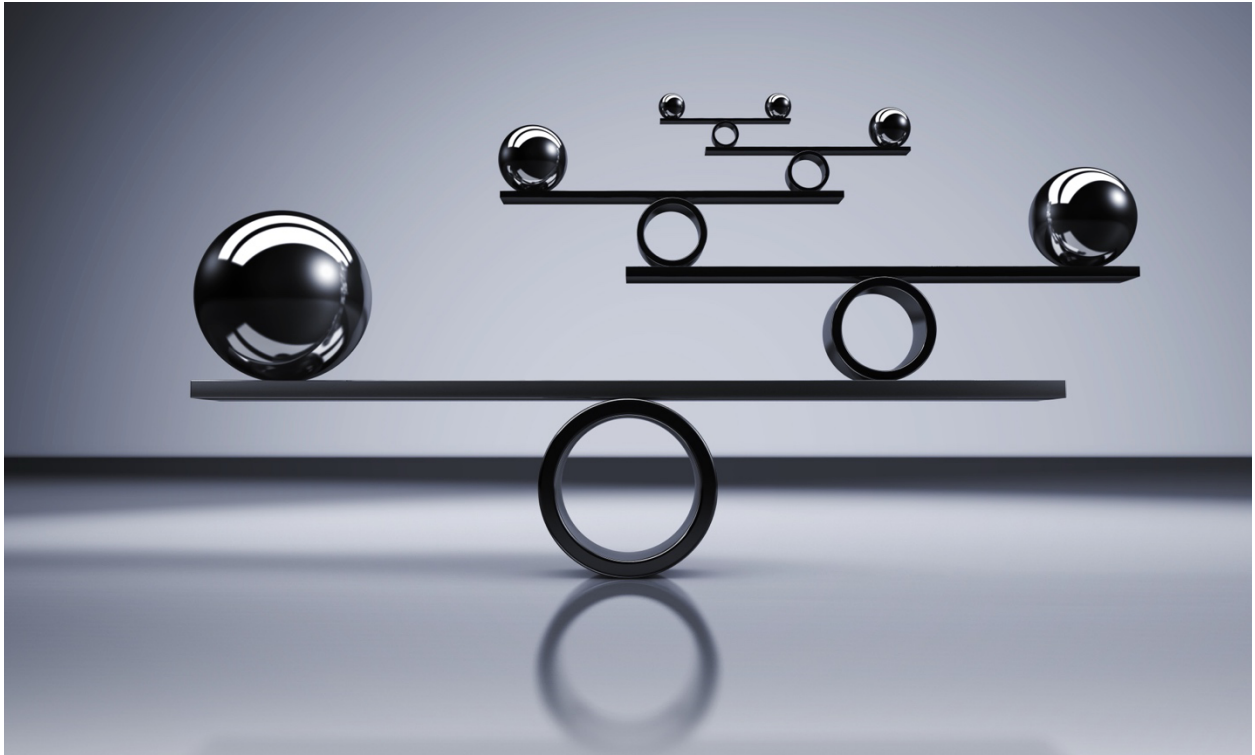


# Until Justice Rolls Down

**A Bible Study of Amos, Micah, and Habakkuk**

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## **Biblical Justice and Social Justice in Modern Times**

Being *just*, by definition, means acting in a way that conforms to what is morally upright or good; in other words, being righteous, impartial, or fair. Although *justice* is a simple word, its meaning has become muddled amid divisive politics and opposing ideologies. Many of us can hardly bear to watch the nightly news these days for fear that our world's constant reports of violence, unrest, and corruption will push us to despair. Although we desire to see justice carried out and long for the discord to diminish, we struggle to discern what is proper. To complicate matters, some critics are drawing distinctions between biblical justice and social justice. Erickson puts it this way: "We carry within us an innate sense of right and wrong, a conviction that oppressors should be punished and the weak protected. Yet, who defines 'right'? Is there a moral law that we inherently know to follow?" (Erickson, 2018).

