

# George Philip Bible Readings

## Book of Amos

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## 1:1

The moment we are introduced to this Old Testament prophet we are given historical facts so that we can set the context of his ministry. We are presented at once with references to the kings of both Judah, the southern kingdom, and Israel, the northern kingdom, reminding us of how after the death of Solomon the kingdom was divided. Old Testament history tells us that Israel had an almost unbroken succession of nineteen evil kings of whom Jeroboam, son of Joash, was the thirteenth. His story is in 2 Kings 14:23-29 and tells of how under his reign Israel grew and prospered as a nation, great but godless. The story of good king Uzziah is told in 2 Chron. 26:1-23, and most readers are aware that it was in the year that Uzziah died that Isaiah saw his vision of the throne of God in the early days of his ministry. Trying to set Old Testament dates for the various kings is difficult and both the kings we are dealing with here seem to have ruled as co-regents for a number of years before taking sole occupancy of the throne. The various commentaries indicate that Jeroboam ruled alone in Israel for about fifteen years before Uzziah (sometimes called Azariah) was sole occupant of the throne in Judah. Judah is mentioned first in today's verse because Amos was a native of that land, living and working some twelve miles south of Jerusalem. But his ministry was to Israel, the northern kingdom, and therefore he could be regarded as a foreign missionary. His ministry is dated two years before the earthquake, an event that we cannot date accurately, but which was a well known historical fact by the time Amos' words were in written form. Both the kingdoms were glorying in their prosperity but they were about to be shaken. It was in these circumstances that Amos ministered.

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## 1:1

We must always think of the prophets speaking in specific circumstances and we must try to set their ministries in the sweep of history. We know that during the time of Amos Hosea was also ministering God's word in Israel (Hos. 1:1) and Isaiah's ministry was beginning in Judah. What we have to see is that God did not leave Himself without a witness (Acts. 14: 17). He raised up men in successive generations to speak His word to the nations, not just to Israel and Judah but to the surrounding empires, as we shall see in the opening messages of Amos' ministry. Perhaps some more general dates will help us to grasp the flow of Old Testament history. If we take Abraham at approximately 2000 B.C., Moses and the Exodus at 1280 B.C., the Books of Judges and Samuel take us up to 1050 B.C. David was king over the united nation about 1000 B.C. and seventy years later on the death of Solomon, the nation was divided into Israel and Judah. From then (930 B.C.) we have the Fall of Samaria in 722 B.C, the final collapse of Jerusalem in 586 BC, the seventy years' captivity in Babylon and then the return to Jerusalem under Ezra and Nehemiah. If we think of Daniel, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi in the context of the captivity in Babylon and the return to Jerusalem, we are left with the spell of 344 years from the death of Solomon in 930 B. C. to the Fall of Jerusalem in 586 during which the major and minor prophets exercised their ministries. All we are dealing with is history, and history must be seen and interpreted in terms of the activity of God in both salvation and judgment. Many times in the Bible (Nehemiah 9; Ezekiel 20; and Acts 7, to name but three occasions) we are given a sweep of history to remind us that we are dealing with God and that he is dealing with us (Amos 4:12.).

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## 1:1-5

Both Israel and Judah had become prosperous nations and there seems to have been little awareness of the possibility of an "earthquake" physically let alone economically and socially. The nations had little sense of the catastrophes that would soon overtake them, and it seems that there was little warning or counsel from the religious establishment. Indeed it seems clear from 7:10-16 that the priesthood resented and resisted the preaching of this man who, on his own admission, was, not part of the ecclesiastical establishment (7:14-15). But Amos was the man God laid hold on to declare His message to the nations. There is no need to think of Amos being suddenly laid hold on by God, nor to think that he was unprepared and unfitted for his task. He was a shepherd, trained to observe the situations he lived and worked in, and to be alive to impending dangers. As he travelled to the wool markets he would watch and listen and be able to judge the atmosphere and direction not only of trade but of the traders. In his home territory at Tekoa he was able to look towards the high ground

of Jerusalem and the Temple and be reminded of the things of God, the Law of God and the manifest neglect of God in an affluent and indulgent society. He seems to have been aware that God had neither sanctioned nor recognised the division of the kingdom. He was aware that Jerusalem not Samaria was, as it were, God's headquarters. That is why he spoke of God roaring from Zion, and his voice being heard from Carmel in the north to the grazing lands in the south. God was speaking but people were not listening. There were signs that things were to be shaken but people were not aware of the danger. What of us? Do we look as carefully as Amos did at what is happening among the nations? Do we pause to think what God is saying and what God will do?

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### **1:6-10**

The section from v.3-10 deals with three pagan nations with no blood relationship to Israel and Judah. They are addressed by the names of their capital cities (5,6,9): Damascus (Syria), Gaza (Philistia) and Tyre (Phoenicia). Syria is referred to in terms of outrage and atrocities in 2 Kings 8:7-13 and it would seem that they had never changed. The Philistines feature right through Israel's history, always a danger, always as enemies to all that was good and godly. Gaza was the last town on the road to Egypt and knew plenty about the ruthless slave trade and crimes against humanity. Tyre (9) seems to have had a total disregard for all the obligations of treaties. Some commentaries suggest that Tyre handled the business side of the slave trade and that "treaty of brotherhood" indicates the human rights and dignities that were simply trampled underfoot. There is reference to Tyre in Ezek. 28:11-19. These nations are summoned by God and charged by God with transgression on transgression, outrage on outrage, and told that it is impossible for Him to withhold His judgment. Whether nations recognise God and His authority or not they are answerable to the Judge of all the earth. In the providence of God the grim excesses of these nations were often used to chastise God's own people and to bring them to repentance. But that did not excuse their evil, and their day of reckoning came. God is not mocked, nor is He ignorant of what is going on. Think of His investigative visit to Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:20, 21). God still comes down to see. God still hears and records the cry of iniquity that is heard among the nations. We often feel their empires are impregnable. But God is Judge.

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### **1:11-2:3**

Edom, Ammon and Moab were all blood relatives of the Israelites, as Gen. 19:36-38; 25:30 makes plain. In speaking God's word of judgment against them the warning comes nearer and nearer to Israel and Judah but it is doubtful if the prosperous nations were aware of this. Indeed, as judgment was announced against the nations for their evil deeds, we have to imagine Israel and Judah agreeing with God in His pronouncements. We read here of atrocities but we cannot be shocked since we, in modern times, have produced the gas-chambers, holocausts, nuclear fall-out, large-scale abortion, drug disasters, moral decadence and terrible crimes of lust and cruelty. We are all too similar to the nations of Amos' time. We have grown accustomed to these terrible things, we shrug our shoulders and say that these are the facts of life. True! But God is not prepared to accept the situation, and since He is a God of righteousness and justice the time comes when He roars in judgment. In Amos' lifetime all these nations came to their day of reckoning and were brought to judgment. Edom stifled compassion, nursed his anger and kept up endless vindictiveness. Ammon was guilty of ruthless cruelty and oppression in the interest of extending his territory and power. Fire and whirlwind were to overtake him. Moab seems to have descended to the deliberate profaning of the dead. There was an absence of any reverence or respect for the living or the dead. This is profanity and obscenity. Be it relationships, purity, property, home or church, nothing is respected. How long can God stand back and let this go on? Amos declared that for outrage on outrage God had declared His judgment and He would not withdraw it.

