

RUF Bible Study – The Minor Prophets
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Amos – Does God Care?

I want you to imagine your worst night. I have mine in mind, even though I don't like to think of it at all. What was yours? Was something done to you that night? Did you wake up in a place you hadn't started off at?

What was said to you that night? Are those words burned in your memory?

What did you feel that night? Can you remember the feelings of loneliness, of despair, of humiliation, of hopelessness, of jealousy?

I cry almost every time I hear Patty Griffin sing the song, *Sweet Lorraine*. Lorraine grew up in a terrible, poor, drunk home. When she left home, her mother threw rocks at her in hatred. Finally Lorraine got engaged to be married. But what a tragic scene:

Her daddy called her a slut and a whore On the night before her wedding day

The very next morning at the church Her daddy gave Lorraine away

The best day of her life is ruined. It's tinged with sadness. She cannot escape the wounds.

It's my belief that almost all of us have something like this in our lives. If we pull back the veil, we see tremendous brokenness and heartache. We often cover it all up, but it's in there. We're petrified to share these moments with others, so we hide them away.

So in those moments, does God care? If he doesn't care in those moments does he care at all?

Does he care about Haiti? About international injustice? About the homeless? About famous people like Tiger Woods or President Obama or President Boren or Bob Stoops?

Does he care about Megan and Mallory Carey? They lost their grandmother this week. Kyle Williams lost his great grandfather this week. What do you think when you get that awful phone call that your high school friend has died in a car wreck? When we sit in a funeral grieving, we often ask ourselves, Does God care?

What about the pain of divorce? Parents often try out the line, "It will be better for the kids if we're not together any more." That is never, true is it? You want them together and have no say in the matter. Every kid wants their parents to stay married. Does God care about this? Does he care about me?

Does he care about me? Does he care about my free time and how I spend it? About my classes and what I'm learning (or if I'm going)? What my grades are? My body, my eating, how much I work out? What about my thoughts?

Does God care when I get ignored by someone? When I don't get asked to the dance? When I suffer from someone's neglect?

Does God care when I do those things to others? When I'm the perpetrator instead of the victim?

Do you think there is a creator who has made all things and holds all things together? Or do you think we are the process of biology, moving forward with no real purpose or goal except to procreate, dominate and eventually die? Or do you function as a practical atheist? You acknowledge God. You went to the zany junior high church lock ins and threw cheesy pops on each other's whipped cream faces. You maybe got a Bible for graduating. But really in your heart, it doesn't matter to you, it doesn't affect you in a day to day life.

I've seen many people write God off when bad things happened. They conclude that he doesn't care after all. Is that warranted reasoning?

Today we're going to look at the book of Amos. Amos is the third minor prophet in our series. Minor prophets mean the books are smaller. They're just as important, but we'll have to admit we don't go there very often in our Bible reading or in sermons we've heard. They're neglected.

But they shouldn't be. Amos was called by God to be a prophet to his people. He is the first of the writing prophets, meaning he wrote down what he said instead of only preaching it. Amos lived in the 750s B.C. He would have been contemporary with Isaiah, Hosea and Jonah – other prophets. Amos was preaching and writing to the Northern tribes of Israel. They had broken away from the rest (what we call Judah) and had made their own key cities and temples, forsaking Jerusalem as the central place of worship.

And Israel was doing really well at this time. It was a prosperous place. People were conservative, religious and wealthy. Does that sound familiar? Amos has a lot to say to us. This ancient text is actually relevant for our place and our time. So let's see what Amos might say to us and see if he might answer whether or not God cares for us.

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For this series, I used commentaries by McComiskey, Boice and Dever, and listened to sermons by as many people as I can find, especially Tim Keller, Jeff Ferguson. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

God cares enough to speak.

After we get Amos' biographical information in verse one, the next words are, "*And he said: The Lord roars from Zion.*"

God talks. We have God's words. This is a pretty amazing thing that we gloss over all the time. The Bible is God talking to us. We often wonder what God says or if he's listening. He does listen. He does talk. He is a speaking God. Sure, he doesn't talk over the loudspeaker at the football game. He doesn't have a youtube channel on the internet. But he speaks through his word, which you can very easily get your hands on. Read his word. Hear his word. Listen to Jesus who *is* his word.

