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Amos 9:1–2, ESV.

9 I saw the Lord standing beside the altar, and he said:

*“Strike the capitals until the thresholds shake,
and shatter them on the heads of all the people;
and those who are left of them I will kill with the sword;
not one of them shall flee away;
not one of them shall escape.*

*² “If they dig into Sheol,
from there shall my hand take them;
if they climb up to heaven,
from there I will bring them down.*

Amos and Corruption: *The Light of the World*.

Amos, one of the twelve minor prophets (because his book is relatively short), lived during a rare period of political stability and economic prosperity during the 8th century B.C. Israel had seen trade routes open and pass through their region, which had brought wealth, with many of its people growing rich. There are references in Amos to individuals having winter houses as well as summer houses, and people buying expensive furniture and wine. A guess is that Amos served from 760 to 750 B.C. There is some evidence that parts of the book were added after the life of Amos, and the book appears to have been heavily edited.

Amos was from the southern kingdom, called Judah, which included Jerusalem, but he served in the northern kingdom, called Israel. During Solomon's reign, people grew unhappy with heavy taxation and poorly paid labor. This led to the ten northern tribes forming their own kingdom, with its capital in Samaria. The southern two tribes remained loyal to the Davidic dynasty and kept Jerusalem as their capital. This division lasted for about 200 years. Because Israel and Judah were separate empires at the time, Amos was very much a foreigner preaching to the northern locals. Although Israel was doing extremely well economically, they were not honoring their covenant with God.

The book of Amos presents an angry God who is going to pass judgement on Israel, the northern kingdom, as well as Judah, the southern kingdom, and surrounding empires that were pagan. God isn't angry simply because people are practicing idolatry, something we see frequently in the works of the prophets. In Amos, we are told that throughout the greater Israel region, less well-off people are being treated inhumanely, and that wealthy people are ignoring the suffering of the poor. The successful people of the Holy Land are cold, acting entitled, and they are too self-absorbed with their luxurious lives to see the pain around them. Amos confronts these people with harsh language. He prophesies punishment by God with poetic, metaphorical visions, including fire and clouds of locusts.

Before we look at some passages from Amos, I'd like to talk about my grammar school, which included first through eighth grades. It was a Catholic School and back then most of our teachers were Catholic nuns. The school drew from the entire city and thus included kids from a wide variety of neighborhoods. My class had in it the son of the owner of a giant sod farm, the daughter of an orthopedic surgeon, and several Hispanic kids whose fathers did manual work. My best friend, who lived in the apartments across the street from us, was being raised by his single mother and they barely scraped by. We'll call my friend Jack. His father had run off and I don't know if Jack had ever met him. Our grammar school charged tuition, charged for lunch in the cafeteria, and charged for various other things, like certain books and supplies. But Jack's mother didn't have to pay for any of this, and neither did the other kids whose parents could not afford to pay. The archdiocese covered some of the costs for less affluent families, but not all of it. I'll get back to how the sisters got the rest of these costs covered.

Most of the Book of Amos is written as poetry. Here is the first, fairly long verse of the Book of Amos, which is not poetry:

1 The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake.

We see that Amos was a humble shepherd from a village called Tekoa, south of Jerusalem. He served under Uzziah, who reigned for quite some time – 52 years – starting as a child with his father as a regent, and was considered a pious, effective leader. He later grew arrogant. Jeroboam was the leader of the northern kingdom, while Uzziah was the king of the southern kingdom, Judah. The earthquake that is referred to in this verse happened around 750 B.C. and is often called “Amos’ earthquake”. There is strong archeological evidence that this very powerful quake had its epicenter in Lebanon and did massive damage over a vast area. The earthquake is named after Amos because of Amos 8:8, where he predicts partial destruction of the northern kingdom:

*⁸ Shall not the land tremble on this account,
and everyone mourn who dwells in it,*

Here are some of the statements that Amos makes. First Amos 2:6,7:

⁶ Thus says the LORD:

*“For three transgressions of Israel,
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment,
because they sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals—*

*⁷ those who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth
and turn aside the way of the afflicted;*

By starting with “*Thus says the Lord,*” Amos is using standard prophet language to declare that he is speaking not his words, but God’s. In this passage,

Amos is condemning both the north and the south for their corrupt judicial systems. The *“pair of sandals”* refers to a small bribe that wealthy people will pay to get out of a punishment. But Amos is saying that God will not *“revoke the punishment”* that these people deserve. And to say that the affluent *“turn aside the way of the afflicted”* he is saying that the poor get no justice at all. Remember that Israelites frequently cleaned their feet to maintain hygiene. By saying that the rich *“trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth”* he is saying that the rich treat the poor like disgusting, dirty feet.

Here is Amos 4:1:

4 *“Hear this word, you cows of Bashan,
who are on the mountain of Samaria,
who oppress the poor, who crush the needy,
who say to your husbands, ‘Bring, that we may drink!’*

Bashan was a northern region, and Samaria formed a major component of the northern kingdom. Calling people from this area *“cows”* was an insult, and Amos notes that they spend their time drinking wine while the poor go hungry.

