

Prayer

Lord Jesus, I thank You for the peace I have in Your presence;
Lord Jesus, I receive the joy You have placed in my heart;
Lord Jesus, I offer myself in the service of Your Gospel;
Lord Jesus, I give all I am and everything I own to You;
Lord Jesus, I ask You to hear these prayers; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Find an opportunity during the day both to pray for someone who is on your heart and also encourage them perhaps with a phone call or email

On-going prayers

- ***Pray about the need for good church leaders.*** *Pray for those in your church who are responsible for holding the leadership to account before God*
- *Give thanks for the routines of daily life that nourish your soul*
- *Pray for Poland as it elects a new president*

Meditation

If the God of all gave you His time and attention,
What would you ask of Him, there and then?

Would you ask Him to explain why evil exists,
Or seek His assistance to overcome it?

Would you hear what He said and consider it later,
Or open your heart to Him, without question?

Would you talk to him about music and worship,
Or fall down on your knees in homage?

Would you tell Him about all you have done for Him,
Or accept His advice and His direction?

Would you discuss the meaning of discipleship,
Or work out how to put His advice into practice?

Be honest with yourself as you respond to Your Lord;
He needs to know the true level of your commitment.

Bible passage - Amos 3:9-15

⁹ Let it be known in the strongholds of Ashdod and in the strongholds of Egypt: 'Gather in the hills of Samaria and look at the great unrest in her and the oppression at her very core.' ¹⁰ 'They do not know how to be honest,' says the Lord, 'these are people who store up thuggery and violence in their strongholds!'

¹¹ So this is what the Lord says; 'An enemy will surround the land, pull down your defences and plunder your strongholds!'

¹² This is what the Lord says; 'Just as a shepherd snatches a couple of legs or a piece of an ear from the mouth of a lion, so will the people of Israel be snatched away, those who live in Samaria with a piece of a bed and those who live in Damascus with a couch!'

¹³ 'Hear and bring testimony against the house of Jacob,' says the Lord God, the Lord of Hosts:
¹⁴ 'For on the day when I punish Israel for her crimes, I will punish the altars of Bethel, and the horns of the altar will be cut off and fall to the ground! ¹⁵ I will tear down the winter house together with the summer house, and the houses of ivory will perish. The great dynasties will come to an end,' says the Lord.

Bible Study

Review

Amos lets loose with an astonishing prophecy exposing rottenness at the core of Israelite society. Other nations are invited to survey the rich pickings of this state gone bad, and God will barely be able to save His people from the wreckage of their civilisation!

The courage of Amos never ceases to amaze us. For under the guidance of the Spirit, he has travelled far from his homeland in Judea to deliver God's message to Israelites at Bethel, north of Jerusalem. When he arrives, he gathered a crowd of Israelites by speaking out God's Word against the surrounding nations (1:3-2:3). Eventually, he unleashes the burden God has placed on his heart, and he condemns Israel for her injustice and for abandoning her faith (2:6-16). People would have been shocked. They would not have expected to hear such things from a country shepherd! But with great skill, Amos justified his trenchant prophecy (3:1-8).

Then, something extraordinary happens. Amos seems to abandon all clever forms of speech to deliver four brief prophecies that cut to the heart. The first of these says that Israel is rotten through and through, and Amos invites the surrounding nations of Egypt and Ashdod (3:9) to watch; the nation is being torn apart by corruption and violence (3:9-10)! Ominously, the second prophecy says that because of her corruption, Israel will suffer the humiliation of invasion and plunder by '*an enemy*' (3:11). Yet God does not delight in this, for Amos' words suggest that disaster is the natural consequence of Israel's rebellion against God. She has opened herself up to God's judgement, which comes in the form of military action by other nations.

All this is tragic, but this is how the world works. The judgement of the nation follows corruption and godlessness in the same 'cause and effect' way that Amos described earlier; '*does a lion roar in the forest when it has no prey? ... does disaster befall a city unless the Lord has done it?*' (3:4-6). Then, just as now, God's people tended to believe that because of their special relationship with God, He would protect them, come what may. To them, the prophetic declaration that God would use foreign nations to judge His own people was scandalous.

Yet we will find this theme throughout Scriptures. In Deuteronomy, Moses warns those who '*think they are safe even though they go their own way*' (Deut 29:19) that they will suffer the curse of invasion by '*a nation far away*' (Deut 28:49). Then, centuries later, Judah and Jerusalem are invaded by Babylon, and Jeremiah the prophet struggles to persuade the people to accept their punishment as from God, so that they can receive His 'new covenant' (Jeremiah 29, 31:31f.). So we must conclude that Amos's prophecy here is entirely consistent with the whole Old Testament, however shocking it may seem.

