



The Prayer Closet”

September 15, 2013

*“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”*

(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying that:

**Russell and Sharla Weisner:** the Lord will strengthen and protect recent converts as they face opposition from friends and family; the Spirit will guide the Weisner children as they serve in Myanmar and Nepal; the Lord will raise up new prayer and financial partners in the United States

**President Obama:** the Lord will give him the wisdom and the will to do what is right rather than what is politically expedient; the Spirit will awaken a hunger for truth and righteousness in him for his daughters and himself; the Father will protect him from all evil

**Children’s Ministries:** the Lord will raise up a full complement of servants for AWANA, Angel Tree, and the Fall Family Fun Festival, and these ministries will effectively reach deep into our community with the life changing truth of the gospel

**Military or Public Service Personnel of the Week:** Casey Brubaker (grandson of Larry and Wanda): waiting to be deployed; please pray for him while he is home is waiting

**Young Adult of the Week:** Caleb Hammonds (son of Tom and Cindy): God will continue to provide employment and opportunity to be a positive influence for the community he serves

**Please pray for our homebound family members:** Fred & Jean Pauly, Gary & Ruth Lentz, Hilda Chapman

(please call the office to request updates)

I.

We continue in our study of Amos. The title of the sermon is “Witness”. The text is Amos 3:9-15. When the Pilgrims came first and the Puritans a bit later and they settled on the shores of Massachusetts Bay and they established their colonies they thought of themselves and they described themselves as a city on the hill. Their anticipation and desire was that the light of God’s truth would shine out from them literally around the world. That was their anticipation; they expected that to be the case. They knew that God had called them to be a witness on His behalf. They knew that, they understood that is what it meant to be, not comprehensively but at its core to be a Christians: one called by the Lord to be His witnesses.

The Lord also called Israel to be a witness for Him. That is what Amos talks to Israel about in Amos 3:9-15. This passage, these few verses are divided up into three sections. I will give you these three sections because that often makes it easier to grasp what is happening. The first section is verses 9-11; the section is just verse 12. The third section is verses 13-15. That is how the [concluding section] of this little chapter is broken up. We will go through and look at what Amos had to say on God’s behalf to His people Israel. Join me in reading the Word beginning at verse 9.

*(3:9) “Proclaim to the strongholds in Ashdod and to the strongholds in the land of Egypt, and say, ‘Assemble yourselves on the mountains of Samaria, and see the great tumults within her, and the oppressed in her midst. (3:10) They do not know how to do right,’ declares the Lord, those who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds.’ (3:11) Therefore thus says the Lord God: ‘An adversary shall surround the land and bring down your defenses from you, and your strongholds shall be plundered.’ (3:12) Thus says the Lord: ‘As the shepherd rescues from the mouth of the lion two legs or a piece of an ear, so shall the people of Israel who dwell in Samaria be rescued, with the corner of a couch and part of a bed. (3:13) Hear, and testify against the house of Jacob,’ declares the Lord God, the God of hosts, (3:14) that 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. (3:15) 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.”*

The first section, verses 9-11, is a proclamation. It is a summons to the Gentile nations to come and see. That was always the intention of God, that His people would be on view. He called them out from the rest of the world to be a witness. They were to give a testimony for God of the character of the God Who had saved them and the nature of that salvation and the goodness of His grace. That was the intention of God. Isaiah, who was a contemporary of Amos, puts it this way in Isaiah 43:10, *“You are my witnesses,’ declares the Lord, ‘and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no savior. I declared and saved and proclaimed, when there was no strange god among you; and you are my witnesses,’ declares the Lord, ‘and I am God.”*

So, God summons Ashdod and Egypt. They are to come and see the witness which Israel has on behalf of the Lord of Hosts. You might recall that both Egypt and Ashdod are enemies of Israel. They are enemies of the people of God. Significantly Amos has already condemned Ashdod in the earlier sections of this brief letter. He has condemned them for the very sins that he will now enumerate regarding Israel or Samaria. The irony is bitter and would not be missed by Amos’ audience. If you are curious to Amos 1:6-8 where Ashdod is grouped with the other Canaanite cities under the leadership of Gaza and is condemned for their callousness for sending *“...into exile a*

*whole people to deliver them up to Edom.*” Presumably when they got to Edom they would have been sold off into the slave markets. So just as the people of Ashdod showed no concern for the human dignity of the people they conquered and enslaved, so the powerful elite of Samaria showed no concern for the human dignity of those who were ground down into destitution by their economic practices and political oppression. Having been liberated from Egypt, Israel has become Egypt.

