

A Famine of Hearing the Word of the Lord

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 June 2022

Preacher: Martin Ayers

[0 : 00] Leading this evening is from Amos chapter 7 and 8, found on page 922. That's Amos chapter 7 and 8.

This is what the Sovereign Lord showed me. He was preparing swarms of locusts after the king's share had been harvested, and just as the late crops were coming up, when they had stripped the land clean, I cried out, Sovereign Lord, forgive me. How can Jacob survive? He is so small.

So the Lord relented. This will not happen, the Lord said. This is what the Sovereign Lord showed me. The Sovereign Lord was calling for judgment by fire. It dried up the great deep and devoured the land.

Then I cried out, Sovereign Lord, I beg you, stop. How can Jacob survive? He is so small. So the Lord relented. This will not happen either, the Sovereign Lord said.

This is what he showed me. The Lord was standing by a wall that had been built true to plum, with a plum line in his hand. And the Lord asked me, What do you see, Amos?

[1 : 09] A plum line, I replied. Then the Lord said, Look, I am setting a plum line among my people Israel. I will spare them no longer. The high places of Isaac will be destroyed, and the sanctuaries of Israel will be ruined.

With my sword I will rise against the house of Jeroboam. Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent a message to Jeroboam, king of Israel. Amos is raising a conspiracy against you in the very heart of Israel.

The land cannot bear all his words, for this is what Amos is saying. Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land. Then Amaziah said to Amos, Get out, you seer.

Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there, and do your prophesying there. Don't prophesying anymore at Bethel, because this is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom.

Amos answered Amaziah, I was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I was shepherd, and I also took care of the sycamore fig trees. But the Lord took from me, tending the flock, and said to me, Go, prophesize to my people Israel.

[2 : 18] Now then, hear the word of the Lord, you say. Do not prophesize against Israel, and stop preaching against the descendants of Isaac. Therefore, this is what the Lord says. Your wife will become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and daughters will fall by the sword.

Your land will be measured and divided up, and you yourself will die in a pagan country, and Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land. This is what the sovereign Lord showed me, a basket of ripe fruit.

What do you see, Amos, he asked. A basket of ripe fruit, I answered. Then the Lord said to me, The time is right for my people Israel. I will spare them no longer. In that day, declares the sovereign Lord, the songs in the temple will turn to wailing.

Many, many bodies flung everywhere. Silence. Hear this, you who trample the needy, and do away with the poor of the land, saying, Where will the new moon be over, that we may sell green, and the Sabbath be ended, that we may market wheat, skimping on the measure, boosting the price, and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling every the weepings with the wheat.

The Lord has sworn by himself, the pride of Jacob. I will never forget anything they have done. Will not the land tremble for this, and all who live in it mourn? The whole land will rise like the Nile.

[3 : 43] It will be stirred up, and then sink like the river of Egypt. In that day, declares the sovereign Lord, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight.

I will turn your religious festivals into mourning, and all your singing into weeping. I will make all your wear sackcloth, and shave your heads. I will make that time like mourning, for an only sun, and the end of it like a better day.

The days are coming, declares the sovereign Lord, when I will send a famine through the land. Not a famine of food, or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord. People will stagger from the sea to sea, and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the Lord, but they will not find it.

In that day, the lovely young women, the strong young men, will faint because of thirst. Those who swear by the sin of Samaria, who say, as surely as your God lives, Dan, and as surely as the God of Beersheba lives, they will fall, never to rise again.

Thanks, Rachel, for reading. And if you could keep your Bibles open at Amos 7 and 8, that would be really helpful. And you can find an outline inside the notice sheet. To follow, if you'd find that helpful. But let's ask for God's help as we turn to this challenging portion of God's word.

[4 : 59] Let's pray together. Gracious God, and loving Heavenly Father, thank you that in our times you have given us your word. We pray that we will not send it away tonight.

That you will open your word to our hearts, and open our hearts to your word. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. I don't know if you've seen the movie The Big Short.

It's a movie that tells the story of the global financial crisis. And it tells how over a few decades, banking had become America's biggest industry, and then it collapsed overnight.

But in the introduction to the movie, the narrator says, But there were some who saw it coming, the financial crisis. There were some who saw it coming. While the whole world was having a big old party, a few outsiders and weirdos saw what no one else could.

They saw a giant lie at the heart of the economy, because they did what no one else thought to do. They looked. And in the movie, you see those outsiders sharing the truth with investment banks that the whole system is going to collapse, literally like a Jenga tower.

