

Prayer

Lord God Almighty, we strive to follow Your ways and we work hard to make Your Name known in this world. Yet despite our efforts, we often fail to make headway and the church regularly falls short of our expectations, let alone Yours. Remake us in Your image we pray; remove all sin and wrongdoing in our midst and revive us according to Your will. Give us a hope for the future that is based on our trust in You alone. We praise You, Lord God: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Pray for some friends you have not seen for some time, and resolve to contact them and find out their real needs

On-going prayers

- **Pray about the need for good church leaders.** *Pray for your own church leader(s) and ask God to sustain them in true service*
- *Pray for Poland as it elects a new president*
- *Give thanks to God for the gift of happiness*

Meditation

Lord of Light – shine on our unlit world;
Lord of Peace – dwell in places of conflict;
Lord of Hope – give strength to the weak;
Lord of Love – comfort the rejected;
Lord of Wisdom – make yourself heard.

Fill us, Lord, with Your Spirit,
so that we may shine with You and dwell in You,
and give help and comfort to the needy.

Make Wisdom, Light, Peace, Hope and Love
be seen, known, heard and experienced throughout the world,
and may the message of the Gospel
be salvation and liberation for all who know they need it!

Glory be to You O Lord, our Saviour, Redeemer and Friend.

Bible passage - Amos 3:1-8

¹ Hear this Word, you people of Israel, that the LORD has spoken against you, and against the whole family I brought up out of the land of Egypt: ² 'You alone have I known from amongst all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins.

³ 'Do two walk together, unless they have agreed to meet?

⁴ Does a lion roar in the forest, when he has no prey?

Does a young lion growl from within its den, if he has caught nothing?

⁵ Does a bird fall into a snare on the ground, when there is no bait set in it?

Does a snare spring up from the ground, when it has taken nothing?

⁶ Does a trumpet sound in a city, without bringing fear to the people?

Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has caused it?

⁷ 'Surely the Lord GOD does nothing without revealing what he proposes to His servants the prophets. ⁸ The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord GOD has spoken; who can but prophesy?'

Bible Study

Review

This remarkable passage of Scripture is unique within the Old Testament. Here, Amos defends himself against those who might reject his message and asserts that what he has said is indeed God's Word; *'the lion has roared! Who will not fear!'*

Amos begins by confirming that his prophecy is indeed God's judgement and it has indeed been delivered against Israel, the nation with a special relationship with God (3:1,2). He then asks a series of seven questions, each of them painting a different scenario. Together, these questions ask the listener or reader to consider that behind everything that happens on earth there is a reason, which is found in the will and purpose of God. This is true of the circumstances of life, such as people meeting (3:3), and also of natural phenomena such as lions roaring (3:4f.). It is also true of world events such as battles and disasters that befall cities (3:6). Then, after his point has been well made, Amos makes two powerful observations, firstly, that God always reveals His intentions to His prophets (3:7), and secondly, that once God has revealed His Word to His servants the prophets, they have no option but to deliver it (3:8).

It is worth recalling the circumstances in which Amos first said this. He had just delivered an aggressive, anti-Israelite prophecy (2:6-16), moreover, he had delivered it directly to Israelite people face to face. He told them that they were under the judgement of God for the injustice to be found in their midst, and because they had deviated from the true faith of their ancestors (2:8-16). Such a shocking word would have been met with hostility, and we can imagine that Amos was heckled, and worse. What right did this southern prophet have to insult Israel? Why should they listen to a wandering prophet like this? Surely, they had their own prophets who could deliver the true Word of God?

So, in his defence, Amos responds to this negativity by making out a strong case that his is indeed a word from God. To begin with, he re-affirms that he is speaking to Israel, '*You alone have I known from amongst all the families of the earth ...*' (3:2), and he adds, forcefully, that this privilege carries with it the searching light of God's judgement; those who are closest to God must bear punishment '*for all your sins*' (3:2).

