

A message from Amos

We know from Scripture that Paul tells us that we are not wise when we compare ourselves to one another (2 Cor. 10:12) I often think this is one of the strongest understatements in all Scripture, because these catastrophic comparisons always leave us feeling either feel better or worse than other people.

That does not mean that there are not absolute yardsticks, however. As our ferry sailed out of Dover recently, I felt the Lord saying that faithless France is better in God's sight than self absorbed Britain, an island whose people are selfishly taken up with its own pleasures and preoccupations.

Similarly, in order to show the gravity of Judah's spiritual condition, a plight to which the Lord returns frequently in the book of Jeremiah, the prophet compares it with that of exiled Israel, and shows Judah to be worse than the northern nation (e.g. Jer. 3:11). In Ezekiel 16, the Lord likewise shows the condition of Jerusalem to be worse than that of Samaria and Sodom.

The Lord has often directed me in the past to look at Amos 7, where we see how intercession can avert many but not all catastrophes. When the plumb line is put to the nation it is found wanting – and we too have been found wanting.

Incidentally, the second part of Amos 7 depicts the barney between Amos, who never set out to be a prophet, and Amaziah, who represents the cause of official religion. It is yet another chapter in the eternal battle between the “genuinely called by God bod” and the ecclesiastical system that resents their presence and all that they bring.

Ecclesiastical systems are often prepared to go to extreme lengths to protect themselves from the challenge of prophets bring when God sends them into their midst. Amaziah persecuted and drove the prophet out. He accuses Amos of being deluded and misrepresents him to the king. He says that Amos ‘has conspired’ – but as one commentator said: ‘his only fellow conspirator was God(!)’

Amos acquits himself well and without rancour in his defence, but the judgement of God would remain on Amaziah for his blindness in not recognising that it was *God* who had sent the prophet Amos. Like Jeremiah, Amos had no choice but to speak the word of the Lord that was burning within him.

In case it's been a while since you last read Amos, Israel had experienced considerable prosperity in recent years, (the Footsie was riding high) – but prosperity had bred smugness and complacency. As a result the nation's expectations were upside down and wrong way up – so much so that God challenges and denounces the nation (for example in chapter 6), warning them that the results of their idolatry will be appallingly serious.

In Amos 8, the passage that the Lord directed me to read, we see something apparently innocuous: a basket of ripe fruit. This was summer fruit, however, whose shelf life was

strictly limited. We could say it was overripe fruit – a picture of a nation ripe not for glorious harvest but for serious punishment.

This is what the Sovereign LORD showed me: a basket of ripe fruit.
“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 them no longer.”
(Amos 8:1-2)

There is a striking wordplay in verse 2. The word for summer fruit is *qayis*, which is similar in sound to the word *qes*, which means “end.” The decisive words *ba haqqes* literally mean “The end has come”. (NIV says, “The time is ripe for my people”) – so entirely differently from the pleasant thoughts a basket of fruit would normally arouse in our minds.

As the Lord speaks of the corruption in the land (from verse 4 on) we might argue that corruption is not on the scale in the UK that it is in some developing countries, where nothing gets done without greasing someone’s palm. But that is not the point. The legacy of commercial theft, exploitation and short-changing of each other is everywhere in our land – and it is profoundly displeasing to the Lord. (Interestingly, of all the weights archaeologists have dug up, no two have exactly tallied, cf 8:5)

Verses 8:5-10 are pointing to something beyond a credit crunch squeeze; they are talking of something approaching a meltdown that leads to a famine. In verse 11 this famine is depicted primarily not as an economic disaster, however, so much as a spiritual drought.

Again, we may be tempted to defend ourselves: we’ve got our God TV, our centres of renewal and revival, and everything else that makes our faith pleasant – surely things can’t be as desperate as that?

Once again the Lord is less than impressed. Just as the apparent promise of the summer fruit was turned into the assurance of Israel’s destruction, so the joyous temple hymns (cf. 6:5) would give way to the wailing of the populace of Israel when the wrath of Yahweh fell on them.

