

“I Shall Restore the Fortunes of My People Israel”

Sermons on the Minor Prophets: The Book of Amos (5)

Texts: Texts: 7:1-9:15 (read 9:11-15); Romans 11:25-36

About the year 760 B.C., YHWH sent the Prophet Amos to Israel (the Northern Kingdom). Amos’ mission was to announce that YHWH’s covenant lawsuit was being served upon his disobedient and unfaithful covenant-breaking people who had separated from Judah (the Southern Kingdom) in a bloody civil war about two hundred years previously. In the first six chapters of the Book of Amos, the prophet proclaimed YHWH’s solemn words to Israel in series of oracles of lament and warnings of impending judgment. Amos’ message—God’s judgment was coming upon Israel, soon, within a generation. Amos’ message is stark and jolting. But as we will discover in our text (vv. 11-15 of chapter 9), Amos’ prophecy does not conclude with an announcement of a final covenant curse. Instead, despite the immediate judgment to come upon Israel, Amos’ prophecy ends with YHWH’s gracious promise of future restoration of Israel, a restoration tied to a coming messianic age when God’s promise to renew his people extends beyond the borders of Israel to the ends of the earth.

We will wrap up our time in the Book of Amos—next time we will take up the Book of Jonah. After a bit of brief review, we will survey the five visions recorded by Amos (in chapters 7-9), before turning to the concluding words of covenant blessing (vv. 9-15 of chapter 9)—a somewhat remarkable and hopeful ending to a book which is characterized by oracles of judgment, woe, lament, warning, and threats of covenant curse.

Recall, that in the first two oracles recorded in his prophecy (chapters 1-2), Amos’ words are intended to shock Israel to attention—like a bucket of cold water to the face. Although the kings and priests of Israel foolishly expected God’s judgment be unleashed upon Israel’s pagan neighbors—thereby vindicating Israel as a break-away kingdom from Judah even in the midst of the nation’s current apostasy from YHWH’s covenant—the opposite was in fact the case. Yes, God’s judgment was coming upon the Gentile nations because of their persecution of God’s people. But God’s judgment was to fall on Israel first because, as Amos reminds Israel, judgment begins in the house of the Lord. For six hundred years, Israel continuously and willfully broke the terms of their covenant with YHWH. The warning that YHWH’s patience had run out should not come a surprise. That it did, demonstrates how far Israel has fallen.

In chapters 3-4, we saw that Amos was sent to Israel at a time of relative peace, economic prosperity, and what seemed to be religious devotion. But the reality was that the apparent peace, prosperity, and piety hid Israel’ self-righteous indifference to the things of the Lord. Within a generation (in 722 B.C.), Israel’s peace would come to a crashing halt—as the nation was soon to fall to the Assyrian empire from the North. Whatever economic prosperity the nation was experiencing in the days of Amos, came about because the rich (both the royal house and the land-owners) exploited the poor. YHWH sent material blessing upon this people—but it never “trickled down” to those in deepest need. During this time of prosperity, the royal house and estate owners acquired much property and fine luxury goods, but the people whose labor brought about such wealth were struggling to survive. Even worse, Amos reports, those exploited were enslaved (through debt) and even mocked by those whom they served.

As for the nation’s spiritual heath—things were no better, perhaps much worse. Sacrifices were being offered at the various religious shrines (Bethel, Gilgal), but by priests appointed by the king, not those who were Levites. As we saw in the oracle of woe in Amos 5:18-6:14, YHWH would not accept these

sacrifices. He hated them. They did not turn aside YHWH's righteous anger toward the people's sin. In offering sacrifices in such an illegitimate way and for all the wrong reasons, the sacrifices only increased the people's guilt. The worship of YHWH was conducted, but worship of Baal was not forbidden. The people were going through the rituals commanded of them with their hearts far from YHWH—perhaps even inclined to the Canaanite gods. Such religious hypocrisy increased the people's guilt. YHWH ceased listening to their songs and ceremonies.

