

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Amos speaks today: Visions, what the Lord showed Amos - Amos 7:1-9:15

It was dark and cold, but I was determined to do my bit for the planet. Really I'm just a bit mean, but anyway the alarm clock had gone off and a new day beckoned. Whilst the rest of the family got dressed, I had gone downstairs to start making the breakfast. On with the kettle, out with the bread and into the toaster, out with the bowls for cereal and plates for toast. I had done this so many times before that I didn't need to put the light on. By the very dim light that came from a street light and the barely breaking dawn, I could make my way around until the breakfast was ready. Except this morning I was a bit slower, or one of the family was a bit quicker and in they came and on with the kitchen light. It was so bright that I was temporarily blinded and my fingers as well as the bread went into the hot toaster. Amazing how quickly we become used to the dark - physical or spiritual - so that the light blinds us to our own condition.

Some time later, it struck me that so often in life this is exactly how so many of us choose to live our lives. Morally and spiritually, we become accustomed to the dark. We become so used to doing something, we fail to see how wrong it might be. Perhaps it is taking our spouse for granted and not saying thank you for a meal, or perhaps driving 35 mph in a 30 mph zone. Just the small things really, but over time they build up and, like cholesterol in the arteries, block off our relationship with God and our sensitivity to how He views things.

I think this was very much how the nation of Israel was behaving at the time that Amos was prophesying. This morning we come to the end of his short book by looking at Amos 7:1-9:15 and the five visions that God gave him. In this series, we have seen how Amos was called as a prophet from the relative obscurity of Judah, to prophesy to the northern 10 tribes of Israel, around 787 BC. As we shall see later, this was about 60 - 70 years before they would finally be taken into captivity by the Assyrians. The name Amos means 'burden', and rightly identifies for us the very real burden that Amos had because of the behaviour of the nation of Israel. Whereas Hosea pleads with the people to change their ways based on the love of God, Amos appeals for a similar change based on the righteousness of God. And yet outwardly, to the casual observer, things were going well in Israel at the time. With Uzziah on the throne in Jerusalem, and Jeroboam, the son of Joash, ruling in Samaria over the northern 10 tribes, the two nations were prospering, retaking territory that had been lost in previous generations. In fact, not since the boom times under Solomon had the land known such military strength and financial prosperity. To a people brought up to believe that material wealth was a sign of God's favour, they 'had never had it so good'. But this was not what God thought. Let us read together the account of this time from the book of 2 Kings 14:23-27: "In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, became king in Samaria, and reigned forty-one years. And he did evil in the sight of the LORD; he did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who had made Israel sin. He restored the territory of Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD God of Israel, which He had spoken through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet who was from Gath Hopher. For the LORD saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter; and whether bond or free, there was no helper for Israel. And the LORD did not say that He would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven; but He saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash."

Earlier in Israel's history, Jeroboam the first had made two golden calves placing one in Dan in the north, and one in Bethel in the south, so that his people would no longer go up to Jerusalem to worship. Such idolatry had persisted and now Jeroboam the second does nothing to rectify this appalling state of affairs. As if God could be represented by a golden calf! Israel was indeed a people "walking in darkness" upon whom the light of God's righteousness was soon to shine in judgement, and Amos was the man to bring this message.

In Amos 7, God gives 3 visions to Amos.

1. In Amos 7:1-3, Amos is shown how God was preparing a swarm of locusts to come and destroy the late harvest. The king had taken the best of the first harvest for himself, and now the late harvest was going to fail, leaving the people to face a winter of famine and starvation.
2. In Amos 7:4-6 Amos is shown a devouring fire that would cover the land. Maybe this was a particularly severe drought that would literally spark bush fires. The whole nation would be consumed.

3. In Amos 7:7-9, Amos is shown a plumb line. God was going to judge Israel and his plumb line would show just how off straight the nation had become.

Oh dear! How had things come to this? We have read already this morning how, under this very king, God had restored Israel to some measure of her former glory for God had seen her bitter affliction, and how she had no other helper. And yet in the arrogance and pride of her actions, Israel probably thought that all that was achieved was due to her own endeavour. And so they continued in their idolatrous ways. I suppose it was just like it is today as we boldly proclaim that science will find a solution to all of our problems or that money can solve all of life's difficulties, but we fail to recognise that it is God who made the science and gave us the brains to discover it, or gave us the resources and the bodies to use them.

Having seen the locusts and the fire, Amos pleads with God for mercy on behalf of the people. Such judgement would destroy them. So it is that God relents and promises that "it shall not be". But on seeing the plumb line, not even Amos can make a case for Israel. Whilst relying upon the mercy and patience of God, Amos could trust that the people could be spared. But faced with the righteousness of God's assessment of the nation of Israel, Amos could only accept that the people deserved fully all that God had purposed for them. So it would be that nearly 70 years and six kings later, Israel would be utterly destroyed by wave upon wave of Assyrian encroachment, until Samaria was finally taken and the last of the nation taken into captivity, to be dispersed throughout the Assyrian empire, never to return. God gave ample opportunity for the people to recognise their error. It was not as though they were overtaken by events, unaware of their impending doom. Yet deliberately, persistently, obstinately they refused to acknowledge the rights of God in their national life, and so they paid the price for their sin.

