

Prayer

Jesus, we appreciate all that You have done for us, but too often, we fail to understand how this should affect how we behave towards others and do our work. Come alongside us and break into our routines of life, so that we become directly conscious of your unceasing presence. Then, speak to us clearly to reveal our sins and challenge our complacency, so that we begin to behave as saved sinners, whoever we are. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Look back over recent events and reflect on them in prayer. What is God saying to you through all that has recently happened?

On-going prayers

- **Pray about the need for good church leaders.** Pray for those in church leadership who know that they need renewal in spirit
- Give thanks to God for the gift of happiness
- Pray for those involved in the football 'World Cup' in South Africa

Meditation

This is our God;
A God of closeness and touch,
A God of mercy, care and compassion,
A God of intuitive creativity and beautiful artistry,
A God of unfathomable mystery and eternal suspense,
A God of infinite variety and connectivity, and endless possibility,
A God of purpose, drive, intention, energy, vitality and everlasting vigour!

Look! He comes
To those who seek the truth,
To those who know the power of sin,
To those who struggle to deal with life,
To those who seek the cover of His love;
He comes unseen,
to be revealed,
in Jesus Christ; Praise Him!

Bible passage – Amos 2:9-16

⁹ 'Yet it was I who destroyed the Amorite before them, who were as tall as cedars and strong as oaks; I destroyed the fruit above and the roots beneath. ¹⁰ And it was I who brought you up out of Egypt and led you through the desert for forty years so you might take possession of Amorite land. ¹¹ And I raised up some of your sons to be prophets, and some of your young men to be Nazirites. Is this not so, O people of Israel?' says the LORD. ¹² 'But it was you who made the Nazirites drink wine, and instructed the prophets not to prophesy!'

¹³ 'Look, I will weigh you down to the ground, as a cart full of sheaves is loaded down. ¹⁴ The swift will be unable to flee and the strong will not retain their strength; neither will the warrior save his life, ¹⁵ nor will the archer stand his ground. Those who are fleet of foot will not save themselves, nor will the horseman save his life; ¹⁶ even the bravest of the warriors will flee away naked in that day,' says the LORD.

Bible Study

Review

Amos unleashes the most terrifying prophecy against Israel; she will be judged for her sins. She has let herself wander from the truths of her inheritance, and in her future lies disaster.

This is Amos' first prophecy against Israel, and his words are dramatic. He had gathered together a crowd of Israelites to listen to his berating of surrounding nations, and we can almost picture the scene. Amos sounded forth about the sins of the Syrians (1:3-5), the Edomites (1:11,12) and others, gaining plaudits for his zeal. In addition, he rebuked the Judeans (2:4,5) to confirm the suspicions of his listeners, the northern Israelites, who would have wondered what more he had to say!

Then with no warning except through the considerable skill of his rhetoric, Amos delivered his message of condemnation; he accused those who stood before him of injustice against the poor, sexual deviancy and ignorance of God's holiness (2:6-8)! The Israelites had listened with eager expectation, but this would have stunned them. Were they hearing this prophet rightly? Who would dare to condemn their way of life? Yet Amos ploughed on. He had a few minutes before those before him either attacked him or went to plot his death. Our passage reflects a sense of urgency and drama.

Amos appealed to his listeners to recall the great deeds of God. Now, we might think that he would refer to a great event such as the crossing of the Red Sea, but instead, Amos chose a less well known incident, the defeat of the Amorites before Israel entered the Promised Land (Num. 21 and Judges 11:19f.). Why did he choose this? It may be that the remembrance of this battle was a significant feast day at the time, and was therefore a topical illustration of God's patronage of Israel. Certainly, Amos appealed to Israel to remember that they were a nation under God, whose history was underscored by the mighty acts of God (2:9,10). Israel could do nothing outside of the watchful eye of her God!

Yet Amos did not hold back his message of judgement, and condemned Israel for her injustice and irreligion. He questioned her sincerity by reminding his listeners of the holy order of Nazirites, one of whom was Samson. These were people who had given themselves to God, kept their hair unshaven, and did not drink alcohol. He challenged his listeners; did they not know this, and did they not know that in their own day, the Nazirite vows had been watered down, and Nazirites commonly drank? Were they not aware that a decree had gone out to forbid prophets from prophesying (2:12)?

