

Prayer

Thank You, Lord Jesus, for the joy of being able to share our faith with others. Thank You for those with whom we share our worship, week by week; thank You for the groups in which we support each other and share fellowship; thank You for the privilege of hearing the testimony of others; and thank You for all the opportunities we have to share what we believe. Lord Jesus, build us up in our faith, we pray: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Listen to some music without words, preferably music that you love and know well. Listen carefully, and let God speak to you through music.

On-going prayers

- **Pray about the need for good church leaders.** Pray for churches that are looking for new leaders or new leadership teams
- Give thanks to God for the wonders of the natural world
- Pray for scientists working at the edge of knowledge

Meditation

Rejoice to see the full day's dawning;
See the providential power of God,
Gloriously pursuing the Universal Law
Of goodness, faith, and hope and love.

Denounce those demons of despair;
The menacing, destructive evil power
That drives all back towards unhappiness
And leads the soul to shadows of despair.

Let the power of God reign now; let Jesus live!
No contest, Satan! Death to sin and suffering!
Let the Maker stamp His image on the heart
And taste the victory He's won, through living faith!

Bible passage - Amos 4:6-13

⁶ 'I gave your teeth no food in all your cities, and made bread scarce in every locality; yet you did not return to me,' says the LORD.

⁷ 'I also withheld the rain from you when harvest was still three months away. I sent rain on one city but not on another; one field would have rain, and another would not and would wither. ⁸ So people would stagger from one city to another just to drink water, but they could not be satisfied. Yet you did not return to me,' says the LORD.

⁹ 'I struck you with blight and mildew, and locusts consumed your increasing number of gardens, vineyards, fig trees and olive trees; yet you did not return to me,' says the LORD.

¹⁰ 'I sent plagues among you just as I did to Egypt; I killed your young men with the sword and captured your horses, and I filled your nostrils with the stench of your camp; yet you did not return to me,' says the LORD.

¹¹ 'I brought catastrophe on some of you, just as I did on Sodom and Gomorrah, and you were like a brand plucked from the burning; yet you did not return to me,' says the LORD.

¹² 'Therefore this is what I will do to you, O Israel; and because I will indeed do it, O Israel, prepare to meet your God! ¹³ For look, He who forms the mountains, creates the wind, reveals people's hidden thoughts, creates the morning out of darkness, and treads on the highest places of the earth; the LORD, the God of hosts is His name!

Bible Study

Review

Amos looks back over Israel's past and sees the abundant evidence of God's desire to restore His relationship with His people. Yet His people have ignored Him and this is why they face His judgement!

As we have read through Amos, it has become increasingly obvious that God intended to punish His people for their sins through some act of war, most probably invasion. Amos has not said blandly, 'God will come and invade Israel's land!' He has agonised over the reasons why Israel wandered far away from her God and the security of their covenant relationship. He has also declared openly that Israel's rebellion cannot continue, and God will soon come to judge His people.

This message is never far from our minds as we read Amos; yet there is a different twist to the prophecies in today's reading. If we stop reading this text from a human perspective and read it from God's point of view, then something new comes into focus. Behind God's drastic decision to judge His people lies His passionate desire to see His people return, and each of the five prophecies in this reading (4:6, 7-8, 9, 10, 11) ends with the same words; '*yet you did not return to me, says the Lord*'. Whatever 'tone of voice' might lie behind these words, they reveal One who has frequently attempted to call Israel back so that she would repent of her ways. The whole passage suggests that if Israel had ever repented, then God would have graciously forgiven her sins; but she had tragically never turned.

Each of the five prophecies describes a difficult time in the past when Israel would have been better served by trusting in God rather than on her own strength or worldly strategies. Amos pinpoints these difficulties as times of famine, drought, pest and plague (4:6-10). The agriculture of the land before modern irrigation and farming techniques was fragile, and these were all a regular part of life until comparatively modern times. Lastly, Amos refers to a time when Israel had narrowly escaped destruction; Israel had been saved at the last moment, as Amos describes with enigmatic flair, '*like a brand plucked from the burning ...*' (4:11). But even this was not enough to make Israel to repent.

It is almost certain that as Amos prophesied, he had in mind certain historic incidents of famine, but unfortunately, there is not enough information for us to say more about when these natural disasters took place. Famine arose in Israel for each of the three reasons given here, that is drought (4:7-8), pest (4:9) and plague (4:10), though we should spot that Amos' description of plague sounds more like war than any spread of disease!

