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Summers of Indulgence: Amos 2.6-8

JOE HAYS

MY SUMMER OF INDULGENCE

It was going to be the best summer of my life. Day by day my enthusiasm grew as I planned who I would have over when and for how long. As the days lengthened, my anticipation grew stronger. What was all the excitement about? We were putting in a swimming pool in our backyard.

As heavy machinery made its way in and out of our backyard, the people of our small town drove by and stared in amazement. Classmates started treating me differently. Some were nicer, but not all.

I remember vividly getting in an argument with some guys on the school basketball courts. After several minutes of dispute about a rule, a couple of them finally walked off the court with these parting words, "We don't want to play with you anyway, rich kid."

I couldn't believe my ears. "What are you talking about? I'm not rich!"

They just laughed and pointed over my shoulder at the big machines moving in and out of our backyard.

JEROBOAM'S SUMMER OF INDULGENCE

Jeroboam couldn't wait for summertime. He had each day planned and knew exactly what he was going to be doing and when. What was all the excitement about? Jeroboam was going to his extravagant new summer home.

Within its ivory halls he was going to eat the best meat, sing the greatest songs, and drink his fill of the finest wine. He was going to lounge on beds of ivory and be anointed with the finest oils.

Those who lived nearby made it a point to see the new home made of ivory. They were in awe of the spectacle. Rumors made their way through the streets about the extravagant plans being made for the king upon his arrival. Many were not happy, but no one dared say a word. None save one.

Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away. (Amos 6:4-7)

The royal court was scandalized. Who dared speak truth to power? Who dared interrupt the king's long awaited summer of rest, relaxation and luxury?

WHO IS THIS MAN?

His name was Amos, and he was, in his own words, "a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees" (7:14). But the Lord plucked him up from his shepherding duties and placed a prophetic word in his mouth. And so it came to pass that a simple shepherd from a small town in Judah confronted the royal court of Israel with the word of the Lord.

Amos's prophetic words were not words of inspiration or hope. He did not come to tickle the ears of kings, queens, and royal priests. His mission was not to gain access to the royal court with hopes of landing a job. He cared not what they thought of him or his message. He had a job to do, a calling to fulfill—no matter the consequences.

Amos spoke his message. And it was not well received. And he was thrown out of the Northern Kingdom, commanded never to return. Just what was it that he said that caused such a reaction?

Amos's Message

Amos's message began innocently enough. Words of punishment concerning foreign nations filled out his speech. These foreign countries were in trouble with God for many reasons. Transgressions such as their treatment of the Northern Kingdom, Israel, found disfavor in God's eyes. Others were condemned for their slave trafficking. And still others were indicted for their handling of the dead. Generally speaking, the royal court was accustomed to hearing foreign nations indicted by God. No doubt, this prophetic word pleased the court. But Amos was just getting started.

He then condemned the Southern Kingdom, Judah, his homeland, for rejecting the law of the Lord and not keeping God's commands. The consequence of these actions would be a fire that would devour the strongholds of Jerusalem.

Although this message was cause for concern for Israel's royalty, they were still in the clear. But once again, Amos was not finished just yet. He had one more oracle of doom:

Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way; father and son go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned; they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed. (2:6-8)

And as if that were not enough, Amos went on to elaborate on the condemnation of the Israelite people. "An adversary shall surround the land, and strip you of your defense; and your strongholds shall be plundered" (3:11). Or in other words, "you will be overthrown."

The elite of Israel, the king, judges, priests and the upper class were consumed with the quest for luxury and comfort. They used those without power and without voice to build their palaces and summer and winter homes.

Although God tried to get their attention through various warnings, they did not have ears to hear. They continued to indulge in luxuries while those outside the palace walls suffered. Because their hearts were hard, Amos's message was one of doom and destruction.

I AM RICH!

They laughed and pointed over my shoulder to the big machines moving in and out of my backyard making room for our new swimming pool.

I couldn't believe my ears: "Rich kid!" I walked home in anger, indignant that I would be called such a thing. I came across my sister and told her of the ridiculous remarks made by my peers. "Can you believe they called me a rich kid? We're not rich!" To which she replied, "Yes, we are."

I didn't want to be labeled a "rich kid." I didn't want to be set apart. However, I couldn't escape the reality that my family was rich. We had a swimming pool, two nice cars, money in the bank, and food to spare. I lacked for nothing.