The concept of justice is a recurring theme throughout the Old Testament and is rooted in God's Covenantal relationship with Israel. The original Hebrew meaning of the term *justice* pertains to all of the actions that contribute to maintaining the Covenant, "the true relation between man and man, and between God and man" (Heschel, 1961, p. 268). People of the Covenant are called to compassion, justice, and selfless love for others, mainly because they were once slaves in Egypt. We can find provisions for the original Covenant handed down to Moses throughout the Pentateuch. For example, Exodus 20:1-17 outlines the requirements for righteous living. Deuteronomy 6:5-6 demands that the people love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, and might. Leviticus 19 specifies other ritual and moral codes that include instructions to "love your neighbor as yourself" (v 18). The people repeatedly disregarded the Covenant and engaged in social, political, and religious injustice and oppression. Even so, God provided ample opportunities for Israel to see the error of her ways and repent (Heschel, 1962, p. 43).

God sent prophets to admonish kings, prophets, priests, and others. Their primary activity was to run interference, often "meddling in affairs" that "were seemingly neither their concern nor their responsibility." They consistently called out "the leaders, the kings, the princes, the false prophets, and the priests as the ones responsible for the sins of the community" (Heschel, 1962, p. 261) for both the major and minor prophets. In Isaiah 1:17, for example, the prophet admonished Judah: "learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow." Isaiah further described God's displeasure with false worship (58:1-6) and warned against continued injustice and oppression (59:1-16). Jeremiah delivered a message to the sons of Josiah regarding the nature of a just king (22:13-17). Ezekiel described the characteristics of a righteous man (18:5-9). In addition, several minor prophets, including Amos and Micah, delivered oracles to 8<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>-century leaders, exposing their unjust practices and warning of harsh penalties, including the destruction of the offenders and their nations. At the same time, the prophets tempered their condemnations with messages of God's mercy for those who repented. In this 8-week Bible study course, the spotlight will be on the oracles of Amos, Micah, and Habakkuk – three minor prophets who delivered messages from God.

## Old Testament Biblical Justice

### **Course Goal**

Using the Bible as the conceptual framework, we will examine justice, focusing on three minor biblical prophets.

### **Lesson Objectives**

- Heighten awareness of what scripture says about justice.
- Analyze current issues in light of biblical principles.
- Evaluate issues from multiple perspectives.
- Identify distinctions, if any, between biblical justice and social justice.

## Bible Study Timeline

Sessions	Scripture
Session 1, Sept. 8	Amos 1-3
Session 2, Sept. 15	Amos 4-6
Session 3, Sept. 22	Amos 7-9
Session 4, Sept. 29	Micah 1-3
Session 5, Oct. 6	Micah 4-7
Session 6, Oct. 13	Habakkuk 1-3

### **Questions for Opening Discussion**

1. What is social justice?
2. Why is the topic controversial?
3. What is the difference between social justice and biblical justice?

## **Background for the Prophet Amos**

Amos was a Judaeen prophet from the village of Tekoa, about 10 miles southeast of Jerusalem (in the Southern Kingdom). Many interpreters say that his oracles stress the divine demand for social justice and concern for the oppressed in 8th Century Israel when the Northern Kingdom enjoyed relative prosperity under the reign of Jeroboam (c. 786–746 BCE) (Heschel, 1962, p. 34). When Amos arrived in the North, the kingdom was full of pride (6:13-14), displaying "plenty, and splendor in the land, elegance in the cities and might in the palaces" (Heschel, 1962, p. 33). Amos condemned the ruling classes for their unjust treatment of poor and needy members of society (Barton, 2003). The leaders in positions of power afflicted the poor, exploited them, and even sold them into slavery (2:6-8, 5:11). According to Swindoll, the book of Amos holds Israel accountable for their ill-treatment of others "more than almost any other book of Scripture." Because they were "drunk on their economic success and intent on strengthening their financial position," they lost sight of the concept of caring for each other (Swindoll, n.d.).

Heschel (1962) observed that God was angry because of their sin and false piety. Their feasts and worship practices were meaningless because they accepted evil and disregarded good. Hence, God sent a message through Amos that God hated their religious feasts (5:21) and desired that they "let justice well up as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream" (5:22-24). Even though God's intolerance for injustice seemed harsh, the prophecy that "begins with a message of doom concludes with a vision of hope (9:11)" (Heschel, 1962, p.46).

