

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Amos speaks today: Relationship and Responsibility - Amos 3:1-6:14

'How religious are British Christians?' was, the question, asked on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme on 14 February 2012. If a similar question had been asked about Israelis in Amos' day, he would have answered as in Amos 3-6. For in this passage he announces three major judgements on, and delivers two grim warnings or woes to, the nation. God's indictment was that although they were very religious, it wasn't the piety He had prescribed in His Law. Each of the three judgments begins with a call to listen: "Hear this word" (Amos 3:1; 4:1 and 5:1); and in each Israel is:

1. clearly shown its guilt as measured by the same spiritual plumb-line,
2. severely rebuked, and
3. warned of the consequences of not heeding each message.

As we heard last week, Amos lived in Tekoa, which was some 12 miles south of Jerusalem in Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel. He was sent from his home town over the border to preach in Bethel, the religious centre of the northern kingdom of Israel, see Amos 7:15.

Why use such a title as 'Relationships and Responsibilities' you may ask? The answer is found in Amos 3:1-2: "Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt. 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities'".

Israel had a unique relationship with God, which carried with it special responsibilities. He chose, redeemed and delivered them from Egypt to become His peculiar possession. Notice that God addressed "the whole family" of Israel. Judah wasn't excluded by any special favour of being true to King David's line! No, they were just as wayward as their bigger relation, Israel. In fact, as we heard last week, Judah was in certain aspects more responsible for the overall deterioration of the whole nation; see Amos 2:4-5. Now we can readily see parallels between Israel's history and our own history here in Great Britain. (Not that there's any particular parallel between the northern kingdom of Israel and Scotland - having a Scottish wife, I won't dare suggest it!). Both Israel and the UK have been greatly blessed by God, the latter in respect to the Gospel. Therefore, as we proceed through these three chapters in Amos, their practical import become clear and we'll discover answers to the *Today* programme's question. We'll need to bear in mind that just as Israel was responsible for continued faithfulness to the Law, so also the professing Christian church bears the responsibility for the maintenance of the Gospel testimony. The Gospel light has shone very brightly for several centuries throughout the UK and the implications from Amos are, the greater the light, the more responsible we are to God.

Announcement No. 1: The Lord God has spoken

Amos 3:1-2 give the principle that God's judgments arise from Israel's knowledge and understanding of God's declared will for them, His chosen people. In Amos 3:3-6, Amos asks some rhetorical questions:

- "Do two walk together, unless they have agreed to meet?" Amos 3:3
- "Does a lion roar in the forest, when he has no prey?" Amos 3:4
- "Does a young lion cry out from his den, if he has taken nothing?" Amos 3:4
- "Does a bird fall in a snare on the earth, when there is no trap for it?" Amos 3:5
- "Does a snare spring up from the ground, when it has taken nothing?" Amos 3:5
- "Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid?" Amos 3:6
- "Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has done it?" Amos 3:6

Each of these causes has a corresponding effect. Likewise, says Amos, when the Lord GOD speaks, the prophets must prophesy, Amos 3:8b. When Amos spoke, it was no longer in tones of gentle, cajoling entreaties as with some former prophets. No! "The lion has roared; who will not fear?" Amos 3:8a. Amos' messages were forewarnings: "For the Lord GOD does nothing without [first] revealing His secret to His servants the prophets", Amos 3:7. Time and time

again he declares: “thus says the LORD”. (When we preach the Gospel today, we must use the same kind of commanding, authoritative tones - for the Gospel includes warnings of eternal damnation for those who do not repent.)

But why in Amos 3:9 are the rulers of Ashdod and of Egypt summoned to the northern kingdom’s political capital, Samaria, to be present when its judgment is announced? Firstly, because every law court must carry the aura of authority and the righteousness of the charge officially established. But, more importantly, both Ashdod and Egypt had seen God’s presence with Israel in former days. Ashdod was the place from which the ark of God was miraculously delivered and returned to Beth-shemesh. Egypt had witnessed the mighty deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea. Now both were summoned to witness God’s withdrawal of His presence from Israel; to see “the great tumults within her, and the oppressed in her midst”, Amos 3:9; and to hear the awful charge: “They do not know how to do right”, declares the LORD, “those who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds”, Amos 3:10. In Amos 3:11, God delivers the sentence: the guilty nation would be invaded and overrun by a foreign power. (We learn from 2 Kings 15-17 that this was the Assyrian power, which destroyed the northern Kingdom in 722 BC) Amos 3:12 indicates the extent of the judgment, the northern nation would be absolutely devastated and only a tiny remnant would survive.

