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A Survey of the Book of Amos, Part. 3

Amos 9:4, “And if they go into captivity before their enemies,
there I will command the sword, and it shall kill them;
and I will fix my eyes upon them
for evil and not for good.” (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, 2001)

The Beauty of Hebrew Prose/Poetry

Already in the short time we have considered the prophetic witness, we have only considered Joel, Jonah, and now half of Amos, and I have come to the conclusion that each prophecy is a literary masterpiece! Who could forget the skill with which Jonah proclaimed his message from the Lord? He not only stated God’s will, but He demonstrated it through a series of chiasms.

That is one of beauties of Hebrew prose and poetry: it not only proclaims the word of the Lord, but it also pictures it! It not only says it, it shows it! And now it is our privilege not only to hear the

message of Amos, but we get to see it!

The book of Amos is divided into a series of prophetic warnings and judgments on account of the rebellion of the God's people. The final section is Amos 7-9 in which God gives FIVE visions which proclaim THREE messages which convey ONE conclusion. Do you *SEE* the countdown?

The book of Amos was written in 765 B.C., just 43 years before the Northern Kingdom would be brought into exile at the hands of Assyria. As such, their time as a nation was coming to an end. If Israel didn't arrive at this conclusion from the message of Amos, they had the privilege of seeing it from the structure of Amos! Let's walk our way through this amazing countdown as God once again indicts the Northern Kingdom of Israel on account of its rebellion! Consider with me first, the countdown to judgment.

Five Visions, Three Messages, One Conclusion

Amos 7:1-2, "Thus the Lord God showed me, and behold, He was forming a locust-swarm when the spring crop began to sprout. And behold, the spring crop *was* after the king's mowing. And it came about, when it had finished eating the vegetation of the land, that I said, 'Lord God, please pardon! How can Jacob stand, for he is small?'"

As a farmer, Amos knew that this was one of the two worst enemies that could come to a farming community; a locust plague (the other enemy is referenced in vv. 4ff). Recall the devastation we saw in Joel where a series of locusts in their various stages of development came through Judah around 852 B.C. devastating the land. In fact so bad was the plague, the nation was plunged into a seven year drought! When we looked at this prophecy, we considered the horror of living through such an infestation.

Now Amos was a farmer, from Judah, the very nation which had suffered through the locust plague of Joel. No doubt, Amos was raised hearing the stories! And he knew how serious the threat that loomed over Israel. And he found himself begging the Lord to relent! Yes, Israel was in rebellion and it needed to be disciplined. But not this! The plague would be too much for the nation to bear.

In fact notice, the locust-swarm is a picture as coming in the spring, after the "king's mowing." In ancient Israel, a farmer's crops typically were harvested twice, with the first being taken by the king (cf. 1 Kings 18:5). That meant that the second harvest, which occurred in late spring, provided the food necessary to feed the nation through the dry period of summer, which usually lasted six months. For God to send a locust plague after the first harvest but before the second harvest would have meant starvation for the entire nation!

This first vision then brings us to the second vision.

Amos 7:4-5, "Thus the Lord God showed me, and behold, the Lord God was calling to contend *with them* by fire, and it consumed the great deep and began to consume the farm land. Then I said, 'Lord God, please stop! How can Jacob stand, for he is small?'"

The theme of a farming calamity continues with this vision. The second of the two worst enemies that could come to farming community is revealed; a fiery drought. Many of us have seen the pictures of the Great American Dust bowl that hit the US in the 1930's. This drought was so bad that many a farmer lost his mind as he endeavored to cope with the plague.

Amos envisioned the start of such a plague as a raging heat; pictured as a fire ripping through the land of Israel. It is so devastating that it not only affected the farm lands, but it dried up the deepest of all wells, the deep springs of the land.¹

Now in the face of this awful vision, Amos once again gave a frantic plea for God to relent (Amos 7:5). What people could endure such calamity? Israel certainly couldn't! And that brings us to the third vision.

Amos 7:7-9, "Thus He showed me, and behold, the Lord was standing by a vertical wall, with a plumb line in His hand. And the Lord said to me, 'What do you see, Amos?' And I said, 'A plumb line.' Then the Lord said, 'Behold I am about to put a plumb line in the midst of My people Israel. I will spare them no longer. The high places of Isaac will be desolated and the sanctuaries of Israel laid waste. Then shall I rise up against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.'"

The vision in this context involves the field of construction. In the ancient world for a workman to build a vertically straight wall, he needed a "plumb line." A plumb line consists of a weight attached to a string. When the weight was suspended above the earth, the gravitational pull would position the string perpendicular to the earth. Thus by holding such a "plumb line" next to a wall, a workman could determine if a wall was built straight up and down.

