

Wrestling with God
Amos 7:1-9

July 9, 2006

SERMON NOTES

A. Introduction — outline of Amos thus far

1. Amos 1-2
2. Amos 3
3. Amos 4
4. Amos 5
5. Amos 6

B. The Vision of the Locust-Swarm Amos 7:1-3

1. notes
2. the symbols
 - a. crops
 - b. locusts

C. The Vision of the Fire Amos 7:4-6

1. the symbols
 - a. land
 - b. fire (cf. Deut 9:3)
2. other items in common between the first two visions
3. lesson 1 about prayer

D. The Vision of the Plumb-Line Amos 7:7-9

1. the symbols
 - a. the plumb-line
 - b. the wall built true to plumb
 - c. God's putting the plumb-line in the midst of Israel

2. lesson 2 about prayer (eg., 2 Cor 6:14, 1 Pet 3:15)
3. further lesson about prayer

E. The Enigma of Payer

1. God's immutable nature (Mal 3:6, Heb 13:8, Exod 3:14)
2. God's sovereign purpose (Isa 46:9-10, Eph 1:11)
3. God's transcendent person (Isa 55:8-9, Rom 11:33)
4. yet, encouragement to pray (Phil 4:6, Eph 6:18, 1 Thes 5:17)
5. Resolution found in John 3:16

A. Introduction – it’s over two months since we last looked at Amos

1. so a review of Amos to this point may be helpful
 - a. in the first two chapters, Amos pronounces the judgements of God upon the nations round about: Syria, Phoenicia, Philistia, Edom, Ammon, Moab; then Judah and finally, Israel, also known as Samaria and as Jacob: Israel forms the target of most of the rest of this book
 - b. in chapter three, the Lord is represented as a Lion, first roaring a warning, and then Lion biting, or punishing
 - c. in chapter four, the comfortable rich are rebuked for living at the expense of the downtrodden poor, even though God has warned them time and time again
 - d. in chapter five, Israel is given two choices: continuing as they are until destroyed; or, repenting, to seek God
 - e. and, in chapter 6, Amos warns, do not be lulled into complacency because of their easy times today for there are hard days coming tomorrow
2. against this backdrop of judgement declared against Israel
 - a. the last 3 chapters of this book record 5 visions
 - b. these graphically illustrate the judgements against Israel announced in the first 6 chapters
 - c. this morning we will look at the first three short visions
 - (A) the vision of the locust-swarm
 - (B) the vision of the fire
 - (C) the vision of the plumb-line
 - (D) these visions represent, in part, the judgement Israel has already suffered, and, in part, those which they are about to suffer in the next 20 years or so
 - d. but let us look at these 3 visions, not just to see how God would punish, but also to learn something about prayer

B. The Vision of the Locust-Swarm

1. ¹ Thus the Lord GOD showed me, and behold, He was forming a locust-swarm when the spring {latter} crop began to sprout. And behold, the spring crop *was* after the king’s mowing. ² And it came about, when {lit., if} it had finished eating the vegetation of the land, that I said, ‘Lord GOD, please pardon! How can Jacob stand, For he is small?’ ³ The LORD changed His mind {relented} about this. ‘It shall not be,’ said the LORD. (Amos 7: 1-3 NAS)
2. to help understand the import of this vision let us note
 - a. first: most visions in the Bible have a symbolic rather than a literal interpretation
 - (A) for example, in the vision of the Pharaoh of Egypt, the seven fat cattle represented seven years of plenty
 - (B) or, the statue build to mixed materials seen by King Nebuchadnezzar, represented successive kingdoms

- b. second: there is no unanimity in understanding visions so we will try to keep our interpretation basic and simple
- c. third: there are two crops in the land of Canaan
 - (A) the first, sown in the fall, is harvested in the spring
 - (B) the second, or latter crop, sown in the spring is then harvested in the summer
 - (C) this locust swarm came while the first crop was yet to be harvested, with only the king's portion taken so far; the new crop's vegetation is devoured completely and the new sprouts will be eaten next as they grow up

3. now, what do the symbols in this vision represent?

