

Born to Win

The Minor Prophets #5

by: Ronald L. Dart

I've been reading the Biblical prophets for a long time now. For many years I taught a class in Old Testament Survey and we had to read through the prophets every year, I had to talk to the students and answer questions. We had a lot of curious students, but in all that time the thing that strikes me the most, about these prophets, is how real they were. These aren't just old Hebrew poets with an axe to grind.

These men are who they say they are and they had had a close encounter with God. The word of God had come to them and spoken. They're not really volunteers, not in that sense of the word. They didn't go off to school to study the prophets, although apparently there were schools of the prophets, at least these guys didn't need to.

For one thing when the prophet of Amos was threatened by one of the low life leaders of the religion in northern Israel, he said to the man, "I was no prophet, neither was I a prophets son. It's not in my heritage, my dad didn't send me out to do this, I'm not doing this because my dad did it. I was a sheep herder and a fruit picker and the LORD took me as I followed the flock, and the LORD said to me, 'Go preach to my people Israel.'"

No need for study, no need for a prophet lineage, no need for degrees, no need for certification. The message, as obscure as it may seem to us, reading it all these generations later, after all it was imbedded in a foreign culture. The message was as clear as crystal to the people who heard it first, which is precisely why Amaziah the low life priest was so angry with Amos.

Now I have also been touched by the fact, that as hard as the prophetic message was, and it was hard, the prophet himself felt an obligation to pray for the people. In some cases the prophets were absolutely broken hearted over the messages they had to deliver, because of the vision that they had seen of what was going to be coming down on these people. In fact Jeremiah was so moved that he often was praying for these people, interceding for these people, and finally, actually three times, Jeremiah was told by God, in Chapter 7 Verse 16; "Pray not for this people, don't lift up your prayer for them, neither make intercession to me, for I will not hear you."

Now realizing what kind of men these were, that kind of response from God had to hurt and it also had to frighten them. The realization that Israel was coming to the end of their rope, Amos knew it, he hated to see it and it really bothered him.

Then it comes to Chapter 8 and Amos records for us what God showed him to see. Reading from the NIV.: "This is what the LORD showed me, a basket of ripe fruit. {2} 'What do you see Amos?' 'Well, I see a basket of ripe fruit.' The LORD said to me, 'The time is ripe for my people Israel; I will spare them no longer. {3} In that day, declares the Sovereign LORD, the songs in the temple will turn to wailing. Many, many bodies flung everywhere! Silence!'"

Now the choice of a basket of ripe fruit seems meaningless, until you think about your own experience with ripe fruit. Everyday ripe fruit progresses from over ripeness to rotten depending on what kind of fruit it is. When it's ripe you better eat it or shortly it won't be fit to eat.

It would seem that the message here is, there's a limit to how far God will go. God had passed by them, time after time after time, but no longer. Why was He so bothered by these people?

Well the message goes on, He says, {4} "Hear this, you that swallow up the needy even to make the poor of the land to fail, saying, {5} 'Well, when will the holiday be over, the new moon be gone, so we can get our corn out and sell it. When will the Sabbath be out of the way so we can set forth wheat? Making the ephahs small and the shekels great and falsifying the balances by deceit.'"

What he means by that is when you sell an ephah of grain, and it should be a certain size, they are shrinking it down and selling it for the same price. They're making the weight of the shekel bigger than it should be, they were falsifying their balances.

Like the old butcher who puts his thumb on the scales. And what are they gaining, that we may {6} "buy the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes, and yea, selling the refuse of the wheat."

They were in such a hurry to get their shops open, they couldn't wait for the holiday to be over. And they were dishonest merchants with a thumb on the scales, robbing the poor and the needy, and selling the sweepings off the floor for wheat at top dollar. Here are greedy men, who just couldn't have enough, and who would actually walk right over the poor thinking nothing of them at all.

The LORD "has sworn", Amos 8 verse 7, "by the Excellency of Jacob surely I will never forget any of their works." Now that's enough to send a chill down the spine, to think that you can come to a place in your life, where God might say to you, "I will never forget what you have done." And God has a long memory.