This vision involves a "vertical wall" which was Israel. The "plumb line" was the covenant standard of faithfulness to the Lord. And Amos, no longer the intercessor, is called upon to be a witness. As the covenant standard was placed next to Israel, what did Amos see? The "wall" which was Israel was way out of plumb; in fact so much so that it needed to come down! That brings us to the fourth vision.

Amos 8:1-3, "Thus the Lord God showed me, and behold, *there was* a basket of summer fruit. And He said, 'What do you see, Amos?' And I said, 'A basket of summer fruit.' Then the Lord said to me, 'The end has come for My people Israel. I will spare them no longer. The songs of the palace will turn to wailing in that day,' declares the Lord God. 'Many *will be* the corpses; in every place they will cast them forth in silence.'"

Here the vision concerns itself with a harvest of fruit, most likely figs or pomegranates on account of the season referenced, it was a "basket of summer fruit." With this vision, a Hebrew Pun is utilized not only to proclaim, but also to show what was to come. Before Amos was a basket of "summer/ripe fruit." The image would have been most delightful for unlike our culture, Israel didn't enjoy year-round fruit. Figs and pomegranates were seasonal crops greatly anticipated by God's people. To behold such a basket would have made the mouth water!

This was the condition of Israel with regard to the judgment of God. The forgiveness Amos prayed for in v. 2 which became a plea for a stay of execution in v. 5, here becomes an affirmation that Israel's destruction is way overdue! And that brings us to the fifth and final vision...

Amos 9:1, "I saw the Lord standing beside the altar, and He said, 'Smite the capitals so that the thresholds will shake, and break them on the heads of them all! Then I will slay the rest of them with the sword; they will not have a fugitive who will flee, or a refugee who will escape.'"

Here the vision is quite different from the previous four:

1. Its object is a Person: God the Father,
2. There is no dialogue between God and Amos, and
3. The vision is almost exclusively auditory (Amos is not called upon to see a thing). Rather Amos hears the voice of a Sovereign Master (the word is NOT Yahweh, BUT Adonai) proclaiming by divine fiat the certain destruction of Israel- a destruction which came in 722 B.C.

These are the five visions God gave to Amos in the closing chapters of this prophesy. What were their messages?

Three Messages

At the outset it should be obvious that the five visions of Amos can be grouped together according to their form and message. For example, visions 1-2 revolve around the horror of natural disaster; a locust plague and a fiery drought. In both cases Amos pleads for God's mercy. Visions 3-4 revolve around the measuring of God's people; a plumb line and a ripening harvest. In both visions, Amos is called upon as a witness to testify to the justice of God's wrath. Vision 5 concerns itself with the decree of a conquering Master/Lord. Amos does not speak; he only listens to the voice of a mighty King who gives a command which is immediately obeyed!

What are the messages being conveyed by each vision-type?

Visions 1-2 (Amos 7:1-6): The Longsuffering of God

In each of these visions, Amos pleads on behalf of Israel.

Amos 7:2b, "And it came about, when it had finished eating the vegetation of the land, that I said, 'Lord God, please pardon! How can Jacob stand, for he is small?'"

Though Israel is guilty of gross sin, nevertheless Amos can't imagine the horror of a Locust Plague and so he begs for God's forgiveness. Actually the Hebrew is in the form of a command. Amos here is not being impudent, but urgent, "God, You have to stop! Please!" The same request is made in Amos 7:5.

Amos 7:5, “Lord God, please stop! How can Jacob stand, for he is small?”

Here Amos does not plead for the forgiveness of Israel, for he knows it is just a matter of time. Rather, he begs for a stay of execution, “God, give them more time!”

What in both cases is the Divine response? Mercy!

Amos 7:3, “The Lord changed His mind about this. ‘It shall not be,’ said the Lord.”

Yes, the word used in this passage is the word for “repent,” yet we ought not to think for a moment that God was somehow changed by Amos’ plea. What was before Amos was a vision of what was NOT most certain to come, BUT what might come. As such it comes across as, “This is what I could do, Amos!” With Amos’ plea, the Lord says, “OK, I won’t bring about this form of judgment!” Now don’t miss it, judgment did come in 722 B.C. God didn’t change. It just didn’t come in this *form*.

With that notice the divine response to Amos, “It shall not be!” Amos pled for Israel’s forgiveness. What Israel received at this point was not forgiveness but a stay of execution. In other words, they got mercy! We see it in Amos 7:6.