The series of intriguing questions found next in verses 3 to 6 have a clear purpose, which is to say that everything happens for a reason, but imagine what it was like to hear them first in these circumstances. People would have wondered what Amos was getting at! After seven examples, they may well have realised the point he was making, but Amos had set them up. For just as he had earlier delivered a round of seven prophecies only to deliver the real message in the eighth (see 1:3-2:6), this round of seven questions is intriguing, but it only leads us towards Amos' main point, which is that God speaks through His prophets as He wills, and not at the behest of His people! God delivers His Word, and it is not up to anyone to prejudge it or set down the conditions under which they will receive it.

In truth, we often misunderstand prophecy today. When people talk about prophecy, they often think of it as a gift of the Spirit and a means by which God speaks to His people. This way of understanding prophecy comes from the New Testament, and we should be careful not to limit ourselves by it, because it lacks some Old Testament perspective. Amos tells us that we should always expect God to reveal what He is doing through His prophets. So, prophecy is not something driven by the need of God's people to know His will, it is driven by the will of God to keep His people informed of what He is doing in our world.

This surely warns us that if we ignore prophetic gifts in our midst, then we will have only a limited understanding of God's work in our world. Moreover, to ignore the prophets is to ignore God Himself. The Lord is constantly speaking to His people; He walks with us, sustains us, feeds us and warns us about what is happening in the world. Those who do not hear Him are those who have stopped listening to His prophets.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- God's Word for God's people (3:1,2)

- The will of God found within everyday life (3:3-6)
- God and His work of prophesy (3:7,8)

Notes on the text and translation

V2 ***'I will punish you for all your sins'***

Other translations:

'I will punish you for all your iniquities' (NRSV)

The Hebrew word used here for 'sins' is 'awon', meaning something twisted or devious. It implies the idea that it was once straight but has become like this in the course of life. Note that when Amos prophesied 'for three crimes and for four ...' (1:3f.) the word used there for 'crimes' is a different word, meaning rebellion.

V3 ***'do two walk together unless they have agreed to meet?'***

Other translations:

'do two walk together unless they have made an appointment?' (NRSV)

A Hebrew question always implies an answer of 'yes' or of 'no', depending on the words used and the way that they are used. In this instance, it is clear that the question requires a negative answer. 'No', we are supposed to say 'two people do not meet unless they have made an appointment!'

V7 ***'the Lord GOD does nothing without revealing what he proposes to His servants'***

Other translations:

'the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing His plans to His servants' (NIV)

'the Lord God does nothing unless He reveals His secret to His servants' (New AV)

The Hebrew words read as follows; 'the Lord God does nothing unless he discloses his counsel to His servants ...'. One reasonable translation of this is 'plan' (NIV), but the modern idea of a plan is of something fixed, whereas the Hebrew behind this word here suggests something far more fluid, that is, God's 'counsel', or perhaps 'what he believes to be right'. My translation attempts to convey this idea as simply as possible.

Going Deeper

God's Word for God's people (3:1,2)

The first verse of our passage directly confirms what we already know; that Amos was prophesying against God's people. Look closely, at what Amos says, however, because underneath the surface of his forceful prophecy against Israel lies a greater concern. First of all, Amos confirms that he speaks against Israel with these words:

'Hear this word, you people of Israel, that the Lord has spoken against you ...' (3:1)

Then, after saying this he adds these words:

'and against the whole family I have brought up from the land of Egypt ...' (3:1)

This second phrase suggests that behind his exterior, Amos was a man concerned not just with Israel (the northern Israelites), but with all God's people including his own people the Judeans (southern Israelites). In his own day the two nations of Israel were split apart, but Amos appears to be one of those who still retained a belief that all God's people were one, despite the enormous divisions between the two in his own day. Remember that in the previous chapter, his seventh prophecy had been against the Judean people (2:4,5), just before he prophesied against Israel. When we looked at this prophecy in our studies we found that although the prophecy seems tame from our point of view, it would have sounded cutting to any true Judean. All of this reminds us of the problems of division amongst God's people and the fact that this, of itself, creates great problems for those who seek to know God's will.

