

The Minor Prophets #4

Amos

by: Ronald L. Dart

In the days of the Old Testament prophets, the gate of the city was like the county court house used to be. It was where the courts were but also where most business was conducted. It was the official gathering place for the town council, the elders in those days.

Even today, if you're going to foreclose on a piece of property, you have to go down to the steps of the county courthouse and auction it off, right there, on the courthouse steps.

In Old Testament times it would have been the gate. In those days, that's where the prophet went to pronounce his message and that's what you see as you read through the prophets and they talk about the gate. They're talking about the courts, they're talking about the public arena; they're talking about the place where the public comes together. So when you read in the book of Amos, a statement like, "They hate him that rebukes in the gate" or "They hate him that speaks uprightly." You begin to see what he is talking about, this is a time where you go down to the county courthouse, as it were, you put up your little box and you get up on your soap box and you preach.

What Goes Around Comes Around

Amos says: "They hate the man that rebukes them in this place." Amos 5 verse 11 continues on from that thought and he says, "Because you're walking all over the poor, and because you're taking away from him his burdens of wheat, you have built for yourself houses of hewn stone, but you're not going to dwell in them. You planted pleasant vineyards, but you're not going to drink the wine from them."

You know, in a way, this is a version of the old saying, "What goes around comes around." Once you begin to corrupt your customs, everyone will virtually be affected. You can't begin to walk over the lower parts of society, the poor, the down trodden, the people who may be ignorant or don't know any better. You just go ahead, you take advantage of them, but what goes around will come around, and the whole society will come down right around your ears. I think we may get a chance to observe that.

He goes on to say. in verse 12, "I know your manifold transgressions; I know your mighty sins: you're afflicting the just, you take bribes, and you turn aside the poor in the gate from their right."

And look, doesn't everybody know that money makes all the difference when you have to go to court in our world, in our time. Do you think a poor guy who broke into a house some night because he didn't have any money, and he doesn't have any money now. He's in the courthouse and he has been brought there from the jail and put up in front of the judge. Do you think that that poor man will have as good of a shake in court as a rich man in a similar crime? Well, you know better than that.

Not to long ago, we had a congressman who was sitting on one of the more prestigious committees in the House of Representatives. He was caught in an FBI sting taking a \$100,000 dollar bribe. They found \$90,000 dollars of it in his freezer, and he is where? He is in congress. He got reelected and he's a free man still in the people's house.

Sometimes I wonder about us. How do you think that affects society at large? And what do you think it says about the people who reelected him knowing that he had done this?

Well, what goes around comes around.

God Commands Amos to Speak

Once your society begins to rot, no one is safe. Verse 13 of Amos 5, "Therefore, the prudent shall keep silence in that time; for it is an evil time." And sometimes you are better off just keeping your mouth shut.

Poor Amos did not have that option. God came to him and God said, "You go tell them," so Amos went down to the courthouse steps and he told them.

Amos continues, { 14 } "Seek good and not evil, that you may live." Now how hard is this? You know, this is one of life's simplest formulas, "Seek what's good, not what's bad, so you can live and so the Lord God of hosts can be with you." God's not going to hang out with us, God is not going to live in our cities, God is not going to walk in our streets, when we're doing bad things all the time.

Corruption in the Courts

Verse 15 of Amos 5, "Hate the evil, love the good, establish judgment in the gate: it may be that the LORD God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph." Now you encounter this theme all the time in the prophets. God was very concerned with the corruption of the courts, and that's what was going on right here, when He says "establish judgment in the gates."

God is saying if you take somebody to court in your country, you have no idea what's going to come out on the other side, it isn't justice for sure, and if you have money the chances are good, you'll get off.

Read the Prophets in a Modern Bible

When you read these prophets, you can get the feeling that those guys were watching television news, right now, today, last night.

You know, one of the ways you can really come and see this is by reading these Old Testament prophets in an ultramodern translation, one that's really up to speed. I remember one day years ago, in a rather troublesome time, I was reading my way through the prophet Jeremiah in the 'Living Bible'. Now the 'Living Bible' is not really a translation, it's a paraphrase, but the man has done a superb job of conveying the sense of what the prophet is saying. Now I will tell you, if you get one of those Bibles, the 'Living Bible', the 'New International Version', you really will get the feeling that the prophets are talking to us nose to nose.