Amos 7:6, “The Lord changed His mind about this. ‘This too shall not be,’ said the Lord God.”

Recall that to this second vision Amos did NOT plead for forgiveness, for God’s judgment was certain. Accordingly the prophet simply pled for another “stay of execution” which God was pleased to provide.

So what is the message of the first two visions? It is one and the same as Habakkuk’s plea 160 years later concerning Judah.

Habakkuk 3:2, “Lord, I have heard the report about Thee *and* I fear. O Lord, revive Thy work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy.”

Family of God, we must once and for all put to rest the notion that God is a Being in heaven who enjoys inflicting punishment on His people. In all His judgments when it comes to His people there is mercy!

Ezekiel 33:11, “Say to them, ‘As I live!’ declares the Lord God, ‘I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked [in Ezekiel “the wicked” [this is a reference NOT to the non-Christian, BUT the rebellious child of God], but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?’”

Do you see the compassion of God? He derives no pleasure from the discipline of His people! Listen to the “burden” that condemning Israel was to God.

Hosea 11:8, “How can I give you up, O Ephraim [another name for Israel]? How can I

surrender you, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
My heart is turned over within Me, all My compassions are kindled.”

Behold the covenant-love of an offended Lord. Israel didn't deserve mercy after all that they had done. But God here gives it! Don't ever think that when a bitter providence comes your way the Lord is in heaven laughing or deriving any pleasure from your sorrow! That may be how Zeus or Baal was understood. But never should we ascribe such wickedness to God!

He cares so much for you He sacrificed His Son that you might live. What else must He do to prove His love? Will you actually posit a lack of care when it comes to God and you? In the words of Paul, “May it never be!”

You say, “If God loves us so much, why any difficulty?”

It is because He loves you so much.

Hebrews 12:7-10, “It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom *his* father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He *disciplines us* for *our* good, that we may share His holiness.”

Truly, the destruction of Israel in 722 B.C. was not ordained by a God who hated His people, BUT a loving Lord who deigned to discipline an erring people! And that brings us to the message of visions 3-4.

Visions 3-4 The Just Destruction of Israel on account of their Moral Bankruptcy

In these visions Amos is called upon to testify against Israel on account of their sin. And in each vision, Israel is shown to be guilty. In the vision of the plumb-line, Israel is so out of kilter on account of their rebellion that the nation must come down. In the vision of the summer fruit, Israel's sin is past the time for harvest. Certainly the nation must be plucked!

With what would Amos have us walk away from these visions? We come away with the conviction that Israel's destruction is most certain and most just. As a nation, they had

- Rejected the authority of God.
- Trampled underfoot the covenant ethic of hesed!
- Used their position and gifts to fleece the sheep rather than care for it.
- Served themselves.
- Cared only for their own wants, desires, and needs.
- Transformed the worship of God into a vehicle of self-pleasure.

How could they not be disciplined? Think of it! At the beginning, when the people of God were organized into a nation, God issued forth this warning.

Deuteronomy 27:15-18, “‘Cursed is the man who makes an idol or a molten image, an abomination to the Lord, the work of the hands of the craftsman, and sets *it* up in secret.’ And all the people shall answer and say, ‘Amen.’ ‘Cursed is he who dishonors his father or mother.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’ ‘Cursed is he who moves his neighbor’s boundary mark.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’ ‘Cursed is he who misleads a blind *person* on the road.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’”

Now the nation at the time of Amos was guilty of far more than what is warned against in Deuteronomy. Does not justice demand their discipline?

So must be our conviction when we face a bitter providence. Though he suffered great loss, nevertheless Job understood that the blessings he had enjoyed for so many years was not earned/deserved but a glorious gift.

Job 1:21-22, “And he said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall return there. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.’ Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God.”

In other words, God was not unjust for taking back that which given to him as a stewardship. Jeremiah wrote this:

Lamentations 3:37-39, “Why should *any* living mortal, or *any* man, offer complaint in view of his sins?”

There is not a bitter providence that you or I will ever face that we don’t deserve on account of our sin. To think otherwise is to take God’s grace for granted! When Joshua confronted Achan on account of the latter’s sin, this is what Joshua said:

Joshua 7:19, “Then Joshua said to Achan, ‘My son, I implore you, give glory to the Lord, the God of Israel, and give praise to Him; and tell me now what you have done. Do not hide it from me.’”