In our day this callousness, this heartless attitude is seen perhaps in people who would say it is just the outworking of the economic laws of supply and demand and the random distribution of advantages. The poor are poor because they deserve to be poor. Once the United States was seen and was a nation inviting the weak and the poor and the disenfranchised of the world to come. Here they could have a new life. Once we sent missionaries around the world, bringing the light of God’s gospel truth to every people: once. But what might the God of Hosts think of a nation of such power and wealth, with business investments and markets the entire world over but taking virtually no notice of the cruelty and oppression inflicted on Christians in so many of those nations where we buy and sell and seek allies? Our nation has changed; but not just our nation. What would the God of Hosts think of a church that claims to be Christ’s and yet they devoted their hearts to a gospel of personal health, wealth and security? How do we look into the eyes of brothers and sisters in Christ whose lives have been and continue to be shredded and decimated by war and disease and the vicious hatred of their neighbors, whether they live in Syria or Egypt or in the slums of Chicago or Los Angeles, and tell them the reason they are not prosperous and healthy is that they just don’t have enough faith to believe that because they are the Father’s children they should live like king’s kids? Really? Tell that to the Christians in Egypt or Syria.

It was James who wrote in James 2:14-17, *“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”*

Amos names the result of the sins in Samaria as “tumults”, referring to social turmoil presumably connected with oppression. A tumult is a condition close to anarchy. It is the breakdown of law order. It is the loss or absence of effective government. There is an irony in this if you read through what Amos has to say; there is an irony because at this time in the history of Israel, the northern kingdom, the government is extremely strong. This is a time in the history of Israel when under Jeroboam II, the king at this time, he has extended the borders of the kingdom through military prowess to its fullest extent. So how can there be tumults? What Amos tells us is that the power of the state has become the instrument or tool of violence in the nation. It is the power of the state which is pursuing policies, passing laws which are shredding the social fabric of the nation. The wealthy and powerful were progressively reducing the majority to powerlessness and poverty and so breaking down the structure of law and order in their own land. Oppression in whatever way it is carried out is a form of violence involving immoral even if not illegal behavior. It necessarily entails a failure to respect the inherent dignity of all persons as made in the image of God and the objects of God’s grace as well as His concern for their fair or just treatment. This was precisely how the power of the state was exercised in Samaria. But what of the policies of our own government? Can we possibly see in our nation the dissolution of the family with its attendant poverty and rise in lawlessness in our general population as the bitter fruit of the arrogance of those who think to substitute the power of the state

for God and the scarcely hidden desire of the ruling elite and their sustained effort to remove all reference to God in the public arena?

As we reflect on these issues we need to be clear on the irresponsibility of the church in willingly abandoning her role not only as the conscience of the nation but more fundamentally in being the servant of the nation in caring for the poor and mistreated. We do not always recall the truth that in the first days of Christianity it was Christians who took it upon themselves to take care of those who were ill during the plagues. The professional people of the Roman Empire fled the cities when the plagues came. The Christians walked into the cities, putting their own lives in jeopardy as they took care of the sick. It is also true that in the first days of the Church it was Christians who would search the rivers and streams for those children who were thrown away because they were not wanted – they practiced infanticide – and they adopted, took those children into their homes and cared for them. The people of the Roman Empire thought that that they were insane. That is how the world looks upon those who sacrificially love others, particularly those others who have no capacity to care for themselves. Beloved, it is quite possible that the most important thing you will hear this morning from this pulpit is what you heard from Pete Gibson regarding the Hope Center and from Bert Binion regarding the Rescue Mission, because those are two ways in which this congregation gives to those who are in need.

The church as the body of Christ has bought into the idea that we are weak, that we are unable to compete with the vast resources of the state. Has the church unwittingly surrendered primacy to the secular god, the state, thereby giving witness to the world that the church is not only weak, but is largely socially irresponsible, scarcely extending herself for others while at the same time lavishing many resources on herself? Alternately, consider whether or not and how many Christians live in comfortable homes worship in run down church buildings with poorly paid pastors and staffs, and with an eye constantly on the “danger” of overspending minimal budgets, while those same families enjoy comforts and entertainments and vacations and hobbies costing them many times what they give to the church in any year.