However, the last prophecy about a narrow escape probably refers to events around the middle of the ninth century BC, when Israel and Judah were saved from the evil dynastic rule of Ahab and Jezebel in a revolt led by an army officer named Jehu (see 2 Kings 10). This period of the Old Testament is not well known, but Scripture regards the terrible religious oppressions of Ahab's rule time as some of the worst in Israel's history. Interestingly, the Biblical record tells us that God used Elisha to appoint Jehu and end the tyranny (2 Kings 9f.).

At the conclusion of this string of prophecies, Amos concludes with an announcement of God's coming, for this is what we find in verses 12 and 13. The strong word '*therefore*' (4:12) tells us that God will now respond to Israel's stubborn rebellion, and Amos uses traditional language describing God as Creator to announce the glorious arrival of '*the Lord, the God of Hosts*' (4:13).

Strangely, this passage describes something of Amos' own character and faith. He had been given a terrible prophecy about the future of Israel, and most of his words reflect the weight of this awesome burden. Yet in this passage we have a glimpse into Amos' heart and His faith in the awesome creative power of God. He was deeply dedicated to the God of Creation and the God of his forefathers, yet he also believed that God passionately wanted His people to return so that He could forgive them. Yes, he had already announced dire punishment, but the inclusion of these prophecies shows how much he, as well as the Lord God, wanted Israel to repent.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Famine (4:6)
- Drought (4:7-8)
- Pest (4:9)
- Plague (4:10)
- Narrow escape (4:11)
- Warning and doxology (4:12-13)

Notes on the text and translation

V6 *'in every locality'*

Other translations:

'in every town' (NIV)

'in all your places' (NRSV)

The Hebrew word translated 'locality' means 'standing place'. It is a general word denoting any particular relevant to what is being discussed. Classically, it is translated 'place' or 'town' (to match 'city' in the previous phrase). However, it seems to me to be right to use the more modern word 'locality', and this reads well.

V9 *'I struck you with blight and mildew, and locusts consumed your increasing number of gardens, vineyards, fig trees and olive trees'*

Other translations:

'Many times I struck your gardens and vineyards, I struck them with blight and mildew. Locusts devoured your fig trees and olive trees ...' (NIV)

'I struck you with blight and mildew; I laid waste your gardens and your vineyards; the locust devoured your fig trees and your olive trees ...' (NRSV)

The translation of this sentence depends on one Hebrew word which appears out of place in the original sentence. The word itself means 'to multiply or increase'. I have translated it 'increasing number' and followed the word order of the Hebrew fairly closely. Other translations split up the list of trees to try and balance the sentence to read like normal Hebrew poetry, and the NRSV believes that the Hebrew is incorrect at this point and suggests an alternative understanding of the word, giving 'I laid waste'. I suggest that it is not worth departing from the plain meaning of the text here even though the grammar is obscure. Little can be gained in the interpretation of the prophecy by major alterations.

V10 *'I killed your young men with the sword, together with your captured horses'*

Other translations:

'I killed your young men with the sword, along with your captured horses.' (NIV)

'I killed your young men with the sword; I carried away your horses' (NRSV)

The translation is a little difficult because the Hebrew says more accurately, 'I killed your young men with the sword and the captivity of your horses'. In theory, this could mean that the young men died because the horses had been captured, which is rather meaningless! I reckon that the most sensible translation is to suggest that together with the young men, the horses were killed. Of course, horses were not natural to Israel and any they possessed were 'captured' from other armies or foreign powers.

Going Deeper

Famine (4:6)

We might not immediately recognise this verse as description of famine, because the first sentence sounds odd; *'I gave your teeth no food ...'*. The Hebrew of this verse says literally 'I will give you cleanness of teeth', which you will find in some translations of Amos 4:6. Those of us who live in developed countries are not used to the fact that is well known to people who live in Africa, for example, that people who are in the grip of famine will frequently have very white teeth! The lack of corrosive foods in the mouth mean that teeth stay clean.

Famine occurs because of the fragility of the Israelite agriculture. For although the land was fertile enough when it rained, without regular rains when barley and wheat were planted at the beginning of the year, there would be no harvest. Famine had made Abraham leave Canaan and go to Egypt (Gen 12:10f.) and his son

Isaac endured a long period of famine and managed to stay in the land (Gen 26:1f.). Famine again caused Jacob's sons to go in search of food to Egypt in the well known story of Joseph, and if we look at each of these stories, great good came out of these forefathers dependence upon God at such times. Amos' point comes from a good and comprehensive understanding of Israel's past; he does not prophecy famine as if lulling a threat from a bag of natural disasters with which to taunt Israel.

This history of famine in Israel should tell us that despite the worst of human circumstances, God can make great good out of disaster, if we will but trust in Him.