[6 : 13] And they have Jenga towers to show that the subprime mortgages are going to cause the whole economy to collapse. And people just laughing at them. Well, we hear tonight about Amos, who we've been with in recent weeks, working through this book.

He's a shepherd in the early 8th century BC, so the kind of high 700s BC. And God's called him to be a prophet. And Amos brings this message from God to God's people Israel, warning them, if they don't change, if they don't turn back to God, there's a judgment coming from God.

And we've seen how Amos points out to the people again and again that if they'd only look at their lives, their lives show what's going on in their hearts, that they don't love the Lord as they should.

But people don't like what they hear, and so they send him away. They don't want to hear the word. In the movie, *The Big Short*, there's a quote at one point. They say, it comes on the screen, truth is like poetry, but not many people like poetry.

And that's what's going on in Israel. Amos has four visions in the passage we're looking at tonight, chapters 7 and 8. And just so you know, we're not going to tackle it in the order that we have it in our Bibles because the way that these last three chapters of Amos are structured kind of hones in on the kind of, it starts well-ish, ends up really bad in chapter 8, and then comes out and ends well in the bit we'll see next week.

[7 : 46] So we're going to look at the vision he has of a plumb line first. And a plumb line is something, someone told me there are some in church. Can you see any? I don't know, there's little hooks in the middle of the arches here.

And those hooks are to hang a line, hang a rope with a weight on. That's a plumb line. And you would do that when you're building, and it would allow you to check that you're building according to the standard that you need, that things are in line.

And Amos is given this vision of a plumb line because God is showing Amos that he's going to measure his people like he would measure a building with a plumb line and see if they carry the marks of being the authentic people of God.

And they're going to fail. They don't measure up. So our first point tonight is the marks of a people under judgment. And we see the marks in the beginning of chapter 8.

So we see Amos' fourth vision at the beginning of chapter 8 after the plumb line. This is what the sovereign Lord showed me, a basket of ripe fruit. What do you see, Amos?

[8 : 50] He asked. A basket of ripe fruit. I thought when I first read that it sounded promising. I like the idea of ripe fruit, but it depends what the fruit is. And then verse 2.

The Lord said to me, the time is ripe for my people Israel. I will spare them no longer. In other words, God has been waiting patiently to see what fruit emerges among His people.

And this fruit is horrible. And judgment is coming. So what are the marks of that fruit? Well, the first mark is they choose devotion to money over devotion to God.

So you see that in verse 5. He says what they say in verse 5. When will the new moon be over that we may sell grain? When will the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?

See what's going on? The Sabbath was meant to be the highlight of your week. The day when you rested from your work to enjoy and worship God. But they can't wait for it to be over because what they want to do is get back to making money.

[9 : 54] The churches are full, but people can't wait for it to be over to get on with life. It's the burden, the chore, paying your taxes to God. A second mark of them being under judgment is they choose profit over people.

So if you have a look at verse 5, he says there, after he's talked about them wanting to get back to the markets, skimping on the measure, boosting the price, and cheating with dishonest scales.

It reminded me of, you know these stories of when all the Uber drivers, if they all turn off their machines at once, then it goes to like Uber price boost because there aren't enough cars out.

And then if you want an Uber, you have to pay double. And then they all turn their machines back on. I've got nothing against Uber drivers. I suspect they're very hard done by. But it's that kind of idea in the human heart of how do we get the price up?

How do we skimp on the measure and not give people what they're really trying to pay for? Dishonest scales are mentioned. It talks about later, at the end of verse 6, about taking even the sweepings of the wheat that they should have left for the poor in the fields and taking them and gathering them up and selling them on.

[11 : 04] They choose profit over people. And then they choose pluralism over truth. So by verse 14, over the page, these are people who are meant to serve the living God.

These are meant to be God's people. But he says, those who swear by the sin of Samaria, who say, as surely as your God lives, Dan, or as surely as the God of Beersheba lives. Well, Dan and Beersheba are places in the promised land, but they've got their own gods.

What it's saying is that the whole land is just steeped in idolatry, in following other gods, and thinking you can do that alongside the God of the Bible. So what does all that mean put together?

Well, God says there will be a terrible reversal. There'll be a terrible judgment. So in verse 3, the songs in the temple will turn to wailing. If you look at verse 9, he says, I will make the sun go down at noon.

