

A Basket of Summer Fruit

Opening Hymn: #267 — The Beauty of Holiness

“And he said, Amos, what seest thou? And I said, A basket of summer fruit.”

—Amos 8:2

Amos lived over 2700 years ago. He was the first prophet whose utterances were collected together into a single book. There were prophets before him—Samuel, Elijah, Elisha—but their prophecies are combined with a general narrative of the events of their time. We also speak of “major” prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel. But they are major only because the length of these books are great in comparison to the twelve “minor” or shorter prophets. Of the sixteen prophets whose name is on their book, Amos is chronologically the first.

It would be hard to find a more unpretentious man.

Amos 7:14 (RSV) Then Amos answered Amaziah, “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees.

The opening verse says he was a herdsman in Tekoa, a little town six miles south of Bethlehem. The terrain was rugged. One could barely make a living in such circumstances. The contrast between the life of this lonely man from Judea with the pomp and prosperity of the people of Israel was about as great as it could be.

Amos is sometimes called “The prophet of social justice.” He is critical of the wealth derived through deceit:

Amos 8:4,5 Hear this, O ye that swallow up the needy, even to make the poor of the land to fail ... making the ephah small and the shekel great, falsifying the balances by deceit.

The merchants measured out the grain with containers that short-changed the poor. And their scales saw that the coin appeared greater than it really was. It was a time when the rich got richer and the poor got poorer.

Israel

At the time of Amos, there were two nations: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Jeroboam was the king of Israel. He feared that if his people journeyed south to worship in Jerusalem, they might be tempted to revolt and join forces with Uzziah, the king of Judah. So he set up Bethel as an alternate place to worship God. But God was not pleased with this:

Amos 4:4 Come to Bethel and transgress ... (vs. 5) for so you love to do, O people of Israel!

As a people, Israel was enjoying a period of rest from their enemies. Since the court judges could be bribed, the rich could get away with anything. This led to ease and luxury which some thought would last forever. This was the state of Israel before they were carried off into captivity. How could God, who gave them all this prosperity, fail to be pleased? There were feast days, solemn assemblies, burnt offerings, songs and melodies. What more could God want?

Quite a bit more, as it turned out!

The Visions

The seventh chapter and into the eighth chapter, we have four visions describing Israel:

7:1-3 SPRING — the locusts arise to devour the land.

[vs. 2, alternate reading: “And as they were about to devour the herbage...]

Amos looks out over the nation and sees them as they really are. He pleads for mercy:

Amos 7: 2 O Lord God, forgive, I beseech thee! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!

In their own eyes, Jacob saw himself as self-sufficient and proud. But Amos saw with greater clarity. The Lord, in vision, stayed the plague, the punishment.

7:4-6 SUMMER — a fire [or fiery drought] upon the land.

Again the prophet pleads for mercy. Again the Lord stays the plague.

7:7-9 The plumbline

Behold, the Lord stood upon a wall made by a plumbline, with a plumbline in his hand. And the Lord said unto me, “Amos, what seest thou?” And I said, “A plumbline.”

Amos knew it was over. The Lord had had built up his people in the way they should go. “The nation was that wall made by a plumbline.” But time passes and the Lord returns to his wall and measures how straight it was. Against this standard, Amos saw not only the plumbline, but how far the nation of Israel had fallen “out of plumb.” The high places and sanctuaries were used for idolatry and were a blasphemy in God’s sight.

(vs. 8) ... I will not pass by them anymore. [Better: not forgive them]

8:1-2 AUTUMN — the basket of summer fruit

Here’s the final picture: the fruit is fully ripe, and the time is ripe for judgment and punishment. One can almost visualize this basket of ripe fruit turning to rot in the hot sun, picturing how the desirable nation of Israel was rotting away in God’s sight. God repeats his judgment: “I will not forgive them anymore.” Amos recognizes the justice of this verdict and does not seek to overturn it as he had the first two times.

Isa. 5;4,7 What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? Wherefore when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, it brought forth wild grapes? For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant: and he looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry.

Somehow the people believed “once in grace, always in grace.” The Lord had planted. He was obligated to feed them, water them, and protect them forever. But the Lord was under no such obligation in the time of Amos, nor at the time of Jesus:

Matt. 7:20,21 Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them. Not every one that saith unto Me, Lord Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of My Father which is in heaven.