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### **2:4-5**

It is easy to agree with God's declarations of judgment when they apply to other people and to nations far from us. It is easy, for example, to condemn apartheid in another country but to ignore the prejudices whereby we ourselves exclude people from privilege, friendship and opportunity, with an equal ruthlessness. It is easy to

condemn apartheid and to ignore the inhuman oppressions of atheistic communism simply because it suits our political and ideological preferences to do so. It is easy to condemn the whole nuclear programme and at the same time give consent to and to practise personally the slaughter of innocents in the grim business of abortion and euthanasia. It is easy to condemn other people's heretical and non-biblical doctrines and to excuse our own non-biblical way of life and preoccupation with material things. So far, Judah would have agreed with all God's strictures against the pagan and irreligious nations. Judah could see that their attitudes and activities were an offence to God. But what did Judah think when the rebuke was levelled against them, especially when they were so conscious that they were (in their own estimation) far more spiritual than the northern kingdom? Of course, when we claim to have more light than others then there is less excuse for our sin and failure. Judah had been blessed with a succession of good kings who sought to lead the nation in the ways of God. But they had become complacent. They rejoiced in their privileges. They had the law and the prophets (Rom. 3:1-2; 9:2-5). The hand of God had been on them. They had a past history of great men and could point to many signal deliverances by the grace of God. But God was not pleased.

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### 2:4-5

The searchlight of God now shines on His favoured people and they are accused of the same persistence in evil. In Judah's case their sins were not expressed in terms of gross moral wrong, although that was certainly not absent from the nation. The rebuke was for spiritual wrong: They had rejected the law or the teaching which was God's personal instruction to them. They still had God's law as their "official" position but it was theory not practice. They still had the Ten Commandments but these had been "adjusted" no doubt to bring them into line with current, cultural practice. Of course when national law is determined by what popular opinion has already decided is acceptable behaviour a state of chaos and anarchy ensues. The third error for which Judah was rebuked is that they had turned from true teaching to lies (cf. 2 Tim. 4:3-4) and had followed the traditions and practices of their fathers, ignoring the fact that their fathers had drifted away from God (cf., Zech. 1:4-5). This is the danger in the life of the church of lapsing into an attitude of saying blandly, "We have always done it this way." The question is, "Is it God's way, and has He blessed it in the past?" Spiritual presumption and carelessness are terrible blights upon the people of God. It is so easy to hear the Word of God and agree with it but never let it fashion our way of life (Jas. 1:22). Read the words of rebuke by God's prophet to Judah in Isaiah 1:2-20. When our religion is all on the surface it is worthless. It is the heart that counts.

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### 2:6-16

It is best to read this passage as a unit but we must take time to consider it carefully. Amos had prepared the people of Israel for this charge by outlining the various sins of other nations and getting Israel's agreement that judgment would be right and necessary. Now he exposed the wrongs of the life of the nation and made plain that the moral degeneration, the corruption of business life and the ruthless oppression of the weak and poor all stem from the fact of spiritual declension. We must be clear about this. It is decadent religion that leads to social corruption. It is not social conditions that harm religion. Since this is so, all attempts to rescue the nation in our own day will come to nothing unless there is first spiritual repentance and a return to God. Now note the picture that Amos outlines so starkly. It is the kind of society in which the bribe is powerful and dishonesty is accepted policy. In v.6 the picture is of the creditor exercising his technical right of selling a man into slavery when his debt was as little as a pair of shoes. The man with a righteous case is still found guilty because silver has been given to the judge. In v 7a the reference seems to be to those who push around the weak, possibly the well-to-do who regard themselves as naturally superior to others. This leads on to the ugly picture of shameless decadence that flaunts its sin in the very house of God. Whether the picture is of father and son going to the same girl, possibly a temple prostitute at a pagan shrine, or of fathers and sons alike living lives of open and arrogant immorality, it is all very ugly. In v.8 there is reference to couches made of garments taken in pledge and of drink being bought with money from fines. Is it any wonder that God "roars" His judgment (1:2)?

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## 2:6-16

Whether the "house of God" referred to in yesterday's note meant the Temple or some idolatrous shrine that the people of Israel were frequenting, the fact remains that it was a people whom God had redeemed and made His own who were behaving in this way. That is the emphasis in v.9-10. This was a people who owed all they were and all they had to God and the goodness of His grace. Their lives had been redeemed from destruction (Ps. 103:1-5) and they had been led by God into His great purpose for history. Besides all this, to encourage and help them with holy instruction, and to feed their souls with heavenly manna, God had raised up some of their own sons to be dedicated to holy purpose. They were set apart for God under the Nazirite vow (Num. 6:1-5) so that they could minister God's prophetic word to the people and be channels of His revelation and mercy. But, just as the people of the southern kingdom of Judah were to react, Israel did not want to hear what God had to say (Isa. 30:8-11). They refused to listen. They declined to co-operate with God's chosen men. They put pressure on them so constantly and with such intensity that they made these chosen men break their vows and stop preaching. This is what a worldly-minded, self-centred congregation can do and still does to this very day. They can break a minister's spirit sometimes by pressure and criticism, and sometimes by sheer neglect and studied indifference. This is how some people try, and can succeed, to tone down the Word preached so that the congregation will hear only gentle and easy sermons that will allow them to hide from God.

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## 2:6-16

Following on the comments of yesterday we need to be very careful before we criticise ministers of the Gospel who no longer preach with the conviction and enthusiasm that marked their earlier ministries. It may well be that they are broken men, broken in heart and spirit by converted and evangelical men and women who have refused to open their hearts to the searching and crucifying Word of God. Such an attitude to and dealing with ministers called and anointed of God not only signifies that there is little or no grace in the heart, it also brings down the displeasure of God. This is the significance of v.13-16. God will take action in judgment "against which neither natural ability (14), military equipment (15) nor outstanding courage will avail." (Motyer) The countryman-prophet was thinking of the heavily laden harvest cart, and he thought of the moral and spiritual harvest that the nation was soon to reap. The picture is of Israel heaping up a harvest of wrath, and all the while the nation is relishing its material affluence. Whatever the full significance of the various descriptive details in these verses, the message is clear. God is angry. Judgment is inevitable. But with such rich ministry among them it could have been otherwise. Little wonder Jesus said, "Take heed how you hear" (Lk. 8:18). After all, you can listen to a sermon and agree with every word and yet get no benefit because the Word is not received in faith (Heb. 4:2). How can we escape if we neglect so great salvation (Heb.2:1-3)? There is no escape. That is the message of Amos.

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## 3:1-2

These are solemn verses. Aware of the fact that he was a comparatively unknown prophet in a land not his own, and that he was speaking words not easy for his hearers to accept, Amos affirmed that it was the Lord who was speaking. He did not try to hide the fact that the sermon was "against" this people, and he reminded them yet again (cf. 2:9-11) that they were a people who belonged to God. They were not in any sense their own (1 Cor. 6:19, 20). They were answerable to God. By deliberate choice and by their pattern of life they had turned away from God. They had denied their calling, identity and destiny, and for that reason, in view of all the privileges of being the chosen people, God said He would punish them. They were to be punished, not just because they had taken all their spiritual privileges and abused them, but because in what they had become they were a hindrance to God's saving purposes. They had been uniquely blessed and they were aware of the fact and proud of the fact that God had made them a unique nation among the nations. But their lives were a contradiction of their calling. They *said* they were the people of God but they did not *appear* in practice to be such a people. They assumed that because they were "elect" they were safe. They were like worldly prayerless evangelicals who, when challenged about their lives say, "At least I'm converted." But where is the proof? We need to read 1 Cor. 3:10-15 to be troubled, and Phil. 1:27 to be challenged.

