

WHO TURNED OUT THE LIGHT?

*SERIES: THE CITY SET ON A HILL: LIVING AS THE PEOPLE OF GOD,
REFLECTING THE HEART OF GOD*

By Danny Hall

There is much talk about trends in our culture. People often label the current era “post-modern.” No one can quite define what that is, but supposedly we have shifted in the way we think about things. There is a lot of truth in that, of course. When I was fairly new in the faith, the predominant question I would hear from those who were questioning Christianity was, “Is it true?” Our evangelistic efforts would tend toward establishing that the story of Jesus was historical, that the Bible was really the word of God and was trustworthy, and that compared to all the other big ideas of the world, Christianity was the one that was true. Those questions are certainly still valid, and they’re often asked. We need to be able to engage in such discussions. But the predominant question that people ask about the faith is now, “Is it real?” In other words, does it make a difference? Is it something that actually affects life, and isn’t just some abstract collection of theological premises or philosophical approaches? Is it a concrete, experiential reality that transforms us?

I would suggest that this shift presents wonderful opportunities for us as believers, because even if we haven’t mastered all the theological arguments, or we aren’t able to engage people in a deep philosophical or academic way, we still have the ability to be a witness for Christ by living

out the reality of our faith. People are hungry for a spiritual reality that is more than just some elusive set of ideas, hungry for something that actually changes lives, something that meets the deepest needs of the human heart and soul.

What does this have to do with the book of Amos? Actually, everything! Amos was a prophet who spoke to God's people at a time when they had lost the idea of what it meant to be light in their world, to live out God's calling for them. In this series, we have begun to explore what God has been doing to rescue mankind from the ravages of sin and what the role of his people is in that. In the last message (Discovery Paper 4936) we looked at Amos' first oracle, or sermon, if you will. It had seven points in which God was drawing a circle around the nation of Israel, to whom the oracles of Amos were addressed. He named seven different countries encircling the land of Israel. Now, the book of Amos is a very stylized piece of literature, and it was Amos' habit to make points in groups of seven. So he lays out the sins of Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab, and Judah. The Israelites, hearing Amos' sermon, would have been in full agreement. At the end of it they would have said, "Yes, that's true! We live in the midst of that crazy wickedness and ungodliness!" There would be a real sense of completeness, and a sense that they were an island in the midst of that wickedness. But now Amos introduces a big surprise—it's not just seven points about seven countries, but eight, and the eighth is the bull's eye of the whole message: Israel! We begin reading in 2:6-8. You will notice as we work our way through this that what God says to Israel is longer and more detailed than the accusations he made against the other nations.

A picture of exploitation

This is what the LORD says:

**“For three sins of Israel,
even for four, I will not turn back my wrath.**

**They sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals.**

**They trample on the heads of the poor
as upon the dust of the ground
and deny justice to the oppressed.**

**Father and son use the same girl
and so profane my holy name.**

**They lie down beside every altar
on garments taken in pledge.**

**In the house of their god
they drink wine taken as fines.”**

This list of accusations that God makes against Israel encompasses a lot of different kinds of things that can be summed up as follows: sins of greed, injustice, sexual abuse, and profaning worship and the civil order of the day. Let me highlight a few.

“Father and son use the same girl...” This was probably a situation where a father and son sexually abused perhaps a slave girl, someone in their household who was vulnerable, violating a sense of God’s righteousness both in terms of the misuse of power and privilege, and in terms of sexual deviancy. “They lie down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge.” What little the poor had was taken away from them for the satisfaction and needs of the rich. When a poor person owed money to someone, their cloak was given as surety that they would pay back the debt as they were able to, and the lender would hold that in trust, but the garment would be given back each evening so that the poor person would not be cold during the night. But the picture here seems to be that the rich were hanging on to the cloak, wearing it to church. “In the house of their god they drink wine taken as fines.” It was common for civil fines to be paid with wine, which would become the possession of the city to be distributed at need. But here is a picture of unjust judges, perhaps, who were keeping the wine, either for their personal use or for offerings. The picture that has been painted throughout this list is one of exploitation of others by people in control. God is basically saying to Israel, “You’re no different from all these other nations that I’ve been talking about.” Israel was guilty before the Lord of gross sin, of neglecting their calling.