Amos' words are intriguing. What was going on in those days? It seems that he was speaking to people about things commonly known to them, but not to us. Moreover, what is Amos speaking about when he mentions an instruction that prophets should not prophesy (2:12)? If such a decree was in force as Amos spoke, then it seems that he was breaking the law by prophesying! We are left wondering whether we are reading exploits of great daring and danger!

Lastly, Amos unleashes his message of judgement, and it is shattering (2:13-15), and he uses two prophetic 'pictures' to stunning effect. Firstly, he describes a cart weighed down to breaking point by a harvest, which illustrates the way that God is pressing down on Israel just like a load pressing down on a cart, about to break (2:13). Then, Amos dramatically switches illustrations, and the next two verses read like a terrifying firsthand description of people fleeing battle. It speaks of strong people unable to flee, warriors unable to stand, runners unable to run, and horsemen unable to ride for their lives, and at the end, naked and humiliated men scurry in panic from the field of battle pursued by death (2:14,15). This is Amos' picture of God's judgement and it is utterly dreadful and sickly realistic.

We must not forget that Amos said all this standing before astonished Israelites who could not believe their ears. The prophet was condemning them, and had just pronounced a judgement of death by battle! Just like those who first heard this, we are left in shock. Fortunately for us, we can sit in peace and read through the rest of Amos to try and find out more about what this all means.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- What is this about the battle against the Amorites?
- What is this about the Nazirites and the prophets?
- What does the picture of the cart tell us?
- What does the picture of flight from battle tell us?

Notes on the text and translation

V13 ***'I will weigh you down to the ground ...'***

Other translations:

'I will crush you as a cart crushes ...' (NIV)

'I will press you down in your place ...' (NRSV)

The Hebrew is difficult to translate because the verb translated 'weigh down', 'crush' or 'press' occurs only in this place in the entire Bible, and it is uncertain what it means. Comparisons with other ancient languages suggest that it denoted the action of pressing or crushing, and this idea gives rise to most current translations.

V13 ***'... as a cart full of sheaves is loaded down'***

Other translations:

'... as a cart crushes when loaded with grain' (NIV)

'... just as a cart presses down when it is full of sheaves' (NRSV)

This part of verse 13 continues on from the first part of the sentence. As a whole, the picture painted is of a cart that is overloaded to the point of being 'crushed' by the weight of the load. More importantly, we must try and work out what Amos means by saying this about God and His punishment of Israel (see study).

Going Deeper

What is this about the battle against the Amorites?

It is well known that one generation of Christians will focus on certain great texts of the Old Testament and remember certain stories of God's power and glory well, and yet a few generations later, the emphases will change. For example, fifty years or so ago, Christians in the UK would happily teach Sunday School children about Goliath and David, up to and including cutting off his head. Yet now, such stories are removed from Christian children's literature, or they are amended to remove the parts about death.

In a similar way, the Israelites of old had a different set of recollection of their past than we do today. They were closer to the events, of course, but dominated perhaps by the stories passed down to them as much as by the written texts of God's Word, at that time only just being discerned and gathered. While Judeans in the south held the sacred texts in the Temple at Jerusalem (the Ten Commandments in the Holy of Holies, for example), Israelites in the north retained the memory of other significant events, and it seems that the defeat of the Amorites is one of these.

The Amorites are mentioned several times in the Old Testament as people who inhabit various parts of both Canaan itself and the regions around, to the east. In truth, they were probably a moving tribal federation common in the region. What seems to be clear is that before the invasion of the Promised Land, the Amorites were numerous and powerful, and afterwards, there is little record of them in Scripture. Historically, it seems that they were indeed obliterated from the scene in Canaan, and their removal or defeat was a major part of Israel's occupation of the Promised Land.

The story of their defeat is straightforward. When Israel came towards the end of their journey through the wilderness, the Amorites were the first nation to stand in their way. But with God's help, Israel defeated the Amorites and travelled on towards the Promised Land (Num 21:13-35). Other opponents proved more difficult to conquer, but the Amorites were comprehensively beaten, and the Biblical record clearly indicates that this battle was celebrated as a major military success, and attributed to God.