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### 3:3-8

This chapter and the following two each begin with the call, "Hear this word." It is a call to people to use their brains and their eyes to see what is happening and to recognise that God is saying something important and saying it very clearly. It is a call to assess the contemporary situation in terms of cause and effect. The questions addressed to the people in v.3-6 are meant to emphasise that things do not happen by accident. Being acquainted with journeying in desert places this herdsman knows that chance meetings are most unlikely. There must have been prior agreement to meet or common cause that brought them together. When the lion roars you know that it is no longer stalking its prey but has jumped on it. The bird and the snare tell the same story. Something very significant has happened, and the fate of the victim sealed. The warning signs were authentic, and the evil thing happened. So the warning is being given from God through the words of the prophet and this must be taken seriously. In the illustrations given the "crunch" came quickly after the warning "sign" and this is the point Amos was making. The nation had not much time left to prepare to meet God in the day of reckoning (4:12). The appearance of the prophet in Israel had the same significance as the arrival of Jonah in Nineveh. The overthrow was about to begin (Jonah. 3:1-5). The last two verses (7, 8) emphasise how important it is to recognise that God raises up men to speak His Word, and when they speak, they should be listened to. Ominous signs in society and clear declaration of impending judgment should awaken a real measure of fear (6).

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### 3:9-15

The nations are called by God to take their seats in the amphitheatre of world experience to view the righteous judgment that is to come on Israel because of her sins. But they will not only view Israel they will be God's instruments to punish her. In v.10 there is a solemn description of the condition of the nation. There is no longer any moral consciousness. In respect of the most glaring sins people say, "Why is it wrong?" This is a nation with no standards of any kind against which actions can be adjudged right or wrong. This is part of the terrible blindness that sin brings on individuals and nations alike. Note the terms used to describe the state of a nation heading for disaster in God's judgment. Amos spoke of tumult, oppression, violence and robbery (9, 10). Does that not make us think of contemporary society in our own land which has to such an extent cast off all its former Christian traditions and standards? So blatant are Israel's sins that Assyria (possibly Ashdod) and Egypt are called to view them and to be shocked. Think how people from so-called undeveloped countries and from atheistic countries come to Britain and are shocked by the materialism, carnality and open immorality of a country that is supposed to be Christian. Israel had reached the stage that God was not prepared to tolerate it any longer and Amos was sent to proclaim judgment. His ministry would not be appreciated, understood or welcomed. To be God's witness in a crooked and perverse generation calls for faith and commitment (Phil. 2:15). We must see to it that we are ready in our generation. The signs are ominous.

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### 3:9-13

The picture in v.12 is clear. All the shepherd can bring back after the lion has attacked the sheep are a few bits and pieces. The "left overs" simply confirm how total the disaster was. Subsequent events proved this to be an accurate forecast. The Assyrian armies came, over-ran Samaria, carted away the people and re-populated the land with non-Jews, apart from a very few native Jews who remained. Israel never again regained its true identity as a distinct nation. Right on to the time of the New Testament the Jews would have no dealings with the Samaritans because they were not regarded as true Jews. How we need to learn that sin steals from individuals and nations all that is worth having. Righteousness does indeed establish a nation but sin is a reproach (Prov. 14:34). What we must recognise is that God will not tolerate sin, especially among His people who have been blessed and preserved and forgiven so much. It is made plain in v.13,14 that the disaster to befall the nation is the direct consequence of sin. But the nation's sins are linked very closely with the nation's apostasy and falling away from true religion. The northern kingdom (called Samaria or Israel) had its altars at Bethel. They had their religious observances but these are no substitute for the faith that leads to obedience to God. And in any case their religious activities were false because they were not conformed to what God had revealed concerning Himself and what God had spoken so clearly and categorically in His Word. It all has a contemporary sound about it. We have ministers as well as bishops denying the faith; Christians indulging in

immorality and feeling offended when rebuked and disciplined; evangelical believers ignoring every call to prayer and even abandoning evening services. They set their own arbitrary standards, just as Israel did. And Israel's judgment was announced.

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#### 4:1-3

We failed to note at the end of the previous chapter the part played in the nation's downfall by sheer affluence (3:15). Without doubt luxury leads to extravagance and that to indulgence and indifference to others. This leads on to corruption and ruthlessness as we noted in 2:6,7. Now we begin in this chapter to read stern and indeed crude words. The time for fine words was past. A whole nation of people, who had all along considered themselves to be the chosen, favoured and indeed necessary "people of God", was about to disappear from the scene and they would not be missed. But if they were "chosen" (they would in crisis admit they had not been perfect) what would happen to the work and witness of God of which they considered them selves the representatives and instruments? God would preserve His work. His purposes would not fail. There would be a remnant found in the southern kingdom of Judah and they, after long discipline in Babylonian captivity, would carry the work forward to prepare for the coming of Messiah. No nation or congregation or individual is indispensable, and if any become a barrier to the onward movement of God's saving work then, for the sake of those yet to be brought to salvation, they must be removed. Jesus made plain that salt that lost its savour was no use for anything (Matt.5:13). He also declared that fruitless branches would be cut off (John 15:1-6) and that fruitless trees simply cumbered the ground and should be uprooted (Lk. 13: 6-9). Paul spoke of the possibility of being laid aside as of no further use (1 Cor. 9:27) and the Spirit of God spoke of a church being removed from its place (Rev. 2:5). God is in earnest. We had better be too (4:12).

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#### 4:1-3

Amos refers in impolite but vivid terms to the women of Samaria, no doubt incurring their wrath, just as Elijah aroused the wrath of Jezebel (1 Kings 19:1-3). These women are described as fat and ferocious cows intent on sensual gratification. They are intolerant of the poor and needy, and dominate their husbands, demanding more and more to be provided for them, not in terms of necessities but of luxuries. They represent an oppressing and self-seeking society where the "rat race" of "getting on" and "keeping up" and "higher standards of living" are the main motivations of life. It is a way of life in which moral and spiritual standards are simply swept aside as no longer necessary or relevant. But this kind of society stands before God for judgment because He hears the cry of the oppressed. Now, it is fairly easy to identify the obvious wrongs of society but fail to see the same kind of thing in a more polite form in our own lives. Remember that Jesus spoke about specks and beams in our eyes (Matt. 7:3). We can see the curse of indulgence in alcohol, gambling, sex and drugs and we may tremble at the rotting away of the moral fibre of the nation. But what of our own personal indulgences in terms of clothes, hobbies and pleasure? What of our making use of friends for our own fulfilment and then neglecting them when some new interest comes along? What of our reluctance to adjust any of our fixed "evenings out" whereby we are just not available for any unexpected call for help from friends, family or church? Polite selfishness is no different from gross selfishness except that it pretends not to be selfish. That is hypocrisy.

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#### 4:4-15

Although we read this whole passage we cannot grasp its full message in one day. Amos tells the nation that "behind their social disease, as its cause, lay false religion," (Motyer). The moral, social and business life of the nation proclaimed that it had forgotten God, but at the same time the nation was crammed full of religious ritual. They multiplied their shrines and holy places (4) although God had said this must not be done. They increased the number of what they called dedication services far in excess of the once a year sacrifice and the once-in-three years tithes (4b; cf. 1 Sam.1:3; Deut. 14:28). But religious actions are mere performances if the heart is not given to God and the life is not marked by obedience. When people lose sight of God and no longer live and worship by His revealed will and word, they decide to adjust and modify patterns of religion to make them more attractive and more acceptable to themselves. They thought the unleavened bread sacrifices were

dull so they included leaven in contradiction of God's command (Ex.23:18; Lev. 2:11). They wanted attractive worship, just as in our day many want entertainment evangelism. But God gets hidden that way. Even more, in their religious acts they made a show, drawing attention to themselves, just as the Pharisees did in Jesus' day (Matt; 23:1-7). Think of the story Jesus told about the man who went to church and was so self-absorbed that he spent all his time telling God how good a man he was and how much better he was than the man near him (Lk. 18:9-14). Getting involved in religion and religious activity can be simply a way to escape dealing with God.