This is why church discipline is so important. When a Christian sins and God disciplines him, if the sin remains secret the world is left wondering how God could be so cruel. That is why Joshua exhorted Achan as he did here. Truly when we understand that the horror, trial, and difficulty of this life is the result of sin (Romans 6:23; 8:20), we understand that if justice is our plea, then death is the penalty. If we receive anything other than death in this life, we have been blessed!

Vision 5 The Thoroughness of God’s Judgment

Recall that this vision is quite different from the previous four. In this text Amos hears the Lord, the Master of the universe, issue forth sovereign commands of judgment.

Amos 9:1, "I saw the Lord standing beside the altar, and He said, 'Smite the capitals so that the thresholds will shake, and break them on the heads of them all! Then I will slay the rest of them with the sword; they will not have a fugitive who will flee, or a refugee who will escape.'"

Yet what is being conveyed by this vision? What is its message? The thoroughness of God's judgment.

Amos 9:2-4, "Though they dig into Sheol, from there shall My hand take them; and though they ascend to heaven, from there will I bring them down. And though they hide on the summit of Carmel, I will search them out and take them from there; and though they conceal themselves from My sight on the floor of the sea, from there I will command the serpent and it will bite them. And though they go into captivity before their enemies, from there I will command the sword that it slay them, and I will set My eyes against them for evil and not for good."

The idea is that there will not be a stone unturned when the judgment of God is executed against Israel. No one will escape. The judgment will be

- Thorough!
- Exacting!
- Devastating!
- Complete!

In fact we have a picture of what it will be like on the Last Day. John speaking of the certainty of judgment from which no one will be able to hide.

Revelation 6:15-17, "And the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come; and who is able to stand?'"

Yet we know that as much as man may try to hide from God, the Lord will find them out! Now brothers and sisters, this is a sobering truth, one which ought to humble us. Yet for the child of God, it is also a glorious truth (~Day of the Lord)!

Do you realize that at the Last Judgment we are going to be vindicated? Not only will we be placed among the throng of people who are not guilty of sin, on account of the cross work of Christ, but we shall sustain a judgment which will determine the blessing/award that awaits us in glory.

Matthew 25:34-36, 40b, "Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are

blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me *something* to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me'... 'to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, *even the least of them*, you did it to Me.'"

Because God's Judgment is thorough, we conclude that there won't be a tear cried on behalf of the Lord that will be missed! Now all of this brings us to the conclusion that God intended us to derive from this section. It is found in the narrative detailing the conflict that Amos had with Amaziah (Amos 7:10-17), the head priest of the tabernacle in Bethel which was Jeroboam II's headquarter as well as the most important shrine in Israel!

One Conclusion, Amos 7:10-17

In the middle of a pericope detailing the five visions of Amos we read of an event which seems out of place. Yet on account of its content and placement, we conclude that this passage reveals THE message God would have His people take from Amos 7-9!

Amos 7:10-11, "Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel [as Bethel was the center of the revival in Israel, to be "THE priest of Bethel" means that Amaziah was the most powerful and important priest at this time in Israel], sent *word* to Jeroboam, king of Israel, saying, 'Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel; the land is unable to endure all his words [lit. the land is full of his words- everyone was talking about his message]. For thus Amos says, "Jeroboam will die by the sword and Israel will certainly go from its land into exile.'"

Recall that Jeroboam II spearheaded the revival which Israel at this time enjoyed. Truly, God's people had turned back to their religious roots, and so for the first time in 140 years, Yahweh was being worshipped in the land. As such, for Amos to speak a word against the king after all he had done was unthinkable to Amaziah!

Amos 7:12-13: "Then Amaziah said to Amos, 'Go, you seer, flee away to the land of Judah, and there eat bread and there do your prophesying! But no longer prophesy at Bethel, for it is a sanctuary of the king and a royal residence.'"

As Amos was born and raised in Judah, he was only in Israel because God sent him there to preach His word, the message to him from Amaziah was simple, "Go home! Trouble your own people! We don't need nor do we want your type here!" Amos gave a stinging response.

Amos 7:14-15, "Then Amos answered and said to Amaziah, 'I am not a prophet, nor am I the son of a prophet [the word Amos used here for "prophet" was a word associated in the Northern Kingdom (David A. Hubbard, 1989, pp. 213-214) with a "prophet for hire"; this Amos was not!]; for I am a herdsman and a grower of sycamore figs. But the Lord took me from following the flock and the Lord said to me, "Go prophesy to My people Israel.'"

In other words, "Amaziah, I am bound by the word of the Lord. What I am doing is not the result of

heredity or scheming on my part to be a prophet- unlike you in your office as priest.”