The Old Testament yields some interesting clues about the significance of all this. When Abraham was first promised land for his descendants, God explained that the land could not be theirs until *'the iniquity of the Amorites is complete'* (Genesis 15:13). Certainly, the Amorites did something that deeply offended God! Secondly, the record of their defeat in Numbers includes references to Israel taking lands, villages and towns from them, before they came into their inheritance in Canaan (Num 21:24-35), and it also hints at festive remembrance of this great event. Remnants of Amorites were still around in the time of the Judges, but it seems that by that time, their influence had decreased significantly.

What is this about the Nazirites and the prophets?

After speaking about the Amorites, Amos turned to face the Israelites with their responsibilities to maintain the holy orders God had given, including the Nazirites. The rules for Nazirite living are to be found in Numbers 6:2-8:

Speak to the Israelites and say to them: When either men or women make a special vow, the vow of a nazirite, to separate themselves to the LORD, they shall separate themselves from wine and strong

drink; they shall drink no wine vinegar or other vinegar, and shall not drink any grape juice or eat grapes, fresh or dried. All their days as nazirites they shall eat nothing that is produced by the grapevine, not even the seeds or the skins. All the days of their nazirite vow no razor shall come upon the head; until the time is completed for which they separate themselves to the LORD, they shall be holy; they shall let the locks of the head grow long. All the days that they separate themselves to the LORD they shall not go near a corpse. Even if their father or mother, brother or sister, should die, they may not defile themselves; because their consecration to God is upon the head. All their days as nazirites they are holy to the LORD.

At that period in the life of Israel, the gap between rich and poor had grown so wide that those who were well off felt they had the right to abuse the ancient traditions of God's people, developed from the laws of Moses. As this passage says, the Nazirites had been compromised, and the prophets, the very people who God used to speak His Word had been silenced in Israel. No prophets had spoken there for eighty years since the days of Elisha and the reign of king Joash (2 Kings 13:15f.). Without the moral and spiritual compass provided by these people, Israel was lost.

Amos' words were designed to spell out to God's people the truth of what was happening in their midst, and though past prophets had spoken to Kings and advised them about how they should govern Israel in godly power, such times were past. Amos perceived that he had to go straight to the people. Perhaps both he and the people were surprised by the prophecies that came from his mouth!

What does the picture of the cart tell us?

The first picture Amos used was that of a cart used at harvest-time, loaded with sheaves of corn and ready to be taken to the threshing floor (2:13). As we saw in the notes above, it is hard to interpret the Hebrew words exactly and arrive at a translation which both makes sense and is accurate, but in general, what Amos said was this; the cart was weighed down so much that it was on the verge of breaking, and nothing could be done to prevent it! In other words, his vision was not simply of a harvest, representing 'the end', but something more dramatic. He saw the breakup of the cart, meaning that the harvest itself was compromised!

This prophecy is therefore about a catastrophe, and this is the theme that binds together this picture with what comes next. Amos has not placed this picture together with images of battle for no purpose. They warn that God's judgement is real like a harvest and it will come to an end just like a battle comes to an end, and also, as an overloaded cart will eventually reach breaking point.

What does the picture of flight from battle tell us?

Amos proceeded to conclude his prophetic word. It would have been clear to his listeners that Amos was talking about a catastrophe, and what he said next revealed its nature. Amos held back no longer, and with chillingly descriptive words he prophesied the most extreme thing that could happen to any nation in those days, which was defeat in battle. His words describe the terrible panic of defeat, something that spreads amongst an army when staring defeat and death. He saw strength sapped out of stout warriors, archers unable to steady themselves to shoot, the terror of pursuit in fear of death and the inability of even a cavalry to change the course of battle. Amos' words are one of only a few prophecies in the Old Testament to convey the sheer terror of such a calamity.

