

Justice and Righteousness in Amos

DARRELL DELANEY

Imagine a society ensnared by the grip of injustice, mirroring the challenges we face today. In our upcoming journey through the book of Amos on *Groundwork*, we explore a shepherd turned prophet's timeless words. Amos confronted the echoes of his era, proclaiming a message that transcends centuries. Join us as we unravel Amos's historical roots and discover its relevance, offering a transformative guide for practical living in the present day, next on *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney; and Scott, we are in part two of our six-part series on the minor prophets; and in the first episode, we talked about Obadiah and Joel, and some of the themes of righteousness and justice will show up again in this episode today. We are going to go through the book of Amos today.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Amos was a shepherd from a place in the northern kingdom of Israel; a place named Tekoa. As Amos begins in Chapter 1, Amos leaves the countryside and strides right into the heart of Israel and confronts Israel's leaders; and you know, I can just sort of imagine that this simple, rustic shepherd...and Hebrew scholars say that even the Hebrew language of Amos is rather rustic...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is little bit rough and ready. The leaders probably looked at this guy and thought: What a bumpkin, you know; what a country bumpkin! What a rube! What a hick! How dare he, of all people, smelling of sheep, come and yell at us! So, you can imagine that Amos probably came in for some eyerolling and some mockery.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes, and so, Amos goes into the palace area in the main square and he begins to prophesy; and he looks around and he sees this affluence. He sees everybody seemed to be doing well on the outside, and people who were prospering financially; but internally, their hearts are not with God, and they are doing everything they can to oppress people, exploit the poor, and make more of a profit. That is the issue that God has with the people, and Amos is the one who he called to deliver that message.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But what is interesting, Darrell, is how Amos begins. So, he kind of strides into the heart of Israel and to its leaders, and says that God—Yahweh—our God is roaring; he is thundering in judgment. I mean, he comes out of the gates guns blazing, as it were; and then he has this interesting rhetorical device, where he begins with a series of oracles and judgments against various nations; and he actually mentions seven different nations, and he says the same thing of all of them, that God cannot tolerate them. So, he talks about

Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab; and then, getting a little closer to home, Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel; and Darrell, I imagine that as he excoriated those seven nations, the people were probably cheering him on. It is like: Yeah; oh, good. This isn't going to be so bad. Give it to em...give it to em...give it to the Moabites, give it to the Edomites and the Ammonites, and so forth.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; it seems like that until the spotlight goes right onto them. So, it is interesting how...and I have been guilty of this, when I cheer for the good guys...who I think the good guys are...and then the bad guys are never me in my story, but then, God is the one who has the even scales of judgment. He turns the judgment to the people, and actually begins to say: Hey, three things I have against Israel.

In Chapter 2 of Amos, it says;

⁶“For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not relent. They sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. ⁷They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed.

So, those charges are not just for all those seven nations. Those charges are for God's people Israel as well.

SCOTT HOEZEE

A colleague of mine who used to teach Old Testament at Calvin Seminary calls this the great switcheroo, because they're cheering on Amos as he goes after all their enemies, and then all of a sudden, it is sort of like the line from that famous Pogo cartoon comic strip: We have met the enemy and he is us! Israel, you are in trouble, and mostly because of your callous disregard for the poor, your perversion of justice. The wealthy elite thrive while the underprivileged suffer. So, Amos may be an outsider to the political and religious establishment. They may have regarded him as a country bumpkin, hick, and rube, but boy, he has a stinging rebuke here.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, there are three things that are a problem in this book that God addresses: the issues of justice that keep going on and on; the issues of injustice that keep going on and on; the fact that they are not doing what is right in the context of that; and actually, what genuine worship is; and it seems that the people have forgotten God's standard, and they actually have, in this context of worship, they use scripture...they use singing...they use offering and all these things kind like a rabbit's foot...kind of like a superstition like, if we do these things, everything that we did over there won't matter, and God is going to just overlook it because we are all here singing his praises; we are all here doing these spiritual things; and that does not work in God's standard.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; it reminds me of a line in Jeremiah; you know, the people live riotously evil lives all week long, but then come Sabbath, they go to the temple and say: This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord. We are safe here! God doesn't see our sins; we are safe here. No, it doesn't quite work that way. That is why Jeremiah famously said: You've turned God's house into a den of robbers. This is like the place where you go hide out after you rob a bank. That is not the temple; and in Amos 5:21-24, God addresses this here as well:

“I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. ²²Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. ²³Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. ²⁴But let justice roll on like a river, and righteousness like a never-failing stream!

