

We are continuing in our study of Amos. Let me encourage you to turn to that Minor Prophet, Amos 9:1-10 is where we have arrived in our progressive study. I have entitled this section, “Illusions of Grace”. I want you to focus on that word “illusions”. It is one thing if you are dealing with a person who is just an out and out pagan and has had no contact with the word of God. They are blind, they simply do not know. It is another thing when you deal with people or a culture that does have contact with the word of God, however... It becomes the “however” that we want to reflect upon. There is as I think most of us know, a way of taking the word of God and misusing it, so that rather than coming under the authority of that word, so that you come then to conviction, conviction of [three] kinds, conviction regarding who God is, how He is, and what it is He wants of us His creatures; and conviction regarding my sin and my need therefore for someone to get me reconciled to this holy God, and then conviction that in fact God has made the way, He has provided the means whereby I as a creature having fallen short of God’s holiness now can lay claim to His grace through Christ and in fact come into a holy God’s presence. That is a true representation of the teaching of God’s word. But people can entertain illusions. They can take the word of God and restructure it so that they by-pass what they don’t like, lay claim to what they prefer, and tell themselves, “It is well with me.”

We have seen – if you have read through and followed the study of Amos and I encourage anyone to read through it. It is not long and is relatively easy to read. You know that Israel in the days that Amos came was a deeply corrupted society. Amos has spelled that out in clear and forceful terms. Israel had become – we would say it this way; they wouldn’t use this terminology – we would say it this way: Israel had become a land of winners and losers. That was how they organized themselves; the losers were under the winners and the winners used every means at their disposal to keep the losers where they were. It was an oppressive society.

The profit making that the winners pursued was not the profit making of the entrepreneur and the business capitalist engaged in competition to secure a market for the goods and services that they sell. In our day gradually capitalism is receiving a bad name, as if seeking profits was somehow inappropriate. That is not a Biblical standard. Honest competition secures benefits for everyone, even for the one who loses this round of the competition, for that competition drives the whole economy to greater productivity and creativity, and serves the customer by providing better products and services either in their absolute price – things getting cheaper – or in their variable quality. That is the heart of a capitalistic system which in historical terms has created more wealth than any other possible arrangement of economies that humanity has ever seen. However, when the winners in that competition resort to manipulation and trickery designed to fool the public, when they collude or cooperate behind the scene with government agencies and officials to stack the deck, as it were, in their favor, using the laws of the land rather than the laws of competition to increase their gains and secure their position, the laws of competitive economics are lost, and a steady impoverishment of the larger population soon follows. Such was the case in Israel.

However, the corruption of Israel did not begin with crooked business practices, nor did it begin with venal politicians out to feather their own nests with cozy deals with the wealthy. The corruption in Israel began with the first king of the kingdom and the arrangement which he established in which, as this “Vision of Judgment brings home to us, he subordinated the authority of religion to the needs, authority and policies of the state. It is this reality in the life of Israel that Amos addresses in the opening statement of his concluding message of judgment which we have beginning here in chapter 9 verse one. When you read this you are going to think, “Well, this is the most obvious, correct kind of thing you could want.” What does he say in 9:1? *“I saw the Lord standing beside the*

altar, and he said...” Surely that is where He belongs. Surely the Lord should be standing by the altar. But the reality in Amos’ day is that absolutely everything is wrong with the Lord standing by that altar. We find the background to this in I Kings 12:26-33. This is part of the account of the first king of Israel, another man who was named Jeroboam, the very same name as the king who was on the throne in Amos’ day. The first Jeroboam had actually been an official in King Solomon’s regime. He had become a representative of the ten tribes of northern Israel when Rehoboam the son of Solomon, rather than reducing the excessive labor demands that Solomon had placed on the people said, “I am going to increase the demands.” The northern ten tribes revolted against Solomon, established a kingdom and, as the prophet Ahijah had already said, made Jeroboam their king. This was the fulfillment of God’s own prophecy. Jeroboam was promised by God that if he was faithful he would stay on the throne and enjoy God’s blessings. But Jeroboam sensed a potential problem, a problem for his future. This is what he sensed, and this is I King 12:26-33:

“And Jeroboam said in his heart, ‘Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David. If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the temple of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their lord, to Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah.’ So the king took counsel and made two calves of gold. And he said to the people, ‘You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.’ And he set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. Then this thing became a sin for the people went as far as Dan to be before one. He also made temples in high places and appointed priests from among all the people, who were not of the Levites. And Jeroboam appointed a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month like the feast that was in Judah, and he offered sacrifices on the altar. So he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he made. And he placed in Bethel the priests of the high places that he had made.”