Down to Gilgal, down to Bethel went the children of Israel. The empty rituals meant nothing to the Lord. It was the proper fruits that the Lord was looking for. But he found none. Like a basket of summer fruit rotting in the sun, the nation of Israel had gone bad. The Lord was about to take action:

Amos 3:2 You only have I known of all the families of the earth;
therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.

Spiritual Zion

Amos 6:1 Woe to them that are at ease in Zion ...

If the book of Amos were merely the record of God's judgments upon his disobedient people, it is questionable it would have survived unto this day. Although this book begins with the phrase, "The words of Amos," we have his own testimony that these were not his words, but God's:

Amos 3:8 ... the Lord God hath spoken, who can but prophesy?

But can it be said that spiritual Zion is at ease? that spiritual Zion is guilty of the same sins as earthly Zion at the time of Amos? Let us see.

Rev. 3:14,17,18 And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write ... Because thou sayest I am rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing and knowest not that thou art wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire that thou mayest be rich ...

Here is the seventh and final message to the churches. Here is a church that thinks it is rich and prosperous—at least in its own eyes—but whom the Lord judges to be wretched, miserable, poor, and blind.

Down through the ages, it has been the great church system that has grown rich at the expense of the poor. The great cathedrals of Europe tower above everything. The robes, ceremony, chanting and ritual are impressive. But they are empty gestures, concealing the absence of true riches like mercy, justice, and love.

1 Peter 4: 12 Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you as though some strange thing happened unto you.

In the first chapter of this letter, Peter talks about the trial of our faith. The word "trial" means "test." In the early years of the Gospel age, the main trial was frequently physical persecution. But that is rare today. We hear about going to "the church of your choice" ... if you must go at all, is the implication.

General prosperity is so great that many find Sunday an important day to enjoy their boats, their recreational vehicles, their leisure. If we are not careful, this general attitude can lead us astray, taking us far from the paths of the Lord.

But is it fair to say prosperity is a trial?

Job 21:13-15 [Knox] So, full of ease, their life passes, and they go down at last without a struggle to the grave. And these are the men who bade God keep his distance from them, refused to learn his will; what right had he, the Omnipotent, to their obedience, what advantage would they gain by offering prayer to him?

Prosperity was a trial to Israel and Judah because they thought there never would be a day of reckoning. Things had never been better in their memory. They worshipped when and where they pleased; they believed what they wished. As proof of the “rightness” of their position, they pointed to their prosperity.

There is no greater trial than in the moment of exceeding great fortune! Consider Uzziah, the king of Judah during the time of Amos:

2 Chron. 26:4,5,16,19 And Uzziah did that which was right in the sight of the Lord ... and as long as he sought the Lord, God made him to prosper. But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction, for he transgressed against the Lord his God, and went into the temple of the Lord to burn incense upon the altar of incense. ... and while [Uzziah] was wroth with the priests, the leprosy even rose up in his forehead ...

Uzziah serves the Lord and prospers. But after awhile, the prosperity leads him to acts he'd never otherwise consider. He wants the glory of office belonging to the priests, so he takes it. But there is a day of retribution. God strikes him with leprosy and he dies in dishonor.

When reading about the summer and winter houses in Amos, the arrogance of Uzziah, the failure of Solomon once he was rich, Israel offering the lame and the halt so that they could keep back the best—one begins to wonder if **we** wouldn't all be better off with a little **more** persecution. With no-one persecuting us from the world, we have the luxury of persecuting each other. If someone doesn't see our interpretation of a scripture, it becomes an issue. “Which doctrine is important?” may be asked. And we hear that all are important, which means any deviation from what we perceive as correct requires immediate action on our part.

2 Tim. 2:22-25 [RSV] So shun youthful passions and aim at righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call upon the Lord from a pure heart. Have nothing to do with stupid, senseless controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome, but kindly to everyone, an apt teacher, forbearing, correcting his opponents with gentleness.

Kindly to everyone ... correcting opponents with gentleness! How well are we doing? The next time you decide to “straighten someone out”, think about Paul's advice to Timothy: “Not quarrelsome ... kindly ... apt teacher ... gentle.”

Seeking the Lord

Amos 5:4 For thus saith the Lord unto the house of Israel, Seek ye me and ye shall live.

Amos goes on to explain that seeking the Lord isn't a question of journeying to Gilgal or Bethel; it is a case of, “Hate the evil and love the good” (vs. 15).

We can't buy our way into God's favor, whether by donating money, perfect attendance at the meetings, perfect behavior on Sundays, or whatever. Micah asks himself how he should come before the Lord:

Micah 6:6-8 [RSV] With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased

with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? *[pause]* He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.

