

A REASON TO HOPE

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

By Danny Hall

When I was eleven years old I joined the Boy Scouts. I wasn't very good at it, and I didn't get all that interested in it. But one of the first things that happened after I joined was that our troop went on a hike on the Appalachian Trail out of Gatlinburg, Tennessee. It was on a Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. I didn't grow up in a hiking family, and this was the first time I had done anything like this. I didn't know what I was doing. I learned very quickly that I was ill-prepared. The training they gave us was probably inadequate. The trail in that area is fairly rugged in spots, and for eleven- and twelve-year-olds it was pretty challenging. We didn't have frames for our backpacks. Mine was poorly packed, so it was rubbing my back with every step, and things just got harder and harder as the day went on.

I survived Friday and got into Saturday, which was a long, arduous day getting to the top of Mt. LeConte, one of the highest peaks in the Great Smoky Mountains in eastern Tennessee. Once we got our camp set up that night, across that mountain swept one of the most severe storms I've ever been out in. It was actually the outer edge of a hurricane that hit the coast of North Carolina.

On Sunday on the hike down the mountain there were places where the trail was so treacherous because of water from the storm pouring across it that they had to pass the packs over, then tie ropes around us and sort of hand us through the rushing water, right by a drop-off over a cliff. It was one of those things where you were glad the moms couldn't see what was going on! My heart was pounding with twin feelings of exhilaration from being out with the guys doing this, and absolute, abject terror.

One of the thoughts that kept running through our minds, particularly on Saturday night and Sunday, was, "Are we ever, ever going to get home?" We were so excited when we started out, only to find out that we were ill-prepared, ill-equipped, and on a much more arduous journey than at least I had ever imagined. Of course our scoutmasters, probably partly to convince themselves, and partly to keep our morale up, kept saying, "Of course we're going to make it! We're going to get down there, and there are going to be people waiting at the end of the trail to take us home." It was that promise that kept us going, although probably somewhere along the line we began to wonder.

As I've traced back over our study of the book of Amos, I've realized how much of life in general is like that hike. We are on a journey that is always more rugged than we ever anticipated, and we're generally ill-prepared and ill-equipped for the things that we run into. So how do we keep going?

In this study we've been challenged over and over again to understand what God's calling is for us as his people. The issues we've confronted are the kinds of things we have to deal with day in

and day out, not just pious spiritual platitudes, but the nitty-gritty of what it means to follow Jesus, both as individuals and as the body of Christ. On this journey of life there are many times when we wonder if we're going to ever get home. Is there any hope?

As we come to the end of this journey through Amos, my prayer is that we can gain a glimpse of hope from what God is promising out there for us, so that we can find the courage and strength to continue the tough trek that we're on. In this message we're going to look at portions of chapters 8 and 9. I want to highlight three passages in these chapters to bring our thoughts about Amos to conclusion, and then summarize it all for us as we seek to know how God is leading us.

The first section we're going to look at is in 8:9-14. Once again Amos is speaking the words of God, reiterating that judgment is coming. But he puts a twist on it that is important to consider.

When God stops speaking

“In that day,” declares the Sovereign LORD,

“I will make the sun go down at noon

and darken the earth in broad daylight.

I will turn your religious feasts into mourning

and all your singing into weeping.

I will make all of you wear sackcloth

and shave your heads.

I will make that time like mourning for an only son

and the end of it like a bitter day.

The days are coming,” declares the Sovereign LORD,

“when I will send a famine through the land—

not a famine of food or a thirst for water,

but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD.

Men will stagger from sea to sea

and wander from north to east,

searching for the word of the LORD,

but they will not find it.

“In that day

the lovely young women and strong young men

will faint because of thirst.

They who swear by the shame of Samaria,

or say, ‘As surely as your god lives, O Dan,’

or, ‘As surely as the god of Beersheba lives’—

they will fall,

never to rise again.”