I want you all to know a couple of things or three things. Number one I make it my business not to know what anybody in this church gives. That way my opinion is not affected by what you do or don't do on that score. Secondly, as you most of you know and if you are visitors here you will now know it, this church is remarkably generous. You have oversubscribed our budget every year I have been here and we have come out with a healthy balance year after year. I am sure that God is pleased. We have managed to do that at the same we have expended considerable resources to improve our facilities. I am not a poorly paid pastor and I do not serve God's people in a run down facility. Those are both compliments to you as a people. I am not engaged at this moment in a fundraising drive, nor am I trying to raise my salary. What I am doing is something else. What I am doing is reminding us that what we do with the wealth entrusted to our care as individuals and families is a moral issue and a spiritual issue: always. As Jesus said, *“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”*

I learned something very profound when I was in seminary. Nini and I were outside of Chicago. She worked and I went to school and worked. Our income was so low we were not statistically noticeable. However we tithed a full tithe. I served in a very wealthy Presbyterian Church in a very affluent suburb. I was, most remarkably, the youth pastor. (That is a long and funny story which I will tell you some time!) Nini and I by tithing our very modest

income were in the top five percent of givers in that church. I know that the average family in America gives between two and three hundred dollars a year to church. Do you think God doesn't notice? Do you think that God does not notice what our hearts are controlled by? Of course He does. I have often wondered if maybe sometime we could make it our business as a church to ensure that ten percent of the children who go to Oroville Christian School were on full scholarship because of need. If giving doesn't hurt, it is not sacrificial. If we give up nothing in order to give to someone else, we are not much different from those wealthy men who dropped the excess from their wallets while Jesus took note of the widow who gave all she had to live on to the treasury. The intent is for us to discover the joy of obedience to God's call.

Significantly Amos says regarding Israel [that] she served her money. In verse ten Amos says of this wealthy and powerful and religiously active society, “...*they do not know how to do right...*” indicating not just immoral behavior but actual moral blindness: they do not know. What often begins as the choice to ignore and repress ends with complete ignorance. How many of us have discovered this ourselves? “I cannot possibly tithe! I have so many obligations on my money. You cannot possibly do it!” [That is, you can't] until you try. The minute you try God moves in and begins to bless you and you discover an entirely different pattern of living, and in that pattern you are consistently God's servant. There are enough people in this congregation who know that that if you are not sure about what I just said, turn to your neighbor and ask: it's astounding!

Should we reflect on the obviously self-destructive nature of many of the policies and programs adopted by our government? Beloved, God is truth. All truth originates in Him for all things originate in Him. Apart from God all knowledge is flawed. Just how this manifests itself varies according to the situation, but it is inherent that it will. The first and most fundamental of all the moral laws is that we are to have no other god than the One true God. If we repress this law, if we determine to ignore and deny God, then from the beginning our moral reasoning will be flawed and the seeds of destruction are sown at the root of every enterprise.

Finally in this proclamation Amos indicates that not only in addition to the wealthy and powerful storing up material wealth and immense instruments of power, the sort of things you would expect to find in the houses and fortifications of the rich and powerful, but he says they are also storing up robbery and violence for themselves. This is known as the “boomerang effect” of sin or “what goes around, comes around.” There is a Proverb that says the man who delights in cursing will find that his life is full of curses. Trouble comes to the one who delights in trouble. As the nation continued to concentrate its heart and mind on accumulating wealth and power and doing so by means of oppression and violence, they were guaranteeing violence and oppression in their own future, only then it would be directed against them, as he says in verse 11: they will be rendered defenseless and poor. That is the proclamation.

Now we come down to verse 12: this is the second statement. “*Thus says the Lord: 'As the shepherd rescues from the mouth of the lion two legs, or a piece of an ear, so shall the people of Israel who dwell in Samaria be rescued, with the corner of a couch and a part of a bed.'*” What does this mean to us? This is a peculiar and obscure verse. However, the statement is based on a provision in the Law that they would have known. You will find that provision in Exodus 22:10-13. It is called the law of recovery and restitution. Here is the Law:

“*If a man gives to his neighbor a donkey or an ox or a sheep or any beast to keep safe, and it dies or is injured or is driven away, without anyone seeing it, an oath by the Lord shall be between them both to see*

*whether or not he has put his hand to his neighbor's property. The owner shall accept the oath, and he shall not make restitution. But if it is stolen from him, he shall make restitution to its owner. (Here is the part for us.) If it is torn by beasts, let him bring it as evidence. He shall not make restitution for what has been torn.”*

