

Amos 7-9: The Reasons for God's Judgment

Introduction

After warning of certain destruction for grave disobedience on the part of the northern tribes, Amos begins to wrap up the book by speaking of five visions from the Lord God. Whether these were actual events that Amos saw or something God made known to him inwardly, we do not know.

The first vision, 7:1-3

In this vision Amos sees a locust-swarm forming. Was this a literal locust invasion such as in Joel's writing? Probably not. More likely, it is symbolic of what God would do because of Israel's continual rebellion. The late crop Amos refers to here is the crop that begins growing after the spring rains. (The growing season in the Middle East begins in October and continues through the winter months.) If the locusts took out the grass after the late crop came in, there was no hope for grass to grow substantially during the hot summer months. *The king's mowings* was probably referring to a tax levy placed on hay for the cavalry. As the locusts finish eating the grass, Amos prayed on behalf of the people seeking God's mercy, grace, and forgiveness. Israel was not as large, powerful, and influential as its people thought. They would not be able to recover easily from such a devastating locust plague. Verse three says that God relented and for a time took away the utter destruction He promised. Could the point of this vision be to show Israel that judgment would have come sooner had it not been for the prayers of the prophets and righteous people scattered throughout the land?

The second vision, 7:4-6

Later, God gave Amos a second vision in which he saw fire being poured out by God that devoured the land. This was not the usual kind of fire. This was the fire of judgment which lapped up the sea (the great deep) and was going to devour the land. Some have speculated that the phrase *devour the territory* refers to the newly acquired land in the north taken from Aram during the reign of Jeroboam II. This all-consuming fire was put out only because of the prayer of Amos who reminded God of their helplessness and dependence upon Him. Once again, God turns away from destruction. Could the first two visions be representative of the advances of the Assyrian army in the years leading up to Israel's final destruction in 722 B.C.? Tiglath-pileser led three campaigns between 734 and 732 B.C. that took away a good portion of Israel's territory. There is little doubt that the Assyrian general could have taken out the entire nation during these raids, but he held off for some reason. By 732 B.C., Israel had been reduced to little more than a vassal state with a puppet king who was required to pay heavy tribute to the Assyrian nation. 2 Kings 15:19-20 tells us that Menahem paid one thousand talents of silver as tribute to Pul (Tiglath-pileser). In commenting of this Pul wrote the following in the historical records of the Assyrians:

I received tribute from Menahem of Samaria...Like a bird, alone he fled and submitted to me.¹

After a revolt in 722 B.C., Israel was completely absorbed into Assyria by Shalmaneser, 2 Kings 17:3-6.

The third vision, 7:7-9

In this vision God has a plumb line in His hand. A plumb line is a line with a weight on one end. This tool was used to assist builders judge the straightness of a wall vertically. Smith notes that “the plumb line was a symbol of judgment in the Old Testament,” 2 Kings 21:13 and Isaiah 34:11.² In this vision Israel is the wall and the plumb line represents the law of God. At one time, Israel had been an upright nation, but now because of idolatry and rebellion the wall began to lean. Because of their spiritual instability, God determined that He could “no longer spare them.” God said that time of pardon was passing away and they would be punished. The high places of Isaac refer to the altars erected to idols that dotted the landscape of Israel. They would be the first place to suffer the wrath of God. The idols that God's people toyed with all their existence would be unable to protect them against certain and swift destruction.

God also mentions the destruction of the house of Jeroboam II. Jeroboam II's great-grandfather, Jehu, was evil and followed in the idolatrous paths of his predecessors. 2 Kings 15:12 says that the sons of Jehu would rule over Israel for four generations. Jeroboam II was the third in line in this succession, and after his death, his son Zechariah reigned in his place. He was assassinated after just six months, 2 Kings 15:12. This brought an end to Jeroboam's ruling dynasty.