And darken the earth in broad daylight. What a horrible picture of the wrath of God. That in midday, when it's meant to be light, it will go dark. Verse 10, it says, instead of singing, they will be weeping.

[12 : 12] And what's being described there in poetic language is that God will stop protecting his people from their enemies. He will allow an empire to come in and destroy the kingdom.

And it happened in 722 BC. So a few generations later, about five kings later, the Assyrian army swept in to that northern kingdom and destroyed it.

It was a terrible thing. So their judgment is in our history books. But there is a judgment coming for the whole world. God is clear on that today.

We shouldn't think to ourselves when we read language like this, oh, but that's the Old Testament. And, you know, the Old Testament is kind of, it's a bit down on people and it's full of anger.

We shouldn't think like that because here's some words from Jesus about the coming judgment day from Matthew's Gospel. Jesus says, when the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne.

[13 : 14] All the nations will be gathered before him and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

He talks about how those who get through that judgment with him will have everlasting life and those who do not will have everlasting destruction.

And we find it hard to believe today because we say, well, isn't God a God of love? How could a God of love judge the world? But when we read the scriptures, we see that his love is an aspect of his character and his justice is an aspect of his character.

His holiness, his love is a holy love. God cares how we live because he cares about us. He'll judge us because he loves us. He cares how we treat him and he cares how we treat one another.

And even the idea that God is love is a Christian idea. It's a uniquely Christian idea. That's why we believe in our culture that God is a God of love because the Bible says he's a God of love.

[14 : 22] It's not a kind of universal concept but we need to go back to God's word to understand what that means. And it says that God is a God of love who will have a day of reckoning where all people stand before him.

And he shows us here in Israel's history some of the marks of a people under judgment. But then we get something that we've not had in Amos before. Our second point is the famine for a people under judgment.

We find here we meet this guy Amaziah who is essentially the religious leader of the people. And we see him do everything he can to get the word of God away from the people.

So by verse 12 of chapter 7 he turns on Amos. Just have a look at his words to Amos who's bringing this word to the people. Verse 12 he said to Amos get out you seer go back to the land of Judah earn your bread there and do your prophesying there.

Don't prophesy anymore at Bethel because this is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom. But Amos won't go and Amaziah gets condemned with the next words.

[15 : 34] They're really grim words that are said about Amaziah and how his family will fall in verse 17. They're really grim. But it's good to remember what's at stake here.

That this is the people of God who were redeemed by God and given a land to live in that they would save the nations because by living by God showing them grace and mercy and them showing that grace and mercy to one another to display God's grace and mercy the nations will be drawn in to know God.

And instead what's happened is the churches are full in effect. Everyone's worshipping but no one cares what God says. No one's listening to him anymore. And he sent warning after warning after warning that they won't listen to.

And the church leaders that the people follow, the synagogue leaders say to the people there's no judgment coming. God accepts us just the way we are. You don't need to change.

You've got nothing to worry about. So Amaziah and the people reject the word and they send the prophet Amos away. And in verse 11 we learn of chapter 8 that God will give them what they want.

[16 : 48] Just over the page verse 11 the days are coming declares the sovereign Lord when I will send a famine through the land. Not a famine of food or a thirst for water but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord.

I don't know what you think about that but I think it's a really haunting idea that when a people who claim to be God's people stop listening to his word God's response could be I'm going to take my word away because you won't listen.

And then he describes the distress that will come. People staggering around. People who are malnourished from not having the word. They're going to search desperate to know God desperate to get direction from God.

And I wonder if we see that kind of judgment on the church today maybe in Scotland where you can walk into churches where there's no Bible. You can't find a Bible and you hear a talk or a homily from the front and it doesn't talk about Jesus as our saviour and that we need him.

And where we have synods or general assemblies of kind of the historic institutions of church where when people speak about God's judgment they get laughed at and scoffed at. It happens in Scotland today.

[18 : 06] Could it be that God is giving people what they want? That at some point along the line people have stopped listening to the word of God so he's taken it away from the churches.

And I wonder if there's a challenge for us personally here just to heed the warning. Not that we're necessarily guilty of this but just to heed the warning that if we feel challenged by God's word in an area of our lives but our response instead of turning back to God is to ignore the word might there come a point where God's patience was to run out and he would take the word from us.

So we're not all guilty of the sins that Israel committed here and we might be more like Amos. He came from the southern kingdom around Jerusalem up into this northern kingdom Israel to bring this message.