The people of Israel were called to live out a life of light in the midst of the darkness, and they failed to do that. They fell into the same patterns as all the nations around them and were living without God, even though they still went through their religious motions. So God has continued to say, “Judgment is coming.” Now as we come to the close of this book, he says that the time is at hand. The phrase “in that day” usually signifies a time when God is going to act. Here it points to the fact that all the warnings are now at an end. God will act.

The interesting aspect of this judgment is that when it happens, there’s going to be a famine not of food or water, but of the words of the Lord. You see, as Amos spoke these words, along with many other prophets whom God sent to Israel, the nation turned a deaf ear. Things were going pretty well. They looked around them and said, “We have a nice house, nice vineyard, nice life—what are we worried about? God must surely be blessing us.” But Amos predicts that when the calamity starts, when God’s protective hand is removed and the Assyrians come in to conquer Israel and things begin to fall apart, all of a sudden people will start looking for answers. And where will they go? They’ll go back to Samaria, to Dan, and to Beersheba, which were probably centers of worship of foreign gods that they had mixed in with their worship of Yahweh. They’re going to return to the voices that they have been listening to. But they’re going to find no real hope or help in the midst of their calamity. God says, “I have sent prophet after prophet to you. I have spoken my words to you over and over and over again. I have warned you that this was coming. I have invited you to seek me and live, to come back to me in repentance. And now, I’m not going to speak any longer. The time for judgment is at hand.” The people will have nowhere to turn, because there will be no voice of God.

The very pointed implication of this statement about a famine of the words of God is that even among the religious leaders of Israel, who have been invested with the job of keeping Israel on track with God, there will be no one who knows God and can speak for him. The religious leaders themselves have been compromised and have participated in the trajectory that Israel is on. They will have nothing to say for God.

This reminds us that we have to be careful never to stop listening to what God is speaking to us. We have God's word before us, and we have the people whom God has raised up to speak God's truth to us. What happened to Israel is that they got so absorbed in their own lives that they stopped listening to God, so finally God says, "Have it your way—I'll be quiet."

In this oracle there's an enormous burden of judgment on the people who were raised up by God to be the spiritual leaders of that nation, to be faithful to him and continue to speak truth. God expects men and women who are in leadership, or any place of influence, to be spokespersons for him, to be willing to speak his truth, to teach his word, to call people to live in that word and be changed and molded by it. One of the worst things that can happen to any people is for the word of God to fall silent. At this point the nation of Israel is hitting rock bottom. The nation is about to come apart at the seams, and there is no one who will speak for God.

But in the next passage, 9:8-10, rays of hope begin to glimmer.

Mercy in the midst of judgment

“Surely the eyes of the Sovereign LORD

are on the sinful kingdom.

I will destroy it

from the face of the earth—

yet I will not totally destroy

the house of Jacob,”

declares the LORD.

“For I will give the command,

and I will shake the house of Israel

among all the nations

as grain is shaken in a sieve,

and not a pebble will reach the ground.

All the sinners among my people

will die by the sword,

all those who say,

‘Disaster will not overtake or meet us.’”

What Amos is saying is that even while God’s disciplining hand is going to fall on the nation of Israel, it is only going to come on those who deserve it, those who have turned a deaf ear to God, who have been rebellious against their God, who have forsaken their calling as the people of God. God will not utterly destroy the nation of Israel, but a remnant will be preserved. God’s mercy is always available, even up unto the moment that judgment falls. For those who hear that

call from back in chapter 5, “Seek me and live,” who turn to God in repentance, there is always healing, forgiveness, and preservation. The true kernel survives the sifting. This foreshadows what God will fully promise in the verses immediately following.

These closing oracles again remind us that God’s disciplining hand is coming because he loves his people enough not to leave them where they are, and he is committed enough to his purposes and the needs of the world that he will do what he has to do in order for the gospel to be proclaimed.

Now we come to the last section of the book, 9:11-15.

The fulfillment of God’s purposes

“In that day I will restore

David’s fallen tent.

I will repair its broken places,

restore its ruins,

and build it as it used to be,

so that they may possess the remnant of Edom

and all the nations that bear my name,”

declares the LORD, who will do these things.