## Amos Study Questions

### Biblical Discernment

- Read and discuss the assigned scripture passages.
- What are your reactions to the scripture?
- If you had to give a summary of the Book of Amos, what are the key points you would want to include?
- Summarize what the Book of Amos teaches us about God.
- Discuss what it teaches about human relationships.
- Evaluate the prophet's message from the perspective of the oppressed groups.

### Quotations for Contemporary Reflection

Respond to one or more of the following items.

1. **Read and reflect on the following quote:** Dr. Katie Cannon said: "In this day and time when so much of what we have always known in this country seems to have been compromised, overturned, or challenged, we might all need to take spiritual inventory. What would God have us do today? What is God waiting for us to release, to let go of so that while we still have time, we can begin to live into our purpose? Who is it that we must let go of? What emotions and grudges might we release to be free enough to be useful as a child of God?" (Williams-Smith, 2018, p. 18).
2. **Read and reflect on the following quote:** "Christians are called to compassion, justice, and selfless love for others. Failure to follow these commands is pure disobedience. But can the gospel be believed when its messengers themselves are unjust oppressors?" Barreca, 2020, p. 61–90).
3. **Read and reflect on the following quote:** "Social justice is a communal effort dedicated to creating and sustaining a fair and equal society in which each person and all groups are valued and affirmed. ... It recognizes that the legacy of past injustices remains all around us [and] promotes efforts to empower individual and communal action in support of restorative justice and the full implementation of human and civil rights. Social justice imperatives also push us to create a civic space defined by universal education and reason and dedicated to increasing democratic participation" (John Lewis Institute for Social Justice, 2022).
4. **Read and reflect on the following quote:** "Sometimes it feels as though all of our hard-won lights are in danger of being extinguished. When we think of all the work we have done in the name of justice, and how much of it is in danger of being undone, our spirits are tempted to sink, but this thing called hope is our medicine. It is our spiritual castor oil, powerful enough to penetrate spirits that are clogged with despair" (Williams-Smith, 2018, p. 29).

### Amos Summary Chart

	Amos
Who is the prophet?	Amos of Tekoa The name means "carried by God." Trade: Shepherd and Dresser of Sycamores Time: Mid-8 <sup>th</sup> Century BCE Kings: Uzziah of Judah and Jeroboam II of Israel.
To whom are his oracles directed?	Ruling classes in the North, including Israel
What are some of the concerns? (not all-inclusive)	Oppression of the poor and needy members of society <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selling off needy people for goods</li> <li>• Taking advantage of the helpless</li> <li>• Men were using women immorally</li> <li>• Drunk on their economic success</li> <li>• The people had lost the concept of caring for one another.</li> <li>• The people profaned Yahweh's holy name (2:7)</li> </ul>
What are the consequences?	God would punish Israel.
What are the remedies?	Change sinful ways to avoid destruction.

## **Background for the Prophet Micah**

The prophet Micah grew up in Moresheth, a town near the Philistine city of Gath, southwest of Jerusalem. His name means “who is a God like you?” He prophesied in the days of Kings Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah of Judah (1:1). He held the rulers in the capital cities of Samaria and Jerusalem responsible for leading the people into idolatry and apostasy (Ashbury, 1992). Even though we know very little about the prophet’s life, Heschel reported that Micah was a lonely man whose standards were high and whose concerns for other people were intense (Heschel, 1962, p. 127). Micah’s humble beginnings may have “given him extra sensitivity with the sufferings of the poor and powerless, whom he champions in his preaching” (Sanderson, 2003, p. 1303).