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#### **4:4-15**

The fact that people do not want to have dealings with God does not mean that they are left to go their own way. God spoke to this nation in very strong and disturbing ways but they still did not listen. Of course, worldly-minded people are seldom willing to interpret circumstances, especially grim ones, in terms of God's corrective discipline and judgment. But that is exactly what is being said here in very plain terms. God was behind the famine that was nationwide, but it did not produce repentance. God was the instigator of all seven "troubles" spoken of in v. 1-11. And we have to note that all these things had happened to the nation within living memory. It is as if God was saying, "Do you recall the famine, the drought, the mildew, the locusts, the epidemic, the war and the earthquake?" No doubt they did, and could recall the various explanations and excuses the politicians gave and the various remedies they brought forward. No doubt they were all relieved that the nation had got through its troubles yet again; and they lapsed into their former, godless way of life. Now they were being told that these grim happenings were not coincidence nor were they simply allowed by God. They were sent by God, and in the sending there was difference and discrimination (7,8) in order to make people think. But whatever they thought it had no spiritual effect. This kind of preaching must have shocked and angered the nation, and no doubt there was bitter criticism of this "foreigner" from down south telling them what was right and what they should do. Those who speak God's word clearly, holding back nothing, were then and are now likely to be called fanatical.

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#### **4:4-15**

God is gracious, long-suffering and full of mercy, but He is also holy and true and good. He is of purer eyes than to behold evil (Hab. 1:12-13). Sin has no place of acceptance in His presence and, if people are determined to hold on to their evil ways and so blight their own generation and imperil the generation to come, what must God do? Go right back in history to the great days of Solomon and hear what God said then in 2 Chron. 7: 1-2,11-18. That was His glorious promise of grace and blessing. But read on in 2 Chron. 7:19-22 and see the clear explanation of the state of the nation and of the church within the nation. Grasp also that God says the time will come when He will say, "Enough," and He will cast the nation off. This is exactly what God is saying in v.12 of today's passage in Amos. Prepare to meet your God. The reckoning is coming. The price of sin is about to be paid in full in terms of judgment and final rejection by God. From this God there is no escape because He is totally sovereign and everywhere present (13). There may be in this last verse, which speaks of God the mighty Creator, a suggestion of the fact that man's sin makes the whole world order of creation shudder. There is a suggestion of this also in Rom. 8: 19-21. We speak sometimes of the sighing of the wind, as if creation was sad because of man's sins. But we speak also of the roaring of the waves and the howling of the wind, and some nations know the shuddering of the earthquake. In many ways the heavens declare the glory of God and the earth shows His handiwork (Ps. 19: 1). All with the one voice proclaim, "Prepare to meet your God." How we should pray that people will hear. Pray that the Spirit of God will convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment to come (John 16: 8-11).

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#### **5:1-9**

It is the great and solemn God of warning and judgment (chapter 4) who speaks now this sad and plaintive song. On the one hand it is a tender plea from God to seek Him (4) and on the other it is a sad funeral song that is aware of the death of a whole nation. The same kind of appeal is found in Isaiah 55:1-7 and it is to our shame that we are not more deeply moved by the thought that the Holy Lord God Almighty wants to take us back in



spite of all we have been and done. But in Amos' words there seems to be a note of finality and hopelessness. God thinks back to when He first set His love on this people and He speaks of them as a pure virgin kept for the love of one true lover. But she has fallen, and is forsaken, and there is no one to lift her up. In v.3 the picture is given of a nation suffering the loss of 90% of its army in war. In that situation, when all seems lost and hopeless, the voice of God is heard saying, "Seek Me, and live." But the people are all going to the wrong places, listening to the wrong religious voices, mixing with the wrong kind of "spiritual" activity. It is almost as if God is warning the people that if they are in the wrong places they will surely fall when these places fall. If you are in some place of ill-repute and corrupt activity and the police raid it, no-one will listen if you say you were not really involved. You had no business to be there! Again in v.6 God calls the people to seek Him because He is the way of life, and He warns of consequences. Some say we should not make people afraid by our preaching. But if there is something to be afraid of we must warn them. It's our business to rescue the perishing. Read Jude 22-23.

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### 5:1-9

We take another day with this passage to consider v.8-9 in which, almost abruptly, the prophet causes us to think of God in His might, majesty and power. This is a spiritual exercise we tend to neglect and as a result our worship loses its awe and reverence. We are not good at the business of worshipping and bowing down before the God who holds the depths of the earth in His hand (Psalm 95). We do not know very much about Psalm 93:1-2 nor of the attitude of the prophet who calls the earth to keep silence before God (Hab. 2:20). We tend to prefer to sing Psalm 100 "with cheerful voice" rather than to consider the paraphrase of that Psalm which says, "Before Jehovah's awful throne, ye nations bow with sacred joy." In today's passage Amos turns from men who work perverted transformations (7), to God who also works mighty changes. Our God is the God of the changing seasons and who rules day and night. He is the God who can change darkness into light, the shadow of death into morning (v.8 A.V.). No matter how near the crisis of judgment is, God can change the situation. He can restore the backslider. On the other hand, no matter how secure men and nations feel themselves to be, God the Lord can by the swiftness of His terrible sword bring them to destruction. God the Lord is the one who says to the stormy tides of evil, "Thus far and no further" (Job 38:8-11). God is our refuge and strength, especially when the nations totter (Psalm 46). He is the one who says to kings and empires that they are weighed in the balances and found wanting (Dan.5:27).

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### 5:10-15

Our passage emphasises again that the preacher who preaches righteousness, as Amos was doing, will be hated. There is a cost in being faithful and in holding back nothing of God's truth (Acts 20:27). All true prophets and preachers are sensitive and even the fiery ones know what it is to weep (Jer. 9:1; 2 Cor. 2: 1-4). This is an area of great temptation for preachers, and for all Christian witnesses, because we like to be liked and to be accepted. It is so easy to compromise, not in the sense that we preach what is false, but that we hold back from preaching the searching, slaying truths that cause people to hate us. Even when ministry is consistently diffused with love, as it was with Jesus, people will hate when the great idol of "self" is challenged. They hated Jesus without cause (John 15:25). But none of this deterred Amos from speaking God's truth and his words exposed the social injustice of his time. In v.10 the references are to resentment towards the just judge, who upholds the sanctions of law of the land, and people's contempt for the honest witness who speaks the truth. Refusing to recognise law and pressurising witnesses are things all too evident in our own day and should cause us concern, because God says there will be consequences. One commentator says that v.11 refers to the landlord who rents property in accordance with the Rent Restriction Act but then requires the tenant to pay compulsory "gifts". We are dealing here with ruthless dishonesty and with those who use wealth to evade justice (12b). But God says two things. Evil men will not long enjoy the fruit of their evil (11) and their wrongs against their fellows are reckoned as sins against God (12a). That should make us all think.

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### 5:10-15

We must consider well the remaining verses of this passage, not least v.13 which seems to counsel silent submission in the face of social wrong rather than open protest and challenge. There is a time to keep silent as well as a time to speak (Eccles. 3:7). There are things which can be changed and some which must be left, and it takes the wisdom of faith to recognise which is which. The "bull at a gate" approach is not really a Christian one, but it takes real faith to be silent and to wait God's time for redress. Of course, there is also a time to stand up and to speak out, whatever it costs and whether or not the issue is won or lost. But we need to be sure that we are not motivated by short-term self-interest. However, v.13 may indicate the prevailing spirit of society in which "good" men keep quiet about many things just to keep themselves out of trouble. It is the "turning a blind eye" approach which leads to an atmosphere in which wrongs simply multiply. Amos was not keeping silent! He called for moral repentance and a changed way of life. He summoned the people to an attitude of deliberate rejection of evil and a commitment: to what is good and true. There can be no neutrality. This is New Testament teaching, as Rom. 12:9-10, 14-17; Phil. 4:8-9 make plain. Now note how this passage culminates. Three times Amos had called the people to seek God (4, 6, 14), to repent and to return to Him, but the prophet did not give false assurance as if to guarantee that all would be well. He said that "it may be" (15) that the Lord would be gracious. Amos recognised that the nation might have gone too far to allow restoration. Even what may be called revival does not necessarily save the nation. In 2 Kings 22-23 we read of the revival under Josiah, but in 2 Kings 23:26 we read "Still the Lord did not turn away from the fierceness of His anger..." God's patience is wonderful, but it is not endless.

