

## **GOD'S MESSAGE REJECTED**

**Amos 7:7-17**

**Dr. Howard Batson  
First Baptist Church  
Amarillo, Texas  
June 9, 2019**

We come to a vision in Amos 7:7-9 that is a third vision in a series of visions in this book. In fact, the two major sections of Amos are the words of Amos found in chapters 1-6 and the visions of Amos in chapters 7-9. We find ourselves in that second section of the book, the visions of Amos, today.

The first vision is in the first three verses of chapter 7. It is the vision of locusts devouring the crops of Israel. Amos asks God not to let this happen. Look at the end of Amos 7:2. "Lord God, please pardon! How can Jacob stand, for he is small?" Then notice verse 3. Although some people don't like to ever admit this, the Lord did change His mind. "The Lord changed His mind about this. 'It shall not be,' said the Lord."

Amos, one person, made a big difference. And God did not destroy Israel with the plague of locusts.

There is a second vision, a vision of fire, in verses 4-6. Here we have an image of fire devouring ancient Israel. It's a judgment by fire. Once again Amos cries out. "Don't do it. Stop, oh Lord. How can Jacob survive?" So the Lord, once again, changed His mind (verse 6).

Now we come to vision number three – the vision of the plumbline.

### **I. Never again.**

In Amos 7:8, the Lord asks Amos a question. "What do you see, Amos?" And Amos replied, "A plumb line."

When I was growing up, I was a sidekick to Leonard Riddle, who was a skilled mason. Laying bricks is a trade of a craftsman, to be sure. If you don't believe so, drive around town and see many crooked walls put up not by a craftsman but by a novice. I was just a teen and never mastered the ability to lay bricks. My job was mixing the mortar and carrying the bricks or the stones to the sight for the mason. I remember mixing three to one – one mortar mix to three shovels of sand. And just the right amount of water. "It's too soupy," he'd say this time. And the next time he'd claim my mix was too dry.

But I remember clearly that whenever he built a wall, he had a string. It was a line. It was his plumbline. If the wall followed the string, it was straight and strong. If there was space between the string and the wall, there was nothing wrong with the string – the string was the standard of measure, it was the plumbline. There was something wrong with the wall.

God is saying to Amos, “I’m about to be an architect. I am about to be a construction foreman. I am about to lay a plumbline and see if my people (“my people” is a reference to the covenant Israel had with God)...I am about to see if my covenant people have measured up to my word. If not, I will spare them no longer.” Look at verse 8.

There are two recipients of God’s wrath (verse 9).

First, the places of worship – whether they are the high places, that is the shrines placed on the hill tops, or whether it is the sanctuaries, the places of worship like Bethel and Dan that had been placed in the Northern Kingdom as rivals to Jerusalem.

Second, the recipient of the wrath was going to be the dynasty of Jeroboam (2 Kings 15:8-10) – that is, Jeroboam II. God was going to rise up against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.

Another way to translate the Hebrew at the end of verse 8, “I will spare them no longer,” is “I will never again pass by them,” meaning “I will never again pass over their sins, but rather I will pass through their midst.” That is, God’s punishment will not be delayed.

But notice this vision, unlike the vision of the locusts and the vision of the fire, has no prayer of intercession, no cry of Amos on behalf of the people petitioning God not to do what He has declared He is going to do. Amos is silent. This particular vision ends without God changing His mind. This vision ends without hope.

Those are hard words, “never again.”

**John said to his wife, “Never again will you hurt me like this. I just can’t forgive you this time.” Ann could feel the pain of his words. His heart was broken, and now he was going to break hers. Never again. No more chances. That was the tone of his language.**

**Ann said there was a finality in his words she’d never heard before. She had done it this time, and she knew it. She could just sense something was different in his voice. Sure, she had hurt him before and he had hurt her. But despite harsh words, they had never been quite like this. They had always come back together eventually. Never had she heard, “Never again.”**

**She shuttered at the implications of his verdict. It sounded so final. She had gone too far this time.**

\*\*\*\*\*

**He was shocked beyond belief. The words hit him like nothing had ever hit him before. Despite all the rest the doctor said, of course he could only hear those words, “You have AIDS.”**

**“Did the doctor say what I thought he said? Surely this is a dream. Surely I’ll wake up and there will be no AIDS, there will be no such diagnosis.” All he could do was remember the words – those three words, “You have AIDS” – every day for the rest of his life. Never again would there be a day, however long he lived, when these words would not haunt him and**

**overshadow everything that he did. Never again would he awake to a carefree day with a full life to enjoy – no worry, full of hope. Never again. All because of a stupid, careless act. He knew there was no one else to blame. The choice had been his. And now life would be “never again.” (Cecil P. Staton, Jr., “Never Again,” *Interpreting Amos*, ed. Cecil P. Staton, Jr., Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Macon, Georgia 1995, p. 119-120)**

When we hear the words “never again,” like the words Yahweh uttered to Israel, life changes forever. Life is hard on the other side of “never again.”

