

**“Bring us some drinks!” Amos 4:1**

## 1. The Consumer Society - Then and Now

The society of Amos' day could be very aptly described as a “consumer society”. The prophet would have instantly recognised the accuracy of the title, even if the modern version may have a much greater choice of luxuries for a greater number of people. It has, of course, been seen many times in history. In 750 BC “When Uzziah was king of Judah, Jeroboam was king of Israel” and Amos was prophesying (Amos 1:1), it was just such a time. It was not only a time of high living, however. It was also a time when God spoke through numerous prophets of his displeasure at some of the things he saw in that society. Amos began this prophetic thrust, and what he had to say is very relevant to us simply because the times in which he lived are astonishingly like our own. God's assessments of those times are something for our consumer society to dwell on carefully.

As with any consumer society the most obvious feature was its extraordinary prosperity and luxury. This was primarily because the reigns of Uzziah and Jeroboam were long and peaceful, reigns in which commerce and business could flourish. Each king ruled for about 40 years, Uzziah from 783 BC to 742 BC, and Jeroboam from 782 BC to 745 BC, and throughout their time these two kings were sensible enough not to fight each other. They put aside all the traditional national prejudices and turned their backs on the history of conflict that had been present ever since Israel had split off from Judah at the end of Solomon's reign. They knew that more was to be gained by leaving each other in peace than by wasting their resources on fighting. Thus long decades of devastation in Palestine came to an end, for when these two dominant nations made peace with each other the other nations fell into line.

Moreover, at that time there was no superpower to threaten their stability from outside. Assyria, Babylon and Egypt, the potential superpowers, were all weak and unable to interfere. Thus the stage was set for a time of enormous economic expansion, since trade could now flow freely from Damascus in the north to the gulf of Aqabah in the far south. It was on this platform of widespread peace and trading opportunity that the great prosperity of this period was built.

**The consumer society has been seen many times before in history**

**There is a marked correspondence in this scenario with our own times.** A prolonged peace in Europe has lasted for over 60 years, of which the last 40 have seen an immense growth of wealth and luxury through a developing globalised trade. As was the case in Amos' day, there has been a unique lull in the struggles and wars that have affected almost every generation on this continent. A refusal of the major European powers to fight each other, and the containment and collapse of the only superpower that threatened the peace, Russia, has left us with an unparalleled economic prosperity. The absence of major conflict among other advanced nations in the world has been a further basis for this development. Thus in the Western world, and in other countries in the world associated with its economic and technological growth, luxury goods, now abound. Choice, as was the case in Amos' day (at least for the rich), is the order of the day. Trade, wealth, extravagance are multiplied. The race is now for more money with which to indulge.

**It was to such an age that God had something severe to say through Amos.**

## 2. Social Collapse

There is nothing necessarily evil in prosperity. Poverty is a curse which no one wants to see. Prosperity is a blessing and is promised to the righteous. It was God who blessed Solomon with prosperity. However, prosperity brings great dangers and challenges. It was prosperity, and the idolatry that grew fat on it, that proved to be the Achilles heel for Solomon, and brought about the splitting of his kingdom. In the same way prosperity threatened the Israel of Jeroboam. For behind the picture of prosperity and wealth lay a major weakness, which Amos sums up with a key word, “oppression”. It soon becomes evident in Amos that the “oppression among her people” is the oppression of the poor by the rich. The fact is that the vast inflow of wealth had polarized the rich and the poor, the former getting richer and the latter getting poorer. The gap between them was widening, as more and more money was squeezed from the poor.

Amos spells out the root of this oppression. It lay in an intense and insatiable desire for money, and the things money could buy - land, houses and possessions. The rich said Amos, “*hoard plunder and loot in their fortresses*” (3:10). They were never satisfied. Pushing aside their religious scruples, they could not “*wait for the new moon to be over, and for the Sabbath to be ended so that they could market wheat*” (8:5). Making money was the main objective of life, for it was the key to pleasure and self-indulgence. This led, in Amos' day, to a gross and callous exploitation of the poor: “*They sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed*” (2:6-7). Again and again in Amos, this charge of oppression is repeated, as for example in 4:1:

**“prosperity brings great dangers, and easily leads to oppression”**

“*you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, ‘Bring us some drinks!’*” and 5:11: “*you trample on the poor and force him to give you grain*”; cp also 7:4 and 6:6.

Amos further exposes the fact that this money-making could not be satisfied with ordinary business transactions. Far more was to be made through corrupt channels. Honesty disappeared and there was no redress for the poor at law, for even the judges took bribes: “*You oppress the righteous and take bribes, and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts*” (5:12); “*you turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground*” (5:7). Amos is aware of their sharp, dishonest business

practices: “skimping the measure, boosting the price, and cheating with dishonest scales, selling even the sweepings with the wheat.” (8:5-6), and he knows that it is only so that they might indulge in drink and food (a very significant feature of the consumer age! 4:1) and bigger houses. For many, therefore, the blessings which might have been associated with wealth in fact had become a curse. The gods of war may have been dethroned, but in their place **the god of Mammon had been enthroned**. The nation was learning the truth that “*the love of money is the root of all evil*”: it had brought about callous corruption and threatened social disintegration. Indeed the national economy itself was under threat, though the leaders of the nation and the rich, basking in their excessive luxury, were blind to that.