So for us today could it be that we see the marks of God's judgment on our culture around us? People who choose materialism over and business over devotion to God.

A culture where people prefer Black Friday to Good Friday. And where the biggest marker that we see around us that we might be under the judgment of God in our culture is people's attitude to his word.

[19 : 30] I remember being in just a cafe in Nero with a friend one day and saying to him it's hard isn't it when you look around you. We're in a cafe it was quite full and busy and there was people there with families and there was people there with friends and lots of them seem nice people and I said it is hard isn't it to think these people face an eternity of everlasting destruction, everlasting death away from away from God and it's hard isn't it.

And my friend said to me well I tell you what why don't we why don't we go around the tables now and ask each person if they'd like to hear a bit more about Jesus and we'll talk and say can we open the Bible with them and then see what their reaction is to that and then we'll see why God's going to judge them.

See the key mark of being under judgment is how we approach his word and people around us hate God's word especially God's word about judgment and when we hate God's word it reveals what we think of God.

So when we look at Amos here bringing that word faithfully to a culture that's saying get out you see her he shows us a bit of a model of what it might look like to be faithful in that kind of culture.

So that's our third point the faithful among a people under judgment. Amos stands in the gap between the people and God and he speaks to God about the people.

[20 : 57] So we get that right at the beginning of our reading the start of chapter 7 the first two visions that God gives Amos. The first thing he shows him is a vision of locusts that would descend on the land and bring destruction.

It's a horrible picture. After the first harvest of crops in chapter 7 verse 1 that had to go to the king that's like your taxes you then had a second harvest that you could keep for yourself but before that comes locusts will come and they're going to devour everything.

But look at verse 2 of chapter 7. When they'd stripped the land clean this is in a vision remember of what will happen. I cried out sovereign Lord forgive.

How can Jacob survive? He is so small. So the Lord relented. This will not happen either.

The sovereign Lord said. This time of fire raining down. So explosive it dries up the Mediterranean Sea. This fire. There's no water. And his response in verse 5.

[22 : 07] Verse 5. Then I cried out sovereign Lord I beg you stop. How can Jacob survive? He is so small. So the Lord relented. This will not happen neither the sovereign Lord said.

So Amos here is acting like the perfect priest. He stands in the gap between the people and God. They're not even his people. He's from a different kingdom. But he pleads to God for mercy for them.

Could we be inspired by that example? It's easy to get self-righteous when we see injustice in our world. And to think oh well I'm not like them. And even perhaps even to think oh well God will judge them.

God will deal with that. There was an episode of the sitcom Seinfeld where does anyone still watch Seinfeld? No? Ish?

Okay. So there was this sitcom Seinfeld. Very good. And there was this character in it Elaine. And she's one of the main characters. And she went out with this guy Puddy in one of the episodes.

[23 : 11] And then she got in his car one day. And she found that all the radio presets were for Christian rock music channels. So she realizes that she's going out with a Christian.

She says to Jerry, her friend, that she says that she feels betrayed. And he's like well what's your problem? Are you disappointed he has a spiritual side? And she says I got together with him because he seems so one-dimensional.

I feel misled. So she confronts Puddy and says are you a Christian? And he says yeah. And she says but I'm not. Doesn't that bother you? And he says well not really.

I'm not the one going to hell. And that was that. Anyway it was this picture of the Christian who just doesn't care. So well I'm alright. The problem is yours.

And maybe as a Christian we could find our hearts starting to feel like that when we look at society around us and think well it's very sinful out there and it seems to be getting worse. But let's just batten down the hatches and hold on till we get to heaven.

[24 : 14] What we see Amos do is even when he's so badly treated he's moved with deep compassion for these people. He's come to a country that are not on good terms with his people where he sees offensive, injustice, complacency, pride and he feels compassion and he pleads with God for the people.

could we pray for the people around us? Could we speak to God about people, stand in the gap for them and plead with them? We can do that about the whole nation around us.

Asking God to turn people's hearts back to him. We can do it for other countries. We could do it for Putin's Russia. We could pray for the church in Russia where the national church in Russia seems to be kind of supporting Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

Could we pray for them that God would have mercy? We can do it for our friends that God would give them a new heart, that he'd open their heart to receive his message and turn back to him.

So Amos speaks to God about people and then he speaks to people about God. He doesn't stop doing that. And it's striking how much he has to stand firm against all that pressure from Amaziah the priest.

