

In the ancient near east, when a king conquered another country, he would establish a treaty with it, making a covenant with his new vassals. In this covenant, the king would establish his claim over the people with a historical prologue, explaining his rightful rule, and would set forth the stipulations governing their conduct toward him, including the penalties for disobedience, and the rewards for obedience. Finally the king would call witnesses who could testify to the ratification of the covenant. Moses' sermons in Deuteronomy follow this same covenant-treaty pattern. In Dt 1-4 Moses sets forth the history of God's gracious dealings with Israel. Then in chapters 5-26 he sets forth the covenant law of God, the stipulations that Israel must keep as God's covenant people. In Dt 27-28 Moses set forth the blessings that would result if Israel kept God's covenant, and the curses that would result if they broke his covenant. (Read 28:1-6, 15-19) Then in Dt 29-30, Moses explains that Israel is going to fail, But that God will restore Israel in the end. (Read Dt 30:1-6). And Moses called heaven and earth to witness this covenant (verse 19). And in Dt 31-34 Moses sets forth the disposition of the covenant for the future, with the anointing of Joshua as Moses' successor as mediator.

More than five hundred years later, a sheep breeder from Tekoa was called to prosecute Israel for breaking God's covenant. Israel had separated from Judah more than two hundred years before, and the northern kingdom had a history of idolatry and corrupt worship. The King was not pleased with how his subjects had flagrantly violated his law. Now Amos would come as the prophetic covenant lawyer, bringing the divine lawsuit against the people of God. In a prophetic lawsuit the prophet speaks on behalf of God—who is both plaintiff and judge, past relations are reviewed—especially recent disobedience, witnesses are summoned, indictments are delivered, repentance is offered and the threatened punishment is specified. Amos's prophesy is very clearly structured. After God makes it clear that he will judge all nations in chapter 1, he sets forth his covenant lawsuit against Israel in chapters 2-6. which is followed in chapters 7-9 with his visions of judgment, and finally, in the very end, of restoration and blessing.

There are four parts to Amos's covenant lawsuit in chapters 2-6, we'll cover the first two today. First, Amos 2:6-16 sets forth the basic charge against Israel a summary of the case that God is making (verses 6-11, ending with "declares the Lord"), and the initial warning of judgment (verses 12-16, again ending with "declares the Lord"). Then in chapter 3, Amos establishes God's right to bring judgment, naming the nations as witnesses (3:1-10—ending with "declares the Lord"), and then declares the specific judgment that will come against Israel (3:11-15—again ending with "declares the Lord."). Then, in chapter 4 (which we will cover next week), God explains the rationale for his judgment in six declarations, (4:1-11), concluding with God's own oath, whereby God swears by himself that he will do this. And finally in chapters 5-6 we hear Amos's lamentation over Israel. And each of these last three sections begin with the words, "Hear this word." (3:1, 4:1, 5:1)

We saw last week the basic charge in verses 6-8: oppressing the poor, committing sexual immorality, and profaning God's holy worship through violating his law. These are explicit violations of the covenant that God had established with his people. Exodus 21 had established clear restrictions on slavery; Leviticus 18 plainly forbade father and son from sleeping with the same woman, and since Amos is likely talking about temple prostitution, adultery was compounded with idolatry. And Exodus 22:26 insisted that a poor man's cloak should be returned to him each night so that he would not lose his only covering at night. In verses 9-11, God reminds Israel of what he had done. "I destroyed the Amorite before them, whose height was like the height of the cedars and who was as strong as the oaks." In Numbers, Israel had failed to enter the land because of their fear of the nations, because they were afraid of the Amorites and the other peoples of Canaan. The Amorites dwelt around Jerusalem, and they were the first peoples that the Israelites conquered in Deuteronomy and Joshua. So Amos uses the term "Amorite" to refer to all the nations that he removed from the land. God declares that he was the one who destroyed the Amorites, even though they were greater and stronger than Israel. And further, God