The fact of the matter is that prosperity, rather than bringing a general sense of satisfaction, released dark and selfish forces for gain and profit, which did not ask too many questions about the impact they were having on society in general. Greed was much more the mark than satisfaction. The general upbeat picture of a wealthy consumer nation does not always bear close scrutiny when its social life is looked at closely. The money-making spirit leads to corruption and excess among the rich and huge debt among the poor. The huge debt in Amos’ day was the result of swindling the poor of their possessions; in our day we have a huge debt across society which is the fruit of a massive onslaught of easy credit designed to increase the profits of rich producers. The latter is no less a swindle than the former. It is simply hidden.

**It was with this degenerate spirit of callous greed underlying the prosperity that God took such great displeasure.**

### 3 Religious and moral collapse

Amos had a contemporary, who also prophesied in the period of Jeroboam and Uzziah. This was Hosea (Hosea 1:1). Whereas Amos has a strong, almost exclusive focus on the economic evils of a growing and oppressive divide between rich and poor, Hosea paints a much wider picture of society in general, a society riddled with all the marks of moral and spiritual collapse. He sums up his picture in these words: “*Hear the word of the LORD, you Israelites, because the LORD has a charge to bring against you who live in the land: “There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed”*. Hosea 4:1-2

**“Lying, murder, stealing and adultery attack the very fabric of society”**

“Lying, murder, stealing and adultery”, these attack the very fabric of society, and make life oppressive, fearful and painful for all. Stealing and violence, like greed, soon mark the behaviour of those who cannot keep up with their appetite for pleasure or find themselves dispossessed in the midst of the plenty. But in all strata of that society they were the quick routes to easy gain and indulgence, and at the same time the beginnings of the road to disaster. They were in the “bloodstream” of the nation, and they represented the loss of the most basic standards without which society cannot properly function. The probability is that the rot started at the top of the social ladder (since the main weight of Amos’ stricture falls on national leaders, both religious and secular), and it was their corrupt behaviour that gave license for all ranks to follow the same pattern.

At the heart of God’s charge was the fact that “*there is no acknowledgement of God in the land*”, and, closely allied to that, “*there is no faithfulness, no love*”. The “*acknowledgement of God*” meant the acknowledgement of the God of Moses, the Jehovah God, whose covenant with Israel was one based on strong moral commands. To acknowledge him was to live as he required, and he required the rejection of lying, stealing, murder and adultery. He demanded faithfulness and love, both to God and to neighbour. His people were required, not simply to have faith in God, but faith in a God who was holy and righteous, and who expected those who followed him to show the same righteousness.

**“Hedonistic ages will always seek a rationale for loose sexual behaviour, whether in paganism, liberalism or some other ideology”**

It was, therefore, in the rejection of the God of their fathers, in the rejection of this Yahweh, this righteous covenant God, and in the adoption of more convenient and more “helpful” gods that the beginnings of the moral landslide was to be found. Hosea proclaimed, for example, that the widespread practice of adultery lay in the embracing of pagan rites. He finds a clear link between the prevailing adultery and the current pagan ritual prostitution: “*I will not punish your daughters when they turn to prostitution, nor your daughters-in-law when they commit adultery, because the men themselves consort with harlots and sacrifice with shrine prostitutes”* Hosea 4:13-14 When men ceased to believe in Yahweh and the moral rectitude he commanded, and adopted the Baals with their encouragement of the fertility rites of prostitution the whole land became polluted. Baal worship provided, in other words, a rationale for

adultery and prostitution in society – it was good for the fertility of crops and for growth. That was the accepted wisdom of the age. Hedonistic ages will always seek to provide a rationale for loose sexual behaviour, whether it is based in paganism, liberalism or some other ideology. And such a powerful passion as sex requires very little rationale in order to be released. Choice and freedom of sex is a massive demand of the consumer society; sex is closely allied to the whole money-making culture of such society. There is no rationale, however, for such behaviour in the God of Israel – only a call to appropriate self-control, and a grim warning of the consequences of loose sexual behaviour.

**God’s word through Amos is strong. He is not indifferent to what he sees happening. God might well see prosperity and be pleased about it. But prosperity that is characterized by money-making greed, corruption and lawlessness is not to be tolerated. Neither is permissive sexual indulgence. There has to be a radical change. A return to basic morality is a minimum requirement. A return to God is the only way to secure that. God demands a change. It is not optional.**

**It is the sheer severity of the warnings that come through Amos that most demand our attention. They spelt out the fact that the judgements that would follow failure to change would be catastrophic - peace and consumerism would be replaced by war, conquest, exile and oppression. Plenty would give way to devastation and destruction; high living to poverty and death.**