

SUMMER 2 - For Three Sins.....Even for Four.....

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[0 : 00] Friends, I'll pray. Lord God, we pray that tonight as we look at this passage, you might help us understand it, you might help us see its relevance for us, and you might help us to see its relevance for our understanding of you.

And Father, we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, it was the 24th of April, 1915. In 2015, 600 Armenian leaders, writers, thinkers and professionals in Constantinople were rounded up.

They were deported and they were slaughtered. On the same day, 5,000 of the poorest Armenians were butchered in the streets. And the perpetrators were a racist group.

They belonged to the Central Committee of the Young Turk Party, which constituted the government of the Ottoman Empire in 1915 through to 1916. And the Central Committee set up a special organisation which, in turn, created things called butcher battalions, made up of violent criminals released from prison.

First, the Armenians in the army were disarmed. They were then placed in labour groups. They were then killed. Next, the Armenian political and intellectual leaders were rounded up and murdered.

[1 : 18] Finally, any remaining Armenians in the population were collected. They were told that they would be relocated. They were then marched off to concentration camps in the desert where they would starve and thirst to death beneath the burning sun.

Now, as they were marched off into the desert, they were often denied food and water. Many were brutalised. Many were killed by the guards on the way. And the authorities in Trezor Bond buried the routine.

They simply loaded Armenians onto barges, which they took out to sea. They were disposable barges, and they just sank them when they got out to the deep part of the sea. At the end of the exercise, there had been two million Armenians slaughtered.

And thus began a century that was supposed to be the most enlightened century in human history. Since then, we have seen genocide attempts in Germany, in Cambodia, in Rwanda, in Burundi, in Bosnia, in Iraq, in Kosovo, in Sierra Leone, and in the Sudan.

And that's just to name some of them. In our own country, we have witnessed and sometimes participated in forced assimilation of our own indigenous population. Or we have seen occupying soldiers in Iraq brutalise and torture captives after the Iraq war.

[2 : 38] We have seen the most powerful nation on earth play legal games in order to skirt around international treaty obligations that it signed up to. We have watched on television its orange-clad prisoners of war in Guantanamo Bay, only recently released.

Here in our own country, and some still to be released, here in our own country, we have seen refugees being used as pawns on both sides of politics because politicians know that we, the voters, have strong views on these issues.

Friends, tonight, we are going to take a look at seven ancient nations. They are nations that surround it. You can see them on the map there that I've given you tonight. They are nations that surround the nation of Israel.

And as we look at them, my suspicion is that there will be a tendency for us to look at these nations with arrogance and the people that populate them with arrogance.

And I suspect that we will say, well, they were uneducated, ancient cultures, we in the modern enlightened world know better. My reason for beginning the talk the way that I have is so that you might resist this tendency.

[3 : 49] You see, friends, I think the stories we are going to look at and the stories that we are going to be told in Amos are representative stories. And I think they're told because they are representative of the way that human beings were in those days.

But they also represent, and this is the tragedy, they also represent the way human beings are in our day. In other words, I'm saying that we ought not to be surprised about what God is going to tell us about human beings tonight because their story is our story.

Their humanity is our humanity. They are us. Friends, don't distance yourself from these people for this is the world that we live in as much as the world that ancient Israel lived in.

Our own history provides conclusive evidence of this fact. So, that in mind, let's move on to Amos 1. It's a rather ominous start, isn't it? Open your Bibles with me and follow it with me.

The first thing I want you to notice about Amos 1 is the general structure of what happens. Look at each passage that we read tonight. Did you hear the refrain as we work through? Notice what you see.

[4 : 57] Notice that between Amos 1 verse 3 and Amos 2 verse 5, there are seven distinct speeches by Amos the prophet. Each speech is addressed to a nation that surrounds the nation of Israel.

In the Bible, seven is the number for wholeness and completeness, as most of you would know. In other words, these sort of surrounding nations give a complete picture, a representative picture of what is going on around Israel.

The second thing I want you to notice is that there are certain standard elements in each of the prophecies. Did you hear them as we read through? Each starts off with announcements where God says, For three sins of X, even for four, I will not turn back.

You can see an example. Have a look in chapter 1 verse 3. Amos speaks God's words and says, For three transgressions of Damascus and for four, I will not revoke the punishment because...

Now, this way of speaking is one that was understood in the culture of Amos' day. It was not to be taken literally. It is simply a way of saying that something multiple has happened.

[6 : 06] Some multiple event has happened. It didn't just happen once. It didn't just happen twice, nor even three, but it happened multiple times. There's the beginning of these seven prophecies.

