

THE MESSAGE OF AMOS
(3) VISIONS AND RESTORATION
OR
COMING TO TERMS WITH FUTURE HOPES

Amos Chapters 7-9

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PROLOGUE

The future is not always what we think it will be. In 1951, Cambridge mathematician Douglas Hartree said that England only needed three computers: one in Cambridge, one in Teddington, and one in Manchester. “No one else,” he said, “would ever need machines of their own, or would be able to afford to buy them.”¹

SCRIPTURE

Selected readings from Amos 7-9 using NIV.

This is what the Sovereign Lord showed me: He was preparing swarms of locusts after the king’s share had been harvested and just as the late crops were coming up. 2 When they had stripped the land clean, I cried out, “Sovereign Lord, forgive! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!” 3 So the Lord relented. “This will not happen,” the Lord said. 4 This is what the Sovereign Lord showed me: The Sovereign Lord was calling for judgment by fire; it dried up the great deep and devoured the land. 5 Then I cried out, “Sovereign Lord, I beg you, stop! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!” 6 So the Lord relented. “This will not happen either,” the Sovereign Lord said. 7 This is what he showed me: The Lord was standing by a wall that had been built true to plumb, with a plumb line in his hand. 8 And the Lord asked me, “What do you see, Amos?” “A plumb line,” I replied. Then the Lord said, “Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel; I will spare them no longer. 9 “The high places of Isaac will be destroyed and the sanctuaries of Israel will be ruined; with my sword I will rise against the house of Jeroboam” (7:1-9).

This is what the Sovereign Lord showed me: a basket of ripe fruit. 2 “What do you see, Amos?” he asked. “A basket of ripe fruit,” I answered. Then the Lord said to me, “The time is ripe for my people Israel; I will spare

¹ Quotation from an article by Lord Bowden; American Scientist vol 58 (1970) pp 43-53); cited on Usenet.

them no longer (8:1-2).

“The days are coming,” declares the Sovereign Lord, “when I will send a famine through the land— not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord. 12 People will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the Lord, but they will not find it (8:11-12).

I saw the Lord standing by the altar, and he said: “Strike the tops of the pillars so that the thresholds shake (9:1a).

The Lord, the Lord Almighty—he touches the earth and it melts, and all who live in it mourn; the whole land rises like the Nile, then sinks like the river of Egypt; 6 he builds his lofty palace in the heavens and sets its foundation on the earth; he calls for the waters of the sea and pours them out over the face of the land— the Lord is his name (9:5-6).

“In that day “I will restore David’s fallen shelter— I will repair its broken walls and restore its ruins— and will rebuild it as it used to be, 12 so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name,” declares the Lord, who will do these things. 13 “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman and the planter by the one treading grapes. New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills, 14 and I will bring my people Israel back from exile. “They will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them. They will plant vineyards and drink their wine; they will make gardens and eat their fruit. 15 I will plant Israel in their own land, never again to be uprooted from the land I have given them,” says the Lord your God (9:11-15).

INTRODUCTION

Today’s message is the third in a series of three based on the prophetic book of Amos. The first was an overview of chapters 1 and 2: Indictments and Reform or Coming to Terms with Past Mistakes. The second was an overview of chapters 3 through 6: Judgments and Repentance or Coming to Terms with Present Practices. Today we will be doing an overview of chapters 7 through 9: Visions and Restoration or Coming to Terms with Future Hopes.

Amos takes a hard look at injustice and gives a call to righteousness. Amos was a herdsman from the south whom God sent to the Northern Kingdom of Israel to be a

prophet of justice.

Amos lived during the 8th century before the birth Christ. It was a time of great prosperity. But it was also a time of social injustice, gross immorality, and religious apostasy. Although a major theme of Amos is judgment even in the midst of judgment we find words of mercy and hope.

PRAYER

Let us pray.

Almighty God, may your justice roll on like a river, your righteousness like a never-failing stream! Amen.

INTRODUCTION

In an installment of the popular comic strip, *Dilbert*, the main character is shown asking a woman out for a date. The woman's reply went something like this, "No! No way! Absolutely not! No!" Dilbert then says, "So what are you trying to tell me?" Poor Dilbert – He just didn't get it. In the 8th century B.C. Amos had a clear message for Israel that he repeated several times but Israel just didn't get it.

1. VISIONS OF JUDGMENT (7:1-9; 8:1-14)

In the final chapters of Amos we have five visions, four of which are visions of judgment. The first vision is of locusts:

“This is what the Sovereign LORD showed me: He was preparing swarms of locusts after the king's share had been harvested and just as the second crop was coming up” (7:1 NIV).

A plague of locusts for an agrarian society, like Israel, would have been a great calamity. Israel had two harvests followed by a dry season. Amos indicates that the government of Jeroboam II was so corrupt that they took as taxes from the people almost the entire first harvest. The nation had to survive on the second harvest alone.