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### 5:16-27

Amos emphasises again and again that morality (personal and social) and religion belong closely together and, if a claim to relationship with God does not issue in a life that is pleasing to God, then something has gone far wrong. Faith without works is dead (Jas. 2:14-17, 20, 26). But Amos also makes plain that it is not the decline in moral standards that causes a decline in religion, but the very opposite. It is when men and nations depart from God (sometimes still maintaining the form of religion) that the moral life goes wrong and rotten. There are those today who insist that the church is in good heart, but the atmosphere of the nation's life gives the lie to that. Note how Amos speaks in v.16-17 of despair, defeat and lack of morale being the marks of society. Then in v.18-20 he speaks of misplaced confidence in the realm of religion. They spoke of the Day of the Lord; they said God is our refuge and our hope; and they looked for God to come amongst them, assuming that this would solve all their problems. But the prophet left them in no doubt. He spoke of God passing through the land (17) and that phrase, from the time of the Exodus, signified judgment. Amos' words become even more shattering in v.21-24, for he declares to this people; so complacent in their religion, that God rejects their services, their sacrifices and their singing, all of which they were offering with regularity and enthusiasm. But their religious observances were false because they had no effect on the way the worshippers were living. At the appointed times they remembered God, and for the rest of the time they simply ignored Him.

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### 5:16-27

We stay with this passage to consider the last three verses. In v.25 reference is made to the years of Israel's wanderings in the wilderness. Some commentators suggest that Amos was saying that Israel's elaborate system of worship and sacrifices was never really needed and that, in their early days, their pilgrim spirit and their sense of belonging to God kept them true. There is no doubt that an awareness of being strangers and pilgrims on the earth is a salutary thing and an inspiration to hold to eternal values (Heb. 11:9, 10, 13-16). But if we turn to Acts 7:35-43 we find the words of Amos quoted to mean that even in the early days the children of Israel turned from the God of their salvation to worship "the host of heaven", gods they had invented and fashioned for themselves. It would seem then that Amos was saying that Israel's idolatry was not a new thing, an aberration that had appeared suddenly in his generation, but a long standing thing which God had always found abhorrent. If this be so, we have here a word that causes us to search our hearts when we come to God's House for worship. Do we in fact come to God? Do we come with a heart and spirit that are willing to bow in obedience to God's Word and will? Do we listen to what God says or do we order our lives according to our own private

impressions and "guidance"? These are important questions, because v.26-27 indicate that God does confirm people in their settled choices, and they discover in the day of distress that false gods give neither help nor hope. When Amos spoke of exile beyond Damascus, possibly very few took him seriously. This is the complacency that lays hold on a people when they are adrift from God. This is a solemn aspect of backsliding. It is only *in* God's light that we see light (Ps. 36:9).

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### 6:1-7

The end of the previous chapter made it plain that the people of God were being prepared for captivity not for revival. But they did not believe the message of this stern prophet. They were confidently at ease and felt quite secure the way they were (6:1). They were being called to repentance but they took no notice, and the main barrier to their return to God and restoration to blessing was their religious activity. They assumed that, being busy with things that pertained to God and His House, they were obviously spiritual, accepted and safe. But they were so busy they could not hear God speaking to them, nor could they see that their religious activity was adrift from God, excluding God, and not producing moral lives acceptable to God. What a tragedy this is when religious involvement becomes a charade and a substitute for dealing with God. The prophet called on Zion (Jerusalem) as well as Samaria (the northern kingdom where he preached) to consider several other kingdoms (2). It may be that Amos was saying that these kingdoms had been rich, affluent and indulgent and had fallen, and that the same fate would come to Samaria. On the other hand Amos may have been challenging the proud Jews who may have considered themselves better than these nations and therefore a "special" case who would get preferential treatment from God. It is a constant delusion. We think that because we are biblical, evangelical, expository in ministry and spiritual compared to other churches that are "dead" there will be a special standard for us. It is true! The standard is far higher! God expects far more from those He has privileged and blessed. There may be excuse for those who have never been taught, but no excuse for those who say they "know" (John. 15:22; Amos 3:2; Rom, 2:1-11).

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### 6:1-7

Many today will enjoy their comfortable and even luxurious homes, will choose which of various outfits they will wear, travel in comfortable cars, go to comfortable churches where they are sure to have rich fellowship and good ministry, and will return home "feeling good", ready for a substantial lunch. No doubt many will thank God for all His goodness. Perhaps some others, who do not have these things, will be bitter, envious and grudging. But do we consider what our affluence and comfort are doing to us spiritually? Are we closer to God, more dependent on Him, and more eager to serve Him than in days when we were poor, had little fellowship, and were perhaps a small battling group of believers in the context of an antagonistic church? Take note of the details of v.4-6: rich furnishings, rich diet, music calculated to divert and entertain, indulgence in wine and extravagance in cosmetics. It is a picture of the politician's boast that we have "never had it so good". But note that in v.3 they push far away any thought of the Day of the Lord, and in v.6b they are not grieved for "the ruin of Joseph". This last phrase may refer to the ignoring of the poor by the rich (always a dangerous spiritual condition as Lk. 16:19ff makes plain). Or it may refer to how material affluence makes people blind and indifferent to the steady decline of morals in the nation and in their own lives. Material affluence and spiritual complacency often go together and both have a devastating effect on all we mean by witness and evangelism. As we go to church, glad that it is a "sound" church, consider this: Do we ever invite anyone to go with us?

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### 6:8-14

Our modern generation finds it almost impossible to accept that the crises and catastrophes of history are related positively to the activity of God in judgment. Of course we must be careful not to make *easy* pronouncements linking every incident (such as lightning striking cathedrals) to God's activity in a direct cause and effect sequence. One of the baffling things in experience is the prosperity of the wicked, with God apparently being indifferent and inactive. This was the burden of the Psalmist (Ps. 73:1-18) but he learned, as Moses learned, that in due time the feet of the wicked will slide (Duet. 32:35). We must never think of history as uncontrolled, nor

as being outwith the knowledge and power of God. There will always be an element of mystery in human experience because the world in which we live is fallen, disordered and under judgment. Behind all the economic, sociological and ideological explanations and interpretations of world experience there is the fact of the activity of God. On the one hand He confirms men and nations in their deliberate choices, and on the other hand men and nations withdraw themselves from the protective providence of God by choosing the way of sin. This is the emphasis of Psalm 1. What a man sows he reaps. When a nation sows the wind it reaps the whirlwind (Gal. 6:7; Hos. 8:7). When the prophet speaks here about a plague (8-10) and about an armed invasion (14), he also states quite categorically that it is God who is bringing it all about (8). The whole Bible declares that it is God with whom we have to do, sooner or later.