reminds his people that he was the one who had brought them out of Egypt. He was the one who delivered them from slavery, and gave them a new land. But he had not merely given them the land, he had also given them prophets to speak his word, to remind them of God's commandments and to show them the way of life. And besides the prophets, he had given them the Nazirites. What was a Nazirite? And why does Amos seem to consider Nazirites to be of similar importance to prophets? In Numbers 6, God gives the law of the Nazirite. "When either a man or a woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to the LORD, he shall separate himself from wine and strong drink." The Nazirite could eat no grape product, he could not cut his hair or his beard, he could not go near a dead body (even of his parents or siblings). "All the days of his separation he is holy to the LORD." (Numbers 6:8): And when his days of separation were complete, he (or she, remember that women could be Nazirites as well) would bring both a male lamb and a female lamb without blemish as a sin offering, and a ram without blemish as a peace offering, along with a grain offering and drink offering. The Nazirite would then shave his "consecrated head at the entrance of the tent of meeting and shall take the hair from his consecrated head and put it on the fire that is under the sacrifice of the peace offering." And after the sacrifice of the peace offering, the Nazirite may drink wine. The Nazirite, as Amos suggests, was generally a young man or woman who desired to be holy, to separate himself to the LORD. The Bible does not go into detail as to what the Nazirite *did* during the period of his or her vow, but the point was that they desired to live wholeheartedly for Yahweh. The sacrifices required at the end of the Nazirite vow make it clear that the Nazirite was setting their heart on Christ. The sin offering testified to the fact that even in their quest for holiness, they acknowledged their need for a sacrifice. The peace offering, with its grain and drink offerings, testified to their need for communion with God. It is interesting to note that the first century Christians continued to practice Nazirite vows. The apostle Paul paid for the Nazirite vows of several Jewish Christians in Acts 21:23-26. The law of the Nazirite is plainly bound up with the ceremonial law that has passed away, but it would be to our shame if we failed to learn from it. It is appropriate to take vows before God, devoting ourselves to his service. The elders take such vows, but it is also appropriate for others to take temporary vows, like the vow of the Nazirite. The great error of Roman Catholic monasticism is that they require lifetime vows are a gift from God to his church. How do we think of this gift? And this section, too, ends with "*declares the LORD.*"

Amos now turns to the initial proclamation of judgment: "But you made the Nazirites drink wine"- You didn't want these young men and women to set their hearts on me. You didn't want these young people to be holy. You enticed them into breaking their vows! This could translate today into: you focused so much on getting the young people married off, that you did not encourage them to set their hearts on ME! "And commanded the prophets, saying, 'you shall not prophesy.'" You didn't want to hear the word of the LORD. This one is common enough today. The preaching of the word has fallen on hard times. And to such a people, God declares, 2:13-16, Judgment will come upon Israel for their refusal to hear the Word of the Lord, and their persistent efforts to sabotage others who desired to know God. And once again, we hear the solemn refrain, "*declares the LORD.*" Then Amos turns to God's right to judge. Israel, after all, might ask, "who is Yahweh, that he condemns us?!" 3:1, Again he reminds them that he was the one who had delivered them from Egypt. 3:2, Israel had prided themselves on their special standing as God's covenant people. But God points out that nearness to God is not a matter for pride, but of humility! Judgment is coming upon Israel, because they have heard and rejected the word of the Lord. This was Jesus point in Matthew 11. It will be easier for Tyre and Sidon-and even easier for Sodom-in the day of judgment, than for those who have beheld the mighty works of God, and refuse to believe. And wherever the gospel is proclaimed, the judgment of God falls. Because in the gospel, we proclaim the mighty works of God. Not merely a release from bondage to Egypt, but the forgiveness of sins. Not merely the good news that God will dwell in a tent of wood and gold, but the good news that the Holy Spirit has been poured out upon the church. Because in Jesus Christ we behold the mighty works of God. In verses 3-6, Amos asks a series of rhetorical questions: Do two walk together unless they have agreed to meet? Of course not! Does a lion roar in the forest when he has no prey? Of course not!