DARRELL DELANEY

That echo of: I will not hear you; the noise. It sounds a lot like Isaiah when he was telling the people: Come now, let us reason together; that they have all these things that they are doing, and they think that is going to erase the problem; and God is saying: I want justice that goes beyond ritual, goes beyond regular worship attendance, goes beyond what you put in the offering plate. I need your heart; I need your lifestyle; I need you to be an example; and you cannot do that if you ignore the sin that I am telling you to address.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and it is striking here. Although there are other passages in Isaiah and Jeremiah and the other minor prophets, but it is striking here that what pleases God more...what brings joy to God more than genuine worship? But here, things are so bad, God is actually offended by worship. Think of that. He is sick to his stomach by worship. He calls their songs and their music noise! Wow, that is just amazing. And then, that famous line, certainly, you know, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Quoted this. It was part of the civil rights movement: Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream. Because when you do that, then you would be worshipping from a right place, but as it stands, you most certainly are not.

Well, in just a moment, we want to unravel more of Amos' powerful message, exploring how it resonates with our contemporary challenges, and calls us to a deeper, more authentic faith. So, stay tuned.

Segment 2

DARRELL DELANEY

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and we are going to dive deeper into the book of Amos here, Darrell, as this second program of a six-part series on the twelve minor prophets that round out the Old Testament. We have already seen Amos, this shepherd from Tekoa, now with fire in his belly, and he has an unflinching confrontation with injustice and sin. The people are so guilty of exploiting the vulnerable that when they try to worship God, God just gets sick to his stomach. He gets offended by worship that comes from a context of injustice. Because, Darrell, we read the book of Leviticus, God says not only should you not exploit the poor and the vulnerable: the widow, the orphan, the immigrant; you are supposed to go out of your way to make things extra nice for them...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Israel was making things extra horrible for them.

DARRELL DELANEY

Again, following the tune of the other nations around them, we see that God actually stands with those who have no voice and advocates for the people who are being trampled on; and he uses his prophet Amos to pick up the case of why this is such a big problem. In Amos Chapter 8, we read this. It says: ⁴Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, ⁵saying, "When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?"—skimping on the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, ⁶buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat."

So, they are not even caring about the ritualistic things they are doing for worship that they think will save them, they are actually thinking about what comes *after* that. Can we get back to the business week? Can we get back to the profit? Can we get back to making more money and exploiting the poor? So, their hearts are not even present, even in the rituals.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; it is like, oh, Sabbath, what a waste of time. A whole twenty-four hours, where we are not allowed to do business...not allowed to sell stuff. They are in the temple, you know, but they are tapping their toes...they are tapping their feet, like waiting out the clock...waiting out the clock. When can we go back to business? And then, to twist the knife even more, Amos says: And when you do go back to business, it is dirty business. You are cheating. You've got your thumb on the scales, so you are charging people for more wheat than they are actually getting. So, not only are they ridiculously impatient with the day of worship because, you know, it doesn't put any money in their pockets, when they *do* go back to business, it is exploitation; it is just robbery.

DARRELL DELANEY

And you know, I think the issue here is that they have not just thought about: Oh, we are going to make some money here, but there is actually a system they have set up that affects the society where they live, that makes this okay. So, there is something not just wrong interpersonally, there is something wrong corporately that Amos is addressing. This whole system you got set up has to come down. This whole system is dishonoring the Lord.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because God...if they had followed God's law...God also set up a system, a system of justice, you know; I mean, Leviticus and you read the law in the first five books of the Bible. That was a system that worked for the benefit of the poor, for the vulnerable...the widow, the orphan, the immigrant. But they have swapped out God's system with one that is just a systemic deviation from God's righteous standards. It is idolatrous, it is immoral, breaking all of the law. It is just...it is terrible. Again, Amos comes from the countryside of Tekoa and takes a look at what is really going on in the heart of Israel, and is horrified by what he sees.

In Amos 5, though, I mean, he says, you know: Look, I have to accuse you, but this doesn't have to be the end of the matter. So, here is Amos 5:14:

Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is.

¹⁵Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts. Perhaps the Lord God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph.