He had made. He had made. He had made. Not God; he had made. This is a phony religion. This is a religion for illusion. What Jeroboam has done is as wrong as it is obvious. Jeroboam had suffered a massive failure of faith. He has in fact distrusted the word of God. Jeroboam subordinated the true worship of God to the needs of the state as he saw them. In the Mosaic Law it is clearly specified that the power of the state is to remain distinct from the authority of religion and is ultimately subordinated to God. King Saul, as recorded in I Samuel 13:8-14, got in trouble and in fact lost the kingdom for doing the precisely the same thing that Jeroboam now was doing in Israel. King Saul was waiting for Samuel to come and offer up the sacrifice. While he waited Saul’s army began to disperse and so Saul said to himself, “O my goodness, my army is leaving me. I need to sacrifice in order to keep my army with me.” What was foremost in his mind? He was not paying attention to the Word of God, he did not pay attention to Samuel who told him to wait, told him not to himself to offer sacrifice on the altar. He offered sacrifices in order to secure the army’s continued loyalty. So when Samuel arrived, he said, “That’s too bad, Saul; you have lost the kingdom.”

Perhaps it is the insanity of sin that helps us understand why Jeroboam would decide to make golden calves as the representation of Yahweh. For indeed it was Yahwey they continued to worship. They continued to worship in the name of the God who had spoken to them from Mt. Sinai, the God who had sent Moses down and when Moses found that Aaron had made – what had Aaron made? [He had] made a golden calf! What does Jeroboam make? He makes two golden calves. Do you think anybody stood around and said, “This is dumb!” But how dense is the mind that is gripped by sin? Ah!

Let's go back to the altar. This is an idolatrous altar. This is a rebellious altar. This is an altar that worshipped falsely, and therefore to have the Lord God stand next to that altar. . . Oh! This is idolatry rooted in fear, the fear that a person has when they have lost faith in God. Therefore what would it mean to have the Lord Himself stand beside that altar?

But of course that is not what the people who were there would see. They who had come and engaged in the lavish and abundant and wealthy worship that was carried on in Bethel – we have looked at that in earlier messages. They believed they were favored by God. They were rich. They were powerful. They were secure. Surely this was God's grace. Surely God is mightily pleased! So far removed are they from an accurate understanding of where they stand before God. This indeed is the effect of spiritual blindness when it has taken root in the heart. What a shock it would have been to realize that the God who stood before them now was about to tell them the hour of judgment has come. These ears had been filled with self-assurance and self-congratulations. What would they possibly have thought if the Lord's voice broke through the static of their self-congratulations and they heard Him say as we have recorded in Amos 9:1, *“Strike the capitals until the thresholds shake and shatter them on the heads of all the people, and those who are left of them I will kill with the sword; not one of them shall flee away not one of them shall escape”*? The Lord's command is to have the Temple itself become an instrument of physical destruction as it has already been a place of spiritual death.

Of course only a relatively small portion of the elite of the nation would actually be at the temple when Amos is speaking. But the Lord intends that none shall escape. Amos 9:2 spells that out more fully. *“If they dig to Sheol, from there shall my hand take them; if they climb up to heaven, from there I will bring them down. If they hide themselves on the top of Carmel, from there I will search them out and take them; and if they hide from my sight at the bottom of the sea, there I will command the serpent, and it shall bite them. 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.”* You probably recognize those words. They echo beautifully the magnificent words that David gave in Psalm 139 reminding us that God is omnipresent. All creation is “inside” of God if you wish to put it that way. There is no place, not even hell itself where God isn't. Nothing can exist unless it is held in existence by God. So we read in Psalm 139:7-12,

“Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,’ even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day”.