When the series of oracles comes to an end in Amos 6:14, Amos challenges Israel to reject the misguided idea that the Day of the Lord would amount to some sort of vindication for the nation and the line of royals (descending from Jeroboam I) which had become far more pagan than Hebrew. No, says Amos, the Day of the Lord was not something for which Israel should long. The Day of the Lord refers to those instances when YHWH intervenes in human history to bring about judgment. Barring repentance, the Day of the Lord is a day which Israel should dread. It is a time of God's judgment upon the nation, and a dress rehearsal for the final judgment to come at the end of the age.

When we come to second (or "visionary") section of the Book of Amos (chapters 7:1-9:15) Amos proclaims the contents of a series of five visions in which YHWH reveals to his prophet the course of Israel's future, but not in words (as YHWH had done in the first six chapters) but through visionary prophecy. These visions begin with the formula (as in 7:1), "*this is what the Lord GOD showed me*" (i.e., Amos). After each of the first two visions recounted in this section, Amos appeals to the Lord to spare his disobedient people—recalling the prophetic intercession of Moses on behalf of Israel while in the wilderness. The prophet sees the terrible things soon to come and intercedes on behalf of Israel, even though he (Amos) is from Judah.

And for a time, YHWH relents in his judgment because of Amos's intercession. We read in Amos 7:2-6, that Amos pleads with the Lord in response to the vision given him, "*I said, 'O Lord GOD, please forgive! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!'*" Jacob is the ancestral father of the ten tribes which make up the break-away nation, Israel. Amos recounts that "*the LORD relented concerning this: 'It shall not be,' said the LORD.*" The pattern then repeats itself in the following verses (4-6). "*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. Then I said, 'O Lord GOD, please cease! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!' The LORD relented concerning this: 'This also shall not be,' said the Lord GOD.*" We see God's mercy in answering Amos's plea and granting Israel more time to repent.

But YHWH's long-suffering patience has already come to an end. After twice interceding on Israel's behalf, Amos does not do so again. Instead, Amos informs us that YHWH again reveals his impending judgment upon Israel for her idolatry in 7:8 "*I will never again pass by them; the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.*" The illegitimate Northern Kingdom will come to its end.

A very sobering scene within this vision is revealed in verses 10-17, as Amos recounts the opposition he faces from a priest named Amaziah, who stubbornly refuses to heed Amos' call to repentance. In the response of Amaziah—one of the illegitimate priests appointed by the royal house—we get yet another graphic illustration of Israel's true spiritual condition. We read in verses 10-11, "*Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent to Jeroboam king of Israel, saying, 'Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel. The land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said, 'Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.'*" Amos' words are heard (albeit twisted), but he and his message (YHWH's) is rejected by the priests and by the royal house (implied).

Amaziah is not done. In verses 12-13, we read *“Amaziah said to Amos, ‘O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there, but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”* As Amaziah complains about God’s prophets speaking uncomfortable truths, Amos tells him that he was not through prophesying. The prophet responds in verses 14-16. *“Then Amos answered and said to Amaziah, ‘I was no prophet, nor a prophet’s son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. But the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’ Now therefore hear the word of the LORD. ‘You say, ‘Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.’”*

Amaziah is now confronted directly by YHWH himself (v. 17). *“Therefore thus says the LORD: ‘Your wife shall be a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be divided up with a measuring line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.”* The biblical record is clear, YHWH is merciful to all manner of repentant sinners (prostitutes and tax-collectors). But YHWH will not tolerate religious deceivers or hucksters, especially those who take to themselves divinely-ordained offices (such as that of a priest of Israel who were to come from the tribe of Levi, not to be appointed by a king) and who instruct YHWH’s chosen prophet to shut up when he calls the people to repentance. Amaziah is not a true priest—he’s an instructor in false doctrine and proof of Israel’s religious hypocrisy. He will be judged harshly.

