell you that he hates your singing, he hates your giving, and he refuses to listen to your prayers." How might we react to that? That right there is pretty much what happens in the book of Amos.

This morning, I would invite you to turn with me to the book of Amos, and today I'd like for us to get a taste for the prophets by starting a three-part series of lessons based on Amos 5. This is one of those times when I really wish the books of the Bible were arranged in alphabetical order! But, since they are not, I should give the reminder that Amos is in that series of twelve books known as the "Minor Prophets," right at the very end of what we would commonly refer to as being the "Old Testament."

As we make our way to Amos, I'm putting a timeline on the wall up here, so we can get some sense of where we are in the history of God's people. We have the United Kingdom under the rule of David and Solomon, and then we have the split – Jeroboam takes ten tribes to the north and starts his own system of corrupted worship from the very beginning, with Rehoboam staying with two tribes in the south. In the south, the kings alternate between being good and evil, but in the north, they are all terrible. God, though, still loves his people and sends a series of prophets to both groups. Amos, then, is sent as a prophet to the north in the mid 700's BC (that vertical purple band on our chart up here).

In our culture, when we hear the word "prophet," we usually think of somebody who predicts the future, and that can be part of it. But in the Bible, the word simply refers to someone who speaks on God's behalf. And that's what we have in the prophets – God is reaching out to his people. Maybe we could imagine having a friend or a member of the family caught up in some kind of destructive behavior, an addiction of some kind – drugs, or alcohol, or maybe out of control spending or gambling. We know that if they continue down this path, they are heading for almost certain destruction. These things do not end well. So, we might have some kind of an intervention. And in that setting we think through it ahead of time, and we boil it down to exactly what they need to hear. What do we say to a loved one in a meeting like that? 1.) You are important to us; we love you. 2.) These are the terrible things that will happen if you continue heading down this path, and 3.) There is a way out of this; this is what you need to do. And this right here is a summary of the prophets in a nutshell: 1.) God loves you, 2.) This is what will happen if you continue down this path, and 3.) This is what you need to do. And this is also the message of Amos.

But what makes Amos a bit unique is that he is from the south, but God sends him to the north. And the north and the south are not exactly friendly with each other. We could almost compare it to our own nation back in the mid-1800's. The north is a bit more urban and industrial, and the south is a bit more agricultural (and maybe a tiny bit more spiritual). God, then, for some reason, chooses Amos, a farmer from the south, to go condemn those tribes up in the north. And Amos has no formal training as a prophet. He is truly an amateur. In Amos 1:1, he identifies himself simply as coming ***"from among the shepherders from Tekoa"*** (a village several miles south of Bethlehem). In fact, that's about all we know concerning Amos personally, until we come to Amos 7:10, where a local priest objects to what Amos is saying by complaining to the king,

***<sup>10</sup> Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent word to Jeroboam king of Israel, saying, “Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel; the land is unable to endure all his words. <sup>11</sup> For thus Amos says, ‘Jeroboam will die by the sword and Israel will certainly go from its land into exile.’” <sup>12</sup> Then Amaziah said to Amos, “Go, you seer, flee away to the land of Judah and there eat bread and there do your prophesying! <sup>13</sup> But no longer prophesy at Bethel, for it is a sanctuary of the king and a royal residence.” <sup>14</sup> Then Amos replied to Amaziah, “I am not a prophet, nor am I the son of a prophet; for I am a herdsman and a grower of sycamore figs. <sup>15</sup> But the LORD took me from following the flock and the LORD said to me, ‘Go prophesy to My people Israel.’***

In this passage, Amaziah the priest basically tells Amos to go home: Go back to where you came from! Go back down south; we don’t want your kind up here! In verse 12, he tells Amos to go back to Judah ***“and there eat bread and there do your prophesying.”*** What he’s saying is: Don’t be mooching up here in the north. You are a drain on our resources up here. Well, Amos doesn’t let up, does he? No, in the next few verses after this, Amos will continue by telling Amaziah the priest that his wife would become a prostitute, his kids will die by the sword, his land would be divided up and given to others, and that he personally would die on foreign soil. Amos is not one to hold back.