We live in an era of prosperity. We lack for nothing. We are the modern-day Israelite ruling class with power, prosperity, and position. And if you are having a hard time believing that, then consider the findings of David J. Smith's project reflected in the book, *If the World Were a Village*.¹

Smith did a project with one of his public school classes that took statistics from the U. S. Census. They condensed the world's population into an imaginary village made up of 100 people. In this village of 100 people there is no shortage of food, but the food isn't divided equally; therefore, 60 people are always hungry, and 26 are severely undernourished. When was the last time you missed a meal because your pantry was empty?

The richest 20 people each have more than \$9,000 a year, and the poorest 20 people each have less than \$1 a day. Do you make more than \$9,000 a year? If you have money in the bank, money in your wallet, and spare change somewhere around the house, then you are among the richest eight.

If you have a car, you are among the richest seven. Do you drive a car or two? Only two people in the village have computers; are you one of them? Only one has a college education. Are you that person?

Amos, a foreigner to the Israelite royal court and a foreigner to us, bursts onto the scene and warns us of our prosperity. He reminds us, the rich, that we have a duty. Those of us who are the "haves" of society must take care of those who are the "have nots" of our society.

[Amos] reminds us, the rich, that we have a duty. Those of us who are the "haves" of society must take care of those who are the "have nots" of our society.

We have the opportunity to make right what is so obviously wrong. We have the chance to be a part of the community that helps "repair the booth of David that is fallen" (Amos 9:11). If we will watch out for, take care of, and remember the poor, then we have the opportunity to "repair its breaches and raise up its ruins" (Amos 9:11). The question is, "How? How should we react to Amos's warning? What should we do?"

OUR RESPONSE

As I was still brooding over being called a "rich kid," our doorbell rang. It was a husband and wife bringing us fresh food and vegetables from their garden. I innocently and obliviously took the food. They said, "Tell your dad, thanks." I took the food to my mom and asked her about it. She informed me that my dad, an accountant, did tax returns for families without money.

I then noticed my mother, an educator, giving special attention to students who were at risk because of their home environment and helping those families of students who were without power, prosperity, or position.

Mom and Dad often invited classmates of mine over for dinner and sleepovers. I now realize it was because those classmates had hard home situations and my parents were trying to give them a break from the absurdity.

Yes, we could have lived with much less, and although my parents are not perfect in their economic dealings, they were and still are examples of how we are to live according to the will of God. *We must use our gifts, spiritual and physical, in order to help those who are helpless.*

Jesus said, "The poor will always be among us." However, that doesn't mean they have to be homeless, without running water or electricity, without an education, or without a fair opportunity to make a living wage. Do we care about these people? Or have we become complacent in our suburban homes and churches? Have we forgotten the words of Jesus from when he quoted the prophet Isaiah, "I have come to preach good news to the poor?" (Luke 4:18) Have we forgotten the words of John, Peter, and James to Paul, "remember the poor?" (Gal 2:10) In other words, will we be like the royal court of Israel who can't stand

to hear the words of Amos, or will we be a part of the community of God that raises up the booth of David once more?

Do you have services that could benefit the poor? Are you a doctor, teacher, electrician, minister, plumber, dentist, or secretary? Can you make available the gifts God has given you to those in need? There are after-school programs that need volunteers, and there are ministries in urban settings that are always clamoring for specialists.

**Can you open up the doors
of your churches to the poor
and genuinely accept them as
brothers and sisters?**

Can you be a voice for those who are voiceless and speak to those in ruling positions about the situations of our struggling brothers and sisters?

Landlords are known for taking advantage of the poor. Day-labor halls are known for abusing homeless men and women. There are advocacy groups that are in desperate need of volunteers to speak out about these abuses.

Do you have money to give to services and ministries that specifically serve the desolate? Inner-city ministries, social services, and nonprofit organizations are often underfunded. Financial assistance is an ever-present need.

Can you open up the doors of your churches to the poor and genuinely accept them as brothers and sisters? We must love and welcome all, not just people who look like us, dress like us, smell like us, and speak like us.

Amos's message was not accepted. The royal court of Israel was quick to dismiss the words of an outsider challenging their comfortable way of life. They gambled that his words were not really the word of God.

Will Amos's message fare any better with us?

JOE HAYS

Mr. Hays was the preaching minister at the Fortress Church of Christ in Forth Worth, Texas. In August, he will become the associate minister of the Manhattan Church of Christ. He holds a master of divinity degree from Princeton Theological Seminary.

ENDNOTES

- 1 David J. Smith, *If the World Were a Village: A Book about the World's People* (Toronto: Kids Can Press, 2002).