Drought (4:7-8)

Drought is a significant part of the story of God's people, though we tend not to notice many of the details in Scripture that point to its importance. People sometimes forget that the great prophet Elijah was used by God at a time of drought, to challenge God's people about whether they trusted Him or trusted the Ba'al gods for the fertility of the land (see 1 Kings 17,18). The great clash between Elijah and the prophets of Ba'al make powerful reading, but we forget that at the very end of the story, the answer to Elijah's prayer comes as God sends a small cloud that eventually turns into a thunderstorm, bringing the rain that will save the people and given them crops (1 Kings 18:43-46).

Now we tend to think of Elijah's work at Mount Carmel as an astounding victory for the Lord, but the truth is that after this, there was only a limited repentance on the part of the people and their King (Ahab). Certainly, Elijah knew that his hard work was tenuous and Queen Jezebel sought his life (1 Kings 19:1f). Amos would have seen the great stories of Elijah in this light and may have thought of this event as evidence of Israel's inability to repent rather than her desire to follow the Lord. Famine was a highly emotive subject in Israel.

Because of this, it is not surprising that Amos mentions drought here in this passage. He pictures the vagaries of weather that make for drought in one city but not another, and one field but not another, and the chaos of people wandering about trying to find food at such times. It is easy to imagine that such circumstances might bring out the worst as well as the best of humanity, but as far as Amos was concerned, it was Israel' inability to respond to such events by turning to their God that was most worrying.

Pest (4:9)

Pests are mentioned in a number of Old Testament texts, and Amos is not the only prophet who uses the imagery of pests, from blight and mildew, to locusts. Joel famously describes a storm of locusts and develops a message that calls on God's people to repent and turn again to their God. His message also resolves in the blessing of God, who pours out His Spirit on '*all flesh*' (Joel 2:28), and brings restoration '*for the years the locust has eaten*' (Joel 2:25). In addition, Solomon famously describes '*blight, mildew, locust or caterpillar*' (1 Kings 8:37) as plagues that should remind the people to turn to their God in prayer and humble submission.

Amos would have been aware of the great prayer of Solomon, and there is evidence that this great Temple prayer found in 2 Chronicles (ch 7) as well as 1 Kings (ch 8) was well used. His message could well have been inspired by this prayer, for it is none other than a call for repentance, the same as Amos' message here. The prophecy of Joel is more difficult to pin down, for it is impossible to date the book, and no one has been able to give a certain background for what it describes. It could either have been written before Amos' day, in which case, it reinforces the message, or it was written after Amos, in which case this prophecy may have inspired Joel.

It is worth noting that when Amos delivers his climactic vision in chapter 7, the first vision is that of locusts. Amos' response to his vision of the destructive power of locusts is to beg for God's forgiveness, which is granted (7:1-3). So this confirms our interpretation which says that these prophecies are about repentance more than judgement.

Plague (4:10)

The plagues in Egypt were designed to call Pharaoh to change his mind, and they included all manner of evils alongside what we might think of as plagues. Moreover, the plagues themselves did not force Pharaoh to change His mind, rather, it was the angel of death who did this, after the plagues had been finished. For this reason, we would be wise to think that Amos' use of the word 'plague' here.

If we read the whole of verse 10, we find that it mentions in turn 'plague' or perhaps 'pestilence', then 'the sword', and lastly, the chaos of defeat as typified in the stench of an abandoned military camp after battle. It is perhaps best of we take these all together and accept that all of them describe the terror of defeat in battle. There are a number of Old Testament texts that use this trio to describe military defeat (2 Chron 21:8, Jeremiah 14:12f. etc.), together with famine.

So it seems that Amos has typically fought shy of speaking directly about the one subject that runs like a thread through all his prophecies, military defeat. We saw this theme at the end of chapter 2, and throughout chapter 3, and we will find that it never disappears from this book.

Narrow escape (4:11)

I have mentioned some of the bare bones of the awful horror of what happened to Israel and Judah in the middle of the ninth century BC, after the dire rule of Ahab and his wife Jezebel. Their eventual deaths unleashed a period of bloodshed in the royal households of both Israel (in Samaria) and Judah (in Jerusalem, and if you pick your way carefully through 2 Kings 11 and 12, you will find some incredible stories. The evils of Ahab and Jezebel were quickly removed from Israel by the army officer Jehu, but the daughter of Jezebel, named Athaliah, seized the throne of Judah from her son Ahaziah, and reigned for several years in Jerusalem (2 Kings 11:1f.)! She was only removed from the throne of David by a coup not of army officers but of priests (2 Kings 11:4f.).