But this passage is where Amos identifies himself as a herdsman and as a ***“grower of sycamore figs”*** (in verse 14). The NASB has a footnote on the word ***“grower,”*** further defining it as a ***“nipper”*** or a ***“pincher”*** of figs. As I understand it, there is a point in the lifecycle of figs where some perhaps need to be pinched off to allow the others to mature. We don’t have too much information on this, but it seems to be a form of pruning. I have never pruned figs myself, but I do have quite a bit of experience with grapes and with pears. We might compare it today to detasseling corn. This is what Amos does for a living. He pinches figs. God, then, takes this fig-pincher from the agricultural south, and sends him to the more technologically advanced north with a message: I love you, but if you continue down this path terrible things will happen, and this is what you must do to prevent that from happening.

This, then, brings us to our text for this morning – Amos 5:1-9 – and it is not a text we will ever find engraved on a plaque at Hobby Lobby, and it’s probably not the kind of text that we would find highlighted or underlined in our Bibles. But instead, it’s actually quite sad, even angry. It is personal. Let’s look together, then, at Amos 5:1-9,

***<sup>1</sup> Hear this word which I take up for you as a dirge, O house of Israel:***

***<sup>2</sup> She has fallen, she will not rise again—  
The virgin Israel.***

***She lies neglected on her land;  
There is none to raise her up.***

***<sup>3</sup> For thus says the Lord GOD,  
“The city which goes forth a thousand strong  
Will have a hundred left,  
And the one which goes forth a hundred strong  
Will have ten left to the house of Israel.”***

***<sup>4</sup> For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel,  
“Seek Me that you may live.***

- <sup>5</sup> ***“But do not resort to Bethel  
And do not come to Gilgal,  
Nor cross over to Beersheba;  
For Gilgal will certainly go into captivity  
And Bethel will come to trouble.***
- <sup>6</sup> ***“Seek the LORD that you may live,  
Or He will break forth like a fire, O house of Joseph,  
And it will consume with none to quench it for Bethel,***
- <sup>7</sup> ***For those who turn justice into wormwood  
And cast righteousness down to the earth.”***
- <sup>8</sup> ***He who made the Pleiades and Orion  
And changes deep darkness into morning,  
Who also darkens day into night,  
Who calls for the waters of the sea  
And pours them out on the surface of the earth,  
The LORD is His name.***
- <sup>9</sup> ***It is He who flashes forth with destruction upon the strong,  
So that destruction comes upon the fortress.***

In the time we have left this morning, I'd like to divide this section into two parts: The funeral ***“dirge”*** (in verses 1-3) and then the invitation to ***“seek the Lord”*** (in verses 4-9).

I. But we start with the **FUNERAL DIRGE** (in verses 1-3) as Amos describes the **DEATH OF A NATION**.

We can almost imagine an old-time preacher on the American frontier, standing at the head of a casket, “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to mourn the passing of brother so-and-so.” Only instead of mourning the passing of a person, Amos has assembled them together to mourn the passing of their own nation, the Northern Kingdom of Israel. And instead of looking back on the death of a nation, Amos is looking into the future. At the moment, the “state of the union” is strong. The army is strong. The people are enjoying a time of peace and prosperity. Amos, though, is looking ahead, and he pictures Israel (the Northern Kingdom) as a ***“virgin”*** who ***“lies neglected on her land; there is none to raise her up.”*** It's the picture of a young woman, attacked and left for dead out in the middle of a field somewhere. Not exactly how these people would like to picture themselves. Amos, though, speaks for God, and this is what God sees in Israel's future. This isn't a “celebration of life,” as funerals are sometimes described today; no, this is a ***“dirge,”*** a lament, a description of deep grief and loss. We think of a funeral for someone in their teens or twenties. It's awful, isn't it? Those are some of the worst funerals I've ever done, when a young person is taken in the prime of life. This, though, is a funeral before the actual death. And he predicts that they will, in fact, die young.