"Shall not the land tremble for this and everyone mourn that dwells in it? It shall rise up holy as a flood, it shall be cast out and drowned as by the flood of Egypt, {9} And it shall come to pass in that day, says the Lord GOD. I shall cause the sun to go down at noon and I will darken the earth in a clear day."

Now that is a very interesting statement there. It's one of those statements that causes us to wonder at the scope of the prophecy, how far does this reach?

Amos wrote out of a clear historical context, he was in time and in space, he wrote to his own generation. The prophet Isaiah tells us, that to understand these prophecies we have to understand the historical context of them, because that's not necessarily the end of them. Most of what Amos is talking about is the coming destruction at the hands of the Assyrians in his own time or shortly thereafter. But the language of that last verse is echoed in other prophecies all the way down to the Book of Revelation.

The similar idea of the darkening of the sun in Revelation 6 Verse 12 for an example. "And I beheld when the angel opened the sixth seal. And lo there came a great earthquake and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became like blood." Heavenly signs. The sun going dark on us.

Revelations 8 Verse 12: This is the fourth angel sounding his trumpet out of the seven trumpets. It says “a third part of the sun was smitten, a third part of the moon, a third part of the stars, so a third part of them were darkened. And a day shone not for a third part of it and in the night likewise.”

Big stuff is going on sometime in the future in the book of Revelation. As seen in a vision by John, that was darkening of the sun, the moon and the stars.

Some thinks this refers to an eclipse in Amos' day. Archbishop Usher said there were two major solar eclipses about 11 years after he wrote this, but frankly I'm doubtful that there was any reason to prophesy a natural event like a solar eclipse. These people had been studying the movement of the sun and moon for hundreds of years. You have to understand their calendar was a lunar calendar, they kept looking at this moon and they knew the cycles of the moon. And they had to look at the sun also because in the process of doing that they could determine when they were going to plant their crops, and so consequently they knew about eclipses. And merely for a prophet to prophesy a natural event would have impressed no one.

So maybe this prophecy is intended to be used over and over again until its final fulfillment in the Day of the Lord.

In any case there comes a day when nearly everything around them came apart.

I'm not entirely sure what to make of what Amos says next, but I do find it vaguely disquieting. He said in Amos 8 verse 11: “Behold the days come saith the Lord GOD that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD. {12} And they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro and seek and the word of the LORD, and they shall not find it.”

Now I think God here is speaking in terms of a time when men were expecting to receive the words of God from a seer or a prophet. They would go down to the place where the known prophet of God was to hear what God had to say to the generation. They were looking for God's word but God would not be talking to them at all. There have been long times in history, actually, when God went silent and refused to hear or speak to man. Yes I tell you, I can really understand how that might happen.

You have this long period from the book of Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, until the birth of Christ, when God went clean silent and wasn't talking to anybody. Well, where do you go from that? In these days when the word of God is in print and everywhere, one wonders how man could look seriously for God's word and not find it. Unless God is speaking of a time when no one will stand and speak his word, even though it is written, or we go into a time when the authorities won't allow a man to speak the word of God.

You know, I've noted, it would be a small thing for the government to put an end to religion on television and radio. They could silence my voice entirely and everybody else. Think about it, the airways are, in law, owned by the government. You have to have a permit to broadcast radio waves in the air, freely. You know they do have the amateur bands but you have to have a license or you cannot broadcast in the amateur bands either.

Now how great of a stretch is it, from banning the Ten Commandments from the courthouse, to banning the Bible from the airwaves? Frankly I expect some version of a famine of hearing the word of God in our future. It would have to reach further than just the airwaves, but the way

society is going right now, increasingly no one wants to hear it. A time may come when it's not there to hear.

This is unlikely to come from congress, although there are those in congress who would like to control what goes out over the airwaves and they're talking about getting the 'Fairness Doctrine' back. Where this will come from, if it comes, is from the courts and if Christian people are ready to be silenced and get sheered like sheep, we will cooperate in our own demise. We will be right there voting for the people who will shut us up to where we cannot speak to this people, and there will be kind of a famine of hearing the word of God and I suspect it is in our future.

Continuing in Amos 8 verse 13, Amos said. "In that day shall the fair virgins and young men faint for thirst? {14} They that swear by the sin of Samaria and say, your god O Dan, lives; the manner of Beer-sheba lives' even they shall fall, and never rise again."