The reaction of the high priest

Amos' remarks concerning the royal family raised a response in the high priest of Israel, Amaziah. Amaziah quickly sends word to Jeroboam II. Amos was not seeking to overthrow the king; he was seeking to move the country into a religious awakening that would avert the judgment of God. Amaziah advises Amos to leave the country. It is interesting to note where Amos is prophesying when Amaziah confronts him. Verse thirteen tells us Amos was in Bethel, the very heart and worship center of the northern ten tribes. It could have been easy to rationalize that preaching in Bethel would have been ineffective at best. It was home to the national religion and important government officials dwelt there. We can infer from these verses that Amos was creating a following. How many “Bethels” are there in our day that we may have written off? There is power in the gospel message, and if we move in faith, God will bless us in our efforts.

Amaziah calls Amos a “seer” which is another name for prophets, and then tells him to go back to Judah and *there eat bread and there do your prophesying*. In commanding Amos to leave perhaps Amaziah was acting on direct authority of the king. The phrase *eat your bread* suggests that Amaziah thought Amos was prophesying for money. To that, Amos responds that he was not a professional prophet. The Lord took him from secular work and instructed him to go to Israel. The message of Amos came from the Lord. After Amaziah admonishes Amos not to prophesy, God said that his wife would become a harlot. When Israel fell into hard economic times, was she so wed to her material possessions and lifestyle that she would be willing to sell her body to keep everything she had acquired? Amos says the sons and daughters of Amaziah would die violently. Smith writes, “The fact that daughters would be included in the slaughter would indicate abnormal cruelty. Normally the Assyrians spared the women to become wives for their soldiers.”³ Finally, Amos says Amaziah would die in an “unclean” land. It would be taken

over by the Assyrians. Israel would lose their land possession and be carried into exile. One can only wonder when these events began to play out in Amaziah's life if he recounted this exchange between himself and the prophet from Judah.

The fourth vision, 8:1-3

It is speculated that as we enter chapter eight that Amos has returned to Judah. Here he continues his work in informing Israel of their fate. In the next vision Amos is shown a basket of summer fruit. Summer fruit would be symbolic of ripeness. The nation is ripe for judgment and destruction. *The end has come for My people Israel....* God would no longer spare them. An interesting contrast is to compare Amos 6:3-6 with Amos 8:3. Those who were at ease, reveling in wonderful material possessions and luxuries, would be subjected to wailing and terrible deaths.

Why Israel was ripe for destruction

Israel's sins were multiplied before the Lord. We read the following catalog of sins:

- 8:4 - Trampling the needy.
- 8:5 - Religious hypocrisy.
- 8:5 - Dishonest business dealings.
- 8:6 - Great oppression of the poor, so much that they had to pawn their clothing in order to purchase food not fit to eat.

To this God said He would not forget their sins. For this there would be certain punishment. The earth would quake as a sign of God's judgment. Is this the earthquake mentioned in Amos 1:1? There was a great earthquake during the reign of King Uzziah of Judah, and it was so severe that it was still being talked about two centuries later, Zechariah 14:5. The mention of the rising and fall of the Nile told Amos' listeners that this would be no minor event. The rising and fall of the Nile took weeks at a time. The tremors Amos mentions would go on for some time. In 8:9 Amos says that the sun [would] go down at noon and make the earth dark in broad daylight. On June 15, 763 B.C. there was a solar eclipse over the Middle East. Could this have been what Amos referred to? Maybe, but the more important message is symbolic. As drastic as it is to have darkness in the middle of the day, so it would be for Israel to fall from the pinnacle of economic and political prosperity to a conquered people as a scourge on the land.

A spiritual thirsting

As God would pour out His great destruction on His people and land, the people would begin to remember God and seek Him. Only this time He would not be there. He was going to remove His presence from them. The word pictures painted in these verses are graphic. Picture someone wandering aimlessly, desperate for God and the hope He delivers. They will not find hope because all hope is gone. They would finally realize their love for idols had created this problem. Dan (8:14) was in the northern reaches of Israel and had been a place of worship instituted by Jeroboam I, 1 Kings 12:29-30. Beersheba

was one of the homes of Abraham. Evidently people had erected a shrine to idolatry in this city. There would be no hope in these idols. God had departed and they were left to reap the whirlwind.