There is, perhaps, no better summary of the spiritual requirements of one's religion than this eighth verse. God doesn't look on the outward appearance. He looks on the heart. The Israelites of Amos' time didn't understand this. They thought God looked on the outward appearance. Imagine the fear in their hearts when the prophet steps forward and says:

Amos 4:12 Prepare to meet thy God, O Israel.

Times of Restitution

Acts 3:21 ... until the times of restitution of all things which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.

Amos talked about the "Day of the Lord" and the trouble it would bring. There was an application to Israel in their near future, of course, but there is also an application to the times in which we are living. Consider:

Amos 5:18 Woe unto 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.

The people of Israel thought the "day of the Lord" was the day when all their enemies would be destroyed. One can imagine their delight in the opening words of Amos:

For three transgressions of ... Damascus, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab ... and for four ... I will punish.

What they did not realize was that the judgment of the Lord applied to them as well:

"For three transgressions of Judah, of Israel, and for four, I will punish."

This was unexpected. It isn't until the very end of the book that any real hope is held out:

Amos 9:15 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 thy God.

Here is our restitution text from one of God's holy prophets. In fact, it is this section of the book that James quotes in Acts when in speaks about Peter's experience bringing the gospel to the Gentiles.

Acts 15:13-17 And after they had held their peace, James answered saying, Men and brethren, hearken unto me. Simeon hath declared how God did visit the Gentiles to take out of them a people for his name. And to this agree the words of the prophets, as it is written:

—and here he quotes from Amos 9:11,12—

After this I will return and will build again the tabernacle of David which is fallen down and I will build again the ruins thereof, and will set it up that the residue of men might seek after the Lord and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things.

So we see how the Old Testament scripture uttered by Amos became a proof text to James that someday the Gentiles would be called by God's name. This put the "stamp of approval" on Peter's experience.

Another application of the words of Amos can be found in...

Amos 8:11,12 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 of hearing the words of the Lord. And they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord and shall not find it.

This is a prophecy of the time of the end. Two hundred years later, Daniel used these words in his writings. Here is what he said:

Dan. 12:4 [Amplified] But you, a Daniel, shut up the words and seal the book until the time of the end. [Then] many shall run to and fro and search anxiously [through the Book], and knowledge [of God's purposes as revealed by His prophets] shall be increased and become great.

When he was tempted by the adversary in the wilderness, Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy:

Deut. 8:3 Man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live.

We're living at the time of the fulfillment of this prophecy. There are many who would search anxiously through the Book seeking the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it. It is interesting that many authorities suggest that the original Hebrew should not be translated "knowledge." The word is really something totally different. It should be "wickedness" or "calamities":

Dan. 12:4 [Jerusalem] But you, Daniel, must keep these words secret and the book sealed until the time of the end. Many will wander this way and that, and wickedness will go on increasing.

Wickedness is certainly increasing. And most men do think that they live by bread alone. If they should seek the Lord's leading, they have no idea how to proceed. Hundreds of preachers seek the attention of the masses, but there is no truth in them. It is the "day of the Lord" and that day is one of darkness, not light.

Conclusion

The words of Jehovah through his servant Amos seem harsh to the modern ear. Here was a simple shepherd out of his element. And rather than praising the people, he criticized them. Criticism is not pleasant:

Amos 7:12 And Amaziah said unto Amos, O thou seer, go flee thee away into the land of Judah and there eat bread and prophesy there.

But Amos saw through the pomp and ceremony of his day. He saw Israel, like a basket of summer fruit, ripe for retribution. Their iniquity before the Lord had reached its fullness.

Brethren, let us like Amos, look through the pomp and prosperity in the world around us. Their iniquity is reaching its fulness, ripe for God's judgments.

Isa. 28:17 Judgment also will I lay to the line and righteousness to the plummet...

The principles of God don't vary. He judged earthly Israel as unworthy of his continued favor. How is he judging us?

1 Peter 4:17 For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God.

We do well to join in the prayer of David as recorded in the 19th Psalm:

Psa. 19:13-15 [Knox] Who knows his frailties? If I have sinned unwittingly, do thou absolve me.

Keep me ever thy own servant, far from pride; so long as this does not lord it over me, I will yet be innocent of the great sin. Every word on my lips, every thought in my heart, what thou wouldst have it be, O Lord, my defender, my redeemer!

Closing Hymn: #219 — “Render Thanks to God”

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