We are already seeing some families reduced to washing their clothes by hand because it is proving too expensive to run their washing machines. Thank God that Aldi is there if you can’t afford Sainsbury’s! But these are just the opening skirmishes.

The Lord spells out in verses 8:4-6 some of the reasons why He is visiting the nation with wrath. As Billy Graham put it, He would have to apologise to Sodom and Gomorrah if he did not take note of the things that are being done in our nations.

The Lord has sworn by the Pride of Jacob: “I will never forget anything they have done.” Will not the land tremble for this, and all who live in it mourn? (8:7-8)

The judgment to follow (v. 8) would come because God will not allow His glory to be sullied. Verse 8 goes on to describe the convulsions that the land would suffer. The striking metaphor of an earthquake represents the calamity Amos has referred to throughout the book.

The upheaval predicted by Amos would be a disruption of the national life on such a scale that the fear and dread in the hearts of the people would be similar to the terror a celestial cataclysm would cause.

God's message through Amos is that there would be no escape for the nation. Amos saw the Lord standing by the temple altar (v. 1a). The Lord commanded the temple to collapse on the people, destroying the whole nation (vv. 1b-4). This temple could not have been a literal temple, for the collapse of such a building would affect only a few. Rather it represents the whole religious system of the northern kingdom, which, in the end, would bring about the destruction of its adherents.

The letters I have looked at elsewhere at the start of the book of Revelation (see <http://www.ruachministries.org/articlepub.htm>) make it clear that God has less than no time for cold and empty religion that can only lead to idolatry and national ruin. Those who are ensnared by consumerist greed eventually discover that however good a servant Mammon may be, it makes a lousy master.

The reprise of the verse

the whole land rises like the Nile,
then sinks like the river of Egypt—(8:8 and 9:5)

speaks of the Lord allowing a devastating shaking against which there can be no defence.

God deliberately mentions what he is doing amongst the Cushites, because, to Jewish eyes, they were an insignificant nation. The problem with being greatly blessed is that it can make us feel as though we are the sort of people whom it is easy for God to greatly bless. A great and wonderful truth is pushed too far and becomes a heresy.

The Exodus had led the Israelites to assume that the Lord was unalterably committed to them as a nation and that no other nation counted as far as he was concerned. Amos destroys that false assumption by affirming the sovereignty of Yahweh over *all* the nations. The Exodus did not give them license to presume on the holiness and mercy of God.

So we see in 9:1 the Lord actively involved not just passively watching a great disaster being afflicted on this nation, and a terrible earthquake of truly biblical proportions falling upon the nation. If you struggle with the whole theme of judgement Scripturally, try reading Deuteronomy 32:15 to end of the chapter, and you will how this is an active rather than just a passive affair.

For I will give the command,
and I will shake the house of Israel
among all the nations
as grain is shaken in a sieve (Amos 9:9)

You may not have heard this message in most of the conferences around the country this summer, for they are busy assuring people “be assured that God is in a good mood, you will experience great blessing in this meeting.” By God’s mercy all of this is gloriously true, for the Lord loves to bless those who are His friends, and who are hungering and thirsting for His presence – but don’t let the richness of His presence in these meetings blind us to the wider picture.

This letter from General Walter Walker, the former commander in Chief of the allied forces in northern Europe in Daily Mail June 2nd 2008.

“We need to realise that there is a kind of judgement which God does not visit upon a country suddenly...
He allows it to develop gradually, and during that time He repeatedly issues warnings and urgent calls to repentance.

Then if the nation which has incurred his wrath, and upon which He is bringing that judgement still fails to repent and turn back to Him, despite his repeated warnings, He suddenly causes judgement to fall. Then the consequences are too terrible to relate. It appears that this point in time has been reached.”

This could not be a more serious warning. The fact is that most nations do not turn to God and learn about His righteousness when He grants them mercy and favor. That is why harsher winds are often necessary in order to achieve what gently zephyrs do not.

