

DETOUR TO THE PROPHETS: AMOS

by Michele Hershberger

KEY VERSE:

Amos 5:24

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

FAITH STORY:

Amos 5:1-27

FAITH FOCUS:

Amos was a prophet to the Northern Kingdom during its time of great prosperity. All the wealth of the kingdom, however, stayed in the hand of only a powerful few, and that was what Amos railed against with all his might. In chapter 5, Amos warned the people of Israel that they would build nice houses, but not live in them, and plant wonderful vineyards but not drink their wine. God hated their religious festivals and offerings and warned them to fear and not long for Judgment Day. Why? Because they didn't practice justice.

SESSION GOAL:

Encourage the students to recommit themselves to the cause of justice for the poor and marginalized of the world.

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, the students will have:

- Find newspaper and magazine articles about injustice in American society
- Hear and respond to the scripture passage three times
- Share with the rest of the group what they hear God telling them to do or how to be as a result of interacting with the scripture

MATERIALS NEEDED AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 3 Bibles in 3 different translations
- 2 Current news magazines and newspapers
- 3 3 volunteer readers who will read Amos 5 from the 3 different translations

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS: (9–10 minutes)

Pass out magazines and newspapers and direct the youth to look through them and find stories about oppression and injustice. Give them 5-7 minutes to find as many articles as they can. Call the group back together and share results. Ask, *"In your opinion, do we live more in a just or an unjust society?"*

CONNECT: (5 minutes)

Now ask: *“Would your answer be different if you lived in another part of town, either in a richer part of town or a poorer part of town? Would your answer be different if you lived in Central America? Sudan? Iraq?” Finish the discussion with this question, “How do you think God views our society, as just or unjust and why?”*

EXPLORE THE BIBLE: (10–12 minutes)

For the rest of your time together, you and the students will participate in a prayer activity that will encompass this part (Explore the Bible), Apply and Respond. All three movements will blend into each other. Called Lectio Divina (the youth don’t need to know the name) this prayer practice is a way to pray the scriptures, listen for what God is telling you (Apply) and then sharing what God wants to you to do (Respond).

The first step is to say a prayer that asks God to help everyone focus on the scriptures and hear what God wants to say. Then have the first volunteer read the scripture, in this case Amos chapter 5. Before this reader begins, instruct the youth to listen for words and phrases that stand out to them. Have them close their eyes if this helps the listening process.

After the reader is finished with the chapter, ask the youth to give answers to the question, *“What phrases or words stuck out to you?”* The sharing time always follows the reading of the scripture. It is important for you, as the facilitator, to be very comfortable with silence. Spend some time before this meeting to prepare yourself to be okay personally if no one shares. When the students sense that you are fine whether or not they share, they will actually be more empowered to share.

If questions about the scriptures and certain meanings of words come up, then take this time now to explain some of the historical context of the passage. Some words and contexts that they may be interested in knowing include:

- Israel here probably refers to the ten northern tribes, which became Israel when they separated from Rehoboam in 922 BCE. Sometimes in the Old Testament, Israel can refer to the entire people of God.
- In many of the prophetic sayings, the people of Israel collectively are compared to a young maiden (Virgin Israel). When the people worship other gods in the form of idol worship, God compares himself to a faithful, loving husband whose young bride runs off with a new lover. And like a woman who chases after other men and brings shame on herself, so too does Israel when it chases after other lovers (gods).
- Bethel and Gilgal were religious centers of worship. Instead of seeking out these special places, says Amos (and God), do justice and in doing so you will truly worship God.
- Wormwood is similar to bitterness.
- Pleiades and Orion are star constellations.
- People were to go to the city gate to plead for justice.
- The rich people, particularly in the capital city of Samaria, would build summer houses for themselves (stone mansions or hewn houses). These same people would cheat the poor or use unbalanced scales to determine payment for the poor.
- The “Day of the LORD” was the phrase used to describe the judgment day at the end

of time. Amos warned the rich not to long for it, but to fear it, for on this day they will receive judgment and not a reward.

- The people of Amos' time were doing all the appropriate religious rituals and festivals. They had the look of proper worship. But Amos warned them that God hated all those religious ceremonies and offerings because they were not practicing justice.
- Amos reminded them that in the wilderness time with Moses, religious rituals, sacrifices and offerings were not important (or not nearly as important as obedience to God).

Sakkuth and Kaiwan are names of foreign gods used in idol worship. Many of the prophets made the connection between idol worship and the idolatry of greed and money grabbing.

APPLY: (10–12 minutes)

After everyone has had a chance to say what phrases or words stuck out to them and you have explained any concepts deemed necessary, it is time for the second reading. Ask the students to listen this time for what they hear God saying to them personally. Ask the second volunteer to read Amos 5 from a different translation. After the reading, ask again, *"What did you hear God saying to you?"* Have persons share what they heard God say to them. Remind everyone that no one has to share, but they are encouraged to do so, if they feel they can.

RESPOND: (10–12 minutes)

After this round of sharing, prepare the youth for a third reading by saying, *"Now listen for what you hear God telling you to do differently in your life or how to be different."* Ask your third reader to read from a third translation, while everyone else sits and listens. After the reading, ask again, *"Hearing this scripture and hearing God's voice, how are you to live differently? How are you to be different?"* For the third time, share around the room. When everyone has had a chance to share, then you close in a final prayer.

INSIGHTS FROM THE SCRIPTURE:

Amos, a native of the southern kingdom, was an eighth century prophet who railed against the terrible injustice in the Northern Kingdom. Unlike earlier prophets who spoke more about the threat of idol worship, Amos focused his attention on economic disparity and oppression of the poor. Because of Jehu's purge of the Baal priests (II Kings 10:18-31), Baal worship was not as much of a threat as it was earlier, although Amos also devoted part of his preaching to idol worship.

But the heart of his message was this: if you truly love God, you will practice justice. Wealthy Israelites, especially in the capital city of Samaria, were using their political clout to oppress the poor. They gave unfair payment for goods, they cheated the poor with unequal scales, and they took essential items for pledges. It didn't matter that these same people participated in all the religious activities. Because of their oppressive, unjust ways, God hated their religious festivals.

In some ways, the message was too late, for God showed Amos that judgment was coming, which came true with the Assyrian conquest in 722. But, like many prophets, Amos also gave a glimmer of hope. Amos chapter 9 speaks of restoration and renewal for God's people.

*For more cultural-historical details on chapter 5 see the section called **Explore the Bible**.