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### **6:8-14**

It is a fact of experience that distress and disaster of themselves do not turn people's hearts to God. The pressures of experience tend rather to produce a mixture of fear and superstition, together with a feeling that the worst will not happen and that all will come right sooner rather than later. By and large people are never prepared for crisis even when there are signs that it is coming (1 Thess. 5:1-3). But look at the reaction to crisis as it is portrayed in v.9-10. Practically a whole family has died in the plague and the next of kin comes to arrange for the disposal of the bodies which, because of the plague, are to be burned instead of buried. One person remains in the house and there is a conversation. It is not clear who speaks or what the tone of voice is. But the emphasis is clear. Don't speak about God. Don't mention His name. Why is this so? Is it resentment against God because this has happened? Is it some superstitious fear that speaking the name of God will somehow draw His attention and bring further disaster? Or is there an element of rebuke, as if to say, "Don't speak about God like that"? We cannot answer these questions but one thing is clear. There is no faith or trust, not even desperate faith that casts itself on God in the darkness when there is no explanation and seemingly no hope. The remaining verses seem to speak of the perversity of the people. Horses do not run on rocks, or up rock faces and no one ploughs the sea with oxen. These things would be a contradiction of nature and sense. But this people have made justice into poison and "moral principle into cynicism". Some say that v.13 means "Your greatest achievements are great nothings." They craved material greatness and despised moral greatness. Such a nation cannot stand.

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### **7:1-9**

So far the ministry of Amos has been stern and solemn and marked significantly by the theme of inevitable judgment. So far it seems that his spoken ministry has had no effect. But now we see another side of Amos. No true preacher of judgment finds pleasure in such preaching, and no preacher can continue to speak such a message from God unless he has also a heart of tremendous tenderness and commitment. Amos had such a heart and we see him here in his mighty ministry of intercession. People who speak easy and flattering words to us seldom pray much for us. But those friends and ministers who love us truly and desire for us God's best will not only speak faithfully to us, rebuking us sorely when it is needed, but will pray for us, carrying us lovingly in their hearts to the throne of God's grace. And, like Amos, they will prevail in prayer on our behalf even when we are in no condition to pray for ourselves and even when we have no inclination to pray for our selves. In this Amos reflects the great Intercessor Himself, our Lord Jesus Christ, who ever lives to intercede for us and who pleads our cause at God's right hand (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25). Now it is one thing to pray for people who, as far as we can judge, are showing promise, but it is a harder thing to pray for those who seem "hell-bent" on disobedience and who have thrown over all their former association with and service in the work of God. Amos was praying for a backslidden and rebellious nation. But, there is not always such an intercessor. Read. Ezek. 22:23-31, especially v.30 where God testifies that there was not to be found one single intercessor for the land. Today's verses give us tremendous encouragement to pray. One man, a herdsman from Tekoa, an obscure place, was on his knees before God and critical decisions were being made for the whole nation.

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### 7:1-9

These are tremendous verses. The nation never knew how much it owed to the prayers of this man whose person and ministry they resented and rejected. Amos had a vision of the fields. The king had gathered the first crop, as was his right. Now the second crop on which the people depended was growing and the prophet saw locusts being prepared by God. He did not conclude that the king was righteous and the people not. He knew otherwise. But he saw the coming distress and suffering of a nation about to be plagued by famine, and he cried to God in prayer and his prayer was heard and answered. The judgment of God was held back. The pleading of the prophet is very tender, almost as if he is saying, "Lord, he is your own child, you cannot cast him off totally." Of course, God's purpose was, in the long term, one of grace and blessing to give His people a future (Jer. 29:11). That is a theme we find again and again in Scripture. "But how can God be said to have repented? A key passage on this question is 1 Sam, 15:29-35. The first verse expresses the *absolute* truth about God - His inflexible will; but the last verse shows that this unalterable will has taken into account the fluctuations and variability of human experience and response. Consequently it necessarily appears to us that God changes course, and the Bible speaks of Him as repenting; meaning that the will of God, though inflexible, is not unfeeling, but takes loving regard of all our weakness and foolishness in His perfect, sovereign ordering of the world." (Motyer) To humble ourselves under God's mighty hand while praying with earnest pleadings that his anger may be stayed is not in any sense a contradiction.

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### 7:1-9

We must still consider the third vision of the plumb-line (7-9) because after it Amos did not pray. The picture is of the master-builder coming to inspect the work for which he had given full instructions and made full provision. Both the workers and the Master had a plumb-line but, when the test come, it was revealed just how far from the straight and true standard they had diverged. This made plain the need for their rejection and judgment. After long preaching, long discipline and long praying by a godly man they still resisted God's good and perfect will. This is the blindness and perversity that come as a result of unbelief, sin and disobedience. You reach a stage of hardness of heart that is beyond remedy. God said He would never again spare them; meaning that He would not forgive them. What God said here through Amos is the same as Jesus said to Jerusalem: "Behold your house is left to you desolate" (Matt. 23:38). When Jesus spoke such words He wept, and that indicated the feeling of the heart of the Father when He spoke to Samaria through the prophet. We must not fail to see the significance of v.9 in relation to the "high places". The people, the princes and the priest of Israel had set up centres of worship, "churches" we may call them, with a pattern and emphasis of worship that were totally contrary to God and a denial of His name. There are many such "high places" today with ordained ministers and laymen alike denying the Scriptures, denying the divinity of Christ and denying His resurrection. What a solemn day it will be when God comes with His plumb-line!

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### 7:10-17

At this point in his ministry Amos was rudely interrupted by Amaziah, priest of Bethel. But first, this representative of the religious establishment had gone to the king and had slandered the prophet, twisting his words, just as the Pharisees twisted Jesus' words in order to get a lever against Him (John 19:12). A false church, bereft of truth, grace and spiritual power, will always be the first to resent and to criticise a man and a ministry that deals faithfully with God's given Word. There is such slander in Amaziah's words that we must see behind him the great slanderer himself, Satan, the accuser and opposer of all that honours God. No doubt the priest was angry with the prophet, perhaps having been stung in conscience by one of Amos' sermons. It happens a lot, and we all need to be careful about our reactions because it is not easy to be angry and still to keep ourselves free from sin (Eph. 4:26). It is so easy for an angry hasty reaction to set in motion a whole stream of events that soon is quite out of control. Think of the warning in James 3:1-12 about our tongues starting the equivalent of a forest fire. It is clear that by now Amos and his ministry were well known and the bitterness of this religious priest is seen in his slander to the effect that this kind of ministry was bad for the church and for the nation. You can imagine him saying to the king that this "spiritual" ministry with its overtones of judgment was bad for the young people. But the young needed to hear the warnings to pull them

back from following the decadence of the older generation. You can imagine Amaziah complaining to the king that Amos was dividing the congregation and the whole church. It was true. Jesus did the same in His day (Matt. 10:34-36). Truth fights with error and heart religion challenges mere religious ritual Matt. 6:1-6ff).

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### **7:10-17**

Amaziah was determined to get rid of this missionary with his evangelistic zeal. It was not convenient for the "church" to have him and he was advised to go away and find some of his own kind and have a "little" ministry there. Note how this useless priest talked down to the prophet. You have the same kind of thing today when Moderators, Professors and high ecclesiastics talk as if they were Popes, as if all spiritual wisdom was invested in them. When such people pronounce and write off certain biblical ministries they simply refuse to recognise the helpless and hopeless state of the church throughout the land. And as with Amaziah, the "church" as an institution can be the important thing. Listen to the man's plaintive but bitter complaint. This was the king's chapel, nothing, not even God, must be allowed to disturb the even tenor of the system. Think of how the religious establishment in New Testament times tried to stop the apostles preaching (Acts. 4:1-3, 21, 22). Some commentators suggest that in v.12 Amaziah was suggesting that Amos was in the preaching business for money and that the kind of sermons he preached against Samaria would get a better hearing and a better fee down south in Judah. The same kind of slander was levelled against Paul (2 Cor. 11:7-10). There is no limit to what devilish, religious unbelief will say in reaction to preaching that carries the unction of the Spirit of God. This man Amaziah was resisting the Spirit of God and seeking to silence the Word of God, and was doing both in the name of God. It is a frightening picture. It has an important application in respect of how we hear and respond to the Word of God when it comes to us (Lk. 8:18). Resentment and reservations about sermons may indicate the beginning of a heart of unbelief (Heb. 3:12; 4:2). Be careful!

