

FINDING OUR VOICE

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

By Danny Hall

Here are a few questions to help us ponder our calling to be the people of God, which is the theme running through the book of Amos:

- What do you think the average unchurched person thinks about Christians?
- How do you think your representation of Christ has helped or hindered others from seeing Jesus?
- When you see people living in rebellion toward God, even openly flaunting their defiance, how do you feel? What do you wish for them?
- How do you react when others resist your attempts to live out or talk about your faith?

God called the nation of Israel to be light in a dark, destructive world where people lived without God. We as the church of God have now inherited that commission that God gave to Israel. So how are doing?

Unlike the passages that we've looked at so far in the book of Amos, chapter 7 focuses more on the person of Amos than on his message. Looking at Amos himself will help us with those questions I just posed.

In chapter 7 Amos has two encounters. First, he has an interaction with God that instructively reveals a part of Amos' character for us. Second, he has an interaction with a priest in the nation of Israel named Amaziah that gives us a different look at Amos' character. Through these two interactions I hope we will gain some insight into what kind of heart Amos had, and I hope we will be challenged by that in our own walk with God and our own efforts to extend the gospel of the kingdom of God to people around us.

Let's look at the interaction between God and Amos.

Compassion

Amos 7:1-9:

This is what the Sovereign LORD showed me: He was preparing swarms of locusts after the king's share had been harvested and just as the second crop was coming up. When they had stripped the land clean, I cried out, "Sovereign LORD, forgive! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!"

So the LORD relented.

“This will not happen,” the LORD said.

This is what the Sovereign LORD showed me: The Sovereign LORD was calling for judgment by fire; it dried up the great deep and devoured the land. Then I cried out, “Sovereign LORD, I beg you, stop! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!”

So the LORD relented.

“This will not happen either,” the Sovereign LORD said.

This is what he showed me: The Lord was standing by a wall that had been built true to plumb, with a plumb line in his hand. And the LORD asked me, “What do you see, Amos?”

“A plumb line,” I replied.

Then the LORD said, “Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel; I will spare them no longer.

“The high places of Isaac will be destroyed

and the sanctuaries of Israel will be ruined;

with my sword I will rise against the house of Jeroboam.”

Amos has been commissioned by God to go and speak the word of truth to the nation of Israel. Remember, Amos himself is from Judah. The people of Judah are ethnically related to the people of Israel, but they are now in two separate kingdoms. Over and over Amos has been bringing a message of impending judgment, calling the Israelites to repent of their sinfulness, to seek God and live, to stop abdicating their role as light in the world. Now God gives Amos a picture of how all this is going to be fulfilled. He concludes this section with a picture of a plumb line. “I’ve dropped my plumb line, which shows what true and right is, into the midst of Israel, and they do not measure up. So I’m going to send my judgment.”

Before this, however, God gives Amos two pictures of utter destruction. The first picture is of locusts devouring the land after the king’s share had been harvested and before the second harvest. In other words, this destruction is going to touch all the common folks. In his message Amos has been sensitive to the plight of the common person who has been exploited by the wealthy and the powerful. He looks at what’s headed toward Israel, and his heart is broken. He cries out, “God, please don’t do this! How will Israel ever stand in the wake of this kind of judgment?”

So God says, “I will not do it this way.”

Then there is a picture of fire devouring everything in utter destruction of the nation. Once again when Amos realizes where this judgment is going, he is brokenhearted. He finds himself begging God again, “Please God, don’t let this happen! They’ll never be able to stand.”

And amazingly, the sovereign LORD says, “Okay, I’m not going to do that part, either.”

Now in the message of the plumb line, there is judgment coming. God says he will raise up a nation who will invade Israel and take it away by the sword. In the promises we saw in the last message (Discovery Paper 4939), there will be a remnant that is kept alive; the nation will not be totally wiped out. Those who have faithful hearts, even though they’re a small minority, will be spared.

What can we learn about Amos from this? Amos has been speaking the word of truth to people who need to hear it, but in the midst of this he has a heart of compassion for them. He is devastated, heartbroken when he understands that the judgment that he has been preaching about is indeed going to happen.

Contrast Amos for a moment with Jonah (whose story is told in the Old-Testament book of Jonah). God called Jonah to go to the Ninevites and speak a word to them. Nineveh was a pagan city that was greatly oppressing God’s people. Rather than obey God’s call, Jonah fled by sea but ended up being swallowed by a great fish, by which God preserved him and delivered him onto dry land. Then God recommissioned Jonah to go to the Ninevites, but Jonah didn’t want to go. The problem was, he was afraid the Ninevites would actually listen and believe, and he didn’t

want them to repent and be saved! He was angry that God would actually send his message to these sinful people. He would rather that God wipe them off the face of the earth for oppressing his people. He was appalled that God would show them mercy.