Micah denounced Jacob's transgressions and Israel's sin. He rebuked the "heads of the house of Jacob and the rulers of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity" (3:8-9). Expressly, Micah renounced the vices of the wealthy merchants, who cheated with a short ephah, used dishonest scales and false weights, and were deceitful liars (6:9-12). One commentary reminds us that “nearly one-third of Micah is an indictment of Israel and Judah for specific sins, including oppression; bribery among judges, prophets, and priests; exploitation of the powerless; covetousness; cheating; violence and pride. Another third of Micah predicts the judgment because of these sins, and the final third is a message of hope and consolation (Ashbury, 1992). While Micah was one of the first prophets to predict the destruction of Jerusalem, his prophecies emphasized the relationship between social ethics and spiritual integrity. One of his oracles posed the question: “what is the way of true worship?” (Heschel, p. 129). As Ashbury noted, the people were guilty of divorcing God's standard of justice from their daily dealings and failing to live up to what they had known to be correct (Ashbury, 1992).

At the same time, Micah reminded the people that theirs was a God of justice and equity tempered with mercy and compassion. The people had forgotten how to live righteously, so Micah reminded them: “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God” (6:8). Micah leaves the people with a vision of redemption, noting that God will forgive “the remnant of his inheritance” and will cast all their sins “into the depths of the sea” (7:18).



## Micah Study Questions

### Biblical Discernment

- Read and discuss the assigned scripture passages.
- What are your reactions to the scripture?
- If you had to give a summary of Micah, what are the key points you would want to include?
- Summarize what the Book of Micah teaches us about God.
- Discuss what it teaches about human relationships.
- Evaluate the prophet's message from the perspective of the oppressed groups.

### Quotations for Contemporary Reflection

Respond to one or more of the following items.

1. **Read and reflect on the following quote:** "Evil parades itself as all-powerful. In this political season, it feels like evil has won. Let's say, for a moment, that evil can and does achieve periodic victories. Even so, evil is not greater than God, and we who believe in God are called to walk in hope, to breathe in hope, and to trust in hope – which is to walk, breathe, and trust in God" (Williams-Smith, 2018, p. 28).
2. **Read and reflect on the following quote:** "God is with us. Should we wake up in the morning and find out that our candidate did not win an election, or the ruling party once again attacked our civil rights, we need to know – beyond a doubt – that we will be all right because we have always been all right. As the old hymn states, 'Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal,' but it is also true that there is no evil, oppressive system that we cannot resist" (Williams-Smith, 2018, p. 12).
3. **Read and reflect on the following quote:** "The audacity of the arrogance of oppression is hard to accept and yet, the arrogance accompanies oppressed people, as it always has. The dehumanization of God's children who happen not to be white has been far-reaching and deeply ingrained. All oppressed people have to reach for God to stay above the waters of anger and despair" (Williams-Smith, 2018, p. 76).
4. **Read and reflect on the following quote:** "In the context of our modern global economy in which the richest one percent of the population becomes richer, while the poor grow ever poorer, [we should pay] attention to the many biblical texts that announce God's concern for economic justice. From teachings that govern community life in the Torah of Moses, to the indictments of injustice made by the prophets, and to the good news proclaimed by Jesus in the Gospels, the Bible contains a radical message of God's favor for the poor and God's condemnation for those who exploit the poor and sustain systems of economic injustice. Society today tends to compartmentalize 'religion' and 'real life' in order conveniently to ignore these biblical imperatives" (Horsley, 2015, pp. 415-431.)

### Micah Summary Chart

	Micah
Who is the prophet?	<p>Micah of Moresheth          The name means "who is a God like you?"          Profession: Prophet          Time: 8<sup>th</sup> Century BCE          Kings: Jotham (742–735 BC), Ahaz (735–715 BC), and Hezekiah (715–686 BC).</p>
To whom are his oracles directed?	Rulers of the North who were responsible for leading the people into idolatry and apostasy
What are some of the concerns? (not all-inclusive)	<p>Oppression, hypocrisy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bribery among judges, prophets, and priests</li> <li>• The exploitation of the powerless</li> <li>• Cheating</li> <li>• Violence</li> <li>• Pride</li> <li>• Lack of mercy and compassion</li> <li>• The people have replaced heartfelt worship with empty rituals.</li> <li>• They have divorced God's standard of justice from their daily dealings</li> </ul>
What are the consequences?	Yahweh will execute vengeance on the nations that did not obey.
What are the remedies?	Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly to please God.