In chapter 8:2, we return to the now familiar visionary scene of Israel’s imminent destruction, which is the consequence of the treatment of the poor and the rampant unbelief on the part of Israel’s self-appointed priests and kings. *“And he said, ‘Amos, what do you see?’ And I said, ‘A basket of summer fruit.’ Then the LORD said to me, ‘The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass by them.”* Indeed, the end will come. The Assyrians will invade and lay waste to the land. The nation will be no more, and that sad funeral song of Amos 5:1-17, will be sung by the survivors in their wailing and mourning—the 10% of survivors who remain in the land.

The vision recounted in Amos 8:4-14 once again decries the practices of the rich in their exploitation of the poor, before refocusing upon the nation’s destruction by Assyrian invaders—a day Amos sees in 8:9-10, as one of terrible disaster. *“And on that day,” declares the Lord GOD, “I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight. I will turn your feasts into mourning and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on every waist and baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning for an only son and the end of it like a bitter day.”* The period of peace, prosperity, and outward displays of religiosity, will turn to that which such hypocrisy and self-righteousness merit—mourning. This is especially tragic when we think of what might have been—had Israel not broken away from Judah, and foolishly established their own religious identity in open rebellion against YHWH’s covenant promises of blessing. If only Israel would repent in the face of repeated warnings of what was to come. If only . . .

In verse 11-12 of chapter 8, Amos sees another terrible judgment fall upon Israel. YHWH will send a famine upon the land, only a famine of a different sort and much worse than we might imagine. *“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. 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.”* When God’s people turn from his word (Scripture) and follow their own sinful hearts, YHWH gives them what exactly they want. He will fall silent. No more will he warn Israel through the mouths of his prophets. No longer will he bring forth new revelation proclaiming forgiveness of sin to all who repent and believe his promises. Jonah and Hosea are the last prophets YHWH sends to Israel

before God falls silent and speaks no more. After Israel was swept away by the Assyrians, heaven was sealed. YHWH ceased to speak. There was a famine of the word.

While Amos speaks of this in famine of the word in connection with God's judgments upon Israel, it is likely that this form of judgment continues to come upon God's people whenever we tire of his word and follow our own desires, or worse, follow the spirit of the age. No doubt, there have been many instances of what we might be described as a "famine of the word," throughout church history—times before God's people relent because of God's silence and return to listening to God's voice in his word. The Protestant Reformation has all the appearances of such a famine being lifted when Luther's evangelical breakthrough (his coming to understand the gospel while working through the Book of Romans) inevitably led to Luther's translation of the Bible from the original languages (Hebrew and Greek) into plain German so that every German farmer had access to God's word written. No longer hidden by the high Latin of the Roman church, God's word was accessible to all who could read—which is why the first literate societies in the West were those where people sought to read God's word for themselves.

Dare we even say that in an age such as ours when most American homes have multiple copies of the Bible in very readable translations, and yet biblical illiteracy is at its highest level since the Middle Ages, that perhaps we too live at an age when characterized by the famine of the word. Look at evangelical media and celebrities—how often do we hear ministers of the gospel actually preach from the biblical text? Many think the movies they've seen, the personal interactions they have had in the previous weeks, the clever stories can they tell, or the principles of business and wellness they claim to teach us are more interesting and important than opening God's word and saying "thus says the Lord"? How often do people who say they love God's word actually read and study their bibles? As we watch American Evangelicalism of the previous generations disappear into the pollster's category, "no religious affiliation," is it not a credible observation to say that we live at a time of the famine of God's word? If we want to listen to someone or something which we find more interesting to us than God's word, well then, he'll let us do so. Amos' warning to Israel again reminds us that we moderns are much more like Israel in the 760's B.C. than we care to admit.

As we come to chapter 9, in the closing section of the Book of Amos we find one last and very dramatic (if not frightening) vision. In verse 1, Amos tells his hearers, "*I saw the Lord standing beside the altar.*" The altar is not identified, but the content of the previous visions points in the direction of the Israelite altar at Bethel, which was established as a rival/alternative to YHWH's temple in Jerusalem.¹ The Lord speaks words of judgment in the opening verses of chapter 9, when the people of Israel fully expected YHWH to pronounce his blessing upon their temple. Instead, YHWH orders its destruction. "*Strike the capitals,*" i.e., the tops of the temple's columns, "*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.*" The sanctuary will collapse and those inside (presumably the priests and those engaged in idolatry in YHWH's name, will be crushed.