Now look at Amos. Amos is speaking truth to people who have totally abandoned God and their calling. These people will personally resist and oppress and persecute him, as we'll see in a few moments. These are a stiff-necked people who have not listened to God's word over years and years of his sending prophets and calling them back to repentance. They have openly defied God even while they keep going to the temple on a regular basis and offering their sacrifices. But Amos is brokenhearted that this is about to happen to them. He is a man of amazing compassion, while remaining faithful to his message.

That's why I posed the question: when you see people openly defying God, even flaunting their defiance, in your heart what do you wish for them? I know many times I can't wait for them to get what's due them. I want God to judge them. I'm angry that these people laugh at God. So many times I don't care one bit about them. I wonder how much all of us want others to get what's coming to them, rather than to hear the message of mercy and forgiveness that God offers to them if they will repent and come to him. That's an important gut check for us.

A few years ago there was a man in the college group who had a wonderful heart for the Lord. During the Easter season we were discussing some of what goes on in San Francisco. There was a group of folks there who dressed up like nuns and basically made fun of the Easter story. It was the kind of thing that just made your blood boil. But this man said God put it on his heart that

these people were just lost, so what he was going to do for Easter was go to San Francisco, find them, walk around with them, and see if he could just talk to them. Of course it bothered him, as it bothered all of us, that they would mock Jesus and his church. But what concerned him more, which was a great conviction to my heart, was their lostness that would lead them to make that kind of mockery, and how he could speak into that lovingly but challengingly.

In the same way Amos had a heart of compassion. In the end God said, “Amos, the plumb line has been set; judgment is coming.” But Amos wasn’t glad that was going to happen, he was brokenhearted about the destruction and judgment that sin brings.

In the latter half of this chapter Amos has a different kind of encounter.

Courage

Verses 10-17:

Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent a message to Jeroboam king of Israel:

“Amos is raising a conspiracy against you in the very heart of Israel. The land cannot bear all his words. For this is what Amos is saying:

**‘Jeroboam will die by the sword,
and Israel will surely go into exile,**

away from their native land.”

Then Amaziah said to Amos, “Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there. Don’t prophesy anymore at Bethel, because this is the king’s sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom.”

Amos answered Amaziah, “I was neither a prophet nor a prophet’s son, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. But the LORD took me from tending the flock and said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’ Now then, hear the word of the LORD. You say,

**‘Do not prophesy against Israel,
and stop preaching against the house of Isaac.’**

Therefore this is what the LORD says:

**‘Your wife will become a prostitute in the city,
and your sons and daughters will fall by the sword.
Your land will be measured and divided up,
and you yourself will die in a pagan country.
And Israel will certainly go into exile,
away from their native land.’”**

Amos has been preaching this message of God's impending judgment, calling the nation to repentance. Now Amaziah, one of the priests of the nation of Israel, calls Amos out. First he sends a letter to the king and falsely accuses Amos of speaking out against the king and raising a conspiracy. Then Amaziah confronts Amos face to face, and basically says to him, "Enough already of your loud squeaking and insurrection! We don't want you here, and we don't want to hear what you have to say. This is the sanctuary of our kingdom. So shut up and go home!"

Now, this is from a priest! Remember, the nation keeps going through all the motions of worship, but it's having little or no impact on whether they live for God's glory, on how they treat each other. So the priest is conspiring with the king and the wealthy in oppressing the poor, trying to cloak it with religiosity. He defends his position by telling the spokesperson of God to shut up and go home.

How does Amos respond? He says, "I'm not a prophet. I'm not even the son of a prophet. I just tend sheep and grow figs." We saw earlier that he's probably the equivalent in economic status of a small business owner. He says, "I'm just an average person. But God told me to come here and say this, so I speak the truth that God gave me." You see, authority does not come from our position, which is the way the world often looks at authority, and the way we look at it even in church. Authority comes from the calling of God and the message of God. In the authority of his calling from God and the power and the authority of his message, Amos speaks the truth into a very dangerous situation. For Amaziah has the power to take Amos' life. Amos could go back

home to his business and his comfortable life. But God has placed his call on Amos and commissioned him to speak his truth, and Amos says that's just what he's going to do.

Then he goes on and gives a very harsh word of judgment to Amaziah. Basically, he is saying to him, "You're the priest—you ought to know better than to stand in defiance of the living God! But there you are, complicit in all of the sin of the nation. So what's going to happen to you? Your wife is going to end up a prostitute, your children are going to get killed, and you're going to die in a foreign country when this judgment comes. You may claim to be a priest and you may think everything is going well, but God's judgment is going to visit your household, Amaziah."