- a. the crops? ... the riches or sustenance of the people
- b. the locusts? ... punishment or judgement of the people; this was one of the judgements of God against Egypt's gods, and locusts appear a number of times as being judgement

4. let's look at the next, parallel vision and then at both together

C. The Vision of the Fire

1. ⁴ Thus the Lord GOD showed me, and behold, the Lord GOD was calling to contend *with them* by fire, and it consumed the great deep and began to consume the farm land. ⁵ Then I said, 'Lord GOD, please stop! How can Jacob stand, for he is small?' ⁶ The LORD changed His mind {relented} about this. 'This too shall not be,' said the Lord GOD. (Amos 7:4-6 NAS)
2. the language in this vision has some ambiguities
 - a. some interpret this as a universal fire drying up the ocean (the usual meaning of the phrase, 'the great deep') and consuming the earth – but this 'land' cannot mean earth, but rather a portion, allotment, or tract of land; such an interpretation is also at variance with the context which is directed at one specific people, Israel
 - b. on the other hand, in Genesis 7:11, the 'great deep' was a place where there were fountains or springs and so can refer to the valleys of the land with their water-courses, which is what I understand is meant here
 - c. while the NIV translation of the Hebrew, 'it ... devoured the land', is possible, it is inconsistent with Amos' plea, 'I beg you, stop!' for by then it would be too late
3. so, what do the symbols in this vision mean (in simple terms!)
 - a. the land? ... place where people dwell and find sustenance
 - b. the fire? ... punishment or judgement, and fire is used in this fashion in the Bible; eg., Deuteronomy 9:3 '*... as a consuming fire he (God) shall destroy them ...*'
4. now, the first two visions are parallel to each other, and the symbols convey the same message; what is that message?
 - a. punishment or judgement is taking place

- b. this will affect the crops and land which sustains them
 - c. who is the 'them'? ... Jacob or Israel
5. but what other happenings do these two visions share?
- a. in both cases, Amos pleads for Israel; he prays
 - b. in both cases, God relents, repents, changes His mind
 - c. in both cases God answers prayer! That is the first lesson I want us to learn today: even in the most extreme cases, when we might think there is no hope – the locust-swarm has settled on the earth; the fire is raging everywhere – God hears and answers our prayer
 - d. and, if I understand these verses correctly, in both cases it is in the midst of the punishments; prayer, by God's person averts further judgement

D. The Vision of the Plumb-Line

1. ⁷ Thus He showed me, and behold, the Lord was standing by {or, upon} a vertical wall {built true to plumb}, with a plumb line in His hand. ⁸ And the LORD said to me, 'What do you see, Amos?' And I said, 'A plumb line.' Then the Lord said, 'Behold I am about to put a plumb line in the midst of My people Israel. I will spare them no longer. ⁹ The high places of Isaac will be desolated And the sanctuaries of Israel laid waste. Then shall I rise up against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.' (Amos 7:7-9 NAS)
2. does anybody recognize what I have here in my hand?
 - a. a plumb bob (actually a brass plumb bob which is a bit of a contradiction since it was originally called a plumb bob because it was made of *plumbum* or lead)
 - b. and, now? ... this is a plumb line attached to the bob «
 - c. explain its use; predates carpenter level by millennia »
3. so what do you think the symbols in this vision mean?
 - a. the plumb line? ... an objective standard of something being straight up and down; upright
 - b. the wall built true to plumb, or vertical is not so easy, but perhaps we can determine its message by asking some questions:
 - (A) what was the purpose of a wall about a city? – to keep the enemies out, those inside safe; to protect
 - (B) what was the purpose of a wall about a sheepfold? – to keep the wolves out, the sheep from wandering away
 - (C) what does it mean that it was vertical? – that it was correctly (perfectly) constructed; it was upright; it was safe and would not fall over by itself
 - (D) what does it mean that God was standing by it or on it? – it was something that God had made, established
 - (E) now, what did God establish that was perfect, that would protect His people Israel from the enemy, would keep them from wandering away? – His covenant, or, more specifically, His laws and statutes

- c. when God puts this plumb line in the midst of His people Israel, then, what is He doing – He is measuring them against the objective standard, the requirements of His covenant with them, His laws and statutes
 - d. how do they measure up; how can you tell? ... they do not; God's longsuffering is over, 'I will spare them no longer.'
4. what do we not find in this vision that we found in the others?
- a. the prophet does not pray to pardon the people, he does not pray to stop the punishment
 - b. why? ... because to do so would be in direct conflict with the declared will of God; he cannot pray, 'God, forget Your statutes, overlook Your law, be contrary to Your nature!'
 - c. that is the second lesson about prayer: it needs to be in the declared will of God. Let me illustrate:
 - (A) the young man has fallen in love with a young woman; he is a Christian, she is not. He prays, 'Lord, I love her, that makes everything right, let her say "yes" when I ask her to marry me!' No way! For that is contrary to the declared will of God: 'Do not be {unequally} bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?' (2 Corinthians 6:14 NAS) – and, by the way, that verse applies to a lot more than marriage.
 - (B) in a mixed group, people are being singled out and asked about their faith; being shy, I pray, 'Lord don't let them ask me!' – understandable, yes; but contrary to the declared will of God: 'but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defence to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence' (1 Peter 3:15 NAS)
 - d. this second lesson has a corollary, a resultant truth: prayer is the means of determining the undeclared will of God – of answering 'what would God have me do?' 'Prayer is not so much the means whereby God's will is bent to man's desires, as it is that whereby man's will is bent to God's desires. The real end of prayer is not so much to get this or that single desire granted, as to put human life into full and joyful conformity with the will of God.' – Charles Brent^{2}.