The fifth vision

In the final vision in the book Amos finds God standing beside the altar. What altar? Where? Jerusalem or Bethel? Most feel this altar was in Jerusalem because it is singular in nature. (There were many altars in Bethel to various deities.) No matter where the Lord is the message of this vision is that the destruction of the northern system of religion will take place. The *capitals* in 9:1 were ornaments on top of the pillars which held up the roof of the temple. The *threshold* refers to the doorsill. In other words, the temple would be shaken from top to bottom. There would be no escape. Those who were serving idols in the temple would be killed. Those who escaped the destruction in the temple would be hunted down like fugitives and executed. Even those who found themselves in captivity would be subject to execution. In 9:7, God says that Israel, the once great nation so beloved in the sight of God, was no different than the Ethiopians. The people could no longer rely upon their special status as the people of God. The time of protection and blessing from God had passed.

God would destroy the nation, but not the house of Jacob

While the nation would be taken away, a small remnant would remain in order to fulfill the promises made to Abraham. While the nation would be destroyed, not one righteous person would perish in the destruction, 9:9 *...But not a kernel will fall to the ground.* After the Day of the Lord, God would rebuild the house of David as it had been in the days of old. God would honor the promise He made to David in 2 Samuel 7:11-12, 16. There was a day coming when spiritual blessings through Jesus Christ would make people part of an everlasting kingdom, 8:14. There are some wonderful references to the church age in these verses. While all hope was lost for Israel's physical kingdom, God was moving forward with His plan to bring the Messiah and ultimately bless all the nations of the earth through Him.

Lessons for a 21st century audience

The power of the prayer of the righteous

In the first two visions certain destruction was held off because of the prayer of Amos. God listens to the prayers of the righteous. Consider all the good done and evil averted because of the prayer of the righteous. When we begin to realize the wonderful things that come about because of prayer, it will help us pray even more.

The power of the gospel in difficult places

How receptive would the people of Israel be to Amos' message? How out of place would a herdsman have been on the streets of Samaria? How would he have been regarded by the pious who worshipped in the temple at Bethel? Was Amos just wasting his time? By reading 7:10-17 it appears that Amos' teaching was creating quite a stir among the locals, perhaps even generating a following. How intimidated would we be to go into such a difficult place? The power we have is in God's word. Our job is to communicate the gospel and trust that it will fall on honest and sincere hearts.

Many will realize their great need for God only after it is too late

Amos 8:11-14 contains some of the saddest verses in all of Scripture. God was going to remove His presence from Israel. There would be no more opportunity to turn to Him. All hope had vanished. The people are left to roam around, desperately searching for the Lord, but He is not there. Unfortunately, their spiritual thirst would not be quenched. There is a coming time when God will once again turn away His presence. The souls that are cast into hell will have no hope of ever departing such a terrible place. It is a place of *weeping and gnashing of teeth*, Matthew 25:30. Some will realize only too late as to just how terrible hell will be.

For discussion

1. What took place in Amos' first vision? The second?
2. What caused God to relent on His punishment?
3. Explain the vision of the plumb line.
4. Who was Amaziah? What did he instruct Amos to do?
5. What was Amos' response to Amaziah?
6. What would come upon Amaziah and his family for telling Amos not to preach against Israel?
7. In Amos' fourth vision what was the summer fruit symbolic of?

8. List the sins found in 8:4-6. Would God overlook this?

9. What would be the sign of God's coming judgment? See 8:8-10.

10. What was Amos' fifth vision? What does it symbolize?

11. What are your thoughts and impressions on the book of Amos?

(Endnotes)

- 1 *Archaeology of Ancient Assyria*. www.bible-history.com. Website accessed December 11, 2006.
- 2 Smith, James E., *The Minor Prophets.*, p. 188.
- 3 Smith, James E., *The Minor Prophets.*, p. 192.