Verse 12 is the third prophecy in our passage today, and it is a desperate and tragic description of the ruin of God's people after tragedy. As a shepherd, Amos was used to salvaging the remains of a sheep after it had been savaged by a lion, and he used this imagery to describe God salvaging Israel after an invasion by foreigners. The picture is gruesome; '*just as a shepherd snatches ... a piece of an ear from the mouth of the lion, so will the people of Israel be snatched away ...*' (3:12). Then, to make the point yet again, he pictures people escaping from the war zone with fragments of once luxurious furniture; '*so will Israel be snatched away ... with a piece of a bed!*' (3:12)

Lastly, Amos speaks out against '*the house of Jacob*' (3:13), which is one of the royal names of Israel's ruling dynasty. By prophesying the destruction of the '*altars of Bethel*' (3:13), he says that God will take away the power of this dynasty and destroy its symbols of wealth, the great palatial buildings of court, summer houses and winter houses (3:15).

There is no ambiguity about this prophecy; God will punish Israel through the calamity of war and invasion, and the nation will be destroyed. Amos hints that God will act to save His people, but the picture he gives of this salvation offers little real hope (3:12). It is as if at this point in the Old Testament, the people of Israel demonstrate for us what Paul says centuries later '*the wages of sin is death*' (Romans 6:23)!

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- An invitation to the nations (3:9,10)
- Invasion by foreign powers (3:11)
- The dire picture of salvation (3:12)
- The collapse of power in Israel (3:13-15)

Notes on the text and translation

V9 ***'look at the great turmoil within her and the oppression at her very core'***

Other translations:

'see the great unrest within her and the oppression among her people' (NIV)

'see what great tumults are within it and what oppressions are in its midst' (NRSV)

This sentence describes the state of Samaria, the capital of Israel in the north. The Hebrew words say this; 'see her many tumults and her inner oppressions'. The words tumult and oppression refer to the political state of Israel, and significantly, they hint at the hidden nature of these troubles (see study).

V10 ***'they do not know how to be honest'***

Other translations:

'they do not know how to do right' (NIV)

Nearly all translations are similar to the NIV here, but I prefer the translation 'to be honest' instead of 'to do right', because the idea that lies behind the Hebrew word here is 'straightness', not simply 'right' in the moral sense. This is not about morality itself, but about the inner desire to persist with moral virtue. Honesty is a much misused and misunderstood quality, but it seems to me to be the right translation here.

V12 ***'those who live in Samaria with a piece of a bed, and in Damascus, with a couch!'***

Other translations:

'those who sit in Samaria on the edge of their beds and in Damascus on their couches!' (NIV)

'those who live in Samaria, with the corner of a couch and a part of a bed!' (NRSV)

The whole translation depends on two things. Firstly, on an interpretation of the second to last word, which is a form of the word 'Damascus'; and secondly, on how this last clause fits with the rest of the sentence. Some translators assume that the reference to Damascus is meaningless because it may well have been used to refer to some form of bed decoration (as we might speak of an 'Oxford' pillowcase). There is no other similar use in the Old Testament, so I think it risky to assume this, and have translated the sentence more literally, in a similar way to the NIV.

V15 ***'the great dynasties will come to an end ...'***

Other translations:

'and the mansions will be demolished ...' (NIV)

'and the great houses will come to an end ...' (NRSV)

The Hebrew of verse 15 is a play on the word 'house', which as in English, can refer to houses that are built as well as Temples and other structures, and also dynasties, such as the 'house of Windsor' or the 'house of David'. The last use of the word of house in verse 15 suggests something more than the magnificent palaces for winter and summer built by the wealthy, and it makes more sense to translate this as 'dynasties'. The study will make it clear why this fits Amos' theme well.

Going Deeper

An invitation to the nations (3:9,10)

Samaria had become the capital of Israel in the reign of Omri, who purchased the city from a man named Shemer and renamed the city Samaria (1 Kings 16:23), in the early ninth century BC. After the reign of Omri, his son King Ahab and his queen Jezebel made the city a centre of Ba'al worship (see 1 Kings 18:1f.) and although this was stoutly opposed by Elijah, Ba'al worship continued on the site for a long time. In Amos' day, this would have been well known by all, and whilst Ba'al worship was tolerated by some Israelites, doubtless, others continued to strongly oppose it.