Pause for a moment, however, and think about what was happening as Amos spoke these words, as we have already outlined above. The crowd Amos gathered and who so loudly applauded him for the first seven of his prophecies had been silenced as he rounded on the northern nation of Israel (2:6), and looked these people in the eye. Now, he had the temerity to tell them that God would punish them for their sins by allowing them to be defeated in war! Yet this would have meant little to those who heard Amos. From their point of view, there was indeed a little trouble with the neighbouring state of Assyria, but because the nation of Israel had become rich through trade, it was doing fine and feared no one. What on earth was this trouble maker saying? Where would this threat come from? Those who first heard Amos would have been sceptical, and quite unaware that history would prove him right within a few decades. The mood of the crowd changed with this prophecy of doom, and you can imagine them scratching at the ground for stones. The penalty for someone who insulted their nation like this was death, with no questions asked ...

Application

It is extraordinarily hard to imagine how a prophecy like this might apply to our lives today! Ultimately, Amos' prophecy against Israel is one that pronounces a judgement of battle and war on Israel because of her wandering far away from God. Does God pronounce such judgement today? If we think about this, the answer must be 'yes', because if people go against His will there must be consequences, and ultimately, the end result of rebellion is separation from God, and ultimate separation from God is death. Remember that

our faith is this, in Christ we pass through death to find life, so death is the final judgement. Amos pronounced a judgement on Israel of death through battle. He was unspecific, but perhaps he was aware that death has always been the ultimate consequence of human sin.

This is all difficult stuff, and as we go through Amos, we will find that we are forced to look ever more closely at such things. Certainly, we must read this scripture for what it is, and let it speak to us. If we do, then we may find that it challenges us to think about what it would be like if someone came and insulted our way of church life just as Amos offended the Israelites. It is no bad thing to think about this carefully, for we all need to listen to the fierce judgement of those who look into our own practices from the outside. Of course, we must listen to God's Word, if we so discern it, but we do well to try and place ourselves in the position of other Christians who might come to our fellowship and see all the holes in what we do, especially where we have forgotten ancient godly wisdom. The Israelites had forgotten the Nazirites, and they had forbidden the prophets to speak!

It may sound odd to some, but if you did not know this, it is important to be aware that some Christians teach strongly that the Holy Spirit first came to establish the Early Church, and the signs and wonders of those days including speaking in tongues and healing, were a part of God's 'dispensation' for those days. Many people have been taught such things, and many people consequently believe that there is no work of the Holy Spirit today with which they are obliged to engage. To me, this sounds rather like the modern equivalent of 'telling the Nazirites to drink and forbidding the prophets to prophecy!' Amos' comments about these things may only have been made quickly while he moved on to say more, but they are extraordinarily perceptive, and we do well to think about what similar words may be said about us today.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. How do the great stories of our faith help God's people today? Is it possible for them to be misused and misunderstood, to the point where they lead people astray?
2. Do you believe that there are holy orders of God that have been ignored in our own day, or perhaps misinterpreted and abused?
3. How does God speak to the world about its sins today? Does He use prophets, and if so who are they? Does He speak to us in other ways?

Personal comments by author

Amos had the gift of drawing a crowd and delivering a message. The whole story makes me wonder whether I would be as faithful to the Lord in such dangerous circumstances. Would I be as brave and as persistent, and would I make sure the message was heard by using every technique available to me? Or would I have a go and give up if the going became tough and people did not listen? One of the differences between then and now is that in Amos' day someone could get an audience in the streets by speaking out in public. Nowadays, this is often not possible, so we must try and use other means to broadcast our message.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *The prophecies here in Amos are shocking. But think about this for a little while, surely, this passage of Amos reflects the prophet's conviction that God operates in the true real life affairs of men women and nations. Ask yourself. Do you really think that God uses the events of real life to punish wrongdoing? And, does He use the events of real life to bless His faithful?*
- *Have you ever made promises to God? Have you kept these promises? Think about what it means to make a promise to God, and consider whether it is worthwhile doing so for things that are truly important in life.*

Final Prayer

Your love beckons us onwards, dear Lord. Surround us with such an assurance of our salvation that we are content to do Your will and proclaim Your salvation in whatever circumstance You require of us. May our hearts reflect Your great love, so that others will find You through us. AMEN