Hebrews 1:2 says of the Son of God, “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of His power. “

These kinds of statement, these descriptions of God are of profound comfort to the believer, for what it reminds us is that there is no place that you or I can go that is beyond the reach of God's care for us. I think it was Wayne Hosman who pointed out to me that the most frequent command in scripture is “Fear not.” Fear not, wherever you are going to go, whatever you might need, fear not. For the Lord is with you, He is there to guide you and to keep you and to provide for you. There is no place outside the reach of His grace and goodness. This is phenomenally

good news. But on the other hand for the non-believer this is absolutely terrifying, for there is no escape. There is no escape from the God whom they have rejected: He is everywhere.

Amos follows these chilling words of judgment first with an affirmation of the power of God and then with an affirmation of His impartiality in judgment. Now we are beginning to press home with the whole issue of the illusions of grace. Amos earlier had already spoken of the power of God and as well the judgment. In Amos 5:87-9 he had already written, *“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; who makes destruction flash forth against the strong, so that destruction comes upon the fortress.”* This is a powerful statement about any who would attempt to lift up some sort of protection for themselves against God. The word for “darkness”, as we looked before, is associated with death and these are words of judgment as much as they are of power. In Amos 9:5-6 God’s power is again put in terms of judgment. You can read it there: *“The Lord God of host who touches the earth and it melts, and all who dwell in it mourn, and all of it rises like the Nile, and sinks again, like the Nile of Egypt; who builds his upper chambers in the heavens and founds his vault upon the earth; who calls for the waters of the sea and pours them out upon the surface of the earth—the Lord is his name.”* Reading those verses it is hard to resist the idea that Amos is at least alluding to an earthquake when he speaks of the land in motion, rising and falling. He alludes as well to a thunderstorm which lifts its head in such magnificent beauty, majestic against the sky and contains within itself such a fury of hail and wind and rain. This is beautifully described for us in the Bible in Psalm 29:3-9, *“The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over many waters. The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars, the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon. He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf, and Sirion Like a young wild ox. The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness; the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. The voice of the Lord makes the deer give birth and strips the forest bare, and in his temple all cry, ‘Glory!’”* Again here Amos refers to the waters of the sea being poured out on the land in what may simply be a reference to rain showers but may also be a reference to a flood. There was very little in the days when Amos spoke to protect the average person from nature. You and I live inside of air-conditioned cars, air-conditioned houses, double or triple pane windows, so we enjoy a remarkably comfortable existence. Yesterday our son Caleb hiked over to Feather Falls. How many of us have been to Feather Falls? It is gorgeous. I recommend it to you. What I recommend is that you stand on the edge and that you consider falling! How many of us have been to Yosemite? It is a fabulous experience. What I suggest is that when go into Yosemite is that you walk up to the base of El Capitan and you look up and you say to yourself, “That is a whole lot of rock!” Or perhaps you could just step outside and let your eyes trace out as far as you can into space and realize you do not see more than the most infinitesimal aspect or portion of the infinite numbers of galaxies which stretch beyond the reach of our imagination: God is the One who has made them! Therefore Hebrews says it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the Living God. Remember that what we are talking about here is the illusions of grace.

Amos is talking to people, attempting to give them words of truth, but they are in love with wealth and power. Amos is attempting to speak words of truth to people whose hearts have become hardened and minds closed. They are closed against the appeal of reason, and they are closed against the claims of both authority and thankfulness. How do you deal with people who are so in love with their advantages, their privileges and so contemptuous in rejecting any who would challenge them? How do you deal with people like that? The only way to deal with them

eventually is by way of power. When people reject truth and reason and moral principle it is only by way of power that they can be dealt with. Do we remember Pharaoh? Pharaoh resisted God; constantly God increased the intensity and the severity of the plagues until finally in order to reach that obdurate heart of that arrogant king of Egypt God set the angel of death to slay the eldest in every family of the land. How could you avoid having your eldest son destroyed? Beloved, all Pharaoh had to do was slaughter a lamb and put the blood on the [lintels of the door], but he would not.