It is not surprising therefore, that when Amos wanted to draw attention to Israel's sins, he turned to Samaria (3:9). But he seems to be interested in something more than Ba'al worship, and he speaks of the '*great unrest and the oppressions*' (3:9) at the heart of Israel. What did he mean? Now, Amos prophesied in the dying years of Jeroboam II, who had reigned for around forty years, but after his death, Israel was ruled by his son for only a few months before there was a violent military coup (2 Kings 15:10) by an officer named Shallum. Then, just one month later, there was another coup, and Shallum was deposed by Menahem (2 Kings 15:14). All this shows that underneath the surface of Israel's rich and affluent society there was seething discontent that erupted when the old king died. Amos perceived the situation correctly.

People of the day may well have known a little about this unrest and they certainly knew about the Ba'al worship in Samaria and the other shrines of Israel. Yet when Amos declared God's word of condemnation, he did not give these as reasons for God's wrath. His prophecy says '*they do not know how to be honest*' (3:10), using a word for 'honest' meaning 'keeping straight'. He went to the heart of Israel's multiple sins, for she was unable to walk the straight path given her by her covenant with God. She had lost her moral compass.

Certainly, nations that become rotten at the core become ripe for invasion, and this was known in Amos' day as today. He hints at this with his bold invitation of Egypt to watch what is happening in Samaria (3:9), perhaps he thought that Egypt would be the agent of God's wrath. Eventually, Assyria invaded Israel, not Egypt, but Amos' perception was proved right.

Invasion by foreign powers (3:11)

Invasion by foreign powers is God's way of judging His people in the Old Testament, and the supreme example of this is the exile of Judea in Babylon, where the Jews had to come to terms with the fact that even though they had endured such punishment, God still loved them. Of course, these themes are important for the whole Bible. In the New Testament, we find that Jesus is crucified on the Cross by the foreign soldiers of Rome, and the power of the Gospel eventually takes God's message of salvation beyond the boundaries of Judaism to the whole world. The nations that were once only used by God for judgement become the recipients of His grace, through the work of Jesus Christ.

For this reason, we should not be surprised whenever the Old Testament speaks about other nations and their role in God's eternal plan, whether for judgement or for glory. Some who study the Old Testament say that the entire work is about Israel and God's people, with the whole of the rest of humanity held at arm's length as irrelevant to the purposes of God. I strongly suggest that this is wrong, and that the nations are never far away from God's heart. Although God uses them for judgement in the Old Testament, and not much else, it is not possible to understand what is happening to Israel unless we look carefully at what God is doing with these 'other nations'.

I would go as far as saying that when we accept that the Old Testament describes God's relationship with all nations, we can then understand fully the special relationship He has with Israel.

The dire picture of salvation (3:12)

Many people stumble over the picture presented to us in verse 12. The first half is gruesome, yet to a certain extent, it is understandable (see review above). The prophecy says that God will only be able to salvage small pieces from His nation; but the more we think about this, the less hope it gives. The pieces of ear seem to offer hope, but they suggest that the animal is dead, and cannot be saved! So, what kind of judgement is God therefore bringing, and will some of Israel be left?

The same question hangs over the rest of the verse, which pictures Israel as saved, clutching the wreckage of items of luxury, a '*piece of a bed*' or a '*couch*' (32). But what does this mean? Remember that in the first illustration, the items recovered by a shepherd were used to prove that a lion had indeed savaged the sheep. So are these remnants of luxury items proof of Israel's past extravagance, lest they forget why they were saved?

The reference to Damascus at the end of this verse is interesting (see notes above). We think of Damascus as being a part of Syria, so why should Amos speak about Israelites being saved from Damascus (3:12)? The answer may be found in 2 Kings 14:28, where it is recorded that in the reign of Jeroboam II, Damascus was captured from Syria by Israel! The city was recaptured later, but this brief change of hands goes some way to explaining Amos' comment here.

All this is interesting, but after looking at this verse more closely, we are left with the conclusion that it gives us less hope for Israel than we imagined. As we study Amos further, we will see that this indeed is the prophet's conclusion.

The collapse of power in Israel (3:13-15)

The fourth of Amos' mini-prophesies describes the bringing of evidence of Israel's corruption to trial; '*bring testimony against the house of Jacob says the Lord God, the God of Hosts*' (3:13). A trial had been set for Israel, and punishment would be meted out (3:13,14). Now, in Amos' original round of prophesies, accusations brought against Israel (2:6-11), but the punishments were never specified. If we look back at the punishments given to the other nations, then we can clearly see that God took power away from them; '*I will cut off the ruler from her midst ...*' says Amos to Moab (2:3). So here, God punishes Israel in the same way by removing her power.