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### **7:10-17**

Amos was not a man to be bullied and browbeaten out of his God-given ministry. We have spoken of his public ministry; his secret ministry of intercession (Matt. 6:6) which had more influence on the nation's life than anyone knew; and the rejection of his person and ministry. This rejection was total. The authenticity of his call was denied; his assessment of the national situation was refused; and the manifest unction and authority of God were ignored. Some people may have said of Amos what they said of Jesus: Never man spoke like this man... he speaks with authority (Mt.7: 28-29; Jn.7:46). But the people in power were not prepared to have the man or to listen to his preaching. But Amos would not be silenced. In v.14 he does not deny his calling as a true prophet; he affirms it, but points out that God had had to go outside the formal religious establishment to find a willing and faithful spokesman to declare His Word. Amos also made it quite plain that he had not "taken up the ministry" but had been laid hold on and conscripted by God. He was aware that he was under orders from God and no matter what people said, he would obey God. Note of course that there is a challenge in Amos' reply. God had said, "Prophesy." Amaziah said, "Do not prophesy". That meant that Amaziah was out of step with God. How careful we must be not to be found fighting against God (Acts 5:39). The last verse (17) speaks of Amaziah's own family and also of the nation and foretells degradation, bereavement and defilement. This is the end of a nation that rejects God. "Amaziah was the prime example of that religion without repentance which Amos saw throughout the whole people. But in the day of the accounting it can only show an utter loss." (Motyer)

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### **8:1-3**

Learn a first simple lesson from this next vision Amos saw. People can look at the same thing and can draw totally opposite conclusions. A basket of fruit can signify a harvest of abundance and prosperity and can herald a time of rejoicing and peace. But when Amos saw the basket of fruit the Lord made it plain that it signified that the time was ripe for judgment. It was a solemn and urgent message, but we need to remember that more than thirty years were to elapse before the final fall of Samaria in 722 B.C. It is easy to imagine how the impact of the warnings through Amos would ease and possibly be forgotten. We all know how careful we are to keep

ourselves from sin when we have had a particular fright. But when "nerves" begin to ease, how easy it is to slip back into carelessness. At the end of a Sunday of ministry we can be so resolute about disciplining our lives to have time to read our Bibles, to pray and to be available for the Lord's service. But how soon our good resolutions can evaporate (Hosea 6:4). Amos spoke of the time coming when the happy singing of the temple and the palace would become discordant, when pleasure would disappear, and when a sense of impending doom would envelop the land. It is a sad and grim prospect the prophet holds out, but we must recognise that what is reaped at harvest time is determined exactly by what has been sown earlier. Remember, of course, that all through the Bible when harvest is spoken of there is distinction. The crop is mixed. There is a harvest of light as well as of darkness (Matt. 13:24-30). There is a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked (Acts 24:15).

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### **8:4-10**

This passage seems to have three main emphases. It describes the greed and worldliness of ruthless materialism. This in turn impinges on and imperils the spiritual standards and opportunities of the generality of the poorer people. And the issue of this is confusion and catastrophe which seem to affect even the physical world of nature. If all this be so then we have to recognise that life is not made up of separate, water-tight, independent sections. Business life cannot be kept separate from moral and spiritual life. The two are inter-related and are constantly exercising influence on each other. If we are shady in business we cannot possibly be in a right condition to say our prayers. If, on God's Sabbath, which is ordained to be a means of grace and a blessing in a fallen world, we have half of our minds engaged in calculating next week's business and profit margins, then we are not worshipping God in spirit and in truth. If we are not dealing rightly with God we will never deal rightly with our fellows. And if all the week we are busy taking advantage of those we feel are inferior and in our power, then we cannot suddenly become true and righteous people ready to deal with God in a way that He will accept. The application is even wider. We hear and speak much these days about conservation of natural resources. But when people are wrong with God their influence is totally negative and disruptive. Take one example. Man lives for the moment, and to meet an immediate need, whether commercial or in respect: of war, he destroys forests. But in the long term this disturbs climatic patterns and brings evil consequences in an extensive way. But who relates this to the sins of a certain generation? God does, and so do those who are taught by His Word. How well then are we holding together the different sections of our lives?

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### **8:11-14**

We have become so accustomed to Gospel privileges in our land, and some of us in our churches have become so used to constant and consistent spiritual ministry, that we never think the day might come when all of it could be withdrawn. Amos speaks of a famine of hearing the Word of God. This warning is not sudden and it emerges from what has gone before. In 2:11-12 we read of the people putting pressure on the men set apart for God's service so that they would break their vows of consecration. In this way evil, but religious, unbelievers tried to stifle or at least to restrict the ministry of the Word. It still happens today, and sometimes it is evangelical folk who will not let anything be preached but a simple, comforting, non-interfering Gospel. Then in 7:12-13 we found both church and state working together to stop the ministry of a man who was disturbing the peace by his fearless declaration of God's truth, It still happens today. Neighbouring ministers listen to and encourage criticism from church members who say of their own minister, "He is too extreme". In town and country parishes the leaders of various societies, organisations and activities band together in their resistance to what is going on in their congregation, to keep religion nicely neutral so that no-one will be offended by preaching that calls for repentance and conversion. What we are told here by Amos is that the time comes when a people have so refused to hear the Word of the Lord that the Word is taken away. Bread and water for the body remain in plentiful supply but bread for the soul cannot be found. And man cannot live by bread alone ... (Deut.8:3). Food is highly valued when it is scarce. Perhaps it is time some of us had a taste of real spiritual deprivation. It would do our appetite good, and it would make us grateful.

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## 8:11-14

The three movements of this passage are: spiritual famine, hopeless searching for a solution, and the devastating effect on the young who, in their emptiness, turn to heathen worship, to eastern religions, and, as some suggest, to the occult and the demonic. It is interesting to note that in our own denomination (and in others) there are today many schemes seeking to further Christian education and a knowledge of the Scriptures among the office-bearers let alone the ordinary members of our congregations. But, is it getting anywhere? Evidence would suggest a negative answer and this is not surprising for two reasons. If God is sending a famine of the Word then human ingenuity cannot reverse it. Furthermore, many in the churches seem to be setting before their people a Bible that is so criticised and emasculated, and its doctrines so often denied that people simply do not take it seriously. That there is a significant increase in the number of biblical ministries is a fact that cannot be denied and we give thanks for it. But opening the Scriptures, breaking the bread of life to feed a congregation, and holding back nothing that is profitable is a costly, self-denying calling. There are many temptations to give only crumbs, or milk, or trifles, rather than solid spiritual food that matures the believer and declares a full salvation. We are a generation of experimenters in methodology but we would do well to ask for the old paths (Jer. 6:16) and to re-dig the old wells that proved good for a past generation (Gen. 26:18). Read now Micah 3:4-7 and Ezek, 34:1-10. God is in earnest. We, who are His people, must be the same.

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## 9:1-4

If we find the continuing solemnity of these chapters hard to cope with, spare a thought for Amos who was called by God to preach like this in a generation that found the thought of judgment unacceptable, and regarded it as not applicable to their situation. Amos again speaks as if the judgment was about to break, whereas many years were to pass before the "crunch". It is a token of the mercy and long suffering of God that He is prepared to give such a long time of warning. He has no pleasure in judgment. It comes only after long forbearance. Think of how God waited one hundred and twenty years while the ark was being built, and all the while Noah preached to a wicked generation, calling them to repentance (2 Pet. 2:5). Perhaps we need now to recapture an awareness of coming judgment, not least to give a sense of urgency to our preaching. It is appointed for all to die and after this the judgment (Heb. 9:27) and God has appointed the very day of judgment and given notice of His intention to judge (Acts 17:31). There is no escaping this fact and it is an aspect of the Gospel that is seldom preached. Perhaps it was preached too much in an earlier generation and preached without the heartbreaking compassion of Christ that should accompany it. But we have gone too far the other way. We have so concentrated on the love and compassion of God that we have forgotten that He is the righteous judge of all the earth. Amos seems to emphasise that the people will have no spiritual refuge and no earthly refuge (2-4). Wherever they fly God is there and with Him they have to deal (Heb. 4:13). The same thought of the omnipresence of God is the theme of Psalm 139, but there it brings comfort and reassurance. There is no better refuge than to be held by God's right hand (Ps.139:10).