It is a standard start, but there's also a fairly standard end to each of them. In all of the prophecies, we look at God promises to judge with fire.

Did you hear the reference to fire all the way through the readings? God will send fire on the house of Hazael in verse 4. He will send fire on the wall of Gaza in verse 7, fire on the wall of Tyre in verse 10, fire on Teman in verse 12, fire to devour the strongholds of Ammon in verse 14, and fire on Moab in chapter 2 verse 1, and then finally, fire on Judah in chapter 2 verse 5.

Sometimes this fiery judgment is spelled out. For example, sometimes there's a specific judgment against specific people or groups of people. Look at Amos chapter 1, verses 4 to 5.

So I will send fire on the house of Hazeal, and it will devour the strongholds of Ben-Hadad. I will break the gate bars of Damascus, and cut off the inhabitants from the valley of Avon, and the one who holds the scepter from Beth Eden.

[7 : 25] And the people of Aram shall go into exile to curse, says the Lord. Now, fire was a standard element in ancient warfare. You know, when you occupied a city, you just burnt. You just burnt everything. It was often used to burn down the city gates before you even got in, or you'd burn the city to the ground once you got out, or once you'd sort of entered it and plundered everything.

And by using this language, God himself is being pictured as a warrior waging war. It may not be very politically correct in our world, but that is what this picture is of.

It is of God waging war. He is waging war against the people to whom these prophecies are directed, and he says it is a punishment that he is going to enact that will not be revoked.

And that refrain is repeated throughout the speeches. So there's the beginning of each prophecy. There's the end of each prophecy. And in between the beginning and the end, there is an indictment of the nation under the spotlight.

[8 : 24] In other words, in each prophecy, there is a particular element or sin that epitomizes the sin of this nation. There's the broad outline, friends, of what we're going to look at tonight.

And with that in mind, let's look at the detail. Turn to prophecy number one against Damascus. It occurs in chapter one, verses three to five, and it's directed to that nation Damascus, or that city Damascus, which probably represents the whole of the nation of Aram.

So you can talk about a nation by referring to its capital city. You know, one way of saying that the whole nation is to say that city. Like you could say of the North Samaria, which probably means the whole of the nation.

And you can also talk to it by referring to one or two of its kings. So you can talk about the whole of the nation by talking about Hazeal or Ben-Hadad.

The town of Gilead is mentioned in verse four. It's a town on the border of Aramean territory. Gilead was often the very first city to suffer military incursions.

[9 : 29] And it seems as though here is this city and that there was one particular military incursion during which a barbaric act occurred. Look at it in verse three.

Damascus, we are told, that is Aram, that is Syria, threshed Gilead with threshing sledges of iron. Now, let me just tell you a little bit about that.

The sleds or the threshers referred to here, to here are probably heavy wooden sleds, bent upward at the front like that. They have sharpened iron prongs or stones fastened to their undersides.

They're drawn along by oxen used to chop up ears of grain. And the threshing here, though, is not only of the land, but probably of people as well.

You see, it is a gross, cruel, inhuman treatment of the land and its occupants. It is a way of just desecrating everything and everyone.

[10 : 30] It is one for which we are told both rulers and people will be judged. It is a terrible thing to have done to a nation and its people. They will lose the country from which they migrated.

They will be sent back to their ultimate place of origin. We're told the people of Aram will go into exile in Keir, says the Lord. That's prophecy number one.

Prophecy number two is addressed to Gaza. Now, Gaza was one of the four, the five famous cities of the Philistines. Here it represents the whole Philistine nation in many ways.

And the particular sin that they are indicted for is in verse 6. They took captive whole communities and sold them to Eden. That is, they sold slaves as an economic fringe benefit of war.

We are not told of the identity of the people who were sold as slaves, but we are told to whom they were sold. The Edomites. It is possible that Edom sort of operated as a sort of middle man in the deal and the slaves were then sold on to buyers in Africa or southern Arabia, or maybe that they were just sold to the Edomites for work in their copper mines and smelting operations.

[11 : 43] The point is, though, can you see what's being said? The Philistines engaged in inhumanity and cruelty. They abused people by debasing them to just mere numbers or objects of merchandise.

They were just things to be bought and sold, captured and unsold. They forgot that these victims of war were people.

Like we so often do on those who land on the islands on the periphery of our country, the Philistines forget that they were dealing with people until we see their bodies smashed on rocks and then suddenly remember that they are people that are landing on our shores.

People who have children and parents. People who have homes and people who have a history. You see, the Philistines acted with inhumanity and cruelty.