What an indictment! Yet it was an accurate assessment of Amaziah and the entire problem in the North. They had forsaken God, rejected His word, and so transformed His worship into a vehicle of self-pleasure! With this, Amos gave a terrifying prophesy which amounted to nothing less than the focus/theme of this entire section.

Amos 7:16-17, “And now hear the word of the Lord: you are saying, ‘You shall not prophesy against Israel nor shall you speak against the house of Isaac.’ Therefore, thus says the Lord, ‘Your wife will become a harlot in the city [which means she no longer will be qualified to be married to a priest], your sons and your daughters will fall by the sword [which means Amaziah no longer would have an heir], your land will be parceled up by a *measuring* line, and you yourself will die upon unclean soil [the ultimate insult for a priest]. Moreover, Israel will certainly go from its land into exile.’”

The countdown to judgment so vividly pictured in this passage is at “...one! Blast off!” To what end was Israel hastening at this moment? Certain and unavoidable destruction!

Now let us not miss the point! Amaziah in his arrogance thought he was serving the Lord. He was the chief priest of Israel! He may have been the very one who influenced Jeroboam to turn the nation back to Yahweh! Accordingly, he felt he had the authority to command a prophet- who was commanded by God- to stop prophesying. That in a nutshell was the problem with Israel: though they remained in rebellion against God and His authority, nevertheless they thought that by turning back to the religion of Yahweh they had earned the favor of the Lord. Yet their religion served only to compound their guilt as they utilized the religion of Christ, but missed its focus and substance: submission to Christ!

What we have here is akin to the message Paul communicated to God’s people concerning the Israel of his day.

Romans 9:30-33, “What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness [that is, the ceremonial law], did not arrive at *that* law [the point of the ceremonial law was to direct Israel to full submission to the Messiah]. Why? Because *they did not pursue it* by faith, but as though *it were* by works [~placating God]. They stumbled over the stumbling stone [which is Jesus Christ, THE focus and substance of the ceremonial law], just as it is written, ‘Behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed.’”

All the ordinances, sacrifices, and ritual of the ceremony and service of the Old Testament were designed to lead God’s people to reliance upon Christ. Paul said that the ceremonial law was, “...a *mere* shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.” (Colossians 2:17)

What an incredible blessing it was and is to be the recipients of these gifts (cf. Romans 3:1-2)! Yet, do you know what God’s people did in the Old Testament as well as in Paul’s day? They stumbled over these gifts. Rather than heeding the message contained therein, they became enamored

with the rites and ordinances. As such what was intended to lead them to Christ, God's people tripped over in their love of religion.

This is what Amaziah had done. He hadn't turned to God; he simply turned over a new leaf and he used the religion of Yahweh to do it! And this is what many, oh so many are doing today in the church. Rather than submitting to Christ and so placing themselves at the disposal of God, many in the church have fallen in love with the religion of Christ such that:

- The word is viewed as a means of blessing.
- Worship is about self-gratification.
- Prayer is the means to a religious feeling.
- Service is about fulfillment.
- The Kingdom of God is as a sports team which is followed.

The religion which accompanies the kingdom of God is not there to make you happy, fulfilled, excited, or moved. It is there to enable you to see Christ, trust Christ, serve Christ, and so glorify Christ. Now if you are one this day who is guilty of such practices, do not fear or lament, as we have seen, God is a compassionate God. If you confess your sin, He will most certainly forgive you and restore you in your walk! Truly as we have learned from Amos, a right-standing with God is not based on what we do- good or bad!

Yet if you remain a "consumer of Christ" with no desire to change, know that as our compassionate God, the Lord will discipline you. Yet the discipline will not be in the form of exile; as a nation we are not in covenant with the Lord. Rather, His discipline will take the form of trials, difficulty, leanness of soul, and the like all designed to make us better worshipers/servants of Christ! That means if you fight against the labor pains of life by...

- Indicting the Lord.
- Complaining against His providence.
- Refusing to serve Him.
- Running from Him.

You only will be making your road more difficult. What do you do with a child who in rebellion folds their arm and says, "No!"? Rather, let us in and through all things cultivate a life of faith, dependence, and so submission to the Lord. This is what is behind all ministry in the Kingdom of God.

1 Corinthians 7:35, "And this I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is seemly, and *to secure* undistracted devotion to the Lord."

End Notes

¹ There is a bit of irony here as the deities of Canaan and Mesopotamia religion all deified the deep. That God sovereignly controlled these areas indicates that He is Lord of all (an important theme in this section)!

² Amos used the exact expression which Amaziah used to criticize Amos (v. 11)!

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About the Preacher

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