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## 9:5-8

Like all the prophets Amos never wearies of declaring that God is present and active in all the affairs of the earth. We speak at times of God permitting certain things to happen and that is a right way to think, because it is in God's sovereign power to allow the evil powers of men and devils to operate. He allowed Judas to operate within the twelve disciples. He allowed wicked men to crucify His Son. But Scripture always goes on to affirm that over, above, and behind the activities of men and nations there is the free sovereign effective working of the will of God. The initiative always rests with God and this is our abiding comfort when we become enveloped in situations we can neither understand nor control. Our times *are* in God's hand (Ps. 31:15) and the issues belong to Him (Ps. 68:20 AV) because power belongs to God alone (Ps. 62:11). In the first two verses today there is reference to the earth, the heavens and the sea and we are reminded of how every knee must bow in heaven, earth and under the earth to Him whose name is Jesus (Phil. 2:9-11). How we need to familiarise ourselves with such passages of Scripture as Isaiah 40:18ff. and Job. 38-41. Our thoughts of God are far too small and narrow and we need to learn what He is like so that He will in very truth be our rock and refuge in trouble (Ps. 46:1-7). God's power is never stretched or under pressure. Just the touch of His hand can dislocate



the nations. In v.7-8 we are told of God's control over the movements and migrations of various nations including Israel. But God is no respecter of persons and the fact that He has richly privileged Israel does not excuse them from His rebuke and judgment. Indeed, by their sinning they had made themselves like the other nations that knew not God. They had lost their identity and denied their destiny. It could have been otherwise. What a tragedy!

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### 9:9-15

At the end of yesterday's passage we have the affirmation from God that He will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob. However stern His judgments are, the purpose of God for His people is one that is positive and redemptive. This seems to be the significance of the reference to the use of a sieve. If soil is sieved or riddled, it is the stones and debris that are thrown away and the good soil passes through the fine mesh to be used for fruitful purposes. This meaning seems to be confirmed by the reference to the "sinners" among God's people who are to be removed. In the fires of trial and testing it is the dross that is consumed, purged out, so that what is left will be pure for God. This can apply to an individual life. Peter had to be sifted, and the agency was the evil designs of the Devil (Lk. 22:31-32). But, the experience was specifically and carefully controlled. It may well have been that in his distress the only thing Peter had to hold on to was the statement from Jesus that He would pray for him. This purging can apply also to a congregation and to a nation. People who have ceased to have any desire to be right with God are evil infections within the life of the body and need to be purged away. It can be done by gracious counsel, by sore discipline or by painful surgery, and God will not use the sorer method if the easier one will serve the purpose. He is the God who will not break the bruised reed (Isa.42:3) and will not allow us to be tempted above what we are able to bear (1 Cor 10:13). When we are going through sore trial we do well to consider that God has confidence in what we are able to cope with, and to remember that He has clear plans for us which He is working out in His perfect but inscrutable way. His ways are higher than ours and His thoughts far more extensive (Isa. 55: 8-9). Think what the written record of Amos' ministry must have meant: to people like Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah. Daniel read the Scriptures very carefully (Dan, 9:2).

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### 9:9-15

Count how often in this passage God says, "I will". We are dealing with His purposes for His people. We tend to forget that He has a purpose of good for each of us and for us together as a company of His people. This is true even when God's people prove false to their calling and deny their destiny. God does not cast off His people (Rom. 11:1) and their faithlessness does not cancel out His faithfulness (2 Tim. 2:13; Rom. 3:3). God is speaking here to a people who are about to be swept out of their land and to go into exile and shame. But even in their failure they would remain God's chosen people. "God chose Israel to be an instrument of His revelation to the world, and even when they refused their calling and were rejected in so doing, God did not let them go, but insisted, as it were, in using them in spite of themselves and in their rejection of Him and His rejection of them. Down their long history, even to the present day, their suffering and travail and their amazing mysterious preservation have been used of God for His sovereign purposes of redemption in ways beyond our understanding. Their "casting away (AV)", as Paul teaches in Romans 11:15, is "the reconciling of the world". Israel must therefore remain in existence, the synagogue "shadowing" the Church until the fullness of the Divine purpose is completed." (James Philip) What a comfort this is when the church goes through its "dark ages" spells and how we must learn to believe that God's purposes are in fact ripening, that He is active on the field of history even when it seems that it is evil that is winning the day. The slow watches of the night, when nothing seems to be happening, are as much part of the positive advance of His work as the days of excitement and obvious evidence. Have faith in the God who never wavers, is never slow, and purposes blessing.

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### 9:9-15

Note how even in the context of this word of hope God speaks sternly to those who take a superficial attitude to sin and who lightly assume that it does not really or necessarily lead to bad consequences (10). It is a sad fact of experience in our own generation that some who call themselves evangelical believers do not see any reason

why moral failure should disqualify from service. Have we reached the stage of thinking that sin does not really matter, or do we make special allowances and easier standards for those who claim to be Christians? God is making it plain through Amos that it is after judgment and discipline have done their purifying, reforming work that a new day of hope will begin. God is working towards that day but the way is costly. This is not just a solemn word to those who have failed significantly. It is a word of tremendous hope, because God speaks of rebuilding what had been broken down. Amos declares that it will be as in the days of old (11) but another prophet declared that the glory of the latter house (the rebuilt Temple) would be greater than the former (Hag. 2:1-9). Now, when your Christian life seems shattered and in pieces it seems almost too good to be true that there is still hope. Indeed there are possibilities of fellowship and service greater than ever there were in the past. This is exactly what God is promising. But there must first be the work of correction and we must neither rebel against or undervalue the disciplines and chastenings of the Lord (Heb. 12:3-11).

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### **9:9-15**

For our last study in this prophet we consider the glorious description of future blessing in v.13-15. We could well read Hosea 14:1-9 as a companion passage where in v.4 the old AV speaks of God healing the backsliding of His people. In Amos the passage seems to speak of material blessing and renewal for the earth, as well as spiritual blessing for God's people. These two belong together in terms of the future hope of full and final salvation in Jesus Christ, as Paul makes plain in Romans 8:19-22. It is the gospel of restoration to the favour and fellowship of God, and when it comes there will be but one testimony: "This is the Lord's doing, and marvellous in our eyes." The picture of prosperity, security and permanence is one that shows God completely reversing the dread and destructive effects of sin. God gives to His people, as a people, and to the individuals within that people, the true dignity and fulfilment that was filched away from them by sin and Satan. What a gospel this is! It is God through His Son who looses us from sin and makes us kings and priests (Rev. 1:5-6). This is the blessing that was brought into the world when God sent His Son to be born of the virgin in Bethlehem's stable. He came that we might have life and have it to the full. He came to break the bonds of sin, to take away our guilt, to bring us back to God. But the full enjoyment of that blessing will come only when Jesus comes again in the fullness of His glory, when all sin and sorrow will be done away with for ever (Rev. 21:1-4). Amos certainly leaves us aware that God commends His love to us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us (Rom. 5:6-8). The prophet points forward, as all the prophets do, to the coming of Messiah, our Saviour Jesus Christ. When we speak of God's love, we must never forget that God sent His own Son to the Cross to open for us the way of forgiveness, restoration and hope (Rom. 8:32; John 3:16).

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