There was a very different emperor: Nebuchadnezzar the emperor of Babylon. Daniel spoke to Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar refused to listen. Finally at one point he stood upon the top of his palace, looked out over the city and the garden and he said, “Ah ha! This is Babylon which I have made for my glory!” What did God do? God reduced him to the condition of an animal for seven seasons (years), and at the end of the seven seasons Nebuchadnezzar we are told looked up and said, “I got it. I got it figured out.” Even this obdurate heart and stubborn mind got it. God gives the glory to nobody else.

Grace is God’s reason in the midst of the insanity of sin. Grace is God’s invitation to forgiveness and renewed hope in the face of sin’s arrogance, bitterness and cynicism. You see this beautifully stated in Isaiah 1:15-20, probably one of the most beautiful portions of the Old Testament you will ever read. *“When you spread out,”* God says you Israel which was in full rebellion against Him, *“When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause. Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient. . .”*

Amos 9:7-8 touches on the very core of the delusional thinking of Israel. Their confidence, even as they engaged in sin, their certainty that all was well with them did not rest really or merely or primarily on their extravagant worship and the lavish gifts they gave to the temple. Rather it rested first of all on this remarkable fact: “We are the chosen people of God. That is who we are. We are the sons and daughters of Abraham. And because we are the chosen ones, we are the ones whom God selected out of all the rest; we don’t need to be overly concerned about the moral demands of God’s law.” I don’t doubt but that the members of the ruling elite, wealthy people enjoying every advantage of their society were reasonably decent to one another. They surely saw themselves as and in many ways probably were better than most; probably good enough. But in these attitudes they would have demonstrated their utter incomprehension of grace. Here is where the illusion comes and is so entrapping of the heart. It is the failure to understand what grace is about. Grace, the grace of God relieves us of life’s crushing burden of guilt so that we have renewed hope and strength to pursue the holiness of moral purity and the obedience of faith. Grace is designed to help us become holy.

God’s judgment, however, is always impartial. God makes no distinction unless it is to be more exacting with those who have greater access to the truth. See again Amos 3:2; early on the prophet made this statement: *“You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.”* But Grace? But God says, “Holy!”

It is the impartiality of God’s judgment what is articulated in Amos 9:7-8. Listen to what he says as he is talking to the Israelites, and now he is talking of Israel’s neighbors. *“Are you not like the Cushites to me, O people of Israel?” declares the Lord. ‘Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Captor and the Syrians from Kir? Behold, the eyes of the Lord are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the surface of the ground...’* If we take grace and use it as the permission to abandon holiness and to pursue self-satisfaction, self-indulgence and self-corruption, God says, “I will destroy the kingdom.” For the purpose of grace is holiness. The message that God is giving to Israel is that God is not God only of the Israelites, but He is the God of every nation and people on the face of the earth. It is not only Israel that God has called and moved from one place to another, even if it is only Israel that God had removed from slavery to another nation. Further the divine election of Israel was not for Israel alone. Any fair reading of the Law and the history of God’s dealing with Israel makes clear, Israel was called apart in order to be a light to the nations, they were set in the midst of the nations in order that they would demonstrate what it meant to live a faithful life under obedience to the Laws of God. Instead it had become a pool of darkness.

Do I need to draw any analogies? Is it not true that the Word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and it cuts? What do we think? God says, you will be erased from the ground.

But it is not quite over. In Amos 9:8 we read one of those verses that ought to knock the wind out of you. I have not in any degree overstated the case of Israel’s corruption. But this is what he says: *“Behold the eyes of the Lord are upon the sinful kingdom and I will destroy it from the surface of the ground, except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob.”* What kind of exception is this? Beloved, believe me, it is not the exception fantasized by Israel, the fantasy of irresponsible, unaccountable, self-indulgent and ultimately arrogant exceptionalism. On the contrary Amos first announces that the whole population shall be sifted through a sieve. Significantly that sifting will occur far away from the Promised Land. It will be among all the nations. Stripped of power, stripped of land, stripped of wealth, stripped of every privilege, they will be scattered to live amongst those whom they have treated with contempt, those who hate and despise them. Notice that a sieve is like a plumb line for it is also a measuring device. The distinction is that in this case the measuring includes separating. The sieve separates out all the clods and rocks as undesirable for future use in the sand or soil. There will be a remainder, so Amos says God will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob. But beloved that which remains is that which survives the sieve.