Wailing in the streets

Amos continues in Amos 5 verse 16, "Therefore the LORD, the God of hosts, the Lord said this: "Wailing shall be in all the streets; and they shall say in all the highways, "Alas! Alas!" And they shall call the husbandman to mourning and all their skillful lamentation to wailing. And in all the vineyards will be wailing: for I will pass through you," saith the LORD." 'Skillful of lamentation and skillful to wailing'. You do know that in other lands, especially in the Middle East, people do not mourn quietly.

Generally speaking if you go around where someone has died in our society, you go to visitation, family visitation, it's really quiet. You may hear a little crying here and there, and a lot of people hugging one another, comforting one another, a sniffle here and there as people feel the death of their loved one.

Well, if you go to the Middle East, people wail, loud, they go out in the street and they follow the casket that's carried along, wailing at the top of their voices. Now you may not know this, but in ancient times, they even paid mourners, professional wailers as it was. In fact they're still doing that in Lebanon as we all saw in the recent war between Hamas and Israel. Here though, it was Arab television that was paying the wailers.

So, God says there is going to be a lot of wailing going on. Those that are skillful at wailing will be hired to be in the streets making a lot of noise.

The Day of The Lord

Amos goes on to say, Amos 5 verse 18, "Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD!" Now you have to understand, this expression, "The Day of the LORD" has profound meaning in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. There is a day, in the future, when God will judge, there is a day of lightness, a day when God comes and restores peace and in a sense that is the day of the Lord. You would think you would be looking

forward to that. But God said, "Woe to you that desire the day of the LORD, to what end is it for you? The day of the LORD is darkness, and not light, for you."

It's as if a man was fleeing from a lion and ran smack dab into a bear, or he went into a house and leaned a hand on the wall and a serpent bit him. You can't find any place to get away. {20} "Shall not the day of the LORD be darkness, and not light? Pitch black, very dark, and no brightness in it?"

Do Not Trust In Religion

You know the Holman Bible Dictionary has an interesting summary of this expression the 'Day of the LORD.' They say, "The Old Testament prophets used a term familiar to their audience, a term by which the audience expected light and salvation, but the prophets painted it as a day of darkness and judgment. The Old Testament language of the 'Day of the LORD' is thus aimed at warning sinners among God's people of the danger of trust in traditional religion without commitment to God and His way of life."

Now that's an important statement, because again and again, you will find in the prophets where they will chastise people because they are trusting in religion. By religion I mean going thru the motions, such as going to church, making sacrifices, doing the things that the law specifies and thinking, that even though you don't have a commitment to God that it's going to be good enough to carry you through. They said, "Its language that could be aimed at judging Israel or it could be used to promise deliverance from enemies, as it is, in many places. The 'Day of the LORD' is thus a point in time in which God displays His sovereign initiative to reveal His control of history, of time, of His people and of all people."

So when you encounter this expression, the 'Day of the LORD', pay attention, read it carefully, it's important.

God Despises Your Feast Days

Amos 5 Verse 21, God is speaking and says: "I hate, I despise your feast days, and I do not savor your sacred assemblies. {22} You can offer me your burnt offerings and you can offer grain offerings, I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fattened beasts."

Now what's going on here? Well, first of all, when God says "Your feast days" He's not talking about His own feasts of Leviticus 23. This whole story is told in 1 Kings 12.

What you need to understand is, the House of Israel, the northern kingdom, had been thoroughly and totally corrupted. Jeroboam had moved the festivals all over the place (1 Kings 12:32), changed everything, set up altars in places where God had not authorized, and basically the northern kingdom was lapsing into paganism.

Their Religion Was Their Religion

You need to realize that one of the things that God is really concerned with here, one of the things that truly angers Him, is the way they lived their lives. Their religion was their religion. The life they lived was totally contrary to God's way.

He goes on to say in verse 23 of Amos 5; "Take away from me the noise of your songs, I don't want to hear it. {24} Let judgment run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream." God didn't want to see just religious observances, He wanted to see how it affects the courthouse, God wanted to see that people were protected in the law, He wanted to see the poor people protected, but they weren't doing that.

Verse 25, "Have you offered unto me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness for forty years, O house of Israel? {26} You have borne the tabernacle of your Moloch and Chiun and your images, the star of your god, which you made to yourselves. {27} Therefore will I cause you to go in captivity beyond Damascus," way beyond Damascus, saith the LORD, whose name is The God of hosts. It was the Assyrians that took them away beyond the northern Tigris River, ten times as far away as Damascus was. And why? Oh they were religious all right and in some aspects, I think, they thought they were worshiping God.