In verse 2, we read these words;

'You alone have I known from amongst all the families of the earth' (3:2)

This phrase sounds almost familiar and it is certainly a phrase we might expect to find in the Old Testament. Yet surprisingly, this is the only place in the Old Testament where it is found! This sentence reflects God's pure love for all His people, and we might expect to find similar phrases in the psalms, or perhaps in

Genesis. However, if you look up the words, you will find that they occur in a very different form, in an abundance of warnings to Israel about the dangers of worshipping other gods; for example;

'See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today; and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn from the way that I am commanding you today, to follow other gods that you have not known. Deuteronomy 11:26-28

Some commentators say that the prophecy of Amos is one of the most negative in the whole Old Testament, but this small insight shows that the man had a profound sense of the love of God. This shows that true love must be strong enough to want to deal with what is wrong in this world, and such love reflects the love of God Himself.

The will of God found within everyday life (3:3-6)

The seven prophetic questions found in verses 3 to 6 are fascinating, and they all describe some form of cause and effect. But within this pattern there are differences of emphasis, which say yet more to us. The first question sets the pattern.

Do two walk together, unless they have agreed to meet? (3:3)

Here, Amos declares that there is a reason for everything. He cites a simple story of cause and effect, and the question he asks requires an answer of 'no' (see notes above). His point is that two people only meet together because they have previously agreed to do so, and this is typical of how God works in the world. He works logically and we can work out His intentions.

Does a lion roar in the forest, when he has no prey? (3:4)

Now, Amos turns to an example of cause and effect from the natural world. The lion roars only when it has caught its prey, because it does not have to hide itself any more as part of its hunt. This is an example of God's order within the world.

Does a young lion growl from within its den, if he has caught nothing? (3:4)

In a fascinating twist, Amos turns to a similar but almost opposite example; for a young lion is not mature, and will growl when it is hungry and has not caught anything! Yet this is still an example of the way God has made the world, which works.

Does a bird fall into a snare on the ground, when there is no bait set in it? (3:5)

This question begins to turn the questions towards Amos' final point, because it introduces the idea of entrapment. A bird flies down into a trap because bait has been set, and unless this has been done, then it will not be diverted in flight. Is Amos suggesting that he has set a trap into which his listeners have fallen?

Does a snare spring up from the ground, when it has taken nothing? (3:5)

Again, the example is a simple cause and effect, but if we follow the possibilities I have suggested above, then is Amos commenting on the way that the people have been stirred up against him because they have taken the bait of his message! They will become trapped by its message of judgement!

Does a trumpet sound in a city, without bringing fear to the people? (3:6)

Of course, here is yet another picture of cause and effect. When a city comes under threat, a trumpet is sounded to warn the citizens of impending invasion, for example. But we must remember that Amos had already warned Israel that she was to be punished by God and the results would be war-like catastrophe (2:9-16). It is possible that Amos was introducing this idea to make sure that people knew His message? Certainly the 'trumpet' was a well known metaphor for prophecy in Amos' day!

Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has caused it? (3:6)

Again, everything seems to point towards this as the concluding and seventh prophecy. It also describes cause and effect, it says that God is behind any act of judgement, and it seems unlikely that Amos says this as a simple example. This is his precise message to Israel. He knows it, and those who listen to him know it, which is why they are angry with him!

God and His work of prophesy (3:7,8)

In this fascinating way, Amos both intrigued his audience and kept them wondering what he would say next. He also reiterated some of the key themes of his message about judgement, and he insisted that God was actively warning His people. Those before him wanted to dismiss Amos' prophecy, but this was Amos' defence. God works through the logic of the world to speak to people and reveal His will to His prophets, and those who perceive it must deliver it.

In Amos' day, more than a century had passed since the days of the great prophets Elijah and Elisha. They were unique characters, and in their day and subsequent days, prophets tended to live in groups attached to the great shrines of Israel and Judah. Many were recognised as such and had no other role in Israel and did no other work; they looked after themselves in community (see the stories of Elisha (2 Kings 4f.)).