We come to the end, Amos 9:10. What is the basis for God’s separating judgment? They are all sinners, they are all corrupt. They have all deviated from the path. So what is it that separates some from another? Why use a sieve? Why not come in with a big club and go smash and simply wipe out the whole bunch of them? Why the sieve? [It is] because there is a distinction. You read it in verse 10: take very careful note of what you read. *“All the sinners of My people will die by the sword who say, ‘Disaster shall not overtake or meet us.’”* Ah! Those who said, “Disaster will not overtake or meet us,” those are the ones who in fact have the confidence of fools. This is the confidence that rises up from denial, not from faith. Much later it will be written in Romans 1:18-19 when the *“...wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.”* If this can be said about Gentiles who did not enjoy the special revelation of God’s truth given through Moses and the prophets, how much more can it be said of those who did receive those revelations? It is with this understanding

that Peter wrote in I Peter 4:17, *“For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?”*

So what is the application? We do not like to think of ourselves as being like the ancient Israelites, but we do like to think of ourselves as enjoying exceptional standing with God. That is inherent in the concept of grace. Grace is God’s unmerited favor; it is a gift. It is our understanding and use of the gift that needs to occupy our thoughts. The ancient Israelites understood God’s exceptional grace which called them out of all the nations to be the covenant people of God as giving them special favors so as to be less concerned about the moral demands of God, the call to be holy and pure and righteous, faithful, lovers of truth, faithful in all their dealings with others; in sum to become as much like God as they could. They were mistaken, and judgment fell upon them. What about us? How do we understand the grace of God? How do we respond to His amazing goodness to us?

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, the words of Amos accomplished no good that we know of in Israel in that day. The hardened hearts of the people rejected him and his message. And soon the day of reckoning came, and what happened amongst them is really too awful for us to tel. Our hearts are turned over in us. We tremble to consider that we might be in fact judged not according to God’s in Christ gracious merits of the shed blood that He has given on our behalf, but that we would be judged according to the merits of our words, thoughts and deeds. We know, our Father that we often fall short, not just in the doing but even in the desiring. O grant, Father, that we would not become trapped in the illusions of grace, but rather would drink deeply of the living waters that come solely from the Holy Spirit being poured out in the hearts of those who are repentant and seek Your faith and desire to have the character of Christ and manifest Your love, live by Your truth and place all our hopes in what You have promised. Grant Father that Your Spirit would move in our hearts and we would not be a hard hearted or closed minded people, but rather those who are responsive to Your Spirit. So may we again be blessed and by Your grace be a blessing to all of those with whom we share the days of life. We ask this, our Father in Jesus’ name. Amen

Questions for Understanding and Application:

“Honest competition secures benefits for everyone, even for the one who loses this round of the competition, for that competition drives the whole economy to greater productivity and creativity and serves the customer by providing better products and services either in their absolute price or in their variable quality. However, when the winners resort to manipulation and trickery designed to fool the public, when they collude with government officials and agencies to stack the deck, as it were, in their favor, using the laws of the land rather than the laws of competition to increase their gains and secure their position, the laws of competitive economics are simply lost, and a steady impoverishment of the larger population soon follows. Such was the case in Israel.”

- I. What do you understand should be the relationship between the authority of the state and the authority of Christianity/the church in America? This can also be put in terms of the relationship between moral law and civil law.

2. In what sense were Jeroboam’s actions establishing the temples at Bethel and in Dan a failure of faith? More generally, how does fear of this sort lead to idolatry?
3. If you were to guess, what areas of spiritual blindness do think exist in America?
4. Why is Psalm 139 good news for some and bad news for others?
5. What manifestations of power in nature most impress you with the power of God?
6. “The only way to deal with those who have rejected truth and reason and moral principle is by way of power, eventually even by brute force.” Agree or disagree? Explain!
7. Why is grace rational and sin insane?
8. On what basis did the Israelites ignore the moral demands of God? Does this same attitude manifest itself amongst Christians?
9. Which is applied equally to all, judgment or grace?
10. How does the exceptionalism of grace differ from the delusional exceptionalism believed by the ancient Israelites? Does this apply to Christians today?

According to Amos, on which sinners does God’s judgment fall? (Amos 9:10)