DARRELL DELANEY

Very similar to what is going on in our society today. There are people who they step on; people to get up the corporate ladder. They make a lot of money, or they try to make a lot of money; and all those things are not always ethical. Now, I am not saying it is bad to make money, or want to make money. I am saying that there is a standard that people of God are called to, and if you start throwing God's rules out of the window, and then you start cutting corners, then actually, you are going to be moving closer and closer to what God does not want us to be; and I love the fact that not only does God make that clear as an intervention, here is what we need to do; here is what we need to change; but he also gives a way of escape and a way of mercy to say: If you change, if you seek good, if you repent, then God can show mercy. I love the justice and then the mercy.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and Amos also says, you know, as long as you don't do that...so, now we are in Amos 4 beginning at verse 6: If you don't do that, don't expect me to help you. In fact, I will actually actively fight against you. verse 6 "I gave you empty stomachs in every city and lack of bread in every town, yet you have not returned to me," declares the Lord. ⁷"I [also] withheld rain from you when the harvest was still three months away. I sent rain on one town, but withheld it from another. One field had rain; another had none and dried up. ⁸People staggered from town to town for water but did not get enough to drink, yet you have not returned to me," declares the Lord. ⁹"Many times I struck your gardens and vineyards, destroying them with blight and mildew. Locusts devoured your fig and olive trees, yet you have not returned to me," declares the Lord. This goes on and on: I sent you plagues like I did Egypt. I overthrew some of you like I did Sodom and Gomorrah, and so forth; and yet, you did not return to me.

In other words, Darrell, God has been working really hard to get their attention and it isn't working.

DARRELL DELANEY

This is one thing that I love about God, because he could have just destroyed them; he could have just wiped them out; he could have just been done: I am going to create a whole new people; but he decides he wants to work with the people. He decides he wants to do everything he can to make sure that they are having the intervention they need to snap out of it. I mean, in the New Testament, it says in 1 Peter 5:5, He opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble. If you keep going in your prideful way, don't get upset that nothing is working for you. You are working against God's plan, and he is trying to get you to stop and turn back to him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

One of the things that we learn from the prophets, particularly Amos, I think, sometimes we too often think of sin as just a personal thing, like, I mess up, you know. I need my sins forgiven, and that is what I, you know... But the prophets make it clear that there can be systemic sin. There can be systemic racism. There can be systemic injustice. It is kind of baked in—it is wired into the system; and that is equally upsetting; and maybe God is trying to get our attention in various ways, when things in our lives or in our churches, in our congregations, in our societies fall apart, maybe God is trying to get our attention to make us, as you just said, come to our senses, to try to align our lives with God's plan and with God's vision for how the world should work.

DARRELL DELANEY

And no one can claim exemption...no one can claim exemption when it comes to that. Everyone is involved. We have all corrupted this thing, and God wants to use us to redeem this thing, and so, we need to actually come clean with God, and go to the process of repentance. This is exactly what Amos is calling them to do; and as we conclude this episode, we want to talk about some practical applications on how to live this message out today. So, stay tuned.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Darrell Delaney, and you are listening to *Groundwork*; and Darrell, as we wrap up this episode today on the book of Amos and his profound teachings, we want to get into the practical realm. We aren't ancient Israel, okay; so, we recognize that no nation on earth, including the United States, is a theocracy ruled by God, like Israel. Our countries today have a different status than Israel did, but that does not mean that as citizens of whatever country we live in as Christians, whether it is New Zealand or Canada or the US or Japan, that we shouldn't* have an interest in seeing public justice and in advocating for it. We learn that a lot in Amos.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; and he actually wants us to move beyond ritualistic actions. I mean, even though going to church is important...even though giving an offering is important...he wants us to not just lean back on that and say that makes us righteous. He wants us to live into the character that God has called us into. So, when justice rolls down like a river, and righteousness like a never-failing stream happens, it is an everyday life situation. It is about making sure you treat people fairly in all your dealings, and integrity in your relationships; it is about treating others with respect, and when you see things that are broken, you use your mouth and your voice to speak up against it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we live in a time, Darrell, and many of us are very aware of this, where...and particularly...I have heard this all over the place, from pastors in North American churches. If you talk about justice, some people write you off as *woke*, right? Being *woke*... and being *woke* is bad.

DARRELL DELANEY

It's political.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, you are being...justice is just a left-wing, political thing. Well, no; it is a biblical thing, and you cannot preach on the Bible, in either testament, and not eventually get to justice. It is not a partisan thing; it is a biblical thing...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you know, Darrell, even Jesus talks about it.

DARRELL DELANEY

And Jesus talks about it at the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:6: Blessed are those who seek after righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. They will be filled; and he actually tells them to live out what it means to walk justly and live according to what God's standard is. Even the Apostle Paul picks this up in Galatians 6:9 when he tells believers to not grow weary in doing good because they will reap...they will see it if they don't give up.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, it is interesting that you mention the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew 5, but there is also the parallel Sermon on the Plain in Luke...in Luke 6, and Luke does something interesting...well, he does two things that are kind of interesting that go to the heart of justice and the heart of what Amos was concerned about in terms of taking care of the vulnerable and the poor. Jesus, in Matthew 5, is a little bit more spiritual. He says, you know, blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are those who are hungry for righteousness. Luke just has Jesus say: Blessed are the poor...