God doesn't only speak. He also roars. *The Lord roars from Zion*. Sometimes God speaks in a still, small voice. The Bible tells us to be still so we can know and hear God. We can read God's word. We listen to it in sermons. We study it in Bible study. We see it and even eat it in the Lord's Supper.

Here God is roaring. Like a plane taking off overheard. Like the SuperBowl crowd before kickoff. Like a waterfall you're standing under. Like Aslan. This is something to take notice of and listen to. You shouldn't just walk away. Listen!

Last spring I went to my first NASCAR race with my friend Wade Jewett. It was something I had wanted to do at least once since the Texas Motor Speedway was so close (3 hours away). Every time we'd pass by I'd tell Julie I thought it would be fun to go one day. So she got me tickets. I wore my BassPro hat and my Guns and Roses shirt and met Wade down there for a fun three hours.

We sat down as close as we could. We brought some ear plugs, but they were not adequate for how loud it was! We ended up almost on the front row and the cars roared past us in a blur. All we could see was them coming toward us and then the sound. We could see the sound. We ended up not being able to talk. We sat there and watched cars for three hours, because we couldn't speak over the noise. It drowned everything else out.

God is roaring now. Amos is the sound of the cars. I'm sure you have distractions in your life, things that make you stop paying attention to God. But God is speaking. He speaks and he roars because he cares. Pay attention to God.

Amos is the messenger of God speaking to a lost, straying disobedient people. They are religious and wealthy, but they have created their own temples instead of worshiping at God's stated place in Jerusalem. God is speaking from that place, from Zion, from Jerusalem. He's not coming from anywhere else.

Go to the places where God talks. He talks through Jesus. He talks through pastors and preachers who preach the Bible and the gospel of Jesus. Not a message of good works or self-improvement or believing in yourself. God talks when Jesus talks. Listen to him. Listen to his roar.

God cares enough to feed.

When I was in college, our ministry wore tshirts that had Amos 8:11 on them. We were so cool for being so obscure. *The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will send a famine on the land. Not a hunger for bread or a thirst for food, but a famine for hearing the words of the Lord.*

We were praying for this famine, which we interpreted as a hunger for God and his word. It was a really good prayer. But slowly it occurred to me that this verse means there will be a lack of supplies. There will be a lack. Not a fulfillment. Famines are bad. Famines make you die.

So I think we don't want to pray for a famine. We are in one. Students do not love Jesus, the church and the Bible. Some do, and for that I am thankful. But most don't. About 80% of the students at OU claim to be Christians. They would mark the Christian box for religion. We live in one of the most churched states in the country. But I don't see students going to church. I don't see students reading the Bible. I don't see more than maybe 1000 students going to campus ministries. Going to those things don't prove that you are a Christian. They don't make you a Christian. But Christians want to hear the word. They want to see other Christians. They want to bring their friends to hear about Jesus faithfully preached and taught in the Bible. They want to study the word themselves, to read good books about theology and helping needy people.

A famine is a wider problem than just a person. I see a famine on the land, a famine for hearing the words of the Lord. I pray that God would break that famine and pour out his word on his people and on all the land. That we would be fed.

Another picture of hunger that I see on campus a lot isn't really famine, but I'd call it a spiritual eating disorder. Many Christians look into the mirror of their spiritual lives and they see themselves as fat. Maybe you grew up in church. Maybe you went to Fall's Creek every summer. Maybe you signed a virginity pledge. Maybe you used to read the Bible.

But for some reason now you think you should diet from that stuff. To be sure, some of it was unhealthy eating. Some of it was fast food or junkfood Christianity. But you have swung the other way, and now are trying to starve yourself. You think you have so much spiritual reserve that you can coast for a long time and get things under control. So you stay away. You purposely keep yourself spiritually hungry because you think that's what people want. When you do eat you often only eat useless calories and junk food and drink caffeine.

In a famine people cry out for food. In a famine people who have the food need to create distribution centers in order to get that food to the people who need it. People who know where to get food need to share with the people who need it.

In spiritual anorexia, you need to see yourself as someone who is dying without food. You must admit your neediness and cry out for change. You are viewing the world in an inaccurate way. God says you need to eat healthy and every day.

That's the way we work. Jesus says, "I am the bread of life and I am the vine." Feed on him. You cannot have too much of him.

God cares that we do not remain hungry. If he sends hunger, it is to wake us up to our true need and our true spiritual condition. Jesus said, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness – those who see their need and their lack and understand how much they must have a savior and eat from him.