This first judgment ends with a special call for Israel to listen: “Hear, and testify against the house of Jacob,” declares the Lord GOD, the God of hosts”. God would cause the Assyrian invader to destroy the altars of Bethel, where Israel worshipped the golden calf idol set up by their first king, Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:25-33). He introduced this counterfeit alternative religion to remove the need for the break-away northern kingdom to attend the feasts of Jehovah at the temple in Jerusalem. He placed another golden calf idol at Dan and by these acts of religious independence he caused Israel to sin. 1 Kings 12:25-33 records he boldly claimed that it was these gods who had brought the nation out of Egypt! 1 Kings 12:33 says he cleverly devised this system to mimic the true worship of Jehovah.

There are no fewer than 21 allusions to this apostasy in the two books of Kings. But God will not share His glory with a rival and Amos declares that these altars of this false religion would be razed in the invasion: “on the day I punish Israel for his transgressions, I will punish the altars of Bethel, and the horns of the altar shall be cut off and fall to the ground”, Amos 3:14. This first judgment ends with the announcement that luxuriant materialism would also disappear: “I will strike the winter house along with the summer house, and the houses of ivory shall perish, and the great houses shall come to an end,” declares the LORD”, Amos 3:15. A practical point for us to notice today is that God will likewise discard anything in Christendom that is idolatrous and or a mere pretence of true Christianity.

Announcement No. 2: Prepare to meet your God

The second announcement is directed at the rich Israeli women: “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, ‘Bring, that we may drink!’” Amos 4:1. “Cows” isn’t a very complimentary description, but it’s a true reflection of these morally corrupt high society women. They treated the poor people badly - they oppressed and crushed them in order to maintain their indulgent lifestyles. In Amos 4:2-3, Amos warns them that, having behaved as animals, like animals they would be led away prisoners by the Assyrians. Israel’s depravity went hand-in-hand with its idolatry. The practical lessons for us are very clear - a society is morally what it deems important. Our post-Christian society displays many disturbing features in this respect. Lifestyles, including pleasure and leisure pursuits, indicate what or who its gods are. But Christian believers need to ask themselves: “how pure is my Christianity?” Is it under worldly influences like those of Amos’ day?

When Amos sarcastically invites Israel in Amos 4:4-5: “Come to Bethel, and transgress; to Gilgal, and multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three [years]; offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving of that which is leavened, and proclaim freewill offerings, publish them; for so you love to do, O people of Israel!” declares the Lord GOD”, was God really encouraging Israel to continue in sin at these idolatrous centres: Bethel, Dan and Gilgal? Definitely not! Amos 4:6-13 explain He’d already chastised them for these very things. In their recent history, they’d experienced scarcity and famine; drought in some places; sicknesses from pestilence; warfare and judgment on some cities - all designed to awaken them to spiritual repentance. But each outcome of these five incidents was sadly the same - each time God says: “yet you did not return to Me”, Amos 4:6, 8, 9, 10 and 11. Today’s twenty-first century world is full of such catastrophes, but do we act any differently from those in Amos’ time? It seems to me that our world continues on its godless course without realising these happenings are wake-up calls from God. It’s sobering to think that the Lord Jesus prophesied that the existence of wars, famines, pestilences, earthquakes, etc. are only the beginning of the sorrows preceding the judgments of the last days prior to His second coming. But there’s still opportunity for anyone today to repent while it’s still the day of salvation!

Perhaps you’ve seen a Gospel preacher carrying a placard which reads “Prepare to meet your God” and you’ve thought: “that’s a rather stark message”? But do you realise that Amos finished his second announcement with this very message in Amos 4:12-13? “Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel; because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel! For behold, He who forms the mountains and creates the wind, and declares to man what is His thought, who makes the morning darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth - the LORD, the God of hosts, is

His name!" The sober fact is that each one of us will have a personal interview with God, the Creator and righteous Judge. But He always graciously forewarns men of the errors of their ways to give them ample opportunity to repent and return to Him for forgiveness and blessing.