You run into this syncretistic worship of where you start worshiping God with pagan customs and worshiping God and pagan idols, and God will simply not accept it. In fact it won't hold a society together, it corrupts morals, the whole nation begins to come apart and judgment is no longer available in the courts, righteousness is not a factor in society and your society will destruct.

God's Warning of a Reign of Terror

Amos 6 Verse 1: "Woe to you who are complacent in Zion, and to you who feel secure on mount Samaria, you notable men of the foremost nation, to whom the people of Israel come!" I'm now reading from the New International Version. {2} "Go to Calneh and look at it; go from there to great Hamath, and then go down to Gath in Philistia. Are they better off than your two kingdoms? Is their land larger than yours? Do you really think that you're going to fare better than other kingdoms that I have brought down?" God asks. {3} "You put off the evil day and you bring near a reign of terror."

This is really a sobering thing to think about, because what he is saying is, "All you fat cats, all of you who feel perfectly secure in your country, notable men that people come to. The time is coming when the evil day is going to come down on you. You put that off, you think the evil day is not coming and you bring near a reign of terror."

Under this kind of leadership, there is a reign of terror in parts of the country. {4} "You lie on beds inlaid with ivory, you lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves. {5} You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical

instruments. {6} You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph."

Morally Bankrupt

Consider this, there was in those days, a wealthy elite who lived very well indeed, their country was going to hell around them and they just didn't care. You see this isn't a statement in the ruin of Joseph, it is not about the physical ruin of the nation, which is coming, but at this time their power was intact, their economy was sound but they were like we are, fast becoming, morally bankrupt. The people could not bring themselves to grieve over what was happening in their country, probably because they couldn't see it. They had been brought up in this system, that was all they knew, they depended on it and they were morally blind.

Amos has this to say to them in Amos 7 verse 7, "Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile. Your feasting and your lounging will end. {8} The Sovereign LORD has sworn by himself, the LORD God Almighty declares, "I abhor the pride of Jacob and I detest his fortresses. I will deliver up the city and everything in it." I think what he means by that is simply; "I'm going to walk away and let the heathens have it."

It shall come to pass, {9} "if there remain ten men in one house, they will all die. {10} And a man's uncle shall take him up, and wrap him and he that burns him, to bring the bones out of the house, and they shall say to him that is by the side of the house, "Is there anybody else there?" And he'll say "No," then he'll say "Hold your tongue, we may not make mention of the name of the Lord."

I don't know exactly what to make of that. I don't know whether it had been forbidden to speak of God. I don't know whether it was something people shouldn't do, hard to say. "Hush, we may not mention the name Jehovah." It's a terrible image of a time of famine and pestilence, of a besieged city that could do nothing with the bodies of people who died except burn them.

Verse 11 of Amos 6: "For the LORD has given the command, and he will smash the great house into pieces, and the small house into bits. {12} Do horses run on the rocky crags?" Of course not. "Does one plow there with oxen?" No. "But you have turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into bitterness." When I read this I get the feeling that Amos is mixing his metaphors because the point is; there is a certain rationale in what's happening to folks. He says you don't plow on rocky crags. Now's here's the point, you have turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into bitterness, you're going about this thing all wrong.

"You who rejoice" {13} "in the conquest of Lo Debar and say, "Did we not take Karnaim by our own strength? {14} The LORD God Almighty says, "I'm going to stir up a nation against you, O house of Israel, that will oppress you all the way from Lebo Hamath to the

valley of the Arabath." Basically it's a warning to them, I'm going to walk away from you, and stir up the heathen who will come after you.

Preachers Should Not Relish Calamity on the People

Amos Chapter 7: "Thus has the Lord GOD showed me; and behold, he formed grasshoppers," this is a vision mind you, "He formed grasshoppers, right in the beginning of the shooting up of the latter growth, it was the latter growth after the king's mowings. {2} It came to pass, that when they had made an end of eating all the grass of the land," these locust had come through and denuded the land in the vision, "then I said, "O Lord GOD, forgive, I beseech you: by whom shall Jacob rise? For he is so small." {3} The Lord relented and said "It shall not be.""

I take away from this, that it is also the duty of the prophet to intercede for the people and Amos did. The reason I say this is because over the years I've heard preachers preach prophecy that points toward the last days, they apply it to our society and sometimes quite correctly. But it is almost as though they relish what they are saying and it's almost as though they want it to happen. I think back to poor ole Jonah who went in to preach this kind of message to Nineveh and then God saw that Nineveh repented and He relented and Jonah didn't like it. He didn't like it even a little bit. What's interesting about Amos is, he did not rejoice over it, he wasn't happy about it, he didn't like it, and he actually tried to talk God out of doing it, up to a point.