The fact that a half-Israelite queen reigned in Jerusalem on the throne of David is such an extraordinary slur on the lineage that not only is this period of history expunged from many Jewish records of the ancestry of David, it is entirely absent from the genealogies of Jesus found in Matthew (ch.1:1f.) and Luke (ch 3:23f.)! The massive shock of these events would certainly have been felt for several generations, and people in Amos' day would have certainly looked back on this as a 'narrow escape' for Israel and Judah.

It is possible that other scholars will make a case for other events in the life of Israel and Judah to be closely identified with verse 11 in Amos 4, however, I reckon that this is the most likely contender. Certainly, the apostasy of the ruling elite of those days was the closest we can get to the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah in the life of Israel. Underneath the political headlines lay a considerable element of sexual intrigue, which justifies the comparison with these two cities of depravity.

Amos' point is still that although Israel had been through this experience, she had still not returned to the Lord. 2 Kings 10:28-31 confirms that King Jehu did not eventually follow the Lord as he was supposed to do, and it seems that the '*brand plucked from the burning*' was not entirely saved. She continued to burn!

Warning and doxology (4:12-13)

Amos' call to Almighty God is typical of ancient Jewish liturgical summons to God to come into His Temple and reign. In various parts of Scripture, from the Psalms, to Job to the prophets, we can read similar texts to verse 13 (e.g. Job 38, Psalm 46), and this is not the only place in Amos where the prophet uses such language (Amos 5:8).

Moreover, if we read verse 13 with care we can see that its words are not just like an ancient doxology giving praise to God as Creator, they are also like the great apocalyptic messages of later prophets such as Daniel and Zechariah, who had visions of God's coming again in glory. Certainly, Amos did not say a great deal about the end of the world and God's final recreation, however, these words, together with Amos' description of the 'day of the Lord' (5:18f.) have been essential in the development of our understanding of God's last judgement. Amos describes God's re-creative power to move mountains, His command of the wind (the Spirit) the revelation of hidden thoughts, His mastery of time and His stance above all things '*on the highest places of the earth*' (4:13). This is both a prophecy of Christ's ascension and also of His return in glory!

Application

Whatever we think about God, he is always wanting to draw us back to His care. This is the most we can take from this passage of Scripture, and it is a treasure, perhaps one that we were not expecting in Amos. Whilst Amos was desperately concerned that the people of Israel had not returned to the Lord, what was impossible for Israel has now become possible for us, in Christ.

Many good people struggle with various forms of sin or godlessness and will quickly say 'I am not worthy of the Lord'. I have even come across Christians who have attended church services for decades and profess faith in a variety of effective ways, yet they do not feel worthy of attending a communion service. Others will confess that they have difficulty with some habitual sin and have given up on trying to confess it. They end up feeling unworthy and unclean before God, and unwilling to deal with some aspects of faith because of their shame.

To all such people, the message must go out to say that God is always in the business of hearing our repentance, and He will receive us whatever the circumstances. This is God's nature from the Old Testament to this. Now if we can find this message even in the words of the prophet Amos, then this surely means that it is true! Amos is known as the prophet of doom who spoke about the destruction of Israel, yet in his heart, he knew that God was a God of repentance who would always receive a sinner. Israel did not

return to her God. Through Christ, all of us have an unending opportunity to return, so let each one take it as necessary.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Do we believe today that God speaks to us through the natural events and disasters of the world, as Amos did?
2. Is it wise or unwise for us to explain to other people that God might be speaking to us through events in the world around us?
3. Amos spoke about God as Creator as if this fact was the most important thing about God. Do you agree?

Personal comments by author

It may be too much to imagine that Amos did on fact have a group of supporters in Israel. However, there is constant evidence within the Old Testament that although the northern tribes had their own life and religious structure, different from the people in the south, many northerners were still deeply committed to the God of the forefathers. Indeed, after the exile, the remnant of all the tribes of Israel were gathered together into the 'Jewish' people who survived both the destruction of the northern kingdom under Assyria in 721BC and the destruction of the south by Babylon in 597-587BC. The Lord has never been without His witnesses and He has always sustained them; let us be those people today.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Look at a newspaper and read through one. How many of the reports you read could be explained as God trying to send messages to us about justice, about what is right or wrong, about the judgement of the world, or something similar. The Scriptures tell us that because God has made everything, He is to be found through the world in which we live if we have eyes to see Him. Do your best to see what you can find!*
- *Pray for the people of the world who are trapped in faiths that limit their perception of the one true God and make them dependent upon superstitions about the weather and how people relate to natural features of the world.*

Final Prayer

Help us, dear Lord, to offer ourselves to You in a true spirit of worship. We seek to be set free to worship you in 'spirit and truth'; and yet without Your presence by the Holy Spirit our efforts are meaningless. Fill us with Your Spirit, we pray, so that our worship may be a natural consequence of the lives we live for You: AMEN