Announcement No. 3: Seek the LORD and live

In Amos 5:1-2, the prophet laments the demise of Israel, who, portrayed as a virgin, was supposed to be wholly for Jehovah. She would be forsaken by the LORD; be dispossessed of her land; and so utterly defeated by the invader that she would die as a nation. In this funeral dirge, Amos sees no hope for her citizens - only 10% would remain alive! Yet he continues with a message of grace: "thus says the LORD to the house of Israel: "Seek Me and live", Amos 5:4. However, if idol worship, with its accompanying social injustices, continued at Bethel, Gilgal and Beersheba the nation would abruptly disappear in disaster. But, the Assyrian invasion could be averted if they repented: "Seek the LORD and live, lest He break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and it devour, with none to quench it for Bethel, O you who turn justice to wormwood and cast down righteousness to the earth!" Amos 5:6-7. Again they're reminded who the LORD is: "He who made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into the morning and darkens the day into night, who calls for the waters of the sea and pours them out on the surface of the earth, the LORD is His name", Amos 5:8. If they didn't heed this final invitation, He wouldn't hesitate with punishment, He: "who makes destruction flash forth against the strong, so that destruction comes upon the fortress", Amos 5:9.

Alas, the Lord knew that sinning Israel hated any godly person who reproved them. Yet again Amos states the only way of escape was their repentance of their many transgressions of affliction and oppression of the poor; bribery and corruption; and their arrogant presumption that they could continue in these ways to fuel their lives of ease whilst ignoring the truth. "Seek good, and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, as you have said. Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph", Amos 5:14-15.

This third announcement finishes with the reminder again that without repentance, the judgment would definitely come - the LORD would "pass through" them in the same way that He passed through Egypt, when the Egyptian firstborn perished (see Exodus 11:1-12:28). Except this time, it would be in Israel where there would be weeping and wailing, states Amos 5:16-17.

The First Woe

"Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD! Why would you have the day of the LORD? It is darkness, and not light", Amos 5:18. Whenever Israelis thought of the day of the LORD, they thought only of God's intervention on their behalf to deliver them from their enemies. Amos told them that this was a misconception. Rather it would be: "as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him. Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?" Amos 5:19-20. Why were they mistaken in their thinking? Because God knew their religion was faked. Their response to Him was at best only an outward show of worship: "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer Me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from Me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen", Amos 5:21-23. God wanted them to practise a pure religion: "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream", Amos 5:24. Moreover, He knew the nation had always been unfaithful to Him, even under Moses' leadership. Whilst journeying through the wilderness, they worshipped Jehovah by the sacrifices and offerings required by His Law, but they also secretly carried with them the god Moloch and other idols, declares Amos 5:25-26. Because of this longstanding blatant deceit they would be sent far away into exile, beyond Damascus in Syria, by the command of "the LORD, whose name is the God of hosts", Amos 5:27. Are we Christian believers any better than Israel? To be so, we must be holy in lifestyle as well as in worship!

The Second Woe

Amos' second woe is directed at the self-confidence of the rich, ruling class to awaken them from their complacency: "Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria, the notable men of the first of the nations, to whom the house of Israel comes!" Amos 6:1. Amos preached when Israel under King Jeroboam II had become militarily strong and very wealthy. Success and security seduced them to "put far away the day of disaster", Amos 6:3; and they became indifferent to the impending "ruin of Joseph", Amos 6:6. Life for them was all about pleasure and leisure: "Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall, who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp and like David invent for themselves instruments of music, who drink wine in bowls and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!" (Amos 6:4-6) Amos advised all such in Israel to consider their position relative to Calneh, Hamath and the Philistines, which the Assyrian had already conquered. In Amos 6:2, he warned they would suffer the same fate. As they'd always been the first to grab everything in national life, God

would make them the first to experience the horrors of the invasion at the same time, their revelry would cease, Amos 6:7. “The Lord GOD has sworn by Himself, declares the LORD, the God of hosts: ‘I abhor the pride of Jacob and hate his strongholds, and I will deliver up [every] city and all that is in it’”, Amos 6:8. The Assyrian invasion would be accompanied with serious diseases and only a few Israelis would survive these ordeals, Amos 6:9-10 state. Then the whole nation would be taken into captivity. There would be widespread plunder, slaughter, destruction and affliction. Not only so, but by then judgement would be unavoidable, even if they hastily returned to Jehovah, Amos 6:10. Amos 6:12a announces escape would be as impossible as it is for horses to run up a rocky cliff, or for oxen to plough there! Why? Because Israel had “turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood”, Amos 6:12b. They also rejoiced in their worthless idols and boasted in the military strength of their armies, saying: “Have we not by our own strength captured Karnaim for ourselves?” Amos 6:13. Amos 6:14 declares they would be overrun by the Assyrian, who would conquer from Lebo-hamath, the original northern border, to the Brook of the Arabah, the original southern border of Israel established during King David’s conquests.

I finish by repeating that there are marked similarities between Amos’ Israel and twenty-first century christendom. And, that there’s also Peter’s solemn pronouncement to think about: “For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, [Christians], what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? 1 Peter 4:17.

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