They acted as no human being should. Prophecy number three is against Tyre. Again, the name of Tyre is a way of talking about the whole of the Phoenician nation and the charges listed against them are quite similar to those that the Philistines have charged against them.

[12 : 53] In verse 9, the Phoenicians acted as agents in slave commerce by delivering people to the Edomites. Now, the nation they enslaved, again, is not mentioned.

However, I want you to notice it's not the only criticism of this nation. God has an additional indictment against Tyre. Can you see it in verse 9? God says, They did not remember the covenant of kinship.

Now, this is the only time in the Bible that this phrase is mentioned. The actual covenant being referred to is not mentioned here. We don't know what it is. But let me tell you a bit about covenants.

To remember a covenant in the Old Testament means to observe it. That is to remember the way you should act or behave in response to it. So, when God remembers covenants, He acts rightly in response to them.

So, to not remember a covenant is to fail to do what is right for a covenant relationship. To not remember is to fail to observe the covenant.

[13 : 55] To fail to remember the way that you are meant to act. Can you see what's being said? Instead, the Phoenicians acted in a deplorable manner towards some group of people. They had a kinship relationship expressed in a covenant of kinship.

The people with whom they had this relationship would have expected them to act like kin. And like covenant partners. Instead, what did they do?

They broke their relationship and their covenant. And for financial gain, they sold these people, these kin by covenant, into slavery. They took their covenant partners.

They took their brothers. They immorally trafficked these humans for slave purposes. The modern moral equivalent, I think, and action is clear.

When a nation signs up to an international covenant of brotherhood or justice and then throws them out the window at the first opportunity, they are, I think, inheritors of the condemnation handed down here.

[14 : 59] And my guess is that they may also be inheritors of the judgment promised here. Prophecy number four is directed toward Edom. Now, as you're probably aware, the nation of Edom is descended from Esau.

That is, Jacob and Esau, those twins. Esau, the people who came from him, are the Edomites. In other words, they are a nation that traditionally had ties of kinship and brotherhood with Israel and Judah.

My own view is that that's probably what's meant by the term brother in verse 11. In the Genesis story, do you remember what happens? The relationship between the two brothers is described in this way.

It is prophesied that Esau will live by the sword. Genesis 27, verse 40. In Amos, do you see what we're told he'll do? He will pursue and persecute his brother with what?

The sword. In the Genesis story, we're told that the mother of Jacob thinks that Esau's anger will only be temporary. Genesis 27, 44 to 45.

[16 : 02] Can you see what happens here in Amos? Look at it. We're told of the anger of Esau that he maintained his anger perpetually and kept his wrath forever.

Verse 11 talks about the fact that he cast aside all pity. Can you hear what God is saying to this nation? Here is a nation that has an incessant, never-ending anger and fury.

It has subdued all sparks of mercy and thrown them out. The links between what Amos says here and what we see in our own world and even in our own lives are so apparent.

You see, we let, even at a personal level, anger boil and justify it. We stifle compassion and justify it. We shut our eyes to the pain we see in the eyes of others.

Use rationalizations or justifications regarding our own behavior because we are at the center of our own existence. Friends, the God we believe in created the whole world and the people of the world and he is a God of the whole world.

[17 : 15] He is our God. And as our God, he demands that we treat each other with dignity and respect. He demands that we treat each other as humans.

That is, as we ourselves wish to be treated by him. We were God's enemies, but he acted as our friend in Christ. He gave up his only son for our benefit.

And he tells us to love as we have been loved. To be merciful and kind, even as he has been merciful and kind to us. And friends, yet even in Christian congregations, we see this thrown out the window.

That brings us to prophecy number five. It's unrelenting, isn't it? This prophecy is directed toward Ammon. Look at verse 13. These people ripped open pregnant women in Gilead in order to enlarge their territory.

Now friends, from what we know, such barbarities of war were not unknown in the ancient world. The verb used here is a verb that is used elsewhere in the Old Testament to describe the activities of bears and other animals as they tear each other apart.

[18 : 31] Can you see what's being said here? Here it is human beings that rip open the bellies of pregnant women. And the justification is what? Territorial expansion.

For the sake of extending borders. Heinous, heinous sins are committed. Now this may be part and parcel of ancient warfare, but God does not regard this as an excuse.

Before God, such acts are savage and cruel and beyond the pale. However, let me tell you, as most of you will know, that these acts are not unusual.

Rape, torture of women, similar sorts of deeds have been used throughout human history as a weapon of war. They are being used in our world today. Acts of cruelty towards women and children in war are very common.