It was therefore something of a shock for people to hear a shepherd stand up before them and claim to be a prophet! Make no mistake, this passage here is Amos' justification for speaking in prophecy, and it is the very 'modern' argument that he prophesies because God has given Him a word, no less. This was unheard of, this is the first Scriptural defence of such prophecy, and it opens the door for countless other prophets, including all the written prophets of the Bible from Isaiah to Malachi, who were people of all kinds who were called by God to give His word. The old form of prophecy delivered through specialised prophets had gone, and God was now pouring out His Spirit on a wider range of people. It is interesting that the prophet Joel perceived the same movement of God's Spirit in his own day, and projected this forward, looking to a time when God would send His Spirit on 'all people (Joel 2:28)

Amos had made his case that he was a true prophet of God and that the words of judgement he gave would be fulfilled because they came from God. It was a highly skilful appeal to the people of Israel to accept both him and his message. We cannot know exactly how the people reacted to Amos' defence. People of ancient times were easily swayed by speech, and they also felt deeply about how God spoke through the prophets. But it is hard not to imagine that they remained very much on edge. Despite his subtle and clever speech, what Amos had said in his prophecy (2:6-12) was political dynamite, and his prophecy of judgement by war was something no-one would want to hear. What would become of his prophecies?

Application

Bubbling up from within Amos' austere message to Israel, we find this pearl of the Old Testament, which speaks to us of the way in which God always delivers His Word to His people by means of His prophets. More than this, He also informs His people of everything He is doing in this way. Now, we need to hear God's Word today just as people have needed to hear it in every generation, from Old Testament times to this, and Amos' message reminds us of God's intent to communicate with us, if we will listen. Amos spoke at a time when God's Word was not otherwise being heard, and was hardly expected, and he certainly raised the dust with his words! Perhaps we need prophets who are willing to do the same today!

One feature of this passage is of course the seven questions found at its heart. They have a number of interesting features, and they should remind us that we can see God at work not just in the extraordinary, but also in the ordinary. Amos spoke about natural events and occurrences within the world, and perceived that God was involved in them and indeed behind them. For example, he choose to speak about God being behind a planned meeting of two friends. This might not seem very significant to us, until we think about the fact that in many testimonies, people today tend to bear witness to God as one who works in the extraordinary rather than the ordinary. For example, I have heard many testimonies that rejoice in God's making sense out of an extraordinary meeting between two friends rather than a planned one, and the force of the testimony is this; we are asked to believe that God will do miraculous things for us, too! Of course, there is nothing wrong with such testimony, but Amos' point must be heard, God is normally at work in the ordinary, and we urgently need to perceive this.

This passage of Scripture also deserves to be well read in any Biblical study of the nature of prophecy. As we saw in the 'review', it also tells us that God does 'nothing' without revealing it to His prophets, and this implies that God has revealed a great deal to them that has either not been passed on by the prophets or we have not heard! This is something of great importance, and suggests that within the church today there is a considerable amount of heart searching to do.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What do the brief prophecies (3:3-6) teach us about what Amos came to Israel to say?
2. Discuss what you would feel if someone came to your church and prophesied strongly that it would be destroyed because of its sins!
3. Try to summarise Amos' defence of his prophecies to the Israelites.

Personal comments by author

I find this passage deeply moving. Amos was fighting for his life before a crowd of people who were distinctly hostile. He was prepared to stand up before others and face death in order to proclaim what God had said to Him. I ask myself whether I would have been prepared to do just this. The courage of the ancient prophets is awesome, and God enabled these great men (and in some cases women) to prophesy as they did because the message they bore was more important than they could possibly understand for themselves. This is true of prophets today, and yet all too often we do not often recognise it!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Think about how you have reacted when people have criticised you or have rejected the things you do, at church, at home or at work. We all have powerful emotions at such times, and we need to make sure that they are balanced by a proper understanding of God's Word and not just a result of our natural reactions. Ask the Lord for discernment that will help you know when things go wrong in your life.*
- *Pray for the life of all God's people, and pray that we will all have the courage to deal with prophets of God who tell us what has gone wrong with the church.*

Final Prayer

Dear Lord, drive away from us those spirits of despair that take advantage of our daily troubles and trap us into self pity and gloom. Liberate us by the power of Your Holy Spirit, and may our confidence in Christ be unshakeable, each and every day of our lives: AMEN