## **Background for the Prophet Habakkuk**

We do not have many details concerning the life of Habakkuk. Presumably, the prophet was a native of Judah who prophesied during the reign of Joakim (609–598 BCE) at the time of Nebuchadnezzar's triumphs (Heschel, 1962, p. 178). We can further discern by looking at Habakkuk 1:2-4 that the prophet lived in a society filled with violence and injustice. He was a passionate and caring individual who felt the impact of wrongdoing as if he were its victim (Ashbury, 1992). On the horizon, Habakkuk envisions the Babylonian army—swift, ruthless, and unstoppable and is disturbed by what he sees. The undeniable message is that God had raised the Chaldean army as a machine of destruction to take possession of “dwelling places not their own” (v 6). (Ashbury, 1992). In other words, this new destructive force was God's answer to Judah's sin, and this certainty distressed the prophet.

The book's overall structure is a judicial trial with the components corresponding to the various legal aspects of the procedure (Rosner, 2020). Habakkuk agonizes over the thought that God tolerates evil and asks why God would use the Babylonians, “whose own might is their God,” to be the instrument to carry out the will of God. (1:5-11). During the prophet's dialogue with God, Habakkuk inquires why God is: “silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?” (1:13). In God's response, God reveals that the ruthless Babylonians will punish Judah and take them into exile. At the same time, God assures Habakkuk that he will eventually judge the Babylonians. Until that day, which will surely come, the prophet must “wait patiently, remain loyal to God, and trust God to show himself as just” (Rosner, 2020). In other words, divine deliverance and justice will come at an appointed time in the future. In the meantime, the prophet must wait for the outcome (2:3) because the righteous shall live by their faith (2:4). Such waiting requires hope that the promised vision is sure to be realized (Rosner, 2020).

## Habakkuk Study Questions

### Biblical Discernment

- Read and discuss the assigned scripture passages.
- What are your reactions to the scripture?
- If you had to give a summary of Habakkuk, what are the key points you would want to include?
- Summarize what the Book of Habakkuk teaches us about God.
- Discuss what it teaches about human relationships.
- Evaluate the prophet's message from the perspective of the oppressed groups.

### Quotations for Contemporary Reflection

Respond to one or more of the following items.

1. **Read and reflect on the following quote:** Howard Thurman (1996) acknowledged similarities between love and justice. He defined the disinherited as the masses of people who live "with their backs constantly against the wall." "They are the poor, the disenfranchised, the dispossessed. Artificial limitations are placed upon [the children of the disinherited], restricting freedom of movement, employment, and participation in the common life. The child of the disinherited is likely to live a heavy life. A ceiling is placed on his dreaming by the council of despair coming from his elders, whom experience has taught him to expect little and to hope for less. It must never be forgotten that human beings can be conditioned in favor of the positive as well as the negative" (Thurman, 1996, p. 55).
2. **Read and reflect on the following quote:** "We are children of bitterness, paralyzed by things that have already happened, or are happening now. We curtsy to bitterness, and in effect, give it a power it does not deserve, and we allow it to manipulate us to act in ways it wants us to act. But once we recognize and admit those things that caused us to be bitter, we can dismiss them; we have, in effect, conquered them and snatched away their power to drain us of life" (Williams-Smith, 2018, p.22).
3. **Read and reflect on the following quote:** "God's spirit within us is a treasure. It has kept people intact and in their right minds in the worst of circumstances. It has given those who wanted to give up the 'one more breath' they needed to get to the next day, where they experienced deliverance, discovered answers, and found hope. God's spirit within us is our power; it connects us with the living God and equips us to get through, get over, or get out of dangerous places and situations" (Williams-Smith, 2018, p. 46).
4. **Read and reflect on the following quote:** "For individuals who long ago learned to call on God in the middle of the night, to sing a song or pray a Psalm, or to utter a prayer, even if it is just one word, we already know the value of nighttime. It is a place where we grow by default. It is a place where our eyes, straining to see through the darkness, become sharper, and where are spirits, connecting to the One who gives us the power and strength to make it to the daylight, becomes more aligned with the Spirit of God" (Williams-Smith, 2018, p. 34).

