

LESSON ONE

No Exceptions

FOCAL TEXT

Amos 1:1–3, 6, 9, 13; 2:1, 4–16

BACKGROUND

Amos 1–2

MAIN IDEA

God makes no exceptions in holding people accountable for their actions.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

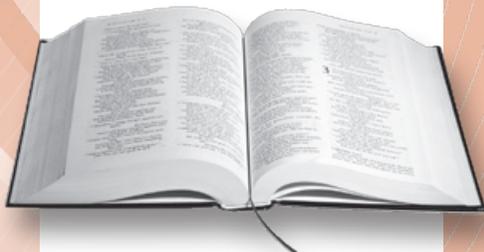
Are we really so exceptional that God's expectations do not apply to us?

STUDY AIM

To acknowledge that God's expectations apply to me and not merely to everyone else

QUICK READ

Every person is accountable to God. That includes those who serve God, those who choose to ignore God, and those who believe in and belong to God.



The phrase *American exceptionalism* refers to the theory that the United States of America is qualitatively different from all other nations of the world. This theory emphasizes American ideals of liberty emerging from its revolutionary beginning. The theory does not necessarily imply superiority, but some people use it to make that assertion.

Most Americans are proud of their country. That does not mean, however, that they believe that their nation is under God's exclusive protection and is superior to all others. It also does not express the belief that they live in a perfect nation.

Amos the prophet encountered a form of *Israelite exceptionalism*. Seemingly, many of his contemporaries believed that they lived under God's protective favor. They believed either that they never did anything wrong or that God would never punish them even if they did.

AMOS 1:1–3, 6, 9, 13

¹ The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa—what he saw concerning Israel two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of Israel.

² He said:

“The LORD roars from Zion
and thunders from Jerusalem;
the pastures of the shepherds dry up,
and the top of Carmel withers.”

³ This is what the LORD says:

“For three sins of Damascus,
even for four, I will not turn back my wrath.
Because she threshed Gilead
with sledges having iron teeth,



⁶ This is what the LORD says:

“For three sins of Gaza,
even for four, I will not turn back my wrath.
Because she took captive whole communities
and sold them to Edom,

- and the needy for a pair of sandals.
- 7 They trample on the heads of the poor
as upon the dust of the ground
and deny justice to the oppressed.
Father and son use the same girl
and so profane my holy name.
- 8 They lie down beside every altar
on garments taken in pledge.
In the house of their god
they drink wine taken as fines.
- 9 "I destroyed the Amorite before them,
though he was tall as the cedars
and strong as the oaks.
I destroyed his fruit above
and his roots below.
- 10 "I brought you up out of Egypt,
and I led you forty years in the desert
to give you the land of the Amorites.
- 11 I also raised up prophets from among your sons
and Nazirites from among your young men.
Is this not true, people of Israel?"
- declares the LORD.
- 12 "But you made the Nazirites drink wine
and commanded the prophets not to prophesy.
- 13 "Now then, I will crush you
as a cart crushes when loaded with grain.
- 14 The swift will not escape,
the strong will not muster their strength,
and the warrior will not save his life.
- 15 The archer will not stand his ground,
the fleet-footed soldier will not get away,
and the horseman will not save his life.
- 16 Even the bravest warriors
will flee naked on that day,"
- declares the LORD.

Expectations for All Who Are Called by God (1:1–2)

Job descriptions are necessary in any business or profession. They are essential in clarifying the expectations of an employer. God calls us to salvation. He then calls us to serve him. That is our divine job description with no exceptions. The prophet Amos fulfilled God's expectations for his ministry.

The name of this prophet relates to *bearing a burden* or *lifting a load*. "Tekoa" was a village in the Southern kingdom of Judah about twelve miles south of Jerusalem and some twenty miles west of the Dead Sea on the edge of the Judean wilderness.

The Hebrew word underlying "shepherds," *noqed*, is not the normal term for shepherds. In its only other Old Testament reference, 2 Kings 3:4, it describes the Moabite king who supplied 100,000 animals to the king of Israel. Amos was either someone who merely tended sheep or someone who was a sheep breeder and owner of substantial flocks. The latter would mean that Amos was himself a member of the wealthy class toward which he directed his harshest words.

Yahweh called Amos to speak the message that he would give him to say. Amos declared that he was not part of any group of *professional prophets* but that God had called him away from his agricultural vocation to proclaim God's word (Amos 7:14–15). He knew the necessity of doing what God expected him to do (3:8).