[25 : 38] Amaziah lies about him to Jeroboam. So he first goes to Jeroboam, the king, and he says in verse 11, this is what Amos is saying, Jeroboam will die by the sword and Israel will go into exile.

He says in verse 10, Amos is raising a conspiracy against you, which is kind of half true. Amos is warning of judgment, but there's no conspiracy. But he's being lied about, isn't he?

Just as Jesus says, blessed are you when people falsely say all kinds of things against you because of me. It's a mark of being one of God's people, that people will say things about you that are false.

And then when Amaziah tells Amos to leave, he puts all this pressure on him, doesn't he? Verse 13, the pressure of the institution. He says this is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom.

But Amos stands firm in verse 14. He says, I was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I was a shepherd and I also took care of sycamore fig trees.

[26 : 42] But the Lord took me from tending the flock and said to me, go, prophesy to my people Israel. Now then, hear the word of the Lord. And for us today, every believer in Jesus has the gift of the Spirit so that we can prophesy, so that we can speak God's word to each other and to a world that needs to hear that judgment is coming and they need to turn back to God for forgiveness of sins.

So that's our third point, the faithful among a people under judgment. Standing in the gap between God and the people because of what we know of him and what we know of them, speaking to God about people, speaking to people about God.

And yet on our own, we know that our prayers won't make a difference. We could share the news of a God of judgment all day and forever and people won't respond.

And for us too, held up against the plumb line of God's perfect law, all of us would stand under his judgment. So we need someone better than Amos to come.

And that's our fourth point, our last point this evening, the savior of a people under judgment. These people need a man to come and save them. They were under God's judgment of the locusts and the fire and Amos cried out to God for them and God relented.

[28 : 12] And for us, when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane, he prayed a priestly prayer for us. In John chapter 17, he prayed that God would take us to be with him where he is now and see his glory.

And when we mess up day by day through our own sin, we're assured that the risen Jesus is busy now as our priest, praying in the presence of God for us.

Hebrews chapter 7 says, because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore, he is able to save completely those who come to God through him because he always lives to intercede for them.

Jesus is there now. That's what he's doing. He's interceding for us, saying, Lord, have mercy on my people. These people had a famine of the word of God, but now God has sent Jesus, his final word, into the world so that if we stick with him, we'll never have a famine of God's word.

In Hebrews chapter 1, it says, in the past, God spoke to our forefathers at many times and in various ways through the prophets, but in these last days, he has spoken to us by a son.

[29 : 27] It's a new class of speaking that the son, who's the heir of everything, who made everything, is God's revelation to us. So we stick with him and we have God's word.

But what is that word to us? Well, I think there's a really haunting word here in Amos chapter 8, and it's in verse 7. It's when the Lord swears by himself, in verse 7, I will never forget anything they have done.

And yet, God promises through another prophet, Jeremiah, that a new covenant will come, Jeremiah chapter 31, where he says that he will not remember what we've done.

He says in Jeremiah 31, that through this new covenant, I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more. So how is it that we can have a God who will remember and not remember, that he'll never forget what the people have done, but he promises not to remember our sins?

Well, he does that by displaying his justice at the cross. What we deserve for the way we've treated God is a famine of God's word. And at the cross, Jesus endured a famine of the word of God as he cried out to God forsaken and heard nothing back.

[30 : 49] We heard here that the judgment of God would turn singing into weeping. And at the cross, Jesus is the man of sorrows who endures that sadness.

And the key mark of God's judgment in our passage here, it was in verse 9, that the sun would go down at noon and the earth would go dark in broad daylight. And Jesus endured that at Calvary as it went dark from midday for three hours as he hung lifeless on the cross so that he could bear the judgment of God for us.

And the word of God he brings for us today is not a word of judgment. It's a word of salvation for all who will receive him. A word that says, whoever comes to me, I will never drive away.

So he is the savior we need, bearing the judgment for us. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we acknowledge that your judgment is right and just, that you are faithful to your word when you judge and write when you speak.

But we pray, Father, have mercy. Have mercy on our land and on our city, Glasgow. We plead with you that by your spirit you would turn the hearts of the people around us back to you, that you would bring revival.

[32 : 23] people. And Lord, would you enable us this week to speak to others about you. By your spirit, would you give us wisdom, courage, gentleness, grace, and truth that we would point people to our great savior, the Lord Jesus, the one who bore your judgment in our place.

And we pray that for the praise of your glorious grace, you would relent and draw many back to you. For Jesus' name's sake. Amen.

We're going to sing to you.