Here are a couple of statements that Amos makes where he tells the people of Israel how they should behave. He points out that by living the way God wants them to God will bless them. The *“remnant of Joseph”* is a specific reference to the people of the northern kingdom. Here is Amos 5:15:

¹⁵ *Hate evil, and love good,*

*and establish justice in the gate;
it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts,
will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.*

Here is Amos 5:23-24, two of the most beautiful verses in the Book of Amos:

- ²³ *Take away from me the noise of your songs;
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.*
²⁴ *But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

It begins with Amos saying the singing and music of the people's worship services is meaningless if they do not follow up their acts of piety with hands-on work to make their nation a nation of justice. He then says that justice and righteousness should be abundant, that they should flow without question, that they should be the dominant quality of the People of God. Importantly, the word for "justice" in the original Hebrew of Amos is "*mishpat*", which specifically refers to justice within the formal legal system. And the word that we translate to "righteousness", "*ū-ṣə-dā-qāh*", refers to caring for marginalized people.

Here is Amos 9:1–2:

9 *I saw the Lord standing beside the altar, and he said:*

*"Strike the capitals until the thresholds shake,
and shatter them on the heads of all the people;
and those who are left of them I will kill with the sword;
not one of them shall flee away;
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² *"If they dig into Sheol,*

*from there shall my hand take them;
if they climb up to heaven,
from there I will bring them down.*

Amos uses “prophet” language here, as well, by quoting God who has spoken to him. This language is meant to be more metaphorical than literal. Yes, the prophets, including Amos, do predict physical harm as a result of living in an immoral, unethical way. But more to the point, the people of the two kingdoms will not be able to spiritually flee from God. They cannot escape their sins. Earthly courts and judges might be corrupt, but there is no way to bribe or trick God. Their wealth means nothing to God. To make the imagery all the more powerful, Amos says that even if they go hide in the Place of the Dead, Sheol, the underworld, they will not escape God.

Here are the first six verses of Chapter 7 of Amos, in which he prophesizes two punishments from God, and again, these are meant largely to be metaphorical. I’ll stop after the first prophesy and then read the second.

7 This is what the Lord GOD showed me: behold, he was forming locusts when the latter growth was just beginning to sprout, and behold, it was the latter growth after the king’s mowings. ² When they had finished eating the grass of the land, I said,

*“O Lord GOD, please forgive!
How can Jacob stand?
He is so small!”*

*³ The LORD relented concerning this:
“It shall not be,” said the LORD.*

Locusts were a great fear of ancient farming communities in that part of the world. The reference to the *“king’s mowings”*, means that the king will get his share, but the rest of the crop will be destroyed, and the people will go hungry. Rich and poor alike will then turn to eating grass. But then the prophet says that the Lord will *“relent”*, that the people of Jacob will be treated with forgiveness. This means that if the people do change their ways, God will stop all punishments and restore his people. Again, this is metaphorical. There is a suggestion here that Amos himself will intercede with God on behalf of the Israelites.

Here is the rest of the double prophesy:

⁴ This is what the Lord GOD showed me: behold, the Lord GOD was calling for a judgment by fire, and it devoured the great deep and was eating up the land.

⁵ Then I said,

*“O Lord GOD, please cease!
How can Jacob stand?
He is so small!”*

⁶ The LORD relented concerning this:

“This also shall not be,” said the Lord GOD.

The same thing is being said. God will ravage his people with spiritual and perhaps physical fire. But again, God is always willing to forgive and restore.

So, let’s get back to my grammar school, which was called Santa Clara. The sisters were given small allowances to buy necessities. They often donated this meager amount of money to the scholarship fund. Some of them had families

who could afford to donate. They would also recruit better off families to cover the costs of poorer families. They were aware of the situation of every kid in the school. If a kid with little money came through the cafeteria line, the sister running the cash register would quietly nod the child through without having to pay. We would have periodic fund raisers, like cake walks. I won't try to remember the value of a dollar back then, but in today's money, if a family with assets bought a cake, they were expected to quietly pay a hundred dollars for it. In general, there was a culture in the school whereby all kids deserved to get an education at the school, no kid was ever shamed or identified as receiving aid, and nobody was publicly told they had to donate. But gifts were proportionate to one's assets. Even the priests found themselves giving to the school.

Here is one last quote from Amos, 8:11–12:

- ¹¹ *“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord GOD,
“when I will send a famine on the land—
not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water,
but of hearing the words of the LORD.*
- ¹² *They shall wander from sea to sea,
and from north to east;
they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the LORD,
but they shall not find it.*

I wanted to read various passages from Amos to you because it is poetry, and it is elegant, and it is very moving. I have always loved this book for three reasons. First, it is stunning poetry. Second, Amos focuses not just on wandering

from God by falling into the pagan practices of neighboring peoples, but also on the need for a people who follow God to be a people who protect and lift up the less fortunate. And third, it has strong metaphorical content. Notice that this prophesy predicts days of famine – but *“not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD.”* We can wander from sea to sea, from north to south, but if we do not enforce a culture of justice and caring, we will not find the Word of God.

My friend Jack did not pay tuition and did not pay for his cafeteria lunches. One day, when we were going through the lunch line, Jack was in front of me. The sister running the register motioned for him, with a slight sideways nod of her head, to just take his lunch and sit down. This happened every day, and Jack always waited for the sister to motion that he didn’t have to pay. After Jack, I came up to the register and pulled out my forty cents to pay for my lunch. (I do remember the actual cost back then.) The sister who took my money knew that I knew that Jack was not expected to pay for his food. As she took my money, she softly referred to the words of Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew by whispering *“We must be the light of the world.”*