In Amos 7:10-17, we get the reaction of Amaziah, the priest in Bethel. Remember this was where one of the golden calves had been set up so that the people could worship God without all the trouble of going all the way south to the city of Jerusalem (1 Kings 12:25-33). Could it be that Israel had made an honest mistake - they admittedly had got the image of God wrong, but it was the heart that really mattered? Perhaps names didn't really matter after all, so long as they were sincere in their religious activity. Well, Amaziah's reaction sums up, on behalf of all the nation, just how far they were from God and all that was true and right. Firstly he distorts the truth and tells lies to king Jeroboam, to try to get Amos into trouble. To his credit, the king does not appear to have acted upon this poor advice.

Then Amaziah tells Amos to go back home and make a living from his prophesying. Perhaps the people of Judah would welcome a message of Israel's destruction. He casts doubts on the motives of Amos, suggesting that it was all done for money, or nationalistic mischief. The message of God's judgement did not comfortably fit with the calm, prosperous way of life that Israel had made for herself. Like a fly in the ointment (see Ecclesiastes 10:1), Amos was just one big irritant. He didn't fit in with the current religion nor with the national pride that filled Israel at that time. Amos responds by saying that he was not what was important, but that it was what God had to say that was important. This is still just as true today as we represent God in this world. In a society that idolises celebrity, we need to rely on what the Bible says rather than what other people may say.

In Amos 8, Amos receives his fourth vision - that of a basket full of summer fruits. The symbolism was clear to Amos and its meaning distressing to him. Israel was ripe for judgement, and their judgement would be final. Their idolatry could no longer be overlooked. The rest of Amos 8 gives us two reasons why, as a nation, they were ripe for judgement. Firstly, the nation was consumed by greed. As we have seen, God had used Jeroboam to restore Israel to a degree of prosperity that she had not known for many generations. But in the blessing of God, Israel had fallen into a trap and become consumed by the desire for more possessions. Greed and materialism had overtaken them. Things had got to such a bad state that they were desperate for their religious days to be over so they could get back to making money - just like having Sunday shopping really! In an all-consuming concern to make money, they would deliberately short change the poor, using faulty weights and selling faulty goods. Material wealth, financial prosperity was the goal and god of the nation's life. The rich had made it, the poor didn't matter. So God would utterly destroy them. Secondly, in Amos 8:11-14, God says that there was famine in the land. But this was no ordinary famine that would lead to physical hunger. It was a spiritual famine where the word of God would not be known and acted upon. It is not so much an apathy to spiritual things - indeed Amos said that they would run to and fro, from north to east looking for the word of God, but would not find it (Amos 8:12).

Have you ever noticed how few people come out of church carrying a Bible? You would not go to the gym without some sports kit, or a shop without some money, so why go to church without the Bible? How else do we expect God to speak to us, if not through His word.

As we have seen already, Amos had a real burden because of his message. Increasingly, as we read through his prophecy we should be likewise burdened, not just for this country, which is so very like Israel was then, but also for the church, which shows all the character of Amaziah and the religious spirit that existed at that time.

How many times can you remember when perhaps one naughty child has cried out "it's not fair - you told me off for doing such and such but not them for doing the same." Now God is not a fair God - in His mercy He does not give us what we deserve, but He is consistent. In all honesty, can we say that we deserve anything less than what happened to Israel? I can just imagine them crying out "it's not fair". They were totally judged, losing life and nationhood, taken captive, never to return. Yet we have done just the same. We have our false idols - money, celebrity, knowledge - the list goes on and on. We think that we have done very nicely and it is all down to our own endeavours. We are self made people in a self made nation that has no need of God. In fact our image of Him is totally out of focus, no better than a golden calf in Bethel and Dan (1 Kings 12:25-33). We live to make money and get rich, hurting others so that we can benefit, and our desire for all sorts of religious experiences goes on and on, but we do not even know the basics of the Bible, the fundamentals of our faith.

If God so judged Israel, we cannot expect Him to do any less with us as a nation, nor with us as His people on earth today - the church. We are so divided because we do not understand who God is or what His word says about the way we should behave together. We have made up our Christianity to suit ourselves and our generation, to make it palatable to our desires rather than to be obedient to what He has said. God is a righteous God - He acted so in Amos' day, and He will do so in ours. As Peter says: "For the time has come for judgement to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God" (1 Peter 4:17).