The second part of this rehearses what God did historically for the nation of Israel. Verses 9-12:

**“I destroyed the Amorite before them,
though he was tall as the cedars
and strong as the oaks.
I destroyed his fruit above**

and his roots below.

I brought you up out of Egypt,

and I led you forty years in the desert

to give you the land of the Amorites.

I also raised up prophets from among your sons

and Nazirites from among your young men.

Is this not true, people of Israel?"

declares the LORD.

"But you made the Nazirites drink wine

and commanded the prophets not to prophesy."

God is saying to them, "Remember how you got where you are. I am the one who brought you into this land. Remember your history. I made a covenant with your father Abraham, but I told him that he would not come into the land until the sins of the Amorites were full." (Genesis 15:12-16.) In God's mercy the Amorites were given four hundred years to turn from their sinful ways. But finally God led the Israelites through the wilderness under Moses, drove the Amorites out before them, and gave them the land he had promised them, in an act of mercy toward his own people and judgment on the sins of the Amorites.

He says, "Not only that, but I've raised up prophets from among your sons to hold you accountable to the covenant that I have made with you." God's prophets throughout Israel's history were called to speak truth into the lives of God's people, to proclaim the very word of

God to them, to remind them of their covenant relationship with God and their calling as the people of God.

He also said, “I’ve placed Nazirites among you.” The Nazirites had a special role in the nation of Israel, with more restrictive laws for their lives: they didn’t cut their hair or drink wine, among other things. They stood in the midst of the nation almost as a living object lesson of the special calling of God’s people, the holy separation that God was calling his people to in order to show the world his character and that there was life in him. But what did Israel do with that? Verse 12:

“But you made the Nazirites drink wine
and commanded the prophets not to prophesy.”

In other words, the very ones God used to try to hold them accountable to their godly calling, they dismissed. They didn’t want to hear, “Thus says the Lord...”

God is saying, “I did all of this for you, my special people, and you laughed in my face, profaned it.” So in the closing verses of chapter 2, he gives an incredibly strong list of seven different ways that they need to realize judgment is coming. Verses 13-16:

**“Now then, I will crush you
as a cart crushes when loaded with grain.
The swift will not escape,
the strong will not muster their strength,**

and the warrior will not save his life.
The archer will not stand his ground,
the fleet-footed soldier will not get away,
and the horseman will not save his life.
Even the bravest warriors
will flee naked on that day,”

declares the LORD.

Notice the sevenfold cadence of how they are not going to escape judgment. Over and over God basically says to them, “You can run but you can’t hide. You will not be able to stand in the day of my judgment, which is coming because you have abandoned what I have done for you and what I have called you to.”

That brings to a close this opening oracle. God’s judgment pinpointing Israel at the end takes us into the heart of the message of the rest of the book: God’s love and call for Israel. Having established that they have compromised their calling and have become just as wicked as all the other nations, in the next oracle God begins to focus on the real issues between him and Israel. In 3:1-2 God give us the core point.

Betrayal

Hear this word the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel—against the whole family I brought up out of Egypt:

**“You only have I chosen
of all the families of the earth;
therefore I will punish you
for all your sins.”**

What underlies God’s anger and heartache in all of this is that they were his special, chosen ones. In fact, the covenant name of God, Yahweh, is used eighty times in the book of Amos as God refers to himself, reminding them over and over again of their special relationship to him. “You alone have I chosen. You were the one that I called out.” Remember that dark, horrible portrait that was painted of the seven nations around them? This is life without God—destructive, manipulative, and ruinous for all people. Who would show the nations a different way? God says, “I reached down to you, Israel, and I called you out of all other people into a covenant relationship, to be my people in the midst of this darkness. But you have forsaken that.” It’s important for us to understand the shift in tone when God looks at Israel. You see, their sin registers differently in his heart than the sins of the other nations do. Yes, God is angry about their sins. But when the people of God sin, it’s not as much about breaking rules as it is about betraying a lover. It’s personal.