Amos here in verse 12 itemizes the evidence that was looked for: part of a leg or the piece of an eye. This is all that is left of the animal. Our lives are far removed from sheep and shepherds, but a commentary that I read brings out the force of the passage, (Motyer, “The Day of the Lion”, p. 84). Here is the quote:

“Here, then, is the irony. The remains of the people of God, the rescue which is no rescue, the surviving proof of what once was, consists of *the corner of a couch and part of a bed*. We may pose the question: if *two legs, or a piece of an ear* point to the former existence of a sheep, what sort of people are represented by the rescued evidence as parts of beds and couches? Imagine that these are the vestiges of the people of God! In spite of the abundance of their religion (4:4-5) it is not in temple ruins or shattered altar-stones that Amos finds evidence of the character and concerns of the people who once lived there. Beds, couches, pillows summarize their life and habits. Sensuality, luxury, idleness, bodily care—but no evidence of religion, never mind the spirituality... Why would God withdraw from such a people? Because there was nothing in their lives corresponding to a heart-concern for spiritual things; their character reference could be written without mentioning God, or prayer, or holiness; their legacy to the future was wholly a testimony to a life lived for the body.”

Some weeks ago I made this statement: “Those who give themselves over to enjoying the good things of life are far from the will of God, even if everything they have earned they earned legitimately. The obedience of faith brings us to trouble because it is designed to bring us to the kingdom of God, and the only way into the kingdom, Paul says, is through trouble. If a life is devoted solely to avoiding trouble and pursuing pleasure and enjoyment, it is a life lived far from the will of God. What else can one say?” This is true even if many words of thanks are offered up to the Lord and we are careful to tithe from our material gain. That was the condition of Israel in Amos' day: they tithed abundantly. They were very religious, and they were spiritually dead. How do we know that they were dead? Because, Amos says, there was no moral fruit, no obedience to the Word of God that flowed from their faith. It did not render them sensitive to the dignity and the rights of their neighbors or sensitive to the issues of justice. They were unconcerned about oppression and the shredding of the fabric of society with ever deepening divisions between which there was a deepening resentment and anger. In the days of Amos their religious behavior was as self-centered and self-seeking as the rest of their lives.

It is the absence of the Spirit which renders Christian people and churches powerless, and it is sin that restrains the Spirit. The heart which is hardened by indifference to others and a preoccupation with its own interests and pleasures, has become insensitive and nonresponsive to the Spirit. The Spirit is grieved as with cold hearts we turn away from the needy in our own midst and care only for our own selves. So we need to ask, is the church powerless today? Have we not observed the stunning lack of effect exercised by the church in all her activities to alter the downward spiral of our nation? Why is this? I said last week that if a man is impure, struggling with sexual sin, then he will lack power in his preaching and teaching. He will be distorted in his reasoning and understanding of the Word of God. I did not mean to imply that if a man is tempted by impurity, for temptation is not a sin. All of us must endure temptation. This is different from the one who struggles with a pattern of failure, a pattern of engagement and then disengagement with sin, let alone the person who does not struggle at all but simply surrenders to sin, or worst of all the person who decides to rename sin virtue, thereby changing the laws of moral

order to suit his passions. Such a man is impure; he is not to be hated but to be loved and helped. Part of that help is to be removed from the impossible task of preaching and teaching the Word of God, for that is a task that can only be done in the power of the Holy Spirit. Like Israel in the days of Amos, the man has become defiled and God will necessarily undertake a work of cleansing. That may well be severe. If it is true for the preacher it will also be true for the congregation. And if it is true for the congregation it will also be true for the community and for the nation. That is what Amos is talking about. That is the second section.

This is the third [section], verses 13-15. *“Hear, and testify against the house of Jacob,’ declares the Lord God, the God of hosts, ‘that 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. 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.”* The conclusion of this section builds on the idea of the self-indulgent and even obsessive materialism of the Samaritans. Amos does so by way of a repetition which actually begins with his reference to Bethel. “Bethel” means, “house of God”. Of course even though Israel named this god “Yahweh” the form or manner or substance of their worship was the way of worshipping Baal, the Canaanite god of fertility but of prosperity generally, In an essentially agricultural economy with crops and herds as the driving force, the economy’s prosperity was virtually determined by the fertility of the soil, the availability of water, which usually meant sufficient rains, and the health of the animals raised. Amos ties the house of Baal with the true heart of the land by focusing God’s judgment on the houses of the wealthy. *“I will punish the altars of the house of god...” “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.”*