Israel cannot escape YHWH's wrath. "*If they dig into Sheol,*" (the grave), "*from there shall my hand take them; if they climb up to heaven, from there I will bring them down. If they hide themselves on the top of Carmel, from there I will search them out and take them; and if they hide from my sight at the bottom of the sea, there I will command the serpent, and it shall bite them. And if they go into captivity before their enemies, there I will command the sword, and it shall kill them; and I will fix my eyes upon*

¹ Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 391.

them for evil and not for good.” These judgments are terrible and fierce, YHWH’s words pointing ahead to John’s words in Revelation 6:12-17, which we read last time. If the temple at Bethel is destroyed, and its priests put to death, only then will YHWH will no longer be blasphemed by his own people. YHWH has already told Jeroboam and Amaziah judgment would come upon them—this is that judgment.

At this point (vv. 5-6), Amos inserts an ancient hymn (or a portion of a hymn) into his prophecy. *“The Lord GOD of hosts, he who touches the earth and it melts, and all who dwell in it mourn, and all of it rises like the Nile, and sinks again, like the Nile of Egypt; who builds his upper chambers in the heavens and founds his vault upon the earth; who calls for the waters of the sea and pours them out upon the surface of the earth—the LORD is his name.”* When sinful men and women make pronouncements of judgments upon their enemies, they are but so much bravado and reflect a deep-seated sense of human anger and desire for revenge. When YHWH makes such pronouncements, they are unlike all human claims. YHWH alone with without sin. He is altogether righteous. His judgments are not issued in fits of temper or anger. He is holy. He has a right to judge all his people.

Furthermore, when sinful men and women make such pronouncements, they are always limited by human weakness, frailty, and limited resources. Yet, when YHWH brings such judgments, he does so with no human limits. As the creator of all things, YHWH has both the right and the power to execute his judgments. If he touches the earth, it melts. He controls the waters of the earth—even the mighty Nile, the greatest river known to the ancients. He controls its waters even as he fills the seas. When YHWH issues his judgments it is not as though the outcome is uncertain, or the motives impure. In YHWH’s judgments we have the perfect illustration of God’s holiness and power. Now we see the foolishness of telling his prophets to shut up and go away, or to offer sacrifices which are nothing but the reflection of a sham self-righteousness. This, brothers and sisters, is the God who is, the God with whom we must deal.

Since Israel’s deplorable spiritual condition has blinded the people to the truth about their peril, in verses 7-10, YHWH reminds them that his rule extends to all the peoples of the earth. *“Are you not like the Cushites to me, O people of Israel?’ declares the LORD. ‘Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir? Behold, the eyes of the Lord GOD are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the surface of the ground, except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob,’ declares the LORD. ‘For behold, I will command, and shake the house of Israel among all the nations as one shakes with a sieve, but no pebble shall fall to the earth. All the sinners of my people shall die by the sword, who say, ‘Disaster shall not overtake or meet us.’”*

This final scene contains the verdict from the heavenly court, where YHWH and his hosts have watched the nation slip further and further into idolatry. The vision again reminds Israel that YHWH’s rule extends to the ends of the earth—the Cushites to the south were thought to be living at the end of the world. YHWH has rescued his people again, and again, and again. His eyes are upon Israel—the sinful kingdom. He will destroy it from the earth. He will shake the nation. Those who mock the oracles of his impending judgment—who deceive themselves by thinking that they are safe, and that disaster will not overtake them—will perish by the sword. Israel will be wiped off the map by Assyrian invaders.

