

## **“The Remnant”**

**Amos 9:1-10**

**July 16, 2006**

We continue, as before in Amos, with the promise of God’s wrath against Israel. The particular theme of these verses, the conclusion of the main body of the prophecy, is that no one can escape this wrath. It makes an appropriate final word. If the last hope of Israel were that, even if God should unleash his vengeance against his people, many of them would escape it, Amos puts paid to that hope as well. No one will escape. God intends to punish his people for their unfaithfulness; and what God intends to do he does and no man can shorten his hand.

### **Text Comment**

- v.1 Verses 1-4 contain the fifth and last of the visions that God gave to Amos. We read the first four in chapters 7 and 8. The pillars of the temple supported the roof and the cut stone thresholds were at the bottom of the great doors. The picture is of the complete collapse of the temple: from top to bottom. One of Israel’s sanctuaries is in view, probably the principal one at Bethel. The picture of the building collapsing on the worshippers indicates that Israelite worship was conducted in some significant measure *inside* the sanctuary, in the Canaanite fashion, not outside in the court in the orthodox fashion prescribed in the Law of Moses. Those who escape that catastrophe will be caught in another.
- v.2 This is a common biblical figure of speech called a merism, after the Greek word *meros* which means “part”: heaven and hell – the two extreme parts of the created universe – together stand for the total area of God’s control. There is nowhere to hide.
- v.3 The places where a man might imagine himself able to find safety will provide no protection at all against the Lord. Carmel was a thickly wooded mountain honeycombed with caves. A perfect hiding place.
- v.4 Even exile and captivity – terrible enough in themselves – will prove no protection against the judgment of death that the Lord has decreed against his people.
- v.5 The “Lord Almighty” is the NIV’s regular translation for “Lord of Hosts” or “Lord of armies.” Remember, the Nile’s rising and falling was used as an image of destruction in 8:8. It serves as another image of the totality of the Lord’s judgment: like a flood that covers the land before it recedes, leaving nothing but destruction behind.
- v.6 There is a somewhat widespread belief in scholarship that vv. 5-6 are the third and last excerpt from a then well-known hymn to Yahweh that extols his sovereign power over the world. Israelites loved to sing this hymn because they imagined that Yahweh’s power and rule would be their protection and always bring them prosperity. But Amos’ message to Israel throughout the book has been that the Lord’s sovereign power that metes out judgment to the nations – that judgment of which you love to sing – will mete out judgment *to you as well* because you are as bad as the nations. Indeed, you are worse,

because, unlike the nations, the Lord brought you into covenant with himself and you have repudiated that covenant.

- v.7 Now the Lord begins to speak in the first person. And he asks two rhetorical questions that place Israel, spiritually speaking, squarely among the nations rather than occupying the unique position she had been given by God as his own beloved people. First, Israel is no more exempt from God's judgment than the distant and despised Cushites were. And, if she thinks that she is different because she had an exodus – Israel was probably thinking that the exodus from Egypt was proof positive that God was on Israel's side and would always be on her side – well the Philistines and the Arameans also had migrations from one place to another. The Lord is the sovereign God of the whole earth and he is ultimately responsible for every important date on a nation's calendar. The point is that Israel, by her lack of faith and her betrayal of God's covenant, has become just like these other people instead of the covenant people of God she was called to be. Since both the Philistines and the Arameans were hated enemies of Israel, the comparison would have been particularly galling. You know the Christmas carol, sung variously by Harry Belafonte and Johnny Mathis, with its line "And man shall live for evermore because of Christmas day." Well, of course, that is not right. Stated like that it is not true. The historical fact – of exodus or Christmas – by itself guarantees nothing to anyone, let alone to everyone. There must be living faith in the God of that history, of that event. The exodus brought Israel out of bondage in Egypt – true enough – but most of those Israelites died in the wilderness, rejected by God because of their unbelief. [Moyter, 196-197]
- v.10 The idea is that the kernels of grain will fall through the sieve to the ground – they represent the believing remnant of Israel – but the pebbles, the chaff – the unbelievers that is – will be caught and thrown out. They will die by the sword, Amos' last reminder that the Lord's wrath will come upon Israel in the form of military conquest. Israel's foolish complacency – a main theme of Amos' preaching – is given the last word: "Disaster will not overtake or meet us."

The final three verses of our text introduce us to an idea that has been only hinted at so far in the prophecy. God's judgment of Israel, though destroying the nation as a whole, will leave a remnant. Yahweh "will not totally destroy the house of Jacob." This remnant will not only survive the catastrophe to come, but survive *as the people of God*, as the house of Jacob. As we have said on several occasions through the prophecy so far, there were some true believers in Israel in the days of Jeroboam II. They were a tiny minority and they wielded little or no influence in the nation as a whole, but God knew them and promised to spare them. These are the kernels of corn that pass through the sieve to be collected on the floor. Most of people are the pebbles that will be caught in the sieve and thrown out.

And who are these people? Amos says in v. 10: "All the sinners among my people will die by the sword." Amos goes on to say of *those* sinners, the sinners that are to be destroyed, that they are the ones who say, "Disaster will not overtake or meet us." The sinners Amos is speaking of are not the sinners who know their sinfulness and guilt before God and have sought forgiveness from the Lord; these are not the sinners who are struggling against their sinfulness and are

seeking to put their sins to death. These are not the sinners who are, by faith, righteous before God at the same time. These are rather the self-satisfied sinners, those who are complacent in their rebellion against Yahweh and who feel secure even though they are indifferent to the demands of Yahweh's covenant with Israel. "They are complacent, careless sinners living in a world of pretence and make-believe." [Motyer, 199]

But there are some in Israel, a few, who are not complacent. They look into the past and see very clearly Israel's betrayal of Yahweh for what it was. They look at the present and know that Israel's sanctuaries, her worship, her priesthood are all false. They know that Israel's life is a mockery of that life of purity and goodness and love to which God's people have been called. They look into the future and see the specter of divine wrath. They knew disaster was coming and they knew Israel deserved the disaster that was about to befall her. These are the people who flocked to hear Amos' sermons *because they knew he was the Lord's prophet and knew that what he said was true!* They are sinners, surely, but they confess their sin and it grieves them. They are people who are marked by spiritual and moral concern. They think about God and about themselves and about salvation in the way they were taught to think in the Word of God. Their greatest discouragement and their greatest fear are precisely that Israel doesn't live faithfully before the Lord. They know very well that they themselves are too often unfaithful to God's covenant, but they struggle to put their sins to death, they long to be holy and righteous before God because they love him for making his covenant with them. They are not hypocrites. They admit and they mourn their failures. They love God's law and want to and strive to obey it. And, says Amos, God's wrath, when it consumes Israel, will not consume them. They will survive. They will live.

Precisely how many such people there were we do not know. In Ahab's day, a century before, the Lord told his prophet Elijah that there were 7,000 in Israel who had not bowed the knee to Baal. We don't know what the total population of the nation was at that time and the number 7