Such things have been used throughout the last century. Such cruelty is being used in parts of the world this very day. Prophecy number six is against Moab.

[19 : 36] And the focus of this prophecy is in chapter 2, verse 1. We're told that God's anger will be vented against Moab because he burned to lime the bones of the king of Edom.

Now it appears as though there are a few elements to this indictment, but at its core, I suspect it's a desecration of a human corpse. I think that's probably what's going on.

It's a bit of guesswork here. But I think what's happened is the phrase burnt to lime simply means the total destruction of a corpse. It may though mean that the bones of the Edomite king were burnt in order to obtain lime for the purpose of plastering or using whitewash for your house or whatever it might be.

In other words, it may mean the calcifying of human skeletons in order to acquire lime. Again, whichever it is, the point that Amos wants to make is that the Moabites have shown total disregard for human dignity and for respect for the bodies of people who have died.

They have callously acted to mistreat fellow human beings. Prophecy number seven is against Judah. Now this is the first prophecy to refer to the law of God.

[20 : 52] You see, where every other nation or people had an obligation towards God because they were the creation of God, this nation had an additional obligation.

This nation, you see, was more than just the creation of God. This was the redeemed, chosen people of God. They had not only a covenant of creation, but a covenant of redemption as well.

And in that covenant, they had obligations to hear and to obey God's word. They had obligations that they would have no other gods but him. They'd signed up to this back in Exodus 19 and 20.

But their history had left those obligations shattered. Loyalty to God had been replaced by the spurning of his teachings. And in place of affection for God, there is affection for other gods and returning to the gods of their ancestors.

This nation rejected the law of the Lord and have not kept his statutes. This nation that should have known better have been led astray by the same lies after which their ancestors walked.

[22 : 00] Friends, this is the prophecy of Amos against the nations. And let me tell you, he's just winding up for a last one against someone else. But we'll get to that next week.

What I want to do now is to see if we can summarize what God is saying through Amos in these prophecies. But before we do that, I just want to make sure that I've made myself clear.

See, I want you to notice what is common here. Did you hear it? Did you notice that with one possible exception, the sins that are indicted here are not sins against the people of God?

You see, they're not sins against God's people that are being spoken of here, it seems. They are sins against God himself. And they are sins against just ordinary, fellow human beings.

And that is what begins my summary of what we learned from Amos. If you take nothing else home, take home this. God is a God who loves his creation.

[23 : 03] And he loves those whom he has made, whoever they are. And he despises those who treat other human beings in such despicable ways.

To sin against a fellow human being, friends, is to sin against God who made them. That's any human being, not just those of the people of God.

That is human beings. Now that said, I want you to notice six other things that flow from this passage. Here they are, and you might want to write them down and ponder them this week.

Point number one. All human beings are in a relationship with God. Can you see that from Amos chapter 1? I think it's clear, really, because as far as God is concerned, all human beings have some sort of accountability structure to him.

You see, God can say to them, you should have done this and you haven't done this. And these are foreigners. As far as God is concerned, all human beings are in some sort of relationship with him.

[24 : 04] And my view is that they are related to him because they are his creation. God made them, so they are his. They are related, therefore, to him, whether they acknowledge that or not.

Second, all humans are accountable to God. That's clear enough through these prophecies, isn't it? I mean, God indicts them. He takes them to court.

It doesn't matter if you're God's chosen people or you're any other nation on earth or any other individual. These prophecies make clear that God not only looks at the actions of whole nations and holds them accountable, he looks at individuals as well and holds them accountable.

And so particular rulers are singled out because they let their nations do particular actions and ought not to have. All humans at all levels are accountable to God.

Third point is that all human beings know what is good and bad. That is, all human beings know what is good and bad. The Old Testament, the New Testament, and a number of non-Christian philosophers and thinkers have indicated that we human beings underneath it all know what is good and what is bad.

[25 : 21] The Bible makes it clear that we know this because God has placed this sense within us. Paul says it in Romans chapter 2 verses 15 and 16 that we have consciences that either accuse or defend us.

We know what is good and bad. We have a sense of it. The fourth point is that all human beings are inclined toward evil, toward bad.

Even if their sinfulness and their cruelty doesn't reach the depths of what is described here in this chapter, all humans are inclined toward bad.

Friends, I've deliberately worked hard to show you this tonight. I've deliberately given you examples from our day and our age of similar sorts of things that you see in the book of Amos chapter 1.