And yet within this frightening word of impending judgment comes a word of hope—a promise of final redemption—*“except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob,’ declares the Lord.”* This glimmer of hope is revealed and explained in the final verses of the prophecy (vv. 11-15). *“In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old.”* *“In that day,”* along with the mention in verse 13, that *“the days are coming,”* point ahead to a time off in the distant future (some 700 years hence) when YHWH will raise up the fallen tent of

David. This is a symbolic reference to David's royal rule again being extended over a united Israel and all the nations. In other words, this is a prophecy of a messianic age yet to come, when God's anointed king rules the nations. From the perspective of New Testament hindsight, we know that the coming Davidic king is none other than Jesus Christ and the coming of his kingdom—established through his death, resurrection, and the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This is the case because in Acts 15:16 (Luke's record of the Jerusalem Council), James cites this very passage from the Book of Amos, and declares it to be fulfilled by the gospel going forth to the Gentile nations, the reason for so many Gentiles coming to faith in Jesus through the preaching of Paul and Barnabas.

After such frightening and intense words of judgment, Amos' prophecy ends with a wonderful promise. God will indeed redeem his people, Israel included. Assyria may come in 722 B.C. and execute YHWH's judgment upon his people, leaving a remnant of 10%, but this is not the last word. Far from it. Amos sees a time when the people of God "*possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name, declares the LORD who does this.*" Edom is one of Israel's most long-standing and fiercest enemies. As used here, Edom represents all of the Gentile nations who have oppressed Israel. In these days to come, YHWH will possess them all, and bring them to that end which he has decreed. YHWH's rule does not end with Israel's judgment. It will bring blessing to every nation and kingdom.

YHWH assures the people of Israel in the closing verses, that after disaster comes, something beyond human expectation will come to pass. "*Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant them on their land, and they shall never again be uprooted out of the land that I have given them, says the LORD your God.*" The people of God will enjoy a prosperity previously unknown in Israel's history. The imagery of a great harvest is used along with that of rebuilt towns and possession of the land, images common and easily understood, and drawn from Israel's past history, the tangible signs of God's covenant blessings. But the figure of earthly blessing as those in the days of Amos would have understood them, points ahead to spiritual blessings beyond anything material. God will bring such blessings to Israel, and to the whole world.

Once David's fallen tent has been rebuilt—Jesus has come to accomplish our redemption on the cross and in the empty tomb—the gospel goes out to the ends of the earth, as Jesus tells his disciples in Acts 1:8, "*you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*" Through the preaching of Christ and him crucified, the gospel goes to the end of the earth, freeing us from our slavery to sin and granting us a spiritual prosperity and a heavenly inheritance (eternal life and justification) which transcends earthly blessing. Even the poorest in Christ's kingdom, possess heavenly riches beyond earthly measure.

When Paul addresses of the future of Israel after the coming of Christ (Romans 9-11), in Romans 9:5, the Apostle speaks of a "true Israel" in contrast to an ethnic and a national Israel. The "true Israel" being a reference to those elect Jewish believers in Jesus Christ, while national (or ethnic) Israel refers to those who are ethnically Jewish, but not yet believers in Jesus. In Romans 11:25-26 (part of our New Testament lesson), Paul speaks directly to the question raised by Amos' prophecy (9:14) that at some point YHWH "*shall restore the fortunes of my people Israel.*" Paul explains, "*I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, 'The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob'; and this will be my covenant with them when I take*

away their sins.” Something astonishing will happen to restore Israel’s fortunes—as Amos foretold.

If David’s fallen tent was rebuilt by the coming of Jesus at the dawn of the messianic age, then when the fullness of the Gentiles comes in, and in this way “all Israel” shall be saved, I take Paul to mean that at the close of the messianic age (when Jesus returns a second time), huge numbers of ethnic Jews will come to faith in Jesus, so all Israel (i.e., great numbers of ethnic Jews) shall be saved. Paul is so excited by this prospect, he launches into one the greatest doxologies in all the New Testament (vv. 33-36). *“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.”*

What a fitting way to end our time in Amos. For nine chapters, the prophet announces YHWH’s covenant judgment upon his disobedient people. Yet, the last four verses point ahead to something so glorious, that when Paul considers Israel’s restoration in the messianic age, he can hardly constrain himself. YHWH promised that one day, *“I shall restore the fortunes of my people Israel.”* In Jesus Christ he has done exactly that.