

XI. Four Visions of Judgment

13-Feb-05

Amos 7:1-9; 8:1-3

Keddie Chapters 10-11

Theme: Although Amos' prayers delayed judgment from coming, ultimately Israel could not pass God's plumb line test and was sentenced for destruction like a rotten basket of summer fruit.

Key Verses: Amos 7:7-9 ⁷Thus He showed me: Behold, the Lord stood on a wall made with a plumb line, with a plumb line in His hand. ⁸And the LORD said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said: "Behold, I am setting a plumb line In the midst of My people Israel; I will not pass by them anymore. ⁹The high places of Isaac shall be desolate, And the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste. I will rise with the sword against the house of Jeroboam."

Review

Last week we looked at Amos 5:18-6:14. This passage forms the fifth main section in the overall seven-part chiasmic structure of Amos. It is parallel with chapter 4, which describes the sins of the "cows of Bashan." **Amos 5:18-6:14 describes the sins of their husbands, those "who are at ease in Zion, and trust in Mount Samaria. This section is itself organized as a seven-part chiasm.**

Units A-A' deal with the Day of the LORD and the Command of the LORD. The Day of the LORD is a day of darkness and terror for those who are the enemies of God. Because of their foolish lifestyles, their pride in their own strength and the spiritual alchemy which has transformed righteousness and justice into wormwood and gall, God issues the command for destruction. The Day of the LORD will come, and the Israelites will not like it when it comes. **Next, units B-B' describe the Israelites unaccepted religion and unaccepted society.** God hates and despises their outward forms of religion that are empty of justice and righteousness. God abhors and hates the pride and material strength of Israel that is based on oppression and abuse. **Moving inward, we come to units C-C'. Because of their unaccepted religion they will be exiled for idolatry; because of their unaccepted society, they will be exiled for indulgence. In the center (X), we have the woe-oracle against those "at ease in Zion:" the presumptuous, the proud, the procrastinator, the prostrate, the piggish, the pleasure-seeking, and the pampered. They are all pitiless for the affliction of their fellow man that allows them the indulgent lifestyle they possess.**

The warning for us is to make sure we are not "at ease in Zion." Those who are at ease in Zion may find themselves one day kicked out of the Kingdom because they have let their indulgent lifestyle and their idolatry consume them. We are not to rest on our laurels. Yes, Christ has saved us, and that all by grace. **But our calling is not to be lazy; there is still much work to be done in the Kingdom.**

Introduction

As we head down the homestretch towards the end of Amos, today we come across **a section of four visions in 7:1-8:3. In these four visions, "the Lord God" showed Amos something.** There is actually a fifth vision recorded in chapter 9; but instead of "the Lord God" showing something to Amos, the vision is simply of Amos seeing the Lord. This week we will be

Minor Prophets: Joel & Amos

focusing on the four visions that God showed to Amos, recorded in 7:1-8:3. Three of those visions are given to us in quick succession in chapter 7: the vision of the locusts, the vision of the fire, and the vision of the plumb line. Then in 7:10-17 the visions are interrupted and we have the little vignette with Amaziah, priest of Bethel, which we looked at in our introductory lesson to Amos. After that episode is recounted, Amos 8:1-3 records the vision of the summer fruit.

If we consider our overarching chiasmic structure for the book of Amos, this is the sixth major section. It is paired with the second section which is chapter 3 – The Roaring Lion. In chapter 3, Amos tells us that the LORD reveals His secrets to his servants the prophets and that when God roars, the prophet must prophesy (3:7-8). Here we see that interplay between God and His prophet through the visions and also through the interaction with Amaziah. Remember how Amos defended himself against Amaziah's attacks? "I was no prophet, nor was I the son of a prophet, but I was a sheepbreeder and a tender of sycamore fruit. Then *the LORD took me* as I followed the flock and *the LORD said to me*, 'Go prophesy to My people Israel'" (7:14-15). Amos is demonstrating what he said in chapter 3: when the Lion roars, the prophet must prophesy!