We like the first two visions. The first, where the locusts are about to devour the sprouting crop and Amos prays on behalf of the people and begs God not to do it, not to punish Israel, and God says, “Okay, I’ll give you another chance.” Or we like the second vision where the earth is about to be scorched by fire and, once again, Amos intercedes and says, “Oh Lord God, forgive, I beg you. How can Jacob stand? He’s so small.” And, again, the Lord changed His mind. “It shall not be,” the Lord said.

I like that. I like that picture of God – a picture of God where God knows what’s right and we know what’s right, and when we do what is wrong God forgives and forgets. And God forgives and forgets because of our prayers.

But it’s this third scene, this third vision that I don’t like. I bet you don’t like it either. God shows Amos something. It’s a plumbline. It’s a picture of everyday life. And yet the word this time is not that God changes His mind. Rather, it is that He will never again change His mind in regard to them. He will never again pass over their sins.

The opportunity for holding back God’s wrath has passed. The time for intercession is gone. The prophet is silent. The places of worship will be destroyed. The dynasty of Jeroboam will come down. No more chances.

I don’t like this passage in Amos. I like the prophet Jeremiah better, where Jeremiah says to the people what God has said, “I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.” Or I really like the psalmist in Psalm 103 when God says through him, “As far as the east is from the west, so far He removes our transgressions from us.” **As Cecil P. Staton said, “As a Christian I am big on grace and small on ‘no more chances.’” (*Interpreting Amos*, p. 124).**

And the words “never again” are especially repulsive when they come from the lips of God.

This is a powerful story. Amos was a godly man. And prayer really does change the course of events, even when God’s involved. There is way too much evidence in scripture for that – don’t try to convince me otherwise. The prayers of a righteous man do yield much.

Yet, there came a time when even the prayer of the prophet could not stop the anger of God. Know that your choices and my choices impact our lives forever. This time the people of God had crossed the line, gone too far. And God was not going to relent. He was not going to hold back His punishment.

Each of us we has the power to make decisions that change our lives. Sometimes our decisions lead us to pain and destruction and even death. And sometimes our decisions lead us to life and hope and joy. But pray – do pray that you never hear those words “never again.”

## II. A paid prophet

The best I can determine, it is pretty easy to buy expert testimony. It takes place in the courtrooms across America every single day. Someone is called to testify. They have a Ph.D. or some other degree that makes them an expert in their particular field. And, of course, as they are questioned they yield answers in direct relationship as to how much money they are being paid by one side or the other. The expert witness for the defense always seems to have an opinion which clears the client. On the other hand, the prosecution’s prophet always seems to bear “an unbiased opinion, a professional opinion” which seeks a guilty verdict.

Opinions are bought and sold, bartered and exchanged without any real integrity. Pay enough money and somebody will say what you want them to say.

I’m afraid that the notion of the paid-for prophet extends far beyond the courtroom. It has come to the pulpits, both of ancient Israel and of America.

Jim started out with a lot of fervor in his preaching. He started out as a flame of fire. He said what he thought, and he thought what he said. He measured his words – but not too carefully, because he was just calling it like he saw it. He was just declaring, “Thus sayeth the Lord.” He’s not sure when it happened, but as he looks back over his ministry he realizes that now he worries more about pleasing the people with his words than he does about pleasing God.

**“It is a subtle slide from the free space of prophetic vision to the entangled web of purchased blindness. It is the process by which a lion’s roar is muted to a gentle whisper by the seduction of power and security. Another would-be prophet has become a kept preacher.” (Alan Walworth, “A Kept Minister,” *Interpreting Amos*, p. 134)**

As he “wises up,” the preacher begins to lick his finger and test the wind before he hurls any homiletical heat. It’s much easier for me to preach sermons about topics that you want to hear than it is to be faithful to the biblical text. As you look across the billboards of many of America’s most popular preachers, you will see sermon titles that sound something like this: “How to Have Success Without Stress,” “How to Make Good Marriages Better,” “How to Win at Life.”