Years ago, I read about a preacher who preached a funeral for his own congregation. He rented a casket, brought it to the front of the room, and invited everybody to pass by. But instead of a body in the casket, he placed a mirror, so whenever someone passed by and looked in, they would see themselves in the mirror. This is what Amos is doing here. He is preaching a funeral before the death has actually taken place. It's a prophecy about what is coming. There is a time coming when the nation will be viciously attacked and left for dead.

In verse 3, he goes on to describe their military response at that time. Right now, they seem to be so strong; things are going well. But when that day comes, the city that sends out a thousand soldiers will only have a

hundred left; the city that sends out a hundred will only have ten left. This has been described as something like a “reverse tithe.” Instead of giving a tenth to the Lord as they should have done, these people were only left with a tenth and were giving up 90% in battle. They are outnumbered and are left without defenses.

Personally, this reminds me of God’s warning back in Deuteronomy 28. As they are preparing to enter the Promised Land, God basically says: If you obey, you will be blessed beyond your wildest dreams; but, if you disobey, I will make you miserable in every way possible. If you disobey, ***“The LORD shall cause you to be defeated before your enemies; you will go out one way against them, but you will flee seven ways before them, and you will be an example of terror to all the kingdoms of the earth”*** (Deuteronomy 28:25). And this is what we see in Amos, another warning, a reminder, that although it seems that everything is fine, everything is not fine at all (in the eyes of God).

I would take this first paragraph, then, as a reminder: What a blessing it is to be able to see ourselves as God sees us. We thank God for the prophets. We thank God for his word. We thank God for good Christian friends who have the courage to pull us aside and tell us, “What you are doing is not good.” Sometimes, we need to be told. I think of the Scottish poet, Robert Burns. This time of year, he’s probably most famous as the author of “Auld Lang Syne.” We might also remember, though, what might be his second most famous poem, “To a Louse.” It’s been a while, but as I remember it, he’s sitting behind a woman in church. She is all decked out in her Sunday finest. But as he sits there, he notices a louse (a little bug) crawling around in her fancy hair-do! She thinks she’s so special, and all he can see is this nasty little bug crawling all over her head. And his conclusion is: It is an amazing gift to be able to see ourselves as others see us. And it is, but it is the greatest of blessings to be able to see ourselves as God sees us. And that is what Amos starts with in Chapter 5. God sees these people as deserving of punishment, and so the prophet starts this chapter with a dirge, lamenting the coming death of a nation.

## II. As we move to the second half of this first section, we now have an opening invitation as Amos invites (even those in the north) to SEEK THE LORD (two times in this passage).

In verse 4, ***“For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel, ‘Seek Me that you may live,’”*** and in verse 6, ***“Seek the Lord that you may live.”*** This is such a simple invitation, but Amos immediately gives the reminder that there is a right way and a wrong way to seek the Lord. In verse 5, he tells them where they are NOT to go to seek God. Bethel is the place where God met Jacob (in Genesis 28 and in Genesis 35). It is also home to Amaziah the priest (the guy we read about in Amos 7, the one who complained about Amos to the king). Amos says: Don’t go to Bethel to seek God; he’s not there! Gilgal is the place where the people camped with Joshua when they first crossed over the Jordan River, as they prepared to conquer Jericho. Do not go to Gilgal. Beersheba is a place of spiritual importance to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Do not go to Beersheba. These are all very important places in Bible history, they are all places of worship in the Northern Kingdom, but Amos is saying that salvation is not found in a place. Seeking God is not about moving from one place to another. We might think of Jesus’ discussion with the woman at the well in John 4. True worship is not necessarily about a location. But the key is seeking the Lord.