Another connection between chapter 3 and the text before us is the content of the judgment. In Amos 3, God promises to "visit destruction on the altars of Bethel" and to destroy the "great houses" and palaces of the wealthy. Amos' visions in chapter 7 speak to the same theme. That is why Amaziah of Bethel was so agitated with Amos. In fact, these visions may have been given to Amos while he was at Bethel. That would help to explain the interruption of Amaziah that took place at Bethel.

Exposition

As we set out to look at these four visions, it may be helpful to make some general observations. **Despite the interruption of Amaziah between the third and fourth visions, the visions seem to come in two pairs.** Hubbard provides a good summary:

Visions one and two picture events as their object — a locust plague and a fiery drought; visions three and four picture things — a plumb-line and a basket of ripe fruit. The dialogue in visions one and two consists of Amos' pleas for God to *forgive* or *cease* because Israel is dependent on him and of Yahweh's promises to withhold the disasters; the dialogues in visions three and four contain Yahweh's questions to Amos, *what do you see?* (7:8; 8:2), and Amos' succinct answers that target the central object of the vision. In the first two visions the threat of judgment is so clear that Yahweh brings no explanation of it; in the next two, Yahweh interprets the meaning of the symbol.

A. Vision of the Locusts (7:1-3)

The first vision that Amos sees is the vision of the locusts:

Amos 7:1-3 ¹Thus the Lord GOD showed me: Behold, He formed locust swarms at the beginning of the late crop; indeed it was the late crop after the king's mowings. ²And so it was, when they had finished eating the grass of the land, that I said: "O Lord GOD, forgive, I pray! Oh, that Jacob may stand, For he is small!" ³So the LORD relented concerning this. "It shall not be," said the LORD.

First off, notice the introduction – "Thus the Lord GOD showed me: Behold." This is the same phrase used to introduce all four of the visions (the 3rd vision has "He" instead of "the Lord

Minor Prophets: Joel & Amos

GOD”). Amos is fulfilling his prophetic role. As we will see in just a minute, Amos is more than just a deaf, dumb, and blind conduit for God’s word. Amos interacts with God. Amos responds to what God shows him and tells him. This is not the word that Amos wants to hear or speak to Israel. But it is the word of God, and Amos must speak it.

Also notice the word *thus*. Whenever you see a “thus” or “therefore,” you need to see what it is there for. These visions follow all that has preceded in the book of Amos. It fits chiastically into a pattern of repeated condemnations of Israel’s sin followed by judgment. Remember that **Amos has repeatedly denounced two main sins. First is the sin of empty, vain, useless religion that seeks to fulfill human needs rather than worship God as He wants to be worshiped. The second sin is that of an indulgent lifestyle that gains its privilege through the oppression of the poor and the denial of justice to others.** Israel was guilty of breaking the First and Second great commandments of the law – to love the Lord their God with all their heart, mind, soul and strength, and to love their neighbor as themselves. **It is because of this twin condemnation of Israel that we have the word *thus*. Because of their sins, *thus* the judgment comes.**

The mention of locusts reminds us of the prophet Joel. If you remember from our study of Joel, the threat of a locust swarm was a very serious thing. A locust swarm could pass through the land and utterly destroy all living vegetation, leading to famine and disease. **We are also reminded of God’s sovereignty over the locust swarm:** “Behold, He formed locusts swarms.” The Lord God is in control over all that happens to His people.

The locust swarm also reminds us of the locust plague in Egypt:

Exodus 10:12, 15 ¹²Then the LORD said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the land of Egypt for the locusts, that they may come upon the land of Egypt, and *eat every herb of the land*—all that the hail has left.” ... ¹⁵For they covered the face of the whole earth, so that the land was darkened; and *they ate every herb of the land* and all the fruit of the trees which the hail had left. So there remained nothing green on the trees or on the plants of the field throughout all the land of Egypt.