**Habakkuk Summary Chart**

	Habakkuk
Who is the prophet?	Habakkuk Name from Hebrew word meaning "embrace." Profession: Prophet Time: Mid- to late 7 <sup>th</sup> Century Kings: Shortly after Jehoiakim ascended to power (609–598 BC).
To whom are his oracles directed?	To God
What are some of the concerns? (not all-inclusive)	A society filled with violence and injustice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prophet feels the pain of the violence and injustice</li> <li>• The prophet is confused by Yahweh's silence.</li> </ul>
What are the consequences?	The righteous must remain steadfast.
What are the remedies?	Wait for justice, and keep the faith.

## **Additional Quotations for Contemporary Reflection**

1. **Read and reflect on the following quote:** "It seems the world has had a rough go. ... It's understandable to feel weighed down by the challenges of this age. The pain is heartbreaking, and the suffering is great. But I think of the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who said, "Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness." (Trimble, 2022).
2. **Read and reflect on the following quote:** "Pursuing justice and declaring the gospel both focus on addressing human sin and brokenness - while justice emphasizes addressing the external systems that contribute to sin and brokenness, evangelism emphasizes addressing the internal state that contributes to sin and brokenness" (Thompson, 2021).
3. **Reflect on the following quote:** "While biblical justice unites and uplifts people, social justice tears down certain groups and creates division. The second problem with social justice is that it surrenders more power to the government since it appears to be the only one powerful enough to correct these systematic inequalities" (Simmons, 2020).
4. **Read and reflect on the following quote:** "There are no examples of early Christians attempting to create a culture or directly influence the political system. Nor do we find them organizing programs to feed the hungry of the world or to right social injustices. Almost all of their attention was on evangelizing the lost as well as the spiritual life and physical needs of the believing community" (Gilley, G., *Social Justice Primer* Kindle loc 620, cited in Barreca, 2020, 61–90).
5. **Read and reflect on the following quote:** "In the New Testament, Jesus introduced a "love ethic" that formed the foundation of his earthly ministry. Adhering to Old Testament teaching, Jesus reinforced the love principle: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: and thou shall love the Lord thy God with all of thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might," and 'thy neighbor as thy self.' ... Every man is potentially every other man's neighbor" (Thurman, 1969, p. 89).

## Full Comparison Table

	Amos	Micah	Habakkuk
Who is the prophet?	Amos of Tekoa The name means "carried by God." Trade: Shepherd and Dresser of Sycamores Time: Mid-8 <sup>th</sup> Century BCE Kings: Uzziah of Judah and Jeroboam II of Israel.	Micah of Moresheth The name means "who is a God like you?" Profession: Prophet Time: 8 <sup>th</sup> Century BCE Kings: Jotham (742–735 BC), Ahaz (735–715 BC), and Hezekiah (715–686 BC).	Habakkuk Name from Hebrew word meaning "embrace." Profession: Prophet Time: Mid- to late 7 <sup>th</sup> Century Kings: Shortly after Jehoiakim ascended to power (609–598 BC).
To whom are his oracles directed?	Ruling classes in the North, including Israel	Rulers of the North who were responsible for leading the people into idolatry and apostasy	To God
What are some of the concerns? (not all-inclusive)	Oppression of the poor and needy members of society Selling off needy people for goods Taking advantage of the helpless Men were using women immorally Drunk on their economic success The people had lost the concept of caring for one another. The people profaned Yahweh's holy name (2:7)	Oppression, hypocrisy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bribery among judges, prophets, and priests</li> <li>• The exploitation of the powerless</li> <li>• Cheating</li> <li>• Violence</li> <li>• Pride</li> <li>• Lack of mercy and compassion</li> <li>• The people have replaced heartfelt worship with empty rituals.</li> <li>• They have divorced God's standard of justice from their daily dealings</li> </ul>	A society filled with violence and injustice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prophet feels the pain of the violence and injustice</li> <li>• The prophet is confused by Yahweh's silence.</li> </ul>
What are the consequences?	God would punish Israel.	Yahweh will execute vengeance on the nations that did not obey.	The righteous must remain steadfast.
What are the remedies?	Change sinful ways to avoid destruction.	Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly to please God.	Wait for justice, and keep the faith.

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