The record of this people, that which will be left behind after the land is conquered and their cities and strongholds are plundered and destroyed, that for which they will be remembered in the future, will not be their piety, not their zeal for the Lord of Hosts who brought them up from Egypt, who cleared the land of the wicked people who lived there before them, who had promised in times of faithfulness fulfilled the promises of health and prosperity for them, it would be instead the shattered remnants of their extravagant wealth seen in multiple homes of lavish wealth built at the same time as the poverty and misery and even homelessness of the majority steadily increased. That will be the evidence for the spirit of that people.

Amos was not alone in pronouncing God’s judgment on Israel. The prophet Isaiah declared this, Isaiah 63:10, though I will read a longer section.

*“...they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit; therefore he turned to be their enemy, and himself fought against them.”* This statement is preceded in Isaiah with (63:7-9): *“I will recount the steadfast love of the Lord, the praises of the Lord, according to all that the Lord has granted us, and the great goodness to the house of Israel that he has granted them according to his compassion, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. For he said, ‘Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely.’ And he became their Savior. In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit; therefore he turned to be their enemy, and himself fought against them.”*

So, what do you think? Now that we have slaughtered fifty some odd million babies, what do you think? Now that we are the world’s foremost producer of pornography, what do you think?

When Isaiah had a vision of God almighty enthroned in the temple with the seraphim in flight singing “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory,” Isaiah’s response was not just to recognize and confess, as he did, *“Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips...”* That was not the entirety of his response. He went on immediately to say, *“...and I dwell in the midst of an unclean people.”* Our thoughts, I believe, should rightly go to Paul’s words in Ephesians 4:29-30. He says this: *“Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”* Can we grasp what the Lord is saying to us? Can we understand that when we read of the horrific destruction of the northern kingdom by Assyria, and the deportation of the people of Samaria, when we read of the horrific destruction of the southern kingdom by the Babylonians and the deportation of the people of Judah, that these things came to pass as the direct action of God, and they did so because the people in that day were stubborn in their rebellion against the Lord and they grieved the Holy Spirit. What will happen to us if we do the same? Beloved, it is not God who changes, but us. Already the prophet Isaiah had told the people, *“Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; but you iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you so that he does not hear.”* This is the frightening reality which had come to pass in Israel. Do we doubt or do we deny that the same will happen to us if we do not repent, seek the Lord’s face and change our ways to match the purposes of God?

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father what deeply sobering words these are. I do not doubt that Amos trembled within himself as he spoke them. We tremble. We pray, our Father, that You will pour out Your Spirit upon us afresh and cleanse our minds and our hearts, for we would see clearly and hear clearly and by Your grace have hearts that are able to respond. We know of Your love for us in Christ and He indeed is our hope in all things. In this thing our hope is for His for His transforming power that we shall be a people who bless and a people who serve, a people regarding whom others will say, “They have been with Christ.” May it be true, we ask it in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. The Lord has said to both Israel and the church that we are to be His witnesses. In what ways do you personally follow through on this?
  
2. When they first came to America, the pilgrims and Puritans described their settlements as a city on a hill; it was to be a witness for the gospel to all the world.
  - a. What do you think has been the dominant testimony or witness of America through the almost three centuries of our nationhood?
  
  - b. How has this testimony changed in that time?
  
3. Do you think our nation has an obligation to care for Christians around the world, and if so, what should our nation be doing?
  
4. How do you think Christians and churches in foreign nations see Christians and churches in America?
  
5. Is it fair to say that the policies of the Federal Government have tended to bring about lawlessness in our land and if so, in what ways does this come about?
  
6. The message asks whether or not it is the case that the churches of the land have “unwittingly surrendered primacy to the ‘secular god’ of the state. What is your opinion and why do you think so?
  
7. Do American Christians tend to give too much or too little to their local churches and ministries and what makes you think so?
  
8. Is it possible that we don’t know how to meet the challenges of social disorder, family disintegration, and the widespread loss of moral integrity because we prefer to not deal with these issues and so do not seek God for answers?
  
9. What renders the witness of a person or a church powerless in the world?
  
10. What would (or will) be the archeological witness of American civilization?
  
11. What might we learn from Isaiah’s response to seeing the vision of God enthroned as recorded in Isaiah 6?