The phrase in Exodus “eat every herb of the land” is echoed here in Amos 7:2 – “eating the grass of the land.” **God is threatening to punish Israel in the same way He previously dealt with Egypt.**

The timing of the locust swarm is interesting: it was “at the beginning of the late crop” and “after the king’s mowings.” Apparently the “king’s mowings” was a form of income tax. The king took his cut first, and then the remainder was harvested for the people and for the livestock for the coming year. **If the king took the first fruits, and the locust swarm took the second, the people would be devastated. Of course, the king and his cronies would make out okay, but the poor and the less fortunate would suffer greatly.**

Amos seems to sense this and unlike the king and the rich men of Samaria, he has pity on those who would suffer most by this plague. So he bursts out in a spontaneous prayer to God, asking for forgiveness. It is obvious that the locust swarm is sent as judgment for the peoples’ sin: Amos ask forgiveness of that sin on their behalf. Amos’ appeal to God’s mercy is a bit strange; he focuses on the smallness and weakness of Israel in the face of God’s overwhelming power. Israel rejoiced in their own strength (6:13), but Amos knows better.

Minor Prophets: Joel & Amos

Amos also calls Israel “Jacob”, a reminder of God’s covenant with the patriarchs and Israel’s own covenant status with the Lord.

Hubbard describes the response to Amos’ prayer: “The prophet almost gained his desired result, but not quite. **Amos had begged for forgiveness of sin; Yahweh granted only withdrawal of judgment: It shall not be.** Remarkably in this passage God withholds his wrath not in reply to the people’s call for mercy but in response to the plea of the solitary prophet, as though Yahweh is open to any feasible reason to stay the judgment.”

B. Vision of the Fire (7:4-6)

That brings us to the second vision, the vision of the fire:

Amos 7:4-6 ⁴Thus the Lord GOD showed me: Behold, the Lord GOD called for conflict by fire, and it consumed the great deep and devoured the territory. ⁵Then I said: “O Lord GOD, cease, I pray! Oh, that Jacob may stand, For he is small!” ⁶So the LORD relented concerning this. “This also shall not be,” said the Lord GOD.

The second vision and the way it is reported to us is very similar to the first. “Thus the Lord God showed me” echoes the introduction of the first vision. But instead of seeing the Lord form the locust swarms, this time Amos sees the Lord GOD calling for fire. But this is no ordinary campfire. This is not even a super Aggie bonfire. **This is supernatural, all-consuming heavenly fire. This is the fire from heaven that cannot be extinguished by human hands.** The “great deep” likely refers to reservoirs of water – the resources normally used to put out this conflagration are themselves consumed by it.

What exactly is this supernatural, heavenly fire? God’s judgment of heavenly fire and brimstone rained down upon Sodom and Gomorrah without human intervention (Gen. 19:24-25):

Genesis 19:24-25 ²⁴Then the LORD rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, from the LORD out of the heavens. ²⁵So He overthrew those cities, all the plain, all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground.

However, **the reference to fire is most likely is the destruction that comes through war and conquest.** Remember the opening oracles of judgment in chapters 1 & 2 of Amos on the seven nations? In all seven cases, from Damascus to Judah, God says that He “will send a fire” (1:4, 7, 10, 12, 14, 2:2, 5) that will devour the palaces and destroy the walls of their strongholds. The results would be similar to that of Sodom and Gomorrah, but the means would be through war and human conflict.

As in the first vision of the locusts, Amos intercedes on behalf of the northern kingdom, even though he is from the southern kingdom. **His reasoning is the same – the weakness of the covenant people. But there is one significant word change in his prayer between the first and second vision.** Do you see it? **In the first prayer, Amos asks God to *forgive*. But that forgiveness did not come, only a relenting of the disaster. In the second prayer, Amos asks God merely to *cease*. Amos realizes that forgiveness seems out of the question. So he merely asks for a stay of execution.** God hears this second prayer of Amos and his response echoes His first one: “This also shall not be.”