“The days are coming,” declares the LORD,

“when the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman

and the planter by the one treading grapes.

New wine will drip from the mountains

and flow from all the hills.

I will bring back my exiled people Israel;

they will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them.

They will plant vineyards and drink their wine;

they will make gardens and eat their fruit.

I will plant Israel in their own land,

never again to be uprooted

from the land I have given them,”

says the LORD your God.

There are two incredible promises in these closing verses of the book of Amos. First, God says, the kingdom itself will be restored. He begins, “In that day...” Now, the term “that day” is not defined for us or given parameters. I believe that here it refers to God’s culminating activities in history, the fulfillment of all his purposes. God is going to act to fulfill his covenant promises.

He says, “In that day I will restore David’s fallen tent.” What is David’s fallen tent? After King Solomon, the son of David, passed away, the kingdom was divided, but that was never God’s

intention. It was to have been a united kingdom of God, following after him. The calamity came because sinfulness crept into the nation. I believe this is telling God's people that he will again bring them back together under the throne of David; the one who sits on that throne forever will unite his people. He speaks of restoration to the way the kingdom was intended to be.

But not only is the kingdom going to be restored, it's going to be expanded. Verse 12 is a beautiful picture of that: "So that they may possess the remnant of Edom..." Edom was one of those pagan nations listed in chapter 1 that were the enemies of God. In the Old Testament Edom is often a metaphor for nations that are opposed to God's people. Yet it says here that the restored kingdom of God will possess a remnant of Edom. And he continues in the next clause, "And all the nations that bear my name." You see, this promised restoration will not only reestablish the narrow band of Israel as they knew it, but it will establish the kingdom of God as people from all nations, even the enemies of God like Edom. All the peoples of the earth who bear his name will be part of this restored and renewed kingdom of God, just as God told Abraham back in Genesis 12 that all the nations of the world would be blessed through him. We have seen in Amos how Israel failed to be a light to the nations that they might find God, but the promise is that the plan of God has not been stopped. The building of his universal kingdom with people from every nation and tribe and tongue will be fulfilled. Amos calls on the people to have hope in what God will yet do.

Verses 11-12 are actually quoted in Acts 15 at a strategic time in church history. You remember as the apostles first began to preach outside of Jerusalem and Paul began to take the gospel into Gentile territory, there arose a controversy over what to do with Gentile converts. Were they

really part of the people of God as they were, or did they have to go through the rite of circumcision and be marked out as Jews as well as believers in Jesus? In Acts 15 there was a wonderful council in Jerusalem where that issue was debated, and James summed up all their thoughts in these words, arguing that the church should be open to all people everywhere, Gentile and Jew, with no requirement that they become Jewish (15:13-21):

“Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

““After this I will return
and rebuild David’s fallen tent.
Its ruins I will rebuild,
and I will restore it,
that the remnant of men may seek the Lord,
and all the Gentiles who bear my name,
says the Lord, who does these things’
that have been known for ages.

[James is probably quoting from the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament, which was slightly different.]

“It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain

from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”

These are moral things that are in line with God’s call to them, but that do not require them to become Jews in order to be part of the people of God.

What all that means is simply this: God’s purposes are going to go forward, and his kingdom is going to be extended to people beyond just the Jews. It’s going to include the whole earth, as God has promised, and that reconstituted kingdom of David will include a remnant from every nation, tribe, and tongue.

So one reason we have to hope is that God’s purposes will be fulfilled, and God will be glorified throughout the earth. Another reason we have to hope, in the latter verses, is that not only is the kingdom going to be renewed, but creation itself will be renewed. Verses 13ff give wonderful, glorious pictures of abundance. The days are coming, he says, when the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman; the harvest will be so abundant that they will not even be able to gather it all when it comes around to planting time again. The vineyards will be overflowing. The planter will catch up with the one who is treading the grapes. New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills. God’s people are going to be put back in the land, and they will enjoy the bounty of the land.