Now, we like to think of sin as breaking rules. But imagine a couple walking into church, and the wife looking around everywhere with a wandering eye, checking out all the guys to see who

might she hook up with at church today. The very thought of that makes our skin crawl. How awful! That's the way God portrays Israel. In many places in the Prophets he calls them adulterers, and the word he uses most often to describe their sinfulness is adultery. That is the sense in which as the called-out people of God they have forsaken that wonderful relationship.

What about us? Because of what Christ has done, because we are called to be his people, we are welcomed as the friends of God, no longer enemies who are estranged from him. But look at that in the context of the way we often live out our lives as the people of God. Most of the time, we are far more concerned about what other people think, about securing our position in the world, about feeling good about ourselves, somehow justifying our existence to others, needing the applause of other people. And what is it that we're bartering away when we focus on that? As one writer said, we're seeking the approval of people all of whom will be dead in the next fifty years or so. They are small potatoes compared to the favor of the eternal God.

In the same way, Israel bartered away their covenant relationship with God. But even in the midst of his judgment, God, in his mercy and loving care for them, continues to reach out to them.

The mercy of God

In verses 3-8 he asks a series of seven rhetorical questions in which he calls out to them to pay attention.

Do two walk together

unless they have agreed to do so?

Does a lion roar in the thicket

when he has no prey?

Does he growl in his den

when he has caught nothing?

Does a bird fall into a trap on the ground

where no snare has been set?

Does a trap spring up from the earth

when there is nothing to catch?

When a trumpet sounds in a city,

do not the people tremble?

When disaster comes to a city,

has not the LORD caused it?

Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing

without revealing his plan

to his servants the prophets.

The lion has roared—

who will not fear?

The Sovereign LORD has spoken—

who can but prophesy?

He's saying, "Just as surely as the logic of cause and effect in these things, be sure that the Lion has roared; the Sovereign Lord has spoken! Wake up! I'm sending my prophets into your midst to proclaim to you that judgment is coming if you do not listen, and listen now. I will fulfill my word. So pay attention!" You see, even in the midst of their sinfulness, God acts mercifully toward them. He doesn't just march in and wipe them out. He warns them. In other places in this book he talks about the different kinds of discipline that he has sent to them. But over and over again he does everything he can to woo them out of their sin and back to him.

The New-Testament counterpart to this is Hebrews 12:5-6, where the author says that God always disciplines those he loves. God cares enough about you and about me not to leave us where we are. He cares enough to draw us deeper into relationship with himself, pruning out the things in our lives that are hindering us from knowing him, living for him to the fullest, and appropriating his presence and power in our lives so that we can be the people of God.

As God mercifully calls out to us and draws us back to himself, the message to Israel and to us is, "Are you listening? Are your hearts and minds open to the work of my Holy Spirit to show you the areas of your life where you need to be surrendered to me?" Over and over again he pounds this idea into their heads: "Pay attention! The Lord is speaking! Please listen!" In the final verses of this chapter, he reiterates that judgment is coming and calls them to listen. Verses 9-15:

Proclaim to the fortresses of Ashdod

and to the fortresses of Egypt:

“Assemble yourselves on the mountains of Samaria;

see the great unrest within her

and the oppression among her people.”

“They do not know how to do right,” declares the LORD,

“who hoard plunder and loot in their fortresses.”

Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

“An enemy will overrun the land;

he will pull down your strongholds

and plunder your fortresses.”

This is what the LORD says:

“As a shepherd saves from the lion’s mouth

only two leg bones or a piece of an ear,

so will the Israelites be saved,

those who sit in Samaria

on the edge of their beds

and in Damascus on their couches.”