The Vision of the Plumbline

Then there was another vision, Amos 7 verse 7, "The Lord stood upon a wall made by a plumbline, with a plumbline in his hand."

I stop here to explain, the reason I do, is that we were publishing one of our Bible Study books. and it had a picture of a Bible with a plumb bob hanging over it, with a little string hanging down with a plumb bob on the end of it. And some of the people in our office staff had no idea what it was. The younger generation sometimes is not aware of some things us old guys take for granted. A plumbline is a length of string with a weight on the end of it. The purpose of a plumbline is to insure vertical alignment when you're building a wall. If you were building a brick wall you would need to find some way of being sure that all the brick were lined up vertically over one another and the simplest way to do it, is to have a weight on the end of a string. It is plumb straight, a plumb line.

Now Amos see's the plumbline in the vision, {8} "And the LORD said to me "What do you see?" "I see a plumbline," and the LORD said "Behold, I will set a plumbline in the mist of my people Israel; I'm not going to pass by them anymore." We are going to set this line up here to see that everything is straight. {9} "But the high places of Isaac is going to be desolate, the sanctuaries of Israel are going to be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword."

The point is, God built Israel straight but since they had become crooked, they would have to be torn down.

Amaziah the Priest of Bethel

Verse 10 of Amos 7, "Amaziah was the priest of Bethel." Bethel was that little town between the northern tribes, the last one you pass through going down toward Jerusalem. It is the place where Jeroboam the first placed an altar and said; "You Israelites don't need to go down to Jerusalem any more, this is a lot closer, this is a lot more convenient." Jeroboam made priests of the lowest of the people (1 Kings 12:31-33). That tells you a lot about Amaziah, the priest of Bethel.

Let's continue in verse 10, "Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent to Jeroboam, the king of Israel, (this is Jeroboam the 2nd.) saying, "Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel: the land is not able to bear his words." {11} For this Amos says, "Jeroboam shall die by the sword, Israel shall surely be led away captive out of their own land." The old sheep herder's simple message was becoming a nationwide problem.

There is no prophet like that today, there are only pretenders.

Amaziah then said to Amos, {12} "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, go back down there and eat bread and prophesy there." Basically, eat bread and prophesy means earn your living and prophesy down there. Of course he's expecting Amos to do what he does for money. {13} "Don't prophesy any more here at Bethel; it's the king's chapel and the king's court."

Then Amos said to Amaziah, {14} "I was no prophet, it's not my business to be a prophet, neither was I a prophet's son; I was a herdsman, a gatherer of sycamore fruit." I was a shepherd and a fruit picker. {15} "And the LORD took me as I followed the flock, and the LORD said to me, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel." "Go preach." Now I think this is really interesting because what he is saying in no uncertain terms, is I'm not a professional preacher. In fact he had not been educated, hadn't gone to college, hadn't gone to seminary, had no doctor's degree, had not studied theology, the truth is, he didn't need it. All he was required to do was go preach to the people of Israel and tell them what God said to tell them. How hard is that?

Amos continues, {16} "Now therefore hear the word of the LORD: You say, "Don't preach against Israel, stop preaching against the house of Israel." {17} Thus saith the LORD, "Your wife shall be a harlot in the city, your sons and daughters shall fall by the sword, your land shall be divided by line, and you shall die in a polluted (pagan) land, and Israel shall go into captivity away from their native land." That's a pretty hard thing to say, to hand down to a man, face to face. Your wife will be a harlot in the city. Why? Well in times of great distress, in times of famine, a person has to sell, what they have to sell, to eat. And I guess that's what was going on with Amaziah's wife.

Amos continued to say, Amos 8, "This is what God has showed me, a basket of summer fruit, {2} and God said, "Amos, what do you see?" I said, "I see a basket of summer fruit," and the LORD said to me, "The end has come to my people Israel. I'm not going to pass by them anymore. {3}The songs of the temple shall be howlings in that day, there shall be many dead bodies in every place and they shall cast them forth in silence."

There is, after all, a limit to God's patience.

This article was transcribed with minor editing from a message given by
Ronald L. Dart titled: "The Minor Prophets #4" (MP4) 3/6/07
Transcribed by: tl 4/28/13

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