

Prayer

Father, we worship You and praise You; help us therefore when our lives do not make sense and nothing appears to work for good. Make us aware of Your presence and touch us with Your love, and may we have the faith to bear the heartaches of life as well as enjoy its thrills. In this way, give us a glimpse of the truth of Your eternal love; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Deaf

Pray for any individuals you know who are deaf and pray about the problems they may have such as hearing you speak and participating in church worship. Pray for their blessing.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for the miracle of life and the love of the Creator
- Pray for those who suffer because of preventable flooding
- Pray for those who work for our safety in counter-terrorism

Meditation

Watch over us, Lord God, in the paths we take;
That we may be wise in all our decisions.

Watch over us, Lord God, during our conversations;
That we may be honest in the things we say.

Watch over us, Lord God, in the company we keep;
That we may be careful to keep close to You.

Watch over us, Lord God, while we do our work;
That we may build Your glorious Kingdom.

Watch over us, Lord God, when our passions overflow;
That we may be committed, sincere and faithful.

Watch over us, Lord God, in our hopes and dreams;
That we may accept Your plans for our future.

Bible Study - Amos 7:1-9

¹ This is what the Lord GOD showed me: he formed locusts around the time the late growth of grass began to grow (the late growth after the king's mowings). ² When they had completely stripped all the grass in the land, I said, 'O Lord GOD, please forgive! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!' ³ The LORD changed His mind about this; 'It shall not be,' said the LORD.

⁴ This is what the Lord GOD showed me: He was calling for a judgement by fire, and it dried up the great deep and was consuming the land. ⁵ Then I said, 'O Lord GOD, please stop! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!' ⁶ The LORD changed His mind about this; 'This also shall not be,' said the Lord GOD.

⁷ This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing by a vertical wall with a plumb line in his hand. ⁸ The LORD asked me, 'What do you see, Amos?' I said, 'A plumb line.' Then the Lord said, 'Look, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will not pass them by again. ⁹ The high places of Isaac will be laid waste, and the sanctuaries of Israel will be destroyed, and I will attack the house of Jeroboam with the sword.'

Review

As we have found out in recent studies, Amos' prophecies declared that the sins of Israel were so great, God would have to destroy them by war together with their land. Here in chapter 7, this theme is highlighted in a new and dramatic way. The chapter contains a sequence of three prophecies, and this should not surprise

us because Amos has used sequences before. Notably, his first seven prophecies were a sequence leading up to a devastating eighth prophecy against Israel (in chapters 1 and 2). The sequence of three (7:1-3, 4-6, 7-9) in our reading today appears to be self contained, but we would be wise to be cautious. Is Amos, the prophet who said repeatedly, 'for three transgression ... and for four ...' (1:3,6,9 etc.), using this sequence of three prophecies to say something more? As we examine them, should we be cautious lest Amos is actually preparing the ground for an important fourth prophecy?

In the first vision, Amos saw a swarm of locusts arising in the early summer, just after the first mowing of the grass, which in Israel was normally reserved for the King as feed for his cattle. Alarming, the locusts then came and stripped the land, leaving the grassland bare (7:2) with no grazing for cattle; it was a disaster. In the vision, Amos then took the role expected of a prophet or priest in Israel; he interceded for the people before God and asked for salvation from the danger engulfing them (7:2), and God heard his prayers for deliverance! This is similar to other famous stories of Abraham and Moses (see Gen 18:22f. and Num. 11:2), when God accepted the pleading of a righteous man on behalf of others, however sinful, and changed his mind about judgement.

The second vision follows roughly the same course as the first, except that the catastrophe was 'judgement by fire'. The vision is extraordinary, seemingly describing the drying up of the sea (the 'deep' – 7:4) and also the land. It is likely that this refers to the annual hot south wind of that region, which severely scorched the land and could create havoc with crops. Amos' plea to the Lord was the same; Jacob (i.e. Israel) was only a small nation and could not withstand such devastation; surely, the Lord would protect His people (7:5)? The Lord accepted Amos' pleas yet again (7:6) and held back from delivering the judgement.

These first two visions are about God and His people Israel, and they illustrate the way in which the Lord usually listened to the intercession of the prophets. The outcomes of these visions are predictable; but the third vision takes a different turn. This famous third vision is about a 'plumb line', describing how God Himself would come amongst His people with a plumb line to symbolise His power and authority. In His presence there could be no holding back and no injustice or godlessness could be hidden from the Lord; He said, 'I will not pass them by again' (1:8). In this vision, God said He would no longer listen to pleas of mercy from the prophets; He would immediately act to destroy evil (7:9).

This trilogy of visions appears to reflect the unremitting standards of God, whose justice is absolute. The third vision is often used together with Amos 5:24, 'let justice surge down like water, and righteousness like a stream in torrent' to preach about the supreme justice of God. However, the plumb line is just a tool, and the vision itself does not mention justice. It could be about righteousness, or the worship of God, for example; both of these are important related themes in Amos. God's righteousness had been affronted by the evils of false religion and worship in Israel (see 2:6f.) and this had a deadly grip on Israel. In his prior prophecies, injustice and irreligion were inseparable, they were the twin reason why the people of Israel would be abandoned by the Lord to war and destruction. We will find that there is more to this sequence of prophecies, and a fourth vision completes this sequence with this precise message of doom (8:1-4).

Today, we do not always spot the meaning of these prophecies, but it is likely that the people who first heard Amos speak understood all this very quickly. When Amos declared these visions at Bethel, the priest Amaziah quickly understood not just the message of judgement but the implication of 'final' judgement, and everything Amos was saying about the people of Israel. He was furious, as we will find out in studying the next passage tomorrow (7:10-17).

The first three visions of Amos warn us today that although God is patient with His people, He will not wait forever for them to hear His Word and submit to His will (the plumb line!). We can too easily assume that God will wait for us while we do what we want, before we turn to him in genuine repentance, but this is not a wise game to play.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In what ways does God tell us something about His judgement of the world through the natural disasters which happen?
2. Why do we find it difficult to think that God might say something to us through natural disasters?
3. In what ways do people today commit the twin sins of injustice and irreligion which Amos condemns?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Amos was very concerned to continue to prophesy although his words were undoubtedly unpopular in his day. He delivered his visions and prophecies in difficult circumstances, and when they might be misunderstood, as well. I wonder whether he felt uncertain at times? I, like many other preachers, can feel uncertain, especially when we have preached what we sincerely believe to be the truth and it has not been received. It is important to remember that no one who preaches the Word of God or delivers a prophetic word can have the luxury of confidence in anything other than God, and if we look to our own feelings or the response of others, we are lost. The Lord will reveal the truth.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Have you ever felt that the Lord has given you some special message about something which you have thought about, but not actually told anyone? I am aware that this is a rather sharp question, but we must each be accountable for what the Lord has said to us. In addition, it is always best to talk about these things with a close friend in Christ, so that we do not let important things like this go, by default.*
- *Ask the Lord to raise up prophets today who will reveal the truth of Your Word to us in our sceptical world, and pray that God's people will affirm the word and take it to heart.*

Final Prayer

Let me hear Your voice tonight, faithful God and Lord of all. Speak to me so that I may know Your will, whether it be hard or easy, comforting or challenging, exciting or mundane; and let me value each and every word, the instruction You give for Your servant's life. Thank You Lord; AMEN