These are **the first two visions.** They are linked by a common format and a common theme. In the first vision, Amos sees the Lord forming a locust swarm to destroy the land, but at the prayer of the prophet, God relents in sending this judgment upon His people. In the second vision,

Minor Prophets: Joel & Amos

Amos sees the Lord sending the fire of conflict and war to destroy the land, but at the prayer of the prophet, God relents a second time in sending this judgment upon His people. **What can we learn? First, when trial or tribulation, crisis or calamity come our way, we can be sure of the source: it is the sovereign God who fashions it, either for or perfecting or for our chastisement.** Either way, we should bow before our sovereign God in submission.

Second, as James points out, “The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much” (James 5:16). Amos’s prayers were short and to the point, but they were fervent and effective. Likewise, **our first response to any situation that confronts us is to humble ourselves and come before the Lord in prayer.** “Lord, remember me, for I am small” is the prayer of a humble man before a mighty God. **Amos demonstrates for us the ministry of intercession that should be part of all of our lives.** Keddie puts it this way: “It is love for God and love for souls that motivates Amos, and must be the motive of every Christian’s witness for Christ today.”

C. Vision of the Plumb Line (7:7-9)

Amos 7:7-9 ⁷Thus He showed me: Behold, the Lord stood on a wall made with a plumb line, with a plumb line in His hand. ⁸And the LORD said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A plumb line.” Then the Lord said: “Behold, I am setting a plumb line In the midst of My people Israel; I will not pass by them anymore. ⁹The high places of Isaac shall be desolate, And the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste. I will rise with the sword against the house of Jeroboam.”

The third vision Amos sees is a bit different than the first two, in both form and content. Like the first two visions, it starts out similarly: “Thus He showed me: Behold.” So, we still have God showing visions to Amos in response to the sinfulness of Israel. But then the vision differs; **instead of seeing a catastrophic event forming, Amos sees the Lord holding an object: a plumb line.** To ensure that Amos sees the vision correctly, God asks, “Amos, what do you see?” Amos responds just simply, “A plumb line.” Once the vision is confirmed by Amos, God proceeds to explain it to the prophet. But before we get to the explanation, we need first to study the plumb line and the wall a bit more closely.

What is a plumb line? Has anyone every used one? It is a construction tool. It is a fairly simple instrument. It consists of a pointed weight at the end of a string. Due to the law of gravity, when the weight is allowed to hang freely at the end of the string, it will hang straight down, perpendicular to the earth. Therefore, **the plumb line is a simple tool to determine if a wall or structure is built correctly.** If the wall is straight, it will line up against the plumb line. If it is leaning, it will separate itself from the plumb line, demonstrating its failure to live up to standards (it may also indicate that it was built by me!).

So now we know what a plumb line is, but what is God’s plumb line in this vision? When God the Master-Builder holds up His plumb line, what is He measuring? **God uses the plumb line of His covenantal standards, His law, His statutes of righteousness and holiness, as a measuring line. He uses His plumb line to see if His people “measure up,” if they conform to His holy standards.**

Amos sees God standing on a wall with the plumb line. What is the wall? It is Israel, God’s creation. Israel, the Old Testament church, was original built according to God’s plumb line:

Minor Prophets: Joel & Amos

Exodus 19:4-8 ⁴“You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. ⁵Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. ⁶And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel.” ⁷So Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and laid before them all these words which the LORD commanded him. ⁸Then all the people answered together and said, “*All that the LORD has spoken we will do.*” So Moses brought back the words of the people to the LORD.

When the covenant was ratified at Sinai, the people of God agreed to follow the laws of God. They were original built as an erect wall, measuring up to the plumb line. But what about the Israel of Amos' day? Was that wall still standing erect, or had it sagged considerably under the weight of rebellion, wickedness, and sin? If you have been paying attention to the rest of the book of Amos, I think you know the answer: that Israelite wall was off vertical more than the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Look what the Lord says:

Amos 7:8b-9 ⁸Behold, I am setting a plumb line In the midst of My people Israel; I will not pass by them anymore. ⁹The high places of Isaac shall be desolate, And the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste. I will rise with the sword against the house of Jeroboam.