God cares about hypocrisy.

During this sermon from Amos, we see several themes. As God speaks, he starts talking about the way his people treat people. God cares about injustice. He cares about right and wrong. He cares about hypocrisy.

Look at 4:1, "*Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor and crush the needy, who say to your husbands, 'Bring that we may drink.'*"

God calls the women cows. I'd say that is pretty brave and bold. They stand around getting fat and happy, asking for cocktails at the pool, while their servants cook and clean for them to keep them lazy and privileged. The person I think of is Lucille Bluth from Arrested Development.

This is one of the themes of Amos. Lazy, luxurious, self-indulgent, compassionless people who don't care what happens to others. Yes there is an outside of religion. There are temples and prayers and priests, but are the people loving other people? Do they really love God or is this just all outside and fake?

Surely we can relate. We are so privileged. I know you may not feel like you have much money, but you are in the top 1% of all people who have lived in the world. People would kill to have your dorm room. People would think that the Caf was some sort of heaven if they could eat their once, much less every day.

I'm not saying to make you feel guilty for those things. But I don't think we are very thankful. I'm not. I wish I had more. I wish I had nicer. I wish I had newer and faster. I'm not content.

God says that I prove that I don't understand the gospel and that I don't really love Jesus as I either ignore the needs of others or I do things that hurt them.

The book of James talks about this. Jesus talks about this with the Pharisees. We must be very wary of being religious people who like conservatism or moralism or free speech or whatever and who actually hate God in our hearts. As Martin Luther said, we believe in faith not works. We are saved because we believe in Christ alone for our salvation. Not Jesus plus anything else. But our faith is not alone. Works flow out of faith. Works are the fruit of a life that is gripped by the gospel. The fruit of the Spirit is displayed in a life in which the Spirit resides.

If you are saying you are a Christian, but you are only living for yourself, or you never are helping others, or seeing compassion in your life, or not giving away your time and money and you're only trying to get ahead in this world – then you have to ask yourself, "Do I really believe in Christ?"

Amos tells us to seek good and not evil that you may live. (5:14) There is the passive evil of ignoring others. There is the subtle evil of turning away. There is the lower level evil of selfishness, position and taking advantage of others.²

God cares about living for him and being real and seeking good. As Keller says, we should be more conservative with our sex and more promiscuous with our time and money. We have it all backwards.

God cares about right and wrong.

Amos reminds us that God is sovereign. He knows all and sees all. He isn't like Sauron in the Lord of Rings. He seems like he knows all and that creepy eye is really big and has a lot of scary electricity. But he gets distracted. He can't find Bilbo all the time. He can be tricked.

God really does see all. He is sovereign, in charge. And he knows right and wrong.

In the chapter 7 God describes a plumb line. This is probably the most famous image from Amos. A plumb line is a straight line used for building so you can get your angles and surfaces correctly built. It would be analogous to a chalk line or a ruler. You have to know where you're supposed to be in order to see if you have deviated from it.

We all have plumb lines in our hearts, but these vary around and aren't always so obvious to us. We have a standard whereby we measure ourselves and others.

Imagine at freshmen bible study if we have a straight line drawing contest, but the line had to go all the way across the room. I'll bet Natalie's would be pretty straight. Mine would wobble a lot, so I'd be out. Phil seems like he might be able to be patient enough to work hard and fight for the lead.

I'd guess we'd probably discuss the lines and debate who drew the straightest one. Some would give up and be frustrated at this whole process. Others would rebel and draw loopy lines on purpose to protest. We'd come up with a winner.

² "A failure to show concern for the poor shows a misunderstanding of our own fragile situation – our own pressing need for God's merciful attention to us in our sin. A religion that allows its adherents to take advantage of the poor, oppress the righteous, obstruct justice and ignore God's warnings is a false religion." Dever, 735

But then we might get out a really long ruler or a measuring tape. This would be our plumb line, our standard. None of us would measure up. None of us would be able to claim true straightness.

We try and try to draw those lines. We try to get others to think we have the straightest. We try to be the most beautiful or the funniest or the smartest or the hardest worker or the best racquetball player or the most well-read or the most insightful or the most savvy or the best dressed or... whatever. We try to find our niche, and we just people who don't measure up to our standards.