What he's talking about when he uses the expression, "the sin of Samaria", He is talking about the idols, the false gods, the gods that these people in Dan and Beer-sheba were serving, which has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with the God of the Bible, so Israel had gone pagan.

In Amos 9, Amos said, "I saw the Lord standing upon the altar." This is kind of an unusual thing, I don't recall it elsewhere. We're in vision and he sees God actually standing on the altar, "and he said, Smite the lintel of the door, that the posts may shake: take an axe and cut the head of the door, in all of them; and I will slay the last of them with the sword: he that flees of these people shall not get away, and he that escapes of them shall not be delivered. {2} Though they dig into hell, from there my hand will take them; though they climb up to heaven, from there will I bring them down."

Now I'm sure that Amos understood all this to be a metaphor, but what's really interesting is that we now live in a time when men can climb up beyond the atmosphere and live in a space station, God says they can't get away up there either.

Let's continue in Amos 9 verse 3, "Even though they hide themselves on top of Carmel, I will search and take them out of there and though they be hiding from my sight in the bottom of the sea, from there I will command the serpent and he will bite them."

I don't think anybody was living in the bottom of the sea in Amos's day. We can do it now, we have undersea habitations for science. I don't know if anything is out there right now but there has been and surely will be again where people will live down there so they can observe what is going on down there. God says try to escape down there and I'll command the serpent to bite you down there.

God says in verse 4, "And though they go into captivity before their enemies, there will I command the sword, and it will slay them: and I will set mine eyes upon them for evil, and not for good."

For these people, who have gone down this road far enough, there is just nowhere they can go to escape God, even being carried into captivity, the sword follows them there.

Now you have to wonder, how bad does society have to get for this kind of punishment to be just. We do know that they had chased off after Baal and we do know the pagan temples of that day featured religious prostitution. We also know that prostitution was often involving children, we know that children were actually bought and sold as sex slaves. In fact that's still going on in the world today so why be surprised about it then.

This is what the Asherah, that are mentioned in the Bible, were all about. They were these pagan temples to the Asherah and in many of these cases there were cult prostitutes but these were not voluntary prostitutes. One kind of wonders, how many women in prostitution actually do ever go into it voluntarily. Either circumstance has driven them into it, and in some cases they are captured or kidnapped, put on drugs and turned into prostitutes.

But in this world and at that time and probably in our day, too, the biggest market was children. Because when you get to misuse children you can control them. Now when you think about Jesus, perhaps you can understand why it is that God will not tolerate child abuse.

We can go along way down the road of sin, we can sleep in bed with lots and lots of women and God will condemn us for it, punish us for it, but when you start abusing children you are teetering on the brink of annihilation from God.

Jesus obviously loved little children, I think of that day when people were bringing little children to him, for him to bless them, and the disciple would say, oh don't bother the Lord get away from here with those children.

Jesus said, in Mark 10 verse 14, "hold it, permit the little children to come to me, because of such is the kingdom of heaven," and he took them up in his arms and blessed them. He didn't bless them from a distance, he didn't put his hand on their heads as they stood near him, he picked them up, and he obviously loved the little children, as the song goes.

Amos continues in Amos 9 verse 5: "The Lord GOD of hosts is he that touches the land, and it shall melt, everybody that lives there will mourn: and it will rise up wholly like a flood; and shall be drowned, as by the flood of Egypt. {6} It is he that builds his stories in the heaven, and has found his troop in the earth; he that calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out upon the face of the earth: Yehovah is his name. {7} You know you people have become like the children of the Ethiopians to me, says the LORD. I brought up Israel out of Egypt; I brought the Philistines from Caphtor, and brought the Syrians from Kir. {8} Behold, the eyes of the Lord GOD are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the face of the earth; saving that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob, says the LORD."

God says very plainly in the prophecies that everybody, all these sinful and corrupt people are eventually going to get it.

Israel on the other hand will not be utterly destroyed.

Verse 9, "For, lo, I will command, and I will sift the house of Israel among all nations, like corn is sifted in a sieve, yet not the least grain shall fall upon the earth."

