

Amos 1:1-2:16 - DiCicco

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[0:00] We need justice. The first time I learned this, I was on the soccer field.

I was about 13 years old, standing just outside of bounds with the ball in my hands. This kid comes running up to me as I'm trying to pass it to my teammate. He's jumping up and down, just inches away from me, toes on the other side of this white line.

And I try to time it right so I can throw it past him as he falls down, but he saw that coming. He faked a jump, and as the ball left my hands, he jumped straight up, and my throw hit him square in the face.

It was one of the most satisfying moments of my soccer career. It wasn't my fault. I tried not to. But the ref, who was just feet away from us, blew his whistle, pointed at me, pulled out a yellow card. What? That was the first time I knew. We need justice. Kids, maybe you know this kind of feeling.

[1:05] Have you ever been punished for something, and then just a couple minutes later, your brother or your sister does the exact same thing, and nothing happens?

Has that ever happened to you? I remember that happening to me, just welling up inside. But mom, dad, didn't you see what he just... We need justice.

This isn't a Christian thing. We all know this feeling, the sense that the way the world is isn't the way it should be. We feel it in small ways.

Biased refs and distracted parents. That person who cuts right in front of you to take your parking space that you've been waiting for. We feel this need, but we feel it in big ways, too.

When bombs start dropping, civilians are caught in the crossfire of things far beyond their reach.

When modern slavery hits the headlines and we read of cobalt mines, sweat shops, brick kilns, where kids as young as mine, two and four, work alongside their families to pay off a debt that will never, ever be paid down.

[2:24] We need justice. This isn't a Christian longing. We all sense the distance between the way the world is and the way it ought to be, and the distance just seems to grow.

We need justice. A few thousand years ago, this is exactly where God's people were. The nation of Israel was surrounded by much smaller nations then, but nations that were constantly trying to expand their borders, building their cities through slavery and slaughter.

In steps a guy named Amos, a prophet. Someone God had chosen to speak his word to his people. And now prophets normally, when they showed up, it was bad news for God's people.

They were telling God's people to shape up. But when Amos opens his mouth, he calls out the nations for their violence. Amos' words spoken in Israel begin this way.

For three transgressions of Damascus and for four, God will not revoke the punishment. God's people are starting to get excited.

[3:39] God's justice is coming on their neighbors. God doesn't just call out Syria. He points at all the nations around Israel. For three transgressions of the Philistines and for four, I will not revoke the punishment.

Because they sold a whole nation into slavery. For three transgressions of the Philistines and for four, I will not revoke the punishment. Because they trafficked these slaves.

For three transgressions and for four of Edom, of the Ammonites, of Moab, and of Judah. I will not revoke the punishment, God says. Seven nations.

One for each day of the week. A complete judgment for the injustice of the nations. And not for small things like yellow cards or parking spots.

No, the God of Israel, the God who made the whole earth. The God that is big enough to hold the nations accountable for their crimes against humanity, has spoken.

[4:37] A perfect three plus four word of judgment against the violence of the nations that surround his people. All of whom stand condemned before the perfect justice. Not just of the God of Israel, but of the creator himself.

Who roars with a voice that makes the mountains wither like grass. Before the fire of his anger. Isn't this what we want today?

When we look around at war and its consequences. When we hear about things like child labor.

Isn't this why people take to the streets for one reason or another?

The distance between the way things are and should be. We feel this too, don't we? We need justice. But Amos doesn't stop at seven.

He opens his mouth again. For three transgressions of Israel and for four, I will not revoke the punishment. The finger isn't pointed out there anymore.

[5:42] Now it's pointed squarely in the face of God's people. God's own are just as bad as the nations. Worse even because of who they claim to be.

And for the rest of the nine chapters of Amos, Amos will stand as God's lawyer and prosecute God's own people for their transgression.

Transgression. Now that's a two dollar word. Transgression. It's just another word for what the Bible calls sin.

I think sin gets a bad rap for being a religious word. But it's something we all have a category for.

Even if you don't call yourself a Christian tonight, you know what sin is.

We know when we get that feeling that we did something that we shouldn't have done. We didn't do that thing that we know we probably should have.

[6:41] Israel was very good at noticing this outside their border. But aren't we all? You see, it's easy to point the finger.

It's harder to look in the mirror. How good are we at noticing the distance between where we are and where we should be? Israel was pretty bad.

You can read through Amos yourself. But their oppression of the needy for their own comfort is just the tip of the iceberg. Israel felt fine because they could point outside their borders and say, They're not like us.

And this is exactly why God's word comes to them. To hold up a mirror. So that the finger pointed out there is turned around. So that the cry, we need justice, might turn to the realization, We need justice.

We need justice. The difference between Christianity and every human who has that category for sin is simply that the Christian has recognized God, the creator, the one who has the authority over all nations, is the one who defines what we should and should not do.

[8:01] The truth is, when I'm faced with God's word, the same sentence that fell on Israel falls on me. For three transgressions of John, and for four, God will not revoke the punishment.

Because I have not loved him with my whole heart. Because I have not loved my neighbor as myself. Because I have done what I ought not to have done and left undone what I should have done.

And if this is true, and it is for all of us, then justice is the last thing we want. If this is true, then our best chance, as hopeless as it is, is to hide from the justice of God because we need justice.

We deserve punishment. Mine. Mine. Mine was the transgression we sang earlier. But I thought that God was, you know, a God of love.

What about this whole Jesus thing? Yes, Jesus who came down from God to raise us to God.

[9:23] This same Jesus on the night he was betrayed closed his eyes in Gethsemane. Jesus, looking ahead to the pain of the cross, prayed as we read, Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me.

He who was perfect was weighing the dreadful cost of our transgression. Jesus, sorrowful in soul, prayed a second and a third time, My Father, if this cup cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.

Jesus, in the dark and alone, felt the weight of our punishment. Yet because he knew that things were not as they should have been, he bowed his head in submission to the Father's word, which was echoing down from the lips of Amos, now hitting the ears of God's own, his dearly loved son, for three transgressions of those we love.

And for four, I will not revoke the punishment. If justice is the last thing we want because we deserve it, then our only hope is to somehow be made right with the one who would bring us to justice.

And this God has done in Jesus. The distance we feel between the way we are and ought to be is closed because even when it fell on his own son, God did not revoke our punishment.

[10:58] Justice may be the last thing we want, but it turns out it's the very thing we need. God's justice is what we need. Instead of hiding from God's justice, our only hope is to hide in God's justice, to run toward the cross because the ultimate display of God's justice was not his punishment on the nations in Amos' day.

It wasn't the fulfillment of Amos' preaching against the oppression in Israel. The ultimate expression of God's justice is what we have been reading this evening. When on the cross, the punishment for three and four transgressions of you and me fell instead on the Son of God.

We need God's justice. And so we need the cross because only through the cross can God be just and the justifier of the ungodly. Only through the cross can God be right and make us righteous. Only through the cross can God remain perfect while embracing the imperfect. Only through the cross can God close the gap between what is and what he wants to be for his own to be brought close.

And we are brought close to God only when we hide in the justice of God. We are brought close because even when it fell on his own dearly loved Son, God would not revoke our punishment.

[12:17] We need God's justice. So, friends, hide in the justice of the cross.

Would you pray with me? God of perfect justice, we thank you for the sacrifice of your Son.

As we remember tonight, turn our hearts to silence. Teach us to hear your word, to fear your name, and to hide ourselves in the justice of your cross.

Amen. Amen.