“Hear this and testify against the house of Jacob,” declares the LORD, the LORD God Almighty.

**“On the day I punish Israel for her sins,
I will destroy the altars of Bethel;
the horns of the altar will be cut off
and fall to the ground.
I will tear down the winter house
along with the summer house;
the houses adorned with ivory will be destroyed
and the mansions will be demolished,”**

declares the LORD.

In the next message we’re going to look at the specific ways that Israel abandoned their calling and ask ourselves how we have also compromised our faith and our mission. But here I want to simply focus on that larger calling to be the people of God, that special one.

**“You only have I chosen
of all the families of the earth...”**

He has called us as his covenant people to stand out as the light of the world in the midst of this darkness. What difference does this make to you and me? What are we to make of all of this? If

we, as the church, God's people, are indeed the heirs of God's mission to the world, if we are the Israel of our day—and we are, according to the Scriptures—if we are the ones called to be his light, then how are we to live? God wants to demonstrate in the midst of the people living without God all around us that there is a different way to live. In the face of trouble, turmoil, and the ravages of sinfulness that we saw in the last message, who will demonstrate something different—something of hope, grace, forgiveness, transformation, and intimacy with God? That is our calling.

Jesus spoke of this in Matthew 5:14-16: “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” Notice he says, “that they may see your good deeds,” not, “that they may hear your intelligent arguments.” I do not disparage our need to be able to defend our faith and articulate the wonderful, glorious message of the Scriptures, of God's grace and forgiveness. But the truth is that the message of the gospel has its most profound impact when it is lived.

Whether or not it's right or fair or even good thinking, people are watching us and making decisions about Jesus based on what they see in us. The nature of faith is that it is lived out. So the question is, what picture of Jesus are we presenting to the world? What does the world see? What would happen if we knocked on doors in the neighborhood around our church and asked people, “What do you think of Jesus, based on what you've seen of the people who go to this

church?” It might filter down to simply whether we’ve paid attention to where we park our cars. They may be angry at Jesus because we keep blocking their driveway.

In Donald Miller’s book *Blue like Jazz*, he tells a wonderful story about a time when he and some others had a very special weekend at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. He was taking some classes there and had gotten connected with a small group of Christians. Now, Reed College is reputed to be the most liberal college in North America. One weekend a year, they have a festival committed to total debauchery—alcohol, drugs, sex—which the school sponsors. Donald Miller and his friends were trying to figure out what to do as Christians on this weekend. Off the cuff he said, “Why don’t we build a confessional booth and put it in the middle of the campus?” His friends took that idea and ran with it. Then someone thought of a new twist: instead of listening to other people’s confessions, they would confess their own sins to whomever came in. So they actually built a little building, set it down in the middle of campus, and wrote on the front of it, “Confess Your Sins.” They got Donald to be the first one in the booth. He was sitting there listening to the music of the festival blaring and thinking, “What in the world have I done? No one’s going to come here. They’re all going to think we’re idiots.” Just when he was about to bolt, the door opened and someone walked in. “What are you doing here? So I’m supposed to confess my sins to you?”

Donald said, “No, we’re here to confess our sins to you.” The guy was taken aback. Then Donald began to say some of the things that he personally had not done well in representing Jesus, all the ways he had not fulfilled his calling, and this guy’s heart melted and resonated. He didn’t come

to Christ in the moment, but he was so moved he went out and told all his friends, and they had a steady stream of people come in. Reflecting on this, Donald writes:

“I was being changed through the process. I went in with doubts and came out believing so strongly in Jesus I was ready to die and be with him. I think that night was the beginning of a change for a lot of us.