I believe that at the present time God is having to deal with the "Western" church in a disciplinary way, until we learn that only complete obedience and submission to His will is what He requires of us. In a terribly sombre way, He will deal with the world, once He has taken the Church to heaven, in judgement. In doing so, as in Israel's day, it is always for the purpose of drawing as many to Himself in faith and purity, whilst being righteous in judging those who steadfastly choose to disobey Him.

He is a righteous God, and the message of Amos to us today must be that He expects us to behave in a righteous way in every detail of our lives. Recently I heard on the local radio about an environmental campaign that was encouraging everyone to take "just one step." To expect an individual to be able to solve all of the problems was too much, but each individual could do something, even like just switching off the TV rather than leaving it on standby. Well, we may feel a little like that! We might not be able to put right all the things that previous generations have done wrong, but we can all resolve to put right at least one thing in our lives that we know to be not right. If each Christian could do this, then who knows what the result would be?

The prophecy of Amos ends in Amos 9 with the fifth vision Amos has. This time it is of the Lord Himself (Amos 9:1). It is always a good thing when our mind's eye is filled with Him. However, the message he receives is of the most solemn nature. In Amos 9:1-4, we are told that there will be no escape from the judgement that God was to bring on the nation of Israel. As a nation, Israel was finished until the time of God's judgement was complete (we ought not to confuse the nation of Israel today, with the historical northern 10 tribes of Israel). What a difficult message for Amos this must have been to deliver! Sometimes God may ask us to do difficult things, but He will always enable us to perform His will.

In Amos 9:5-10 we are shown the greatness of God. The promise of judgement was no idle threat. This was not the ranting of a spurned minor deity, impotent and furious. No lesser a One than He who had made the world and all that is within it, who controls the seasons and the weather would intervene against Israel. They could not plead that they were somehow too special for God to deal with them in such a way. God had dealt with other nations in a similar way. In fact, all the nations are at His disposal. Israel was no better than the least of nations. We still have an over-inflated view of humanity and a diminished understanding of who God is. We have learnt nothing from history, and so are bound to repeat its mistakes.

And yet, and yet! Even in this most comprehensive of judgements there was always a ray of hope. For we can never go too far wrong if we rely on God to be merciful. He loves to save even in the midst of the execution of His judgement. Perhaps you have never noticed before the importance of the words in the Luke 2:36: "Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher." But Asher was one of the northern 10 tribes, one of the people who were to come under the judgement of God. And yet, centuries later, here is the godly Anna of that self same tribe, serving her God, and blessing His Son. Marvellous mercy indeed! I am sure that whilst the judgement of God came upon the ten tribes unsparingly, there would have been those godly Israelites who were prepared to give up home, possessions and even family to make the journey south to Judah and to settle there, and to worship in Jerusalem, the only place that God had promised to be. By their actions, these people had accepted the life of a pilgrim refugee, before judgement was executed, so that they could be true to God. It is just such people that Hebrews 11:30-40 speak about, real but anonymous heroes of faith. Those who in this life were prepared to give up what they had were to receive a far greater inheritance in a kingdom yet to come.

So, the prophecy ends in Amos 9:11-15, with the promise of future blessing. The kingdom will be restored, united under the Davidic line, no longer divided between Judah and Israel. The borders of the land will be expanded to their

fullest degree, rather than the thin coastal strip that we call Israel today. The land itself will flourish, with the sower of the second harvest, wanting to get on with his job even before the harvester of the first has finished his work. What a picture - the mountains dripping with wine, cascading down the hills, a little like those chocolate fountains you sometimes see in the shops today! God promises that He will cause His people to return to the land in safety and with a permanence that they have never known.

Interestingly, James, at the council of Jerusalem, in Acts 15:6-21, takes Amos 9:11-12 and, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, uses it to show that God would indeed bless the entire world, Jew and Gentile alike. And so we come into the blessing of the prophecy of Amos, and what a wonderful thing that is - the unlimited good news of God directed towards those who accept His forgiveness in faith. But what a wonderful thing it will be for all Israel, when God again takes up an earthly people, and restores them to the fullness of the land that He has reserved for them. To many, this may seem like a fairy tale, the ramblings of a religious fruitcake, as it must have done in Amos' time, when prosperity had brought some measure of peace and security of the Israel of Jeroboam's day. But the righteousness of God demanded that judgement must fall upon them. And it is the same righteousness that will one day return them to the land and bless them.

Many of the other prophets had spoken and would speak of the future glory of the coming kingdom. It will be a kingdom that will teach this world about the wonder of the person of the Lord Jesus, for all will know that it will be He who exerts authority in that day. This world will learn that it has beggared itself by its disobedience to His word now.

For Amos, in the delivery of such a brutal message, it must have been a real joy and a source of deep calm to know that God was in control of all events and that at the end of things there would be a day of great blessing for Israel. We, too, can find a sense of inner strength when we learn to view things as God does, and understand what He has purposed for when "He makes all things beautiful in His time" (see Ecclesiastes 3:11).

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