Amos pictures the locusts coming during the second harvest, making the judgment all that more severe. Remarkably, Amos cries out for forgiveness on behalf of Israel and the Lord relents and says, “This will not happen” (7:3).

What does this mean? Does God change his mind? On the one hand, the answer would appear to be, “No.” His immutable character, eternal decrees and faithfulness are the same yesterday, today and forever. On the other hand, the answer would appear to be,

“Yes.” God accommodates his will to our responses. If we sin, God responds in a certain way and if we repent, God responds in a different way.

John Newton, the author of “Amazing Grace,” was known for his poor memory. In his later years, a friend asked him if he was still having trouble remembering things. Newton replied, “Yes, I still have a bad memory. But there are two things I will never forget: I am a great sinner and I have a great Savior. I don’t need to remember anything else.” Nor do we.

The second vision has to do with fire:

“This is what the Sovereign LORD showed me: The Sovereign LORD was calling for judgment by fire; it dried up the great deep and devoured the land” (7:4 NIV).

Amos again intercedes and God relents. This begs the questions, “How willing are we to intercede on behalf of others?”

T. W. Hunt contends that American Christianity is anemic when it comes to intercessory prayer, that is, prayer for others. He says we pray for ourselves and our immediate circle but spend little time in praying for our church, community and nation. Gallop polls on religious life in America have repeatedly confirmed his analysis. Can you imagine if we really did make a concerted effort to pray for our nation and the nations of the world, what the results might be?

The third vision is among the most well known of all the images from the Book of Amos:

“This is what he showed me: The Lord was standing by a wall that had been built true to plumb, with a plumb line in his hand” (7:7 NIV).

A plumb line is a simple tool that builders have been using for thousands of years. It consists of a cord with a weight tied to the end, and used to tell if a wall is straight. A wall that was not straight had to be taken down and rebuilt.

But Amos is not really talking about a builder who is building a wall. He is talking about God and his people. God has put the “plumb line” to his people and they are not true.

Next, Amos interjects some personal history. The high priest from Bethel, Amaziah, took great exception to Amos and told him to be quiet and go away. But Amos refused to disobey God and issued Amaziah a grim prognosis for his future.

The fourth vision shows us a basket of summer fruit:

“This is what the Sovereign LORD showed me: a basket of ripe fruit” (8:1 NIV).

There is a play on words here. In Hebrew, the word for “ripe” and the word for “the end” sound the same. The NIV tries to retain the pun and so in the next verse we read, “Then the LORD said to me, The time is ripe for my people Israel” (8:2 NIV). The meaning is that the end has come for Israel.

There is also a sharp contrast being depicted here. What do you think of when you think of a basket full of ripe fruit? Surely not sorrow – if anything there would be joy in knowing that the harvest had been plentiful and delicious. At this particular time in history, Israel thought of itself as a great and prosperous nation. Nevertheless, Amos speaks of a famine, “‘The days are coming,’ declares the Sovereign LORD, ‘when I will send a famine through the land – not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD’” (8:11 NIV).

The Black Hills, where we used to live, offers hundreds of miles of hiking on many different mountain trails. But every summer we would hear of hikers, usually from out of the area, who would attempt a long hike without taking water and end up needing medical attention because of dehydration. Now I don’t know whether they were trying to be macho, or they misjudged their capabilities or they were just plain not very bright. Water is a necessity. You can go without it for a little while, but sooner or later, the symptoms of dehydration begin to show, and if the problem is not addressed, the results can be dire.

In a similar way, there are people who think they can go without the Word of God. But the Word of God is a necessity. And sooner or later, the symptoms of spiritual “dehydration” begin to show, and if the problem is not addressed, the results can be dire.

2. A VISION OF HOLINESS (9:1-10; 4:13; see also ISAIAH 6:1-8)

The fifth vision is a vision of God’s holiness. Amos says, “I saw the Lord standing by the altar” (9:1 NIV). Bear in mind that this altar is not the altar in Jerusalem but the altar that Jeroboam placed in the rival temple in Bethel. In this vision, Amos sees God destroying the temple of Bethel, symbolically destroying the religion of Israel. Ironically, the religion of Israel had turned Israel away from God.

Religion, by itself is not necessarily a good thing. Religion that turns people away from God, exploits the poor, promotes injustice or fosters immorality is not acceptable to God.

Amos emphasizes the holiness of God, describing God as, “The Lord, the LORD Almighty, he who touches the earth and it melts” (9:5 NIV). Amos began his prophetic ministry during the time of King Uzziah of Judah, making Amos the contemporary of another prophet called Isaiah. You can read about the call of Isaiah in the 6th chapter of the book that bears his name. Isaiah also had a vision of the Lord by the altar, only this altar was the one in the Lord’s temple in Jerusalem.