Iven started taking a group to a local homeless shelter to feed the poor....We held an event called Poverty Day where we asked students to live on less than three dollars a day to practice solidarity with the poor. More than a hundred students participated. Penny spoke in Vollum Lounge on the topic of poverty in India, and more than seventy-five students came. Before any of this, our biggest event had about ten people. We hosted an evening where we asked students to come and voice their hostility toward Christians. We answered questions about what we believed and explained our love for people, for the hurting, and we apologized again for our own wrongs against humanity and asked forgiveness from the Reed community. We enjoyed the new friendships we received, and at one time had four different Bible studies on campus specifically for people who did not consider themselves Christians. We watched a lot of students take a second look at Christ.” (1)

All of this happened because they decided to become vulnerable and own the fact of how poorly they had represented Christ. It’s important for us as well to ask how we have portrayed Christ.

Now, fortunately, we need to recognize that God's people have done great things. We would be wrong to say the church has failed in everything. It's not all bad news. In fact, story after story, from our own congregation to the church around the world, tells of God's people standing up to be light in the world. For example, following hurricane Katrina, amidst widespread criticism of the politicians for what they did or did not do, the truth is that Christians all across this country, particularly in that region, responded marvelously and beautifully, with millions of dollars in donations, countless sacrificial hours of work, and churches' taking in refugees from the stricken area and housing them. Christians extended themselves completely in order to serve the hurting people there in the name of Christ. Another example is the people fueled by passion for Christ and love for people who have led racial reconciliation movements across the world. And here at PBC we have been connected to ministries like Medical Ambassadors, which has taken the gospel of Christ all over the developing world by reaching out to the whole person through medical clinics and education, demonstrating the love of Christ. Many people in this church extend themselves to their neighbors and families to touch lives. There are plenty of positive examples of how God's transforming power works to bring light to the community.

But still we must ask what difference Christ has made in our lives, what difference our presence makes in our community, on the job, in our family, in the world. One of the feelings we can sometimes get when we hear those questions is, "What can I do?" Let me give you a little illustration that has served me well as I remember how God can take even our smallest efforts to serve him and do great things.

When Christopher was very small, he needed to sleep in a totally dark room, or he couldn't go to sleep. That led to all kinds of comical things, like the time we missed when we tried to put him in the crib and dropped him on the floor. So in order to avoid that, I started using an old runner's watch with a tiny light bulb in it that would illuminate at the push of a button. That tiny light would illuminate that pitch-dark bedroom enough so that I could tell what I was doing. Now, if I brought that watch into a room with normal light and pushed the button, you wouldn't even be able to see its little light. But in a totally dark place, even a little light shines brightly.

Your efforts to just love people for Christ are like that. You can do something simple like taking a meal to your next-door neighbor in love, learning the names of their children and caring for them, sending a card—use your imagination. God can use you to be light in this dark place. What a wonderful opportunity we have as the body of Christ!

Another book I recently read that has been insightful is *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* by Rob Bell, a pastor in Michigan. In a chapter called “The New Culture” he talks about the early church:

“This is why so many passages about the early church deal with possessions and meals and generosity. They understood that people are rarely persuaded by arguments, but more often by experiences. Living, breathing, flesh-and-blood experiences of the resurrection community. They saw it as their responsibility to put Jesus' message on display. To the outside world it was less about proving and

more about inviting people to experience this community of Jesus' followers for themselves.

And so these Christians passed on the faith to the next generation who passed it on to the next generation who passed it on to the next generation until it got to... us. Here. Today. Those who follow Jesus and belong to his church. And now it is our turn. It's our turn to step up and take responsibility for who the church is going to be for a new generation. It's our turn to redefine and reshape and dream it all up again. It's our turn to rediscover the beautiful, dangerous, compelling idea that a group of people, surrendered to God and to each other, really can change the world." (2)

When the community of faith, empowered by the Holy Spirit within us, chooses to live that way in our world, we can be light in the darkness, and that is our calling.

Notes

1. Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz*, © 2003, Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, TN. Pp.125-126.
2. Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, © 2005, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI. P.164.

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Amos 2:6-3:15

Third Message

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