While certainly appropriate in small doses, and while you hear them from my mouth from time to time, that which ought to be the occasional dessert, served in small in limited quantities, becomes the mainstay in the meat of the preaching repertoire. To draw a crowd, theology is reduced to a bare minimum, and people are simply taught how to struggle and make it through life. The focus is on being a husband, a wife, a parent, an entrepreneur, a manager, how to build our self-esteem. In due course, this leaves out the majority of the Apostles’ theology.

But it happens. It happens when we want to fill a building. It happens when preachers simply preach messages that sell. I've learned over the years what you want to hear, and have tried to fight with every fiber of my being not just simply to yield to the popular call to just dose out dessert.

It's easy to become a paid-for preacher.

Maybe that's what happened to Amaziah. He was probably the high priest of Bethel. He was, by all ministerial measures, a soaring success. He was in the big league of pulpits. He was at the first big church. He had the attention of the king, Jeroboam II. You might say he was a priest at the national cathedral.

You have to be careful, though, that you don't become the spiritual guardian of the status quo, where all you are is a profiteering puppet that blesses what the king has already decided. In reality, that is what Amaziah had become. The more he ate at the king's table, the more he developed a taste for the king's cuisine. And as long as he kept the king happy, the hors d'oeuvres were going to keep on coming.

About that time, Amos showed up from Judah. Of course, Amos's message was one which was not very popular with the ancient Israelites. He basically said they were enjoying the prosperity under Jeroboam II mostly because they were breaking the backs of the poor. They were doling out acts of injustice against the marginal of society. And God would not stand for it.

That didn't sit too well with Amaziah. He made his money out of the status quo, out of being the professional prophet to Jeroboam II. He ratted to the king that Amos was conspiring against him. "Amos is saying that you're going to die, and he is saying that the rest of us are going into exile."

"Go home," he says to Amos in verse 12. "Go back to your land of Judah," he seems to be saying. "Eat your bread there and do your prophesying. But no longer prophesy at Bethel, for it is a sanctuary of the king and a royal residence." Amaziah, the truly paid-for prophet, is accusing Amos of being the same. "Go back and earn your prophetic bread back home in Judah."

"Wait a minute," said Amos in verses 14-15. "My call to prophecy came from God. And He's called me to prophesy to Israel, not to Judah. And, by the way, you need to know I'm not the son of a prophet, nor am I a prophet. I'm a herdsman and a fig grower by trade. But God gave me the call. And so I've come here to deliver the word."

The words from Amos are harsh. He says to Amaziah, "Your wife will become a harlot. Your sons and daughters will fall by the sword. Your land will be parceled up by a measuring line, and you yourself will die upon unclean soil. And all of Israel will go away into exile." All five of these curses on Amaziah were typical results of war.

Yes, it's important that the prophet not be paid for. Really, really important.

### **III. God and country**

Don't miss something else here in the text, though. Amaziah was not only a paid-for prophet, he was a paid-for prophet by the government. We must be very, very careful about baptizing our country with our religion. Baptists, historically, have always been a people that have said, "I want my church and my state separate. I can love my country and serve my country, but that is different than my church and the kingdom of God, which has my true and ultimate allegiance. I'm faithful to my country, but I don't want that mixed with my faithfulness to God."

Why is that important? From Constantine to Hitler, every time there is a wedding between the church and the state, the offspring are disasters.

It is our Baptist forefathers who stood, as much as if not more than anybody else, to make sure that America was a free land in which anyone could worship whatever or whoever they wanted – even if they were wrong. It is we who have said the government has no right to tell us how to pray, whom to pray to, or what our pastors should preach.

Friends, that's terribly, terribly important.

Amaziah had become a paid-for prophet. But, moreover, he had become wedded to the state.

**Perhaps we could ask southern preachers who defended slavery from the pulpits in the nineteenth century or segregation from the pulpits in the twentieth century. As Alan Walworth has said, "When a minister places the knees under the linen tablecloth in the master's house for Sunday dinner, it is difficult to see, much less condemn, the social injustices upon which that table sits." (Alan Walworth, "A Kept Minister," *Interpreting Amos*, p. 137)**

Patriotism and religion must always be distinguishable. When the words "God and country" fit too nicely together in one sentence, you'd better be careful. History has taught us, throughout every nation, that it is God who is about to lose.

When no other people can see the importance of the wall – we, as Baptists, must build the wall that keeps the church and the state separate. Yet, we can love them both at the same time. And love them I do.

"Never again." Those are hard words. Before you get to the point of "never again," I would invite you this morning to come to the land of beginning again. I would invite you to God's table of grace. I would invite you to come, find forgiveness, find joy, and find freedom.