God takes the plumb line of His law and uses it to measure the righteousness of His people Israel. As we know, **Israel cannot pass the test.** God has “passed by” them in the past. He has “passed over” them in their history, visiting judgment upon their enemies and sparing them. But no more. God’s days of passing over the sins of His people are ending. Back in Amos 5:17, God had said “I will pass through you” in a lamentation designed to remind them of the horrors that Egypt experienced during the Tenth Plague. God says the same thing again here, albeit in the negative fashion: “I will not pass by them anymore.” **God’s people had been measured by the plumb line of God’s law, and they were found to be no different that Egypt,** no better than the pagans. The church of God was apostate, and it was time to knock down that leaning wall.

Amos picks out two particular institutions that will feel the wrecking ball: 1) the *high places or sanctuaries* of Israel; and 2) the *house of Jeroboam.* These are the official “sponsors” of the two main sins that Amos has constantly been hammering on. **The empty religion of Israel is practiced at the high places and sanctuaries, such as Bethel. The indulgent and corrupt lifestyle of the rich and famous is encouraged by the royal household as the ultimate example of how to get ahead by stepping on the little people.** These two institutions, the state religion and the state itself, are among the first targets of God’s demolition work.

No wonder that Amaziah the priest of Bethel felt compelled to step in and denounce Amos. No wonder he wrote a letter to the king warning him of this threatening little sheepbreeder from Tekoa. No wonder that Amaziah told Amos never to prophesy again at the royal sanctuary of Bethel. No wonder he forbade Amos to prophesy against the house of Israel. Amos was threatening everything that Amaziah held dear. But as Amos points out, these aren’t his words. This is the vision of the Lord God of Hosts. The Master-Builder is the one with the plumb-line.

Minor Prophets: Joel & Amos

Amos is just the conduit for the message: Like Stratford High School, the building of Israel is no longer safe for occupancy and it will be torn down.

There is a distinct message and warning here for us. God's church, the people of Israel, were originally constructed according to God's plumb line. They were a separate people, called to holy as God is holy (Lev. 19:2). They had the law and the prophets, the grace and mercy of God, and all the privileges and blessings of the covenant. And yet they fell away into apostasy. They left their first love. We need to learn from Israel's experience. **God has built up His New Testament Church as a spiritual building. And He will test us; He will measure us against the plumb line of His Word. Do we measure up?**

In **Revelation 2-3** Christ writes the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor. Those letters can be viewed as the results of God's plumb line test. In those letters are words of approval and encouragement, but there are also words of warning and rebuke. "I know your works" says Jesus Christ, "but I have a few things against you." Christ calls the churches to straighten up, to measure up to the plumb line (as it were). The Church of Jesus Christ is under constant scrutiny from heaven. **Let us be careful to stay true to the plumb line of God's Word.**

D. Vision of the Summer Fruit (8:1-3)

After the detour at Bethel in 7:10-17 which we have already studied, Amos gives us the fourth vision in chapter 8:

Amos 8:1-3 ¹Thus the Lord GOD showed me: Behold, a basket of summer fruit. ²And He said, "Amos, what do you see?" So I said, "A basket of summer fruit." Then the LORD said to me: "The end has come upon My people Israel; I will not pass by them anymore. ³And the songs of the temple Shall be wailing in that day," Says the Lord GOD—"Many dead bodies everywhere, They shall be thrown out in silence."