This promise stands in stark contrast to the words of warning in Amos 5:11, where he says,

“Therefore, though you have built stone mansions,
you will not live in them;
though you have planted lush vineyards,
you will not drink their wine.”

Now here is the promise that one day they will be overwhelmed by the abundance of God in a restored and renewed creation that will be the permanent home of God’s people.

The apostle Paul picks up this same theme in Romans 8:18-21 when he writes of the future of the creation: “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.” Paul says our destiny as the people of God is wrapped up with the destiny of the earth itself.

So even when the disciplinary hand of God is falling around us, for those who will come to God to seek mercy and life in him there awaits the fulfillment of all that God has promised, a future hope that is glorious, far beyond compare. In light of the hope that one day God will bring us home, we go forward in trust and obedience. That’s a beautiful hope. After all this negativity, all these words of judgment, at the end of the day God says, “I’m calling out a people for myself

from every nation and tribe and tongue, and I'm going to bless them beyond belief. I will win the day! I will be there to carry you home."

What do we do with all this? Let me briefly summarize what we've been learning from the book of Amos to remind us where this book has taken us and to challenge us in our thinking about what it means for us.

Living as the people of God

First of all, our world is marked by the tragedy and destructiveness of sin. Evidence of it is everywhere: in our own lives, in our families, in our neighborhoods, in our communities, and around the world. This flows out of the deeper tragedy of trying to live life without God, which has been Amos' point all along. But in his mercy, God so loved those he created that while they chose to live apart from him in sin, he called out a people for himself to demonstrate his unending, unconditional love, grace, and mercy. We as the body of Christ, the church, inherit that calling that God first gave to Abraham and his descendants, the nation of Israel. The people of God have the wonderful privilege of demonstrating life with God, thus bearing witness to the hope that is found in Christ.

Now, according to Amos, one of the chief ways that we bear witness is by how we treat people, especially the marginalized of society. If this tragedy brought about by sin, by life without God, is manifested all around us as competitiveness, destructiveness, relational dysfunction,

selfishness, self-preservation, and selfish ambition, then life with God is demonstrated by the way we change that and live selflessly, live for others, especially the downtrodden and marginalized of our society.

So we have to ask ourselves, in what sense are we the champions of the cause of the downtrodden and marginalized in our world? I was challenged in some discussions that I've had recently to think of it this way: it's one thing for us to say we are willing to go and reach out to the marginalized, to the poor, to the hurting in our communities, but it's another whole thing to say we welcome them into our midst. Do you see the difference? What was happening in Israel was that there was a tiered society of distinct classes and groups, and the idea of the community of God was being destroyed. The truth is, one of the reasons we are reluctant to welcome the marginalized into our midst is that it's so messy. You see, every time someone new comes into a group like our church, the group changes. And we like it to be comfortable. Can't we just have church as we've always had it? But the moment someone who is marginal or different from us comes into the body, the body is no longer as comfortable for me. I must own as part of the family of God their life, their story. It's wonderful to know that some have already chosen to not worry about the messiness, and just relate. That's God's calling for us.

Amos also teaches us, though, that when God's people compromise this witness by being drawn back into the mindset and practices of those living without God, God loves them enough to discipline them. We need to be open to the disciplining hand of God, to hear him calling us back to himself. God loves us enough not to leave us where we are. At any time along our journey

when God sees us running down the road toward life without him, he will place his hand upon us in discipline, draw us back to himself, and offer us his grace and mercy.

And finally, Amos teaches us that we are able to live this life with compassion and courage no matter what the cost, because we are confident that God's plans and purposes will be fulfilled.

What would you say is the thing that chiefly identifies you at the core of your being? As the people of God, our primary identity is that we are children of God and part of the family of God. That trumps every other identity we might claim, including those of our natural families, our citizenship in a country, or whatever. That's the challenge of following the message that Amos gave to the nation of Israel so long ago, and gives to you and me today.

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Catalog No. 4941

Amos 8:9-14; 9:8-15

Seventh Message

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October 16, 2005

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