We may not spot this unless we know something a little esoteric about altars, which are mentioned in verse 14; '*I will punish the altars of Bethel and the horns of the altar will be cut off and fall to the ground!*' (3:14). In ancient thought, power was concentrated in altars because they symbolised basic religious power and authority. We do not know why, but ancient people believed that power was concentrated at the corners of altars, or at its 'horns'. Verse 14 is one of a number of similar Old Testament references to the 'horns of the altars'. All this sounds strange to our ears, but the message is clear; Israel will lose its royal power and religious authority.

Finally, Amos plays on the word 'house' to declare God's destruction on the symbols of power (see notes above). He says that God will tear down '*the winter house together with the summer house, and the houses of Ivory will perish*' (3:15). These words form a distinct and self contained section of Hebrew poetry, with the message that the coming destruction will see the end to these great statements of royal power. The next stanza of Hebrew poetry forms the logical conclusion; '*the great dynasties will come to an end*' (3:15), which means that God will bring Israel's royal lines to an end.

Amos' words were very apt, because royal authority in Israel had been passed on from one dynasty to another. So whereas Judah had been ruled over exclusively by the descendants of David, northern Israel had been ruled over by these dynasties for centuries. The first ruler of Israel was Jeroboam, who led Israel in revolt against Solomon's son Rehoboam (1 Kings 12), and his descendants ruled the nation for more than a century until his dynasty was replaced in a military coup by Jehu, around 845BC. This bloody coup was instigated by Elijah, no less (see 1 Kings 19:16), after he had met God at Mount Horeb, and his actions set in place the dynasty of Jehu, which reached its peak with the reign of Jeroboam II in the days of Amos.

Without question, God was doing a significant work amongst His people and revealing it through his prophet Amos. Things would never be the same again.

Application

The judgement of God falls on all sin equally, as the whole of Scripture testifies, and the destruction of northern Israel prophesied by Amos is part of this. If we are to come to terms with the idea of God's punishment for sin and His destructive power, then we should read Old Testament passages such as this together with Romans 2 and 3, which speak of God's judgement as the necessary background to His saving power in Christ. God's wrath comes on the world because He longs to bring people to a place of repentance, where they will turn to Him for salvation, and find in Him the answers to their longings. Passages such as this one in Amos remind us that human sin and self-centredness seed destruction within society, and this is how our world works. It is God's world and it works according to His moral law.

Amos warns us about the dangers of allowing our material wealth to become a substitute for true faith in God and right behaviour. The most telling words in our passage are these; '*they do not know how to be honest*' (3:10). God looks on earth to find those who will be true to their word, and those who will follow through what they have said by putting their words into action. Such things may appear simple, but too many have failed to measure up to God's test, even in matters of faith. Of course, we all struggle with sin in this life, but the Christian is called to be honest and 'straight' in all matters, and we should not sit lightly to this calling.

God sees all things, and although we do not like to think about this, it is true. We, like Israel, can hide nothing from our God, and He will always know what is wrong in our lives whether we confess it or not. The Israelites did not have a reason to bring their sins to God in confession, and they did not know a Saviour. Now that Christ has died for us we should not need to wait to hear God warning us of judgement before dealing with anything that has gone wrong in our lives.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Read through the passage carefully to make sure that you understand it after having read the study. Discuss with your group why Amos might have spoken like this.

2. How easy or hard do you find it to talk about God as one who judges nations by war, as described by Amos?
3. How do our own experiences today affect how we present God to the world, and does our own experience limit God?

Personal comments by author

Amos spoke bravely about the condition of the world as he saw it, and we must speak today about the condition of the church as we see it! The prophecies of Amos challenge me deeply because I hear too many prophecies today that effectively congratulate the church for what it does. However, I hear few that challenge God's people to respond to their failures. God is surely challenging His people to be like Him and continue their witness to Him in the world. In a world in which most Christians are sucked into a church life that drains their personal enthusiasm and spiritual life, the prophetic voice needs to call people to follow the true life of a disciple and reject the religious parodies Satan uses to tempt people away from practical faith. They are found throughout the church and need to be exposed.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Think carefully about the injustices you can see happening within the life of the world at this present time, and consider whether they are reflected in the life of the church. If this is so, then pray and ask the Lord to show you how He will judge both the world today and also the church.*
- *Pray for those who suffer because of injustice within the world and within the life of the church today. Pray that God will liberate people who are oppressed and set them free.*

Final Prayer

Amazing and wondrous Lord, You have guided Your people by a historic path on which astonishing things have happened. Do amazing things amongst us once again we pray; liberate us and remove our small-mindedness, and give us the courage to place our trust in You for everything: AMEN