Like the previous three visions, this fourth vision starts out the same way: "Thus the Lord GOD showed me: Behold." From that point, **the fourth vision has the same structure as the third vision. Amos sees an object, in this case "a basket of summer fruit."** As with the plumb line, God asks Amos what he sees, and Amos again confirms that he sees "a basket of summer fruit." The fruit is likely pomegranates or figs – common fruit for the region. So far so good. The first two visions were calamitous events that Amos was able to pray to God and have Him relent on sending them. The third and fourth visions are simple, everyday objects. A little tool like a plumb line, and a harmless basket of delicious summer fruit. Nothing to be afraid of, right?

That's why we need God to interpret the basket of fruit for us. **Although the summer fruit looks delicious, it does not symbolize fruitfulness and look forward to future blessing.** Keddie comments: "The fruit is picked. There can be no further growth or development. **Israel has looked healthy and prosperous but it has been an Indian summer and the end has come. Her wickedness has ripened and the cup of iniquity is full. She is ripe — but for judgment!** We all know what happens to overripe fruit. It gets soft and flabby." **This fruit is not to be enjoyed. It is to be destroyed.**

In God's commentary, there is a pun in the Hebrew that reinforces this message. **The Hebrew word for *end* sounds like the word for *summer fruit*. The summer fruit signifies that the end has come – Israel is finished.** Notice that God repeats the same judgment found in the vision of the plumb line: "I will not pass by them any more." It's too late. The time has come

Minor Prophets: Joel & Amos

and past for repentance. Israel has been measured by the plumb-line of God's Word and has been found wanting. The building will be knocked down; the rotten fruit cast into the fire.

The end of the vision becomes funereal, recalling to mind the other lamentation passages in Amos (5:1-3, 16-17). The wailing will be *in that day*, taking us back to the Day of the LORD passage (5:18-20). When the Day of the LORD comes, when the day of God's judgment falls upon Samaria, it will be a day of lamentation, as God passes through them in death and destruction. But eventually the wailing of lamentation will transition into the silence of death. This is the vision of the basket of summer fruit. Not exactly a picnic!

Visions three and four are related by similar content and structure. The plumb line demonstrates that God has a standard of measurement that He judges nations, churches, and individuals by. **Those found deviating from the standard of His Word are sentenced for destruction. When the time is right, God's judgment will be administered. That is the message of the basket of summer fruit.** When the wicked are ripe, they will be destroyed. Notice that Amos does not intercede in these two visions; there is nothing the prophet can do or say. God has spoken; the prophet must prophesy.

Conclusion

Amos is given four visions of judgment. The first two, the vision of the locusts and the vision of the fire, were postponed through the faithful prayer of Amos. But the second two visions, the plumb line and the basket of summer fruit, came to pass. Israel was measured by God and found wanting, just as King Belshazzar of Babylon failed to measure up in Daniel 5. As a result, Samaria was destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 BC and the survivors were carted off into captivity throughout the Assyrian empire. The rotten fruit were cast out. The end of Israel came.

God still has His plumb line, and He is still measuring His Church today. No one can measure up to God's perfect standard. No one is righteous enough, holy enough, or sinless enough to measure up. No one, that is, but Jesus Christ. **Christ is the only one who lived a plumb-line perfect life. And because the Christian is in union with Christ, when God takes out His plumb line to see how we stack up, He measures the perfection of Christ in our place.** The same goes for our church. The church is made up of sinful Christians. **When God looks at this congregation, His measuring line is compared to Jesus Christ.** So we pass His test.

But that doesn't mean we can rest easy. **We always need to be on guard against sin creeping into the church. Liberalism and other heresies have crept into many churches and denominations throughout history. They crept into the Old Testament Church of Israel.** And that church of old apostasied to such a great extent that God's grace left them. When God measured Israel, He measured them against their own deeds, not those of the Savior. **We always need to safeguard the purity of our faith and practice. We always need to be coming to the Savior, like Amos, and say, "We are small; forgive us. We are little; restore us. We are not worthy; purify us. Make us to stand in Jesus Christ."** May this be our prayer today. Amen.

Next week: Lesson 12 – The LORD Is His Name – Amos 8:4-9:6 – Keddie Chapters 11-12

Close in Prayer.