Now that is a strange thing. What really did seem to happen whenever the Assyrians came in and took the northern tribes, the house of Israel by name, captive. They went into captivity in Assyria and never came back, they were scattered apparently all over the place. The LORD said, "They would be sifted among all the nations but not the least grain shall fall upon the earth." What does that mean?

Verse 10, "All the sinners of my people shall die by the sword though, the people who say, oh evil will not overtake us." Then he says, {11} "In that day," and somehow you get the feeling, every time you run into that expression "In that day." you're looking way down at the end times, and the context justifies it here. "In that day I will raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and I will close up the breaches of it; I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of

old: {12} That they may possess the remnant of Edom, and of all the gentiles, who are called by my name, says the LORD that does this.”

Gentiles? Now this is way beyond the horizon of this ol' sheep herder. The idea of Gentiles who are called by Gods name, how could this possibly be?

We Christians with all of our experience behind us would think nothing of the idea that Gentiles would be called by Gods name, but going way back in the time of our ole sheep herder, we have to ask the question, what did people think about that? What did it mean, because Gentiles, the other nations, and the word Gentiles in this case means nations not Israel? Who are called by God's name, what did they think?

I think we have to understand something about this expression, to call upon the name of Yehovah, or to be called by the name of Christ, in order for that to be the case, one has to be in covenant with Him.

This is not just people who get on their knees and call out Oh Lord; it's somebody who is in a relationship. For example, all of us are familiar with marriage as a covenant. We go before the preacher and we stand there, he reads the vows to us. We pronounce our vows before God in the presents of a whole bunch of witnesses and when the wedding ceremony is over, we go out and sign the marriage license which is the state imposed marriage contract that we all go by.

When I got married and we went on our way, my wife began to be called by my name. She was now Mrs. Ronald Dart, she signed her checks with my name, we had to put her name on the bank accounts and we began to combine all of our resources together and we, in fact, then begin to act as one.

That's what the Bible says; these two shall become one flesh (Genesis 2:24), so in law my wife and I are considered one. She is called by my name, so consequently when I read in the Bible, the men began to call upon the name of Yehovah, what it means to me is they were beginning to enter into a relationship with God. When talking about it in the future, all the Gentiles who are called by my name, is speaking of Gentiles who are in covenant with God.

When you understand what Christ did and his instructions he gave to his disciples, somehow it got lost in all the translations but it's right there on the page in Greek. When he told his disciples, “All power given to me in heaven and in earth therefore go you into all the world and make disciples of all the Gentiles, baptizing them and teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you” (Matthew 26:19-20).

We don't have a problem with it now, but what we read in Amos was clearly a prophecy of what God is going to do in the future.

In Amos Chapter 9 Verse 13 the LORD says, “Behold, the days come says the LORD that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, the treader of grapes, and him that sows seed; and the mountains shall just drop sweet wine, and all the hills shall just melt with the crops that are on them. {14} And I will bring again the captivity of my people of Israel, they will build the waste cities, and they will live in them; and they shall plant vineyards, and drink the wine thereof; they'll make gardens, and eat the fruit from them. {15} And I will plant them upon their land, and they shall no more be pulled up out of their land which I have given them, saith the LORD your God.”

Now you know this beautiful return happened when Israel came back out of Babylon but it had

to happen again because they were plucked up again and dispersed in 70 AD. They got to go back to Palestine again when the United Nations gave the Jews Palestine in 1948, one of history's most unlikely acts, and yet, there they were, back in the land again planting grapes. My reading of the prophets lead me to believe there is yet another Holocaust in Israel's future, and yet another return, because they just keep getting pulled up out of the land. Sooner or later the prophets tell us there is going to come a time when that won't happen anymore.

Let me remind you that I am no prophet. All I can do is read the prophets, try to understand them, try to help you to understand them as well, so that maybe we can see the implications they have for our day, our time, the decisions that we make that is going to affect our lives and the lives of our children. Some hard times lie ahead of us here.

Christian Educational Ministries

P.O. Box 560 ❖ Whitehouse, Texas 75791

Phone: 1-888-BIBLE-44 ❖ Fax: (903) 839-9311

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