In his vision in the temple Isaiah saw seraphim, which are angelic beings (the word means “fiery ones”), and they were calling back and forth, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty.” These words should be familiar to most churchgoers because many songs are based on these words including the classic hymn by that name, “Holy, holy, holy.”

Why do we say “holy” three times? Why can’t we just say it once? It seems redundant, doesn’t it? If you see someone smiling, do you go up to them and ask, “Are you happy, happy, happy?” If you are feeling blue do you say, “I’m sad, sad, sad?” No, we do not talk this way. But this is a difference between Hebrew and English. In English if we want to emphasize something we have many tools at our disposal such as underlining, bold face and exclamation points. In Hebrew if you want to emphasize something you use repetition. This helps explain some of the things that Jesus said. For example, in John chapter 3, Jesus says to Nicodemus, “Truly, truly I say to you unless one is born again that person cannot see the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus was not stuttering when he repeated “truly.” He was making an emphatic statement. Nicodemus would have understood the repetition. Jesus was saying, in effect, “There are teachings and there are teachings but this one is really important so pay attention.”

On rare occasions something would be stressed to the third degree which would put it in the superlative. By saying something three times, the person was saying that the statement was of the greatest possible importance. Everything else pales in comparison.

If you search the Scriptures you will find that one and only one characteristic of God is ever lifted to this three-fold emphasis. It is the holiness of God. God is holy, holy, holy. Holiness is one of the primary attributes of God as he has revealed himself to us. To talk about God and never mention his holiness would be like describing Mother Theresa as a short woman who used to live in India. True, so far as it goes, but you would be missing a great deal that was important.

Holiness is one of the primary characteristics of God and consequently our primary petition to God is that God’s name be kept holy. A little boy claimed to know the name of God. His mother thought that was interesting and so asked, “Okay, what is God’s name?” He replied, “Harold.” Puzzled, his mother then asked, “Why do you think God’s

name is Harold?" "Because," said the boy, "It says so in the prayer we say at church. Our Father who art in heaven, Harold be thy name!"

3. HELPING OTHERS FIND RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS

The Book of Amos is about right relationships. The first two chapters focus on social righteousness and the need to have right relationships with each other. Chapters 3 thru 6 emphasize spiritual righteousness and our need to be in a right relationship with God. The final chapters of the book (which we are examining today) speak of the future and, by implication, the steps we need to take to help others, including our future descendants, know the righteousness of God.

God made a promise to Abraham and Sarah that their seed would be the means of salvation for the human race (Gen 22:18). Isaiah reaffirmed the Word of the Lord on this matter and heard the Lord say, "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth" (Is 49:6). This promise was reiterated after Jesus was born when Simeon prayed, "For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:30-32). And after Jesus rose from the dead he told his followers, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8 NRSV). It has been the mission of the people of God from the very beginning to help others find a right relationship with God and right relationships with each other.

But Israel was not interested in helping people find God or treating people the way God intended for us to treat one another. They showed no remorse for their faithlessness nor did they turn aside from evil. Instead, they continued to engage in social injustice, gross immorality, and religious apostasy. In 722 B.C., the warnings of the prophet came to pass, and the Northern Kingdom of Israel was destroyed.

4. GOOD NEWS IN THE MIDST OF BAD: PROMISE (9:11-15)

But even in the midst of the prophet's comprehensive judgment we find words of hope. There is Good News in the midst of bad and the Good News comes in the form of a promise. "'In that day I will restore David's fallen tent. I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be, so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name,' declares the LORD, who will do these things" (9:11-12 NIV).

The Book of Amos ends on a promise, the promise of restoration. Did the promise ever come true? In Acts chapter 15 we learn of a serious issue faced by the early church: Is the Gospel for Jews only or can Gentiles also believe? Today, we take the affirmative answer

for granted. But back then it was a source of great contention. In order to resolve the matter, the Apostle James, Jesus' brother, stood up, and after commenting on Simon Peter's impressive work with Gentiles, quotes *this* passage from Amos (that I just read to you) as though it has come to pass. For James and the rest of the apostles believe that the Davidic throne has been spiritually restored in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And the promise of salvation is not for the descendants of Jacob alone, but for any and all who would receive Christ as Lord including the remnant of the Northern Kingdom of Israel known in Jesus' day as the Samaritans.

CONCLUSION

James also said we should not make it difficult for people to turn to God. We need to follow that wisdom today. Let's not make it difficult for people to turn to God.

Three rival shopkeepers rented three adjacent spaces at a shopping plaza. The retailer on the right put up a large sign that said, "Gigantic Sale." Not to be outdone, the shopkeeper on the left put up an even bigger sign that said, "Slashed Prices and Huge Discounts." Meanwhile, the shopkeeper in the middle, recognizing that his competitors were missing the obvious, put up a simple sign above his door that said, "Entrance."

There are so many big and confusing messages in the world today. As Christians, we need to offer a simple and clear message about where people can find hope.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16 NRSV).