DARRELL DELANEY

Period.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Blessed are the hungry; blessed are the persecuted; and then Luke adds something that Jesus in Matthew 5 doesn't have. He adds a series of corresponding woes: Woe to you who are rich now; woe to you who are well-fed now; woe to you who are well thought of now. So, Jesus is making clear...and Luke does this all through his gospel, that we are to be concerned that we be on the side of justice, particularly standing up for those who are most the victims of systematic inequality, systematic racism, systematic injustice. Jesus wants us to do what he did. Jesus always could spy the marginalized person; you know, he always saw the little people. He gravitated to them; they gravitated to him; and he says: Go and do likewise.

DARRELL DELANEY

And Jesus becomes their advocate—Jesus becomes their lawyer; the one who picks up their case and speaks on it, because either their voice has been diminished or has been taken away altogether, and Jesus shows us how we are to live. So, what makes this difficult, Scott, is that you cannot point to a system and say that is the problem.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

The system is elusive, it is in the walls, it is in the water, it is in the air that we breathe, figuratively speaking, but we as people have created these systems; and so, that means we as people can actually allow God to

Speak into these systems so that they can change. It is hard and it is marathon work, but definitely worth it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You said it was elusive. It reminds me of a scene from early in John Steinbeck's classic novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, where, you know, banks are gobbling up people's farms. They are foreclosing on farms, and so forth; and at one point, a displaced farmer says that he wants to get together and go shoot the banker, and he neighbor says: Well, it is not the banker's fault. You know, it is just the way it works. Well, whose fault is it? Well, the bank! It is the bank's fault. The guy says; How can I shoot a bank? I mean, who is to blame here, right? But that is sort of the idea; and again, you know, to find echoes of Amos in the New Testament, think of Jesus in the well-known passage of Matthew 25, you know: the sheep and the goats; and you know, he blesses those who are on his right; he blesses the sheep, and he says: ³⁵For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.

The sheep...the righteous say: When did we do all that to you? We don't remember seeing you. Jesus said: Yes, you saw me every time you saw a poor person; and then the goats say: Well, we don't remember *not* seeing you; and he said: Every time you *didn't* see an invisible person, you were missing me.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is really powerful how Jesus personally identifies with those people who are called "the least of these", the least, the lost, the left out, the looked over; these are the ones who Jesus resonates with; and actually, that passage right there, Scott, is very important to me. I serve as a chaplain in a jail ministry in Kalamazoo, *Reach the Forgotten*. I used to preach this one at church, but then, now God has called me as a person, along with the people in the community of Kalamazoo, to actually show love to people. So, when we do that, we are actually doing justice, we are loving mercy, and walking humbly; and we are serving in a tangible way, Jesus, because these people need it, and they are empowered when they leave. So, it really resonates with me that Jesus is asking us, not only to live out what it means to do justice, but take worship beyond church on Sunday.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Romans 12:1: [Therefore,] I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.

Actually, what it literally could say from the Greek: This is your true and proper liturgy; and it is not just on Sunday morning at church, it is everywhere you go; and so, how do we live into some of this? How do we avoid the things that Israel's leaders were guilty of, as Amos targeted them? We speak up for the voiceless; we see and make visible the invisible; we volunteer at foodbanks; we advocate for and mentor at-risk youth; we argue for and vote for fair housing practices. These are all things we do, both as a church corporately, but also as individual believers, so that we can lean into the things that Amos wanted Israel to do; we can lean into the things that Jesus so clearly called us to do.

DARRELL DELANEY

And ultimately, Scott, that means that we become ambassadors for Christ. We are using his power in the circles of influence that we live in, in our homes, our schools, our jobs, our social networks, our community, to be the light and witness he has called us to be; but we have to first acknowledge that we have been part of the problem, and we need to repent; and once we do that, we together can actually be instruments of shalom, where nothing is missing, nothing is broken, and everybody has what they need. When we do that, we honor God; thanks be to God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Thank you for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We hope you will join us next time as we study the prophetic book of Micah.

Connect with us now, though, at our website, groundworkonline.com. We would love for you to share what *Groundwork* means to you, and even make suggestions for future programs on *Groundwork*.

DARRELL DELANEY

Groundwork is a listener supported program produced by ReFrame Ministries. Visit reframeministries.org for more information and to find more resources to encourage your faith. We are your hosts, Darrell Delaney with Scott Hoezee.

***Correction:** In the audio of this episode, host Scott Hoezee misspeaks and says “should” when he meant to say “shouldn’t.”

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/justice-and-righteousness-in-amos>

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