

Amos 1:3-2:3

We get our ideas about God from at least three sources, and likely in this order of influence: (1) culture (i.e., what others think and teach us, including our parents, friends, teachers, media, and broader society), (2) our own thought and experience, and (3) Scripture. The first two are corrupted by fallen human nature. So it is no surprise that only the third is a reliable means for knowing God.

Nor is it any surprise that Scripture often challenges our most fundamental beliefs about God, and our self-serving interpretations of our experiences with him. Or that we tend to prefer topical preaching, so that we can superimpose our values on Scripture, rather than enduring the painful reshaping of our values through Scripture. Or that, when we read the biblical text, we do so through the lenses of culture and human nature, and so distort its meaning and message to suit our preferences.

American culture and human nature are marked, for example, by narcissism, self-preoccupation, and an inclination toward self-congratulation. We tend to think highly of ourselves, and are surprised when others do not. Consider your surprise, for example, when someone you are dating breaks up with you: “How could they not think I am so compelling that they would jump at the chance to spend the rest of their lives with me? Or, in the immortal words of Stuart Smalley (a.k.a. Al Franken): “I deserve good things. I am entitled to my share of happiness. I refuse to beat myself up. I am attractive person. I am fun to be with.”

And so we go to God – and to the Bible, and to church – to hear the good news that he concurs with our opinion: “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life!” So we are really surprised when Amos begins with, “God is angry, he is very angry. He is so angry that he is going to kill people. A lot of people. And he is right to do so. They deserve it.”

Of course, lest this message be too much to bear, God never speaks of his anger without urging people to repent. That is why

he speaks in the first place, rather than just destroying the world: so that they can repent and be spared. Moreover, he never warns of coming destruction without promising a glorious future when he will rehabilitate the world and us, so that his anger is no longer necessary.

Seven centuries after Amos, and two millennia before our time, God spoke again, and it was the most startling message of all: he sent his own son to die in punishment for our sin, so that he need not kill us. Finally, he will speak once more, at some indeterminate time in the future, when he comes to judge the world, saving some, condemning others.

Consequently, we do well to listen carefully, not only to the soft words of Scripture, but also to its hard words. So that we might hear God speak, and respond accordingly. Last week, God spoke of his anger. This week, he clarifies both the object of his anger, and the reason for it: he is angry with the various nations around ancient Israel; he is angry over their brutality in war.

How does any of this transfer to the modern world? The closest parallel is the most obvious: God is angry with nations or regimes that are brutal in war. At least when speaking through Amos, God does not prohibit war altogether, so we cannot. Nor does he condemn the nations expressly for waging war against Israel, so we cannot. God is angry over brutality in war, and he specifies specific aspects of brutality that anger him.

This is not the usual fare for personal devotions. But the neglect of such topics reflects a culpable part of American culture and a sinful part of human nature. Sociologists commonly critique American evangelical Christian for a ‘privatized’ faith: our relationship with God tends to be all about us, about our personal lives, about our family and our jobs, about God as our very own personal God. God surely is all this. But he is also much more: he is God of the nations, Lord of the universe, Master of all that is, seen and unseen. In Amos 1:3 – 2:3 he tells us that he cares about how the nations wage war. Given that we worship and serve him, we, too, should care about such things.

Some of What God Hates about War

God created the world, and supervises all nations, so he is naturally and justifiably angry when those whom he created and whom he cares for abuse each other. In each of the six paragraphs of Amos 1:3-2:3, God identifies something that he hates about the way that the ancients – and we moderns – conduct war.

Each paragraph breaks down into five parts:

- (1) invocation of God
- (2) a declaration of judgment
- (3) the charge
- (4) the sentence: ‘fire’ (i.e., destruction by invaders)
- (5) invocation of God

Items 1,2,4,5 primarily declare impending judgment. The distinctive is item 3: the charge laid against each city-state.

For each day and paragraph, consider that charge, how and to whom it applies today, and pray both for our country and for the world, in how it engages in war. And if you studied political science, give the rest of us some idea what else we might do to influence the military policies and decisions of our country and the world.

Day One: God Hates Excessive Brutality 1:3

Damascus (Aram) “threshed” its enemy “with sledges having iron teeth.” Heavy sleds with metal teeth were used in harvest, to separate grain kernels from the stalk. The metaphor points to excessive brutality in war: war inflicts suffering, but countries should aim to limit the harm, rather than maximizing destruction. Excessive brutality may include such strategies as “scorched earth” policy (U.S. civil war), carpet bombing, and nuclear weapons.

Day Two: God Hates Slavery 1:6

One way to finance ancient wars, and to grind opponents into the ground, was to sell them into slavery. While God zeroes in on slavery as a war strategy, he despises any enslavement of the helpless, such as the estimated 300,000 *restaveks* (poor children, victims of child labor abuse) in Haiti.

Day Three: God Hates Treachery 1:9

It has often been noted that treaties of non-aggression are not worth the paper they are written on. The Paris Peace Accords of 1973, for example, theoretically ending the war in Vietnam, lasted only briefly. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Sudan has teetered on the edge for four years, and remains fragile.

Day Four: God Hates Internecine Warfare 1:11

Edom (descendants of Esau) and Israel (descendants of Jacob) were distantly related, nearly a millennium earlier. Still, God says, the link is there, and such violence is unjustifiable. Modern parallels may include Roman Catholic and Protestant in Northern Ireland, Shiite and Sunni in Iraq, or Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda.

Day Five: God Hates Genocide 1:13

The city-state of Ammon was not content to kill opposing enemy combatants, but also slaughtered women and children, even unborn children, in a savage effort to wipe their opponents out of existence. Genocide is a common form of contemporary war, from Bosnia, to Rwanda, to Sudan. Pray also regarding the calamity of abortion in the United States, the killing of the unborn not at the hands of vengeful enemies, but, astoundingly, at the hands of parents.

Day Six: God Hates Defiling the Dead and Gratuitous Humiliation of the Helpless 2:1

The soldiers of Moab were not content to defeat their enemy, and to kill its king. They disinterred his body, and burned him to dust, in order to humiliate both king and country. Much like dead soldiers were dragged through the streets of Mogadishu, Somalia, or Fallujah, Iraq, among other places.

Day Seven: Worshipping our Justly Angry God

To reach this point, you have waded through the muck of humanity, the sorts of stories that are in our news every day. Use today as a balm, worshipping God, that he has not long ago wiped humanity off the face of the earth, that he has placed us in America in relative safety, and that he keeps score of brutality and sooner or later avenges victims.