E. The Enigma of Prayer

- 1. the matter of prayer is not without problems or questions
 - a. first, owing to the nature of God
 - (A) For I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed. (Malachi 3:6 NAS) – His people's actions do not change how God treats them
 - (B) Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever. (Hebrews 13:8)
 - (C) His very name: Yahweh, Jehovah, 'I AM THAT I AM'
 - (D) what problem does this present with respect to prayer? – how can my prayers, I who am weak, transitory, have any influence on an eternal changeless God?
 - b. second, owing to the purpose of God
 - (A) Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, Declaring the end from the beginning And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose

will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure' (Isaiah 46:9-10 NAS)

- (B) also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will (Ephesians 1:11 NAS)
- (C) what problem does this present respecting prayer? – why pray for God knows and has already determined what He is going to do?
- c. third, owing to the person of God
 - (A) 'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Neither are your ways My ways,' declares the LORD. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts.' (Isaiah 55:8-9 NAS)
 - (B) Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! (Romans 11:33 NAS)
 - (C) what problem does this present about prayer? – how can we communicate with One so inutterably different from our own selves?
 - (D) moreover, how can we stand and contend with Him, argue with Him, present our case to Him? He is, to put it in common speech, 'out of our league'

2. and yet, prayer exists! prayer is heard! prayer is answered!

a. men and women have wrestled with God in prayer and there have been amazing and tremendous results

- (A) we read earlier of Jacob, literally wrestling until God had given him a blessing
 - (B) we also read earlier Jesus' words in Luke 11:5–8, an encouragement to keep wrestling in prayer
 - (C) in these verses from Amos: Amos wrestled with God in prayer and God listened and answered his prayer!
 - (D) Moses, more than once, argued with God defending the children of Israel from God's punishing wrath
 - (E) Abraham sought to divert God's punishment from the city of Sodom by debating with God
 - (F) by his effectual, fervent prayer, Elijah, a man of like passions as us (I know he was like us because after his great victory over 400 false prophets, he ran afraid and discouraged from one woman, Jezebel) – Elijah prayed and it did not rain for 3½ years
 - (G) David's prayers are recorded to encourage us. There was at Toronto Bible College a young lady who stood well under 5 feet tall. She was full of enthusiasm and energy unmatched by her size. Typically, she chose Psalm 18:29 as her graduation verse: *With the help of my God, I shall leap over the wall.* – what a prayer!
- b. and every believer is encouraged in his or her prayer life:
- (A) *Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.* (Philippians 4:6 NAS)
 - (B) *With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints* (Ephesians 6:18 NAS)
 - (C) *Pray without ceasing.* (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

3. how can I reconcile God's immutable, sovereign, transcendent nature with His willingness to answer and to respond to our prayers? I cannot! But He does! Praise God! I can only suggest that it is bound up in His eternal purposes, the same purposes which are revealed to us in Christ Jesus: '[For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.](#)' (John 3: 16 NAS) – God's love for His creation, man, so amply demonstrated in the death of His Son on the cross for our sin.

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ASV	American Standard Version of 1901
AV	Authorized (King James) Version
NAS	New American Standard version © 1975 The Lockman Foundation
NIV	New International Version © 1984 by the International Bible Society
NKJV	New King James Version © 1979 Thomas Nelson Inc., Publishers
NLT	1996 New Living Translation © 1996 by Tyndale Charitable Trust
PHIL	New Testament Translation © 1972 by J. B. Phillips
RSV	Revised Standard Version © 1946, 1952 by the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U. S. A.
WEY	The New Testament in Modern Speech © 1902, 1912 R. F. Weymouth

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2. Charles Brent (1862-1929), Kerux illustrations #4286