What we see in Amos in this encounter is courage. What does it mean to be a courageous spokesperson? One of the most liberating things I ever heard was when someone pointed out that in Ephesians 6:19 the apostle Paul asks people to pray for him so that he will be bold. Now, the last person on earth I ever thought needed someone else to pray that he would be bold was Paul! He preaches, then gets beaten up and dragged out of the city, but he gets up and walks back in and keeps on preaching. But you see, courage is not the absence of fear; rather, it is the willingness to trust God to do the right thing, to live out your calling. Amos looks at the threat of persecution, and he remains faithful to the message and the calling that God has given him, trusting God whatever might happen to him. Courage is looking into the fear, into the persecution, into the difficulty, and stepping out in faith, saying, "I am God's person, called to this place to speak his truth to these particular people. While I have compassion for them and do not want them to die, I also know I have to speak the truth that God has given me."

Amos ends up standing in a long line of people Jesus himself speaks of in Matthew 5:10-11, at the end of the Beatitudes:

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

What do we need to learn from this picture of Amos?

Drawing our security from God

One thing I asked myself is, what makes it so hard for me to faithfully represent Christ in my world? As I thought about Amos and about my own heart, I was drawn back to the beginning of the book of Amos, and an image that I shared with you early in this series. Remember, in the first chapter we looked at the oracles to the nations surrounding Israel (Discovery Paper 4936), and we talked about life without God, which leads people on a path of destruction in which societies and relationships disintegrate and people’s lives are ruined. The simile I offered you to think about was from Donald Miller’s book *Searching for God Knows What*: life without God is like

being in a lifeboat in which there is not enough room for everybody, so you have to justify your being allowed to stay in the lifeboat (1). Life without God is an endless competition with others for survival. You're always trying to prove yourself to other people. You make alliances with those you think will keep you safer. You distance yourself from people you think are marginal and might hinder your staying in the boat. Without God to tell you who you are, to give you your sense of worth and security, that's what life is like.

I realized that we are conditioned by the way our society works to live this way. When we find our redemption in what other people think, then we become concerned with our identity in the group, and we get so caught up in that that we cannot hear God or freely represent him. It leads to an us-versus-them mentality. We do this even as Christians. Many times I've thought about sharing my faith or reaching out to someone, but in my heart and mind that same old calculation was going on: What are they going to think about me if I do this? Will they accept me? Are they going to think I'm nuts? Are they going to think I'm intrusive? Bigoted? Stupid? So much of my ability to reach out to other people and care for them and love them compassionately is thwarted by this.

If we extrapolate from ourselves to our collective mindset as the church, how much of our energy in ministry is expended in trying to justify our place in society? We are busy defending ourselves and talking down to others to try to prove our moral superiority or intellectually defend the gospel. Now, legitimate questions ought to be answered, including intellectual ones, but how much of our efforts aren't really about answering the questions, but about making ourselves feel good? When we get sucked down into the competition, we can't hear God's voice, we can't be

compassionate toward people because we're trying to make sure they like us, or make sure we feel good about ourselves. In contrast, Amos was a man whose heart was broken for people and who courageously stood in the face of the persecution, simply wanting to tell the truth for God.

We live even as believers too much the way those who are without God live. We're too concerned about what other people think. We try too hard to earn a place of respectability in the general debate of ideas. We're so caught up in that that sometimes we have no energy left to speak the truth in love. When we try to redeem ourselves on the horizontal plane rather than drawing our security from our redemption in God, it saps us of our ability to speak. We end up ashamed of the gospel, bashful, combative, defensive. It's a trap that deters us from acting with courage and compassion.

That leaves us with the stark reality that we're weak. But that is good news, because the starting point for getting it right is to recognize just how weak we are in this, just how easy it is for us to get caught up in the games of this world as believers and as churches. Brokenness is the first step toward obedience.

Following this series in Amos, Steve Zeisler will preach a series on some truths in 2 Corinthians that are key to our walk with God. Let me foreshadow that with two verses of wonderful promise in 2 Corinthians. The first is 3:4: "Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant...." The other is 4:7: "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not

from us.” Paul goes on to talk about all that he’s had to suffer, yet God’s strength was made alive in him. If we will come in our brokenness and admit our weakness, if we will begin by owning how much of what we do and think is based on what other people will think of us, let go of all that, and simply say God, “These are people lost without you, and I want to love them as you love them, give myself to serve them as you serve them, speak the truth in compassionate love,” then we’ll be set free to be like Amos. Compassion and courage flow out of the heart of God. We must connect with him so that we can see the world as he sees it, and trust his resources in us so that we can share his love to the world no matter what the cost.

Notes

1. Donald Miller, *Searching for God Knows What*, © 2004, Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, TN. Pp. 105-118.

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Catalog No. 4940

Amos 7:1-17

Sixth Message

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October 9, 2005

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