In verse 6, Amos warns that if they don’t seek the Lord, God will ***“break forth like a fire.”*** Fire is a threat that’s repeated over and over in the book of Amos. I glanced through the book again yesterday afternoon, and I lost count after about half a dozen references. Over and over again, God threatens to ***“break forth like a fire.”*** I We’ve seen fire ***“break forth”*** a day or two ago out in Colorado, haven’t we? Up to a thousand homes destroyed

in a matter of minutes. Fire is destructive and it often consumes very quickly, with no warning. This is the warning. Seek God, or else.

In verse 7, we have a reference to ***“those who turn justice into wormwood.”*** Wormwood is basically a bitter and poisonous plant. Injustice is a barrier to seeking the Lord. We will get to more of this next week. For now, this is the alternative to seeking God. It is not a pleasant picture at all.

In verse 8, we see God’s power demonstrated in the creation. In other words, God is worth seeking. He made the stars, he arranged the constellations, and even now, he ***“changes the deep darkness into morning.”*** He also ***“darkens day into night.”*** He commands the waters of the sea. God is worth seeking. Even today, though, people continue to look in all the wrong places. Just a few days ago, our nation launched a rocket containing a \$10 billion telescope, 100 times more powerful than Hubble, with the purpose of exploring the origins of the Universe. They are seeking something, aren’t they? But what they are seeking cannot be found with a telescope. The origin of all things is God. Like the Northern Kingdom of Israel, we (as a society) are also looking in all the wrong places.

And then, at the end of this verse, Amos declares, ***“The LORD is His name.”*** In most translations, when LORD is in all caps, it’s translating God’s personal name, ***“YAHWEH.”*** He is the great I AM. In terms of salvation, he is our only option. As we sometimes ask as we sing, “Where could I go but to the Lord?” Nowhere! He is strong enough to both save and destroy, and he is our only option. And it seems as if the Northern Kingdom has forgotten his name. They need to be reintroduced, ***“The LORD is His name.”***

### Conclusion:

This morning we have just started looking at Amos 5, and we have focused in on God’s judgment. We’ve started this chapter with a dirge, with a lament, a funeral song, but it’s a funeral message before the fact, predicting the death of the nation. Everything seems fine at the time – the military is strong, the economy is booming – outwardly, everything is just fine, but God sends the prophet Amos with a funeral sermon. Things are not fine at all.

And then we have had the opening invitation to ***“seek the Lord.”*** And this just starts to introduce the idea that there is an alternative to death and destruction. It has been so long, though, that Amos has to reintroduce the Lord to these people, ***“The LORD is His name.”***

I’d like to continue in this chapter next week, if the Lord wills, but as we ask the “So what?” question, the application of this passage to our lives today is twofold: First of all, even if we personally have left the Lord, if our hearts have wandered (even if our worship continues on the outside), even in that situation, God loves us and has made a way for us to come back. So, if we put ourselves in the place of the Northern Kingdom here, God loves us also, and he invites us to come back. And that is awesome news. Like a family confronting an addict, God also loves us.

But secondly, on the other hand, we might have an opportunity to play the role of Amos here. In other words, as we live, and work, and go to school here in the “north,” as we pinch our figs (so to speak), we may be in the unique position of speaking truth to the world around us. I know we talk about “being Jesus” to the world around us, but in this case, maybe we can think about “being Amos,” and we can communicate to the world around us what Amos communicated to the Northern Kingdom. Be Amos.

I would invite you to read ahead in this chapter as we prepare for next week, but before we partake of the Lord's Supper, let's close this study by going to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are the Great I Am, creator of everything we see around us, including the sun and the stars. You are Lord and Master over the oceans, pouring your water back on the earth in the form of rain and snow. You are a God who loves all of us, even when we slip and fall, even when we wander, especially when we wander. We are thankful for your grace and mercy. Thank you for your patience.

We are thankful this morning for your servant Amos – for his willingness to leave his home in Tekoa to preach your word to the Northern Kingdom, for his willingness to endure rejection and insults. We pray that we may be willing to follow in his footsteps, sharing your message of love and mercy to the world around us.

Bless us, Father, as we start this new year. We pray that we may honor you in everything we do.

We come to you this morning in the name of your Son Jesus. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)