In verse 9: 7 he says, do you think you are better and more important than these other nations? I have been leading and directing and overseeing them as well. We are back again with heavenly comparisons.

Yet the Lord promised that he would not completely destroy the nation. It is the false idolatry, the complacency and the trusting in wrong hopes that He was attacking. He was speaking against ‘all those who say, ‘Disaster will not overtake or meet us.’ (9:10)

The Lord has heard the prayers of so many saints who have toiled and prayed for this nation. At the end of the day, however, as Brother Andrew points out, there are only two kinds of nations: those that say “it can never happen here”, and those that lament, “we thought it could never happen here.”

Who will the Lord use to bless the nations? Not the great and mighty so much as the disadvantaged and seemingly disempowered. Often and again the Lord chooses “the least the last and the lost.”

Incidentally if we may dare to personalise the nationalities mentioned in the Bible, we could say that Amos 9:8 is, and I put this no more strongly than this, a picture of the huge number of Brits who have left the nation. There is a real scattering going on.

Have a look at Amos 9:9-10 to see just how anti complacency God really is! The grain is being sifted in a sieve, yet not one true kernel will be lost. God is evaluating His people, His church, and its leaders most carefully. Nothing that we do that is true value will ever go unnoticed in the place where it really matters. But woe to those who say that nothing bad will ever happen to them.

What will the Lord do in this time of extreme shaking? He says,

‘I will restore.’
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,
(Amos 9:11)

That which now is like a house in ruins I will rebuild and restore. The fact that some walls, even church walls, will fall down, should not deceive us. God will have the last word, He will build His church His way.

I the Lord have spoken and I will do these things. The time will come when the grain and grapes will grow faster than they can be harvested, and the terraced vineyards will drip with sweet wine. ..I will firmly plant them in the land, and they will never again be uprooted. (Amos 9:13 I love the NIV translation): “the days are coming when the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman and the planter by the one treading grapes.”

So ends the message of the prophet Amos. We have seen shaking and establishing, uprooting and replanting, famine and abundant harvest. It is wrong to focus on the one to the exclusion of the other, but most certainly wrong to overlook the harder words. You can't have the one without the other.

At the end of the book Amos shows himself to be by no means only a prophet of doom. Yes there is much about the church now that is like a house in ruins, not least the Anglican church post Lambeth – but the Lord still says “I will rebuild its walls and restore its fallen glory.” It may be, perhaps, a church without walls, consisting of a people who are pressing in to know God better – but how much better is that than people merely dipping in to pay Him lip service?

Prophets do not denounce what they are not prepared to weep over, and the Lord who hates complacency will not permit such a situation to continue. If that means certain

things have to close so be it. It has happened to many Welsh chapels, and it can happen to the Church of England in England.

We heard much at the conference in Jersey of how the Lord is doing this, and what shape the newly renewed tent is looking like and what form it will take. The scale at which God is doing this is both staggering and wonderful. The kingdom that is being established now, and which is for the most part invisible will become extremely visible when Christ returns. The inclusion of Gentiles in the divine promise is a concept attributed to the Servant of Isaiah (Isa 49:6).

Amos echoes the same truth. The ancient promise that Gentiles as well as Jews (Gen 12:3) would experience divine blessing is fulfilled in the Offspring of David. And just as Britain needs the help now of those to whom we once took the gospel, so Israel itself is benefitting from the input of those who love the Lord, and who long to see the veil removed to enable God's original people to see and embrace their Messiah.

God is not fazed by the shaking process that is currently going on; He is used to fire – after all He created the sun – and the sun is only a comparatively minor star. He can handle fire, and He knows what will emerge from the fire of His love. A young worship leader in Canterbury came to visit us the other evening, bringing a gift of a beautiful painting that she had painted during the prophetic workshop in Jersey. She had given it the title “The wings of love will rise victorious out of the fire.” Even so may it be!

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