I've worked hard to show that the sins committed in the time of Amos are not unusual sins. The nature of the sins committed in the day of Amos are still common today. And the Bible is clear that they are common because the nature of human beings hasn't changed.

[26 : 31] Even if we don't do some of the gross things that we see outlined in these verses, we still do act, don't we, as self-willed, self-centered people. And it's that self-will, that self-centeredness that causes the very things we see in Amos 1 and 2.

Our attitudes, the thoughts of our hearts betray us. And we are like this. Our attitudes to our neighbours betray that we are like this.

Sure, we may have restrained ourselves, but in so many ways we tick this way. The hearts of humans are inclined away from God and His ways.

They're inclined toward evil and they're disposed toward sin. My fifth point is that God is long-suffering, but He will not hold off forever.

You see, friends, one of the functions of the phrase, for three sins, even for four, is this, isn't it? It indicates that God has actually held back for a little while. He's held back some of His judgment.

[27 : 37] Three or more similar sins have gone by and God has restrained Himself. And the rest of the Old Testament and the New Testament confirms this. He not only allows His nation to go on although they are sinful, He sometimes allows other godless nations to go on though they are sinful.

And have we not, friends, cried out in our hearts, God, will you not bring an end to the reign of such and such a person? But what these verses tell us is that God will not allow it to go on forever.

Their day will come and He will hold them accountable. And we cannot push God forever either. God will not hold off His judgment forever.

For some it will come in this life, but it isn't. If it does not come in this life, it will come in the next. God will not hold off His judgment forever. And my sixth point is that God speaks in Amos and speaks loudly and clearly.

And He promises that rebels will be punished. Eventually, God's long-suffering will end. You see, Amos and the Old and New Testaments tell us that sin must be punished, friends.

[28 : 51] It indicates that God will wage divine war against sin and those who commit it. You see, He's a moral and holy God and cannot allow sin to be left unpunished.

He cannot simply turn a blind eye to it and remain just. And if He's not just, friends, you don't want to worship Him. So there are other things we learn from this passage in Amos.

And the New Testament agrees with everything that Amos says. But the New Testament also spills out two extra points that are implied in the Old, but spelt out in the New. The seventh point is that God has provided a way out for humans.

He has provided a way whereby humans might be reconciled, forgiven and restored to relationship with Him. The New Testament tells us that God sent His Son into the world.

That Jesus enables us to be forgiven. We have celebrated that fact here tonight. God enables us to be justified rather than condemned.

[29 : 55] He enables us to be reconciled to God. In one sense, He does revoke the punishment that was due to us. Well, in another sense, not because His Son takes it for us.

But I want you to turn in your Bibles to 2 Corinthians chapter 5, verses 16 to 21. 2 Corinthians 5, 16 to 21.

If you're looking for it, you'll get to 1 and 2 Corinthians and find chapter 5.

And I want to read from verse 16. 1 Corinthians 5, 16 to 21.

And He has given us the ministry of reconciliation. That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

[31 : 17] For we are ambassadors for Christ. Since God is making His appeal through us, we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

For our sake, He made Him who knew no sin to be sin, who knew no sin, that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. Look at verse 19 again.

In Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them. And that's the seventh point.

But there is an eighth. And the eighth point is that God calls upon people everywhere to repent and to trust in Jesus. You see, the message of the Christian gospel is clear. God calls upon people everywhere, in every age, no matter who they are, where they come from, what age they live in, what they have done, no matter how gross it might be, God calls upon everyone to repent and to trust in Jesus.

And He promises them, as clearly as He promises judgment, that when they do come to Jesus, He will grant them amnesty. He will give them eternal life.

[32 : 31] He will give them what they do not deserve. He will give them life that is eternal in quality and quantity. He will be to them like a welcoming Father, rather than a divine man of war.

There will be peace, rather than the fierce heat of judgment. Friends, please hear the message tonight. If you are already Christian, then you've heard this passage condemn you, and you've heard this passage condemn you, then, friends, go to the only place there is to go.

Flee to the Lord Jesus. Flee to the cool shelter offered in the cross. And if you're not Christian, and you're here tonight, then I beg you to hear this message.

I beg you. I want to even use the words of Paul to do it in verses 20 and 21. He says this, We entreat you, on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

For our sake. He made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him, we might become the righteousness of God.

[33 : 47] Friends, if you are not Christian tonight, and you are here, please, please turn away from the inevitable fire of God's judgment, and turn to the cool and receptive shelter from judgment, offered in God's Son, Jesus Christ.

We entreat you, on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. And there is only one way to do it, and that is through the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

Let's pray. Let's pray.