Amos reminds us that we all fail the real standard. None of us draw straight lines in our lives or hearts. You might think it's straight. You might be straighter than someone else, but you fall short of the standard. In 2:13, God says like Drago in Rocky IV, "I will break you."

Well that sucks, but actually it is comforting that God knows and he cares about good and evil. There actually is a standard. In our world of greed, corruption, abuse, hurt, hatred, murder, war and neglect, God says those things are wrong.

God cares about insignificant people.

It's encouraging to me to see that it's Amos that is talking. I could have put this at the front of the message but I needed a break from the plumb line. Amos is a nobody, just like you and me.

God has this amazing knack for picking people like this. Read the Bible and notice how many times he picks some obscure person, not at all the rich and famous, not the beautiful or intelligent.

He picked Abraham, who was just an old guy hanging out with his old wife. He picked Jacob, the second son instead of the first. God picked Leah and not Rachel to have the Messiah's lineage come through. Leah was the forgotten unwanted ugly one. But God picked her. He picked Joseph, the last of the sons. He picked Moses, who had been barely saved, then did live a life of privilege but for the wrong side. When God spoke to him in the burning bush, he'd been wandering out in the desert for a long time, living a life of exile because he had killed someone. David was the last son in line. His dad didn't even bring him when the prophet came looking for a king. He was an afterthought, the runt of the litter.

But God picks people like that. So often we're trying to be the first son, the prettiest wife, the most intelligent one, the most glamorous one, the most well-liked one.

In the end, we are trying to be like people that God *won't* pick, because he goes after the broken, the weak, the poor, the overlooked, the forgotten. Let's remember that those people are valued in God's sight.

So when you are in those broken places in your life and in your heart. When you are with these people and you are these people, then we are very near to God and his heart. God picked Amos to be his prophet. God cares about small people. There are no little people with God.

God cares about the future.

One last thing that Amos tells us that God cares about in this text. He cares about the past. We see that in his speaking to Amos in the context of his day. I'm contending that God cares about the present. Amos is still relevant and real for us today. God is still speaking. But God also cares about the future.

The end of Amos is filled with a prophecy about the restoration of the world.

9:13 *Behold, the days are coming,* declares the Lord, *"when the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. 14 I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. 15 I will plant them on their land, and they shall never again be uprooted out of the land that I have given them," says the Lord your God.*

We are heading to a day when all will be set right. Kyle's great-grandfather will be restored. Megan and Mallory's grandmother will be restored. Baby Lucy (Julie's niece) will be restored. The world will be set right again. Sin will be finally stopped and destruction will end. The devil will be silenced and no longer wreak his havoc. Jesus will reign in glory and majesty and goodness.

Is that your vision for the future? Do you hope and long for this? Do you think we're going to get there with more education? We're the most educated world ever, but it's not working. I'm for education, but we can also just make people sin more intelligently. Are you for more prosperity? That doesn't solve our hearts. In fact, it can just make us more and more greedy. Is it more equality? I'm for that, but the issue isn't really equality because we have hatred in our hearts.

There are a ton of posters up all over OU telling you to stop the violence, or get your breasts checked, or say no to smoking. Some of these are driven by better information, some by fear even.

But the real change comes from being gripped by a vision that things can change. The radical change we're longing for is the change that only Jesus bring in the new heavens and the new earth, when everything is set right again. That is our great hope. Come quickly, Lord Jesus.

Have you forgotten already your worst night? I'm sorry to bring it up again. Most of us think God wasn't there in that place and it makes us wonder if he cares at all.

I want you to remember Peter's worst night. It's detailed in John 18, when Peter betrayed and denied his best friend, his Savior, Jesus Christ. That really, really sucked.

But Jesus was there. In Luke 22:61 immediately after Peter's last denial of knowing Jesus, we read, *And the Lord turned and looked at Peter.*

Wow. Jesus was there in Peter's worst night. It's weird. Jesus didn't stop Peter from saying it. Jesus didn't prevent Peter's worst night, and surely he could have. I don't know why he didn't.

Jesus didn't prevent your worst night either. He could have but he didn't. I think you should talk to Jesus about that. It's okay to be mad at him. Most of the time we just block it out and ignore it and brick up that place in our hearts. I think Jesus was there. And he looks at you not in a mad face or a disappointed face. He looks at you, like I think he looked at Peter, with a face of love. Because he cares.