

The Sunday-School.

THIRD QUARTER.
LESSON XII.—Sept. 18.

ISRAEL REPROVED.

AMOS 5: 4-15.

THE LESSON.—The entire chapter, with a general view of the whole book of Amos, and a comparison with Hosea 14.

GOLDEN TEXT.—*Seek the Lord, and ye shall live.*—Amos. 5: 6.

Learn by heart Vs. 14, 15; 1 Sam. 16: ; Acts 24: 25.

HISTORICAL SETTING.—*Time.*—In the latter part of the reign of Jeroboam II (Amos 1: 1), when Israel was most prosperous; probably about 760 B. C. (Hastings), revised chronology, 780 B. C., common chronology. A century after the death of Elijah.

Place.—Amos lived at Tekoa, twelve miles south of Jerusalem, and prophesied at Bethel, a royal and religious centre thirteen miles north of Jerusalem.

Contemporary Prophets.—Amos followed Jonah. Hosea prophesied chiefly after Amos during the same reign. Joel belongs to the same period, but his date is uncertain.

Rulers.—Uzziah, king of Judah. Jeroboam II, king of Israel. Assyria, at 760 B. C. was in temporary eclipse under Assurban III. The mighty Tiglath-pileser came to the throne 745 B. C.

Amos prophesied about 760 B. C., a century after the death of Elijah.

THE PROPHET AT HOME.—*His Name.* Amos means, literally, *bearer*, and is generally interpreted to signify *burden-bearer*, or *burdened*. His parents are not named, and it is inferred that his family was a humble one. His home was Tekoa, a village about five miles south of Bethlehem and twelve miles south of Jerusalem.

His Business.—Amos says of himself, "I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son." He obtained his living, in part, from some little-esteemed sycamore trees, whose fig-like fruit is eaten only by the poor. In addition he owned a small flock of a peculiar breed of sheep, valuable for their excellent wool.

THE PROPHET'S CALL.—Amos was prompted to his utterances by (1) his surroundings, with the historic memories they invoked; (2) the lamentable condition of his nation; (3) the impending threat of other nations; (4) God's spirit, illuminating his mind and moving his conscience and will.

The Condition of the Nation.—Judah, the Southern Kingdom, in which Amos lived, was enjoying material prosperity under king Uzziah, a good king, who "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord."

Israel, the Northern Kingdom, was in sore need of a prophet's warnings. Israel was outwardly prosperous under the brave and powerful Jeroboam II. The wealth of the nation became greater than at any other time since Solomon. The spiritual condition of Israel grew dark as its material glory brightened. Wealth accumulated, but men decayed. The rich grew richer, the poor grew poorer. Society from the highest to the lowest had become corrupt. Drunkenness and debauchery spread. Even the women were given to their cups. Such sensuality led to

all other vices. No truth, or mercy, or knowledge of God, we are told, was left in the land. The shameful worship of Baal and of the licentious Ashtoreth, with their abominable orgies, weakened the nation in body and soul.

The surrounding nations were outwardly weak, but prophetic vision foresaw their growing menace and ultimate triumph.

The impelling of the Holy Spirit seized upon all these influences and motives and aroused Amos to action, and speech. Amos spoke because he must.

THE PROPHET AT BETHEL.—The warnings of Amos were directed almost entirely toward the Northern Kingdom, both because it was evidently more wicked and its peril from Assyria was more immediate. One of the most historic deeds in all the Bible was that of the shepherd-farmer who went obediently to confront the power of a kingdom in one of its great centres.

The reception of Amos's bold message is related only in 7: 10-17. When the prophet dared openly to mention the king (7: 9), and foretell the fall of his house, Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, haughtily bade Amos return to his own country. This Amos refused to do until he had completed his message, and he added a stern prophecy to the fate of the priest's household.

There are still many who, like Amaziah, try to stifle conscience by silencing the voice of truth. They are like a man who breaks the alarm bell instead of putting out the fire. They say, Peace, peace; when there is no peace (Jer. 6: 14).

