

**“Confronting Hard Truths”**  
**(A Dramatic Sermon)**  
**Amos 8:1–12**  
**Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman**  
**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**  
**July 20, 2025**

Thank you for inviting me here today, from the bottom of my heart, thank you! I don't receive many invitations to speak, and I can assure you that I have never been invited back to speak a second time anywhere. In fact, in what turned out to be the primary calling of my life, the work of a prophet, I wasn't invited at all nor was I welcome.

I was living a simple life as a shepherd and dresser of sycamore trees in the little town of Tekoa, south of Jerusalem, in the southern kingdom of Judah, when God called me to proclaim a message to the northern kingdom of Israel. I would have been happy to have continued my life as a pet whisperer and tree hugger, but God had other ideas.

I was to be a prophet - if you haven't noticed, they don't often fare well - and I would be an outsider for my audience. Can you imagine that? Would people up north listen to a southerner telling them how to live? Would you listen to a Yankee? But God saw some advantage in the message coming from an outsider which I most certainly was.

So, I started off at a disadvantage, and then there was the message itself... It concerned Israel's sin, there is always some sin that is the problem, some disloyalty to God, and in this case, it was highly sensitive stuff. No, not that... it was about something more sensitive – money!

To be more precise, it was about the rich taking advantage of the poor, merchants caring more about making a buck than anything else, including God. We knew the latter because they wanted the Sabbath and the festivals over quickly so they could get back to making money, which wasn't evil, but they tinkered with the scales to increase their profits dishonestly and made the ephah smaller and the shekel heavier. Your archaeologists have found proof of this practice in excavations at Tirzah, two sets of weights, one for buying and one for selling, dating to the eighth century BCE (*Amos*, OTL, James Luther Mays, p. 144).

So, I had to call them out for this, given God's concern for the poor, and for justice, and they didn't much like it. In fact, in your reading last week, which your minister chose wisely not to preach on... when I talked about some of this with an image of a plumb line, Amaziah, the priest at Bethel, told me in no uncertain terms to get out of town and not come back! But it wasn't just the fact that I was criticizing their business practices, it was that I was criticizing them at all.

It was a time of incredible success economically, politically, and militarily. Not since the days of David and Solomon had Israel done so well. Jeroboam II was making the nation great again, surely this meant that God was blessing them, so where did I come off saying that there was a problem? Some leaders just can't handle any criticism...

Yet, I was not deterred, I did it again. In your reading today, I talked about a basket of summer fruit. Your first thought might be of peaches and peach cobbler, mine too, but this was a sign that Israel's time was up for bearing fruit. God detested their unjust treatment of the poor, their dishonest business practices, their disloyalty to God. The punishment would be a famine – not of food or water but of the word of Lord. Since they didn't want to listen anyway, they would no longer hear from God and thus they would suffer the consequences.

Some might say I had gone from preachin' to meddlin', talking about business practices in sacred space. What did this have to do with religion? I would say to all such critics, "Take that up with God, not me. I didn't ask to be a prophet, God made me one. This isn't my message, it's God's. For some reason, God seems to think that the whole world is God's domain, not just our private lives." But no matter what I said, I wasn't invited back.

Of course, as it turned out, I was right, or God was right. The nation fell to the Assyrians soon after I left. And a little over a century later, the southern kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonians after the people refused to listen to a prophet named Jeremiah. You might think they never had a chance. I never gave them a choice. I just named their sin and promised God's judgment. But this is all Jonah said to the people of Ninevah, they repented and thus were saved. Israel had a choice, they could have changed and been spared, they just didn't and

weren't. But in the final verses of my book, I talked about a time when God would repair the nation and rebuild it. God's judgment was not final. God's wrath is always a last-ditch effort at redemption.

But what does all of this have to do with you? Well, I could be careful here, but you're not likely to invite me back anyway... I don't have any desire to disturb you or be a hit-and-run guest preacher; but keeping quiet about serious concerns is not an act of kindness, and God has called me to be a prophet. What shall I say?

At the very least, I need to urge caution in regard to national pride. Loving one's land is a good and glorious thing, but God's realm extends to all people, humility is always an asset which leads to growth, and our first loyalty is to God – not to any nation, party, leader, or land. Furthermore, sometimes the best way to love one's nation is to be willing to examine it carefully, to hear words of criticism openly, to seek something better. Secure people in a secure land do not see this as a threat. If only Isarel and its leaders had been willing to listen non-defensively to God's message... but they weren't. Are you?

Then, I should probably say something about unjust economic practices. I know, this sounds political. So what? Does God not care about politics? Should God's people not care? All public issues are personal issues. And the two that the Torah talk about more than any other are the treatment of the poor and the welcoming of strangers in the land. That's how any nation will be judged. How are you doing in these regards? Are the scales of your system balanced, do you allow the ephah to be smaller and the shekel to be heavier?

What do I know? I'm just a simple shepherd from ancient Judah. But in preparation for my time here, I have read a little bit, and I am concerned. From predatory lending to elder scams, there are plenty of illegal practices too softly policed. But I also find that \$50 trillion dollars have trickled up to the richest people in the past fifty years. I can't even picture that sum. I don't know if there are enough sycamore trees on the planet, especially these days, to sell for that much money!

50 trillion... what is a trillion? I'm all for industry, making money, and rewarding hard work and ingenuity, but are there no limits? Once

starting down this path, can one ever have enough? Where does God come in the list of priorities in a land so obsessed with wealth?

I said you wouldn't invite me back... but I can't be here and not raise a flag of caution about what I see with my very old eyes and outdated way of thinking. I know how you probably feel. I remember how the leaders in ancient Israel responded. "God's judgment on us? Really? We're living high on the... well, not hog... the lamb. Go whine at someone else! Go home, seer! Go feed some sheep!" But judgment did come for them, it took a while, but it did come, God will prevail.

A man named Jim Wallis in your time tells a story about a woman in South Africa whose husband died and left her to raise their eight children alone. To make matters worse, she only made two dollars a week as a seamstress, and this was in the time of Apartheid and she was black. So, she had few rights. But she worked hard and over time saved enough money to buy 400 bricks to repair her home which was falling down. But when the man pulled up to unload her bricks, he only left 250. She complained, since she had paid for 400, but he told her to bug off. She said "O.K." because the God she believed in took care of orphans and widows and somehow, she said, he would realize this.

Two weeks later the man returned with 150 bricks. When the widow asked what he was doing, he said that two houses he was building had mysteriously burned down and he was afraid that God had something to do with this (*The Soul of Politics: Beyond "Religious Right" and "Secular Left,"* pp. 187–188)!

This kind of justice, divine or not, isn't experienced often. Most of the time, those who swindle others get away with it. But judgment is still coming in this life or the next. Since this is the case, we are wise to address any involvement we might have with injustice whether we are taking advantage of the poor or simply being complicit with those who are by remaining silent.

I know this is a heavy message. You probably won't invite me back, that's OK, I get it. But know this — God's intent is always our redemption, it's just that sometimes redemption requires confronting hard truths. That's all I am here to do.