Does a young lion cry out from his den if he has taken nothing? No. Does a bird fall in a snare on the earth, when there is no trap for it? Come on, Amos, do you think we're stupid? Does a snare spring up from the ground when it has taken nothing? No. Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid? Of course not. Trumpets were used to warn of invading armies. Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has done it? Oh. Amos then zeros in on his target once again: "For the Lord GOD does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets." The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord GOD has spoken; who can but prophesy?" God has the right to judge; God has the authority to judge; and God is now going to judge. But before judgment falls, God wishes to call witnesses. This is a standard part of the covenant lawsuit. There must be witnesses who can attest to God's justice in his dealings. In Deuteronomy Moses called heaven and earth to witness, here Amos calls for the Philistines and the Egyptians: 3:9-10, Bitter irony! The Egyptians are called to testify to the oppression of the poor in Israel! *The Egyptians?!!!* The Egyptians oppressed Israel for 400 years! And the *Philistines?!!* All you have to do is read Judges and 1 Samuel to know that the Philistines had oppressed Israel for centuries as well! But now they are called as God's witnesses to see that Israel is no better than they were. And this too concludes, "declares the LORD."

Finally, in 3:11-15, God pronounces judgment. "An adversary shall surround the land and bring down your defenses from you, and your strongholds shall be plundered." When the church fails to hear the word of the Lord, the strongholds of the church are plundered. Geneva is a good example. I spoke last week of the effect of the Reformation on Geneva. The Academy of Geneva became the leading center of Reformed theology. The University of Geneva has been plundered. Today it has moved far from its Reformed roots. Harvard, Yale and Princeton are examples of other strongholds of the church that have been plundered because the church no longer desired to hear the Word of the Lord. And this is what the Lord says about this: "As the shepherd rescues from the mouth of the lion two legs, or a piece of an ear, so shall the people of Israel who dwell in Samaria be rescued, with the corner of a couch and a part of a bed." Here Amos introduces the remnant theme. God will deliver his people-but only a remnant. It is like when a lion devours a sheep-and the shepherd only recovers a piece of an ear.

In verses 13-15, God speaks to the prophet, "Hear, and testify against the house of Jacob," declares the Lord GOD, the God of hosts." When God calls himself "the God of hosts," there is a definite sense of judgment involved. This name of God is used especially by Jeremiah (five times), and in six Psalms. But it is especially prominent in Amos (eight times). God declares that he will come with his armies to punish Israel. This judgment will center on the altars of Bethel. Israel had established two centers of worship-in Bethel and in Dan, in violation of God's command to worship him only in Jerusalem. Jeroboam I was afraid that the Israelite people would return to the house of David, so he established Israel's own altars. Now in the reign of Jeroboam II, God declares that he would bring destruction upon these altars. And with this, all of the great houses of Israel would perish.

Judgment is coming upon the houses of God's people. Where do you turn? Amos gives a hint to the northern kingdom at the beginning of his epistle: "The LORD roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem." You who have worshiped at Bethel and Dan, turn your hearts to Jerusalem, turn your hearts to the son of David! And at the end of his prophecy he makes it explicit: "In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen." (9:11) Judgment is coming. Only the remnant will be saved. Only those whose hearts are turned, like the Nazirites, to the Lord GOD. Only those who remember God's promises to David, to establish his Son on his throne forever. Your only hope is Jesus Christ. He is the sin offering who removes your iniquities. He is the peace offering who brings you fellowship with God.

The prophecy of Amos warns us of the results of trusting anyone or anything but Christ. And as we come to the Lord's Table today, we partake of Jesus Christ, the peace offering of the church. Your sins have been forgiven through his sacrifice, now partake of him who loved us and gave himself for us, for he is our life-the true bread from heaven which nourishes us unto eternal life.