THE PROPHET'S MESSAGE.—Vs. 4-15. In the midst of the severest threats Amos now and then cries out in a burst of tender yearning, a loving invitation to return to God and all may yet be well. *Seek ye me.* Israel should return to the worship God had ordained. *And ye shall live*, escaping the woes of which Amos had warned them. *But seek not Beth-el*, the centre of their idolatrous worship. *Nor enter into Gilgal* near by, Joshua's first camp after passing the Jordan, now become another idolatrous centre. *And pass not to Beer-sheba*, in the south of Judah. This place had become famous for corrupt worship. *For Gilgal shall surely go into captivity, and Beth-el shall come to nought.* Literally, and Beth-el shall become nothing. *Seek the Lord.* The exhortation repeated. *Lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph.* That is, the Northern Kingdom, Joseph being the father of its most powerful tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh. *Ye who turn judgment to wormwood*, your judges, that should be strengthening bread to the poor and wronged, have become their bitterness. *And leave off righteousness.* R. V., "And cast down righteousness to the earth." *Seek him.* That maketh the seven stars. The Pleiades, in the constellation Taurus, "the most interesting and important of the naked-eye clusters." *And Orion.* The Hunter, facing Taurus, the Bull; the most brilliant constellation in the heavens, marked by four bright stars in legs and shoulders, and three in his belt. *The shadow of death into the morning.* "I, e., causes morning to follow night. *Maketh the day dark with night.* The reversal of the preceding clause. *Poureth them out,*

God's power coming close to the ungodly in punishment. *That strengtheneth, etc.* That bringeth sudden destruction upon the strong. *They, the unjust rulers, hate him that rebuketh in the gate.* A just judge or a bold advocate. *Your treading, etc.* The R. V.: "Ye trample upon the poor, and take exactions from him of wheat." Exorbitant taxes and tolls. *Houses of hewn stone.* A sign of wealth or luxury. *Pleasant vineyards.* Vineyards of delight. *But ye shall not drink wine of them.* The "delight" you expect shall turn to sorrow. Amos has many condemnations of the drunken revels of the rich. See 2: 8, 12; 4: 1; 6: 6.

The Temperance Application.—Were Amos to prophesy now, he would find in the drink traffic the chief source of all the evils for which God condemned the Israelites. It embitters the poverty of the poor. It enriches rascals. It corrupts justice. It destroys righteous rule. It ministers to sensuality. It overthrows true religion and sets up idolatry. It leads its victims, and the entire state, into a captivity as terrible as any the Assyrians could inflict. The only remedy is the annihilation of the traffic.

For I know, etc. Jehovah's knowledge of what they imagine he is ignorant of, is the ground of the sentence expressed in V. 11. *Therefore the prudent shall keep silence.* Amos was acting a part higher than mere prudence. *An evil time.* A time full of peril. *Seek good.* That is, God (V. 4). *The God of hosts*, mighty against the Assyrians or any foe. *As ye have spoken.* The Israelites still fancied themselves God's favorites, Amos exhorts them to transform by obedience the thought into reality. *Established judgment.* Set it up, where they have laid it low (V. 7). *The remnant of Joseph.* A repentant and purified few from the sinful mass of the house of Joseph. This is the remnant whose preservation Amos finally prophesies (9: 8-15), and whose future the later prophets, especially Isaiah, delight in describing. (Mic. 4: 7; Isa. 11: 11).

The Third Section of the book, chaps. 7-9, is a series of visions. The saints of Israel are compared to locusts (Amos 7: 1-3), to a terrible drought (Amos 7: 4-6), to summer fruit on the point of decay (Amos 8: 1, 2). God's judgment is a stern plumb line of righteousness (Amos 7: 7-9). But the prophecy closes, like our lesson, with an open door of hope (Amos 9: 8-15).

THE HEART OF THE LESSON.

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1. The material wealth and power do not make a country great.
2. The times of prosperity are seasons of especial danger.
3. That it is never safe to allow even the humblest to be wronged, or the most powerful to commit an injustice.
4. That outward prosperity does not always mean God's favor.
5. That punishment for evil, though postponed, surely comes.
6. That the most useful citizens are those who, like Amos, dare to show the nation its sins.

The church needs to learn how easy it is to go through the forms of religion, and not serve God in the life. "Woe to them that are at ease in Zion" is a cry that should be raised in many a slothful church to-day.

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