The recipient of the ministry of Amos was Israel, also called the Northern kingdom. Amos was the only writing (or canonical) prophet who lived in Judah but was called to represent God in Israel. The Israelites would not have been thrilled to hear anything from him.

When did the ministry of Amos take place? The two kings noted here were contemporaries in the eighth century B.C. They both enjoyed long, prosperous reigns. Amos's King Uzziah (also known as Azariah) ruled Judah for fifty-two years, 783–742 (2 Kings 15; 2 Chronicles 26). Jeroboam II (the first Jeroboam was the first king of the Northern kingdom) ruled Israel during the years 786–746 (2 Kings 14:23–29). His death was the beginning of the end for Israel's existence.

The specific chronological reference is "two years before the earthquake." The African Rift Fault runs through the Jordan River Valley, making the land of Israel and Judah prone to earthquakes. This particular one must have been especially severe. Some 200 years later, the

prophet Zechariah remembered it (Zechariah 14:5). The prominent Israeli archaeologist Yigael Yadin identified evidence of an earthquake that affected Hazor that he dated to 765–760 B.C.

“Words” (Amos 1:1), usually singular in the first verse of prophetic books, was a technical term for the sayings or messages of the prophets. Amos “saw” these words. “Saw” meant *to perceive or understand a truth that is spoken or to experience a vision*. The Book of Amos includes both words (Amos 1–6) and visions (Amos 7–9).

The theme of Amos’s preaching was the judgment of God (1:2). The God of Amos was depicted as a roaring lion, poised and fully committed to the attack and destruction of its intended prey (see also Joel 3:16; Jeremiah 25:30). The Lord would roar from his dwelling place or from the temple in Jerusalem. “Zion” referred to the mountain fortress that was incorporated into the city of Jerusalem and became another name for the city.

The second picture of judgment is thunder, which usually produces the rain of the storm; however, on this occasion the thunder would produce drought and devastation. The green pastures of the shepherds would suffer. “Carmel” is a prominent mountain jutting out into the Mediterranean Sea at the northwestern end of the Jezreel Valley.

THE NUMERICAL SAYING

Careful readers of Amos 1–2 quickly detect the standardized form or patterned way in which Amos expressed the judgment sayings on the nations. The phrase, “for three sins . . . even for four,” begins all eight pronouncements. Amos was the only prophet in the Old Testament to use this literary device.

This kind of numerical saying (n and $n + 1$) was a favorite tool of the wisdom teachers in Israel (Job 5:19; Proverbs 6:16–19; 30:15–17, 18–20, 21–23, 29–31). They used it to organize a number of items for consideration and reflection. Favorite numbers used by them were three/four and six/seven. The numbers should not be taken literally. Amos did not mean that God would forgive three of their sins but not the fourth one. He used the numerical saying to assert that the sinfulness of the nations had reached a saturation point with God. God had had enough of their rebellion and determined to punish them.

“Carmel” means *fruitful land*, and it was noted for its rich soil and heavy vegetation.

Expectations for All Who Are Created by God (1:3—2:3)

These verses record the first prophetic preaching by Amos in Israel. He probably delivered this sermon at either Samaria, the political center, or Bethel, the religious center of Israel.

Israel’s God was the sovereign God over all people groups in the world. He had created all of them and had expectations that they treat one another in humane ways, with no exceptions.

Announcements of judgment against foreign nations are common in the prophetic literature (see also Isaiah 13—23; Jeremiah 46—51; and Ezekiel 25—32). Amos is the only prophet to begin his message with them. Also unique to Amos is the standardized form or patterned way in which he packaged these words of judgment on other nations. (See the small article, “The Numerical Saying.”)

The other prophets used these pronouncements to imply that God would save his people by punishing others. Amos used them to announce God’s judgment on Israel and Judah. They would not be exempt from punishment.

The prophets introduced their messages in a stylized or formulaic way. One phrase they frequently used is “this is what the LORD says” (Amos 1:3). This is called the *messenger formula* because royal decrees announced by heralds or messengers began with *this is what the king says*.

The Hebrew word for “sins” in each judgment saying denotes a rebellion against the authority of one’s superior. This rebellion was expressed in the oppression of others or inhumane treatment, crimes against humanity.

The classical judgment sayings asserted by the prophets included two elements: the indictment or accusation of the sins committed and the declaration of punishment for the sins. Each of these focal verses provides the first of these two elements.

If you were to consult a map of ancient Israel while reading Amos 1:3—2:3, you would see that geographically Amos encircled Judah and Israel by announcing the judgment of God on all their neighbors. The

TO DISCIPLINE OR NOT TO DISCIPLINE

This scenario was reality for me during my children's growing up years. Your sons and other neighborhood boys are playing football in your yard when rough tackling causes tempers to flare. All the participants share in the blame of the fight that results. How do you respond?

- Discipline no one (boys will be boys).
- Discipline your kids only.
- Discipline your kids and other kids equally.
- Discipline all the kids but your kids more firmly.

My now adult sons could reveal to you what I chose to do. We know what our heavenly Father does.

Israelites listening to Amos would have been hearty in their rousing *amens* and *preach on, brother*. They probably fell in love with this new prophet as they listened to his message in these verses.

Damascus (1:3), or the people called Arameans, was a serious enemy of Israel. Gaza (1:6) was one of the five chief Philistine cities (Gath is the only one not mentioned here). They were Israel's most dangerous threat until the time of David. They were involved in human trafficking. Tyre (1:9) was the most important Phoenician city in Amos's day. The "treaty of brotherhood" (1:9) may refer to the alliances enjoyed by David and Solomon with the Phoenician kings. Ammon (1:13) and Moab (2:1) were kingdoms east of the Jordan River and were ethnically linked to Israel and Judah. Amos accused them of outrageous behavior against vulnerable members of society and shameful treatment of conquered enemies.

Expectations for All Who Are in Community with God (2:4–16)

Amos included the Southern kingdom, Judah, as a recipient of God's judgment (2:4–5). In all statements previous to this one, the basis of God's judgment was a general inhumane treatment of others. Here God would

judge Judah because of her rebellious disobedience to God's instructions revealed in his law for them.

God's judgment was described as destructive fire (see 1:4, 7, 10, 12, 14; 2:2). Israelites would not have been that bothered by the destruction of their southern neighbor. Maybe they still felt comfortable with Amos, but not for long. The new prophet *brought the hammer down* on Israel (2:6–16).

This eighth and final oracle of judgment differs from the others. It is longer and breaks the pattern or form. Amos changed the dialogue from the customary third person to the second person of direct address (2:10–16). In our vernacular, this is *I am talking to YOU*.

Amos first brought specific charges of sin against Israel (2:6–8). “Righteous” denotes those who are innocent of legal charges brought against them. “Sandals” were sometimes used in legal transactions, especially of property. “Trample” probably means *to turn away or deny due process to individuals*. “The same girl” used by both father and son may refer to a slave girl.

The innocent poor experienced injustice at the hands of the rich and powerful who used the legal system selfishly. The wealthy placed no value on the poorer elements of society, especially female slaves as they used them for their own gratification.

Israel had no legitimate reason for acting in this sinful and oppressive way, for they had a divine advantage (2:9–12). God had given them this land after liberating them from Egypt and leading them through the wilderness. God also provided spiritual leaders to guide them, but they opposed both prophets (Elijah and Elisha) and Nazirites (Samuel and Samson).

Israel sinned in spite of the work of God within them; consequently, God would bring judgment on them (2:13–16). Amos depicted this total destruction in two ways. The first picture is defeat by a military enemy. The Assyrians would be that enemy. The seven phrases represent the various facets of Israel's army, revealing that the defeat would be comprehensive (2:14–16).

The other picture is more difficult to interpret (2:13). The word “crush” occurs nowhere else in the Old Testament. Most interpreters favor a meaning of the pressing of a heavy weight as when a cart of grain groans under the heavy weight of the produce. Others think it depicts the overloaded cart that shakes and quivers like the earth does during

an earthquake. Amos said either that the Israelites would be completely crushed under the heavy hand of God's judgment or that they would be swallowed up by a crevice in the earth.

Touching Your Life

In recent years, we have seen many examples of powerful, famous people who seemed to think they could engage in risky behavior and escape the negative consequences. Why is it that those who enjoy *red carpet* treatment conclude that they will never be *called on the carpet* for their shameful behavior? They do it because they are sinners. We do it too, but it generally is not the subject of blogs and tweets because we are not famous.

We believe that others will be judged by God for their immoral actions but that somehow we will avoid the same judgment for our moral failures. We are wrong in that belief. In fact all people are accountable to God for the way that we treat both God and others.

QUESTIONS

1. God called Amos from Judah to minister in Israel. Have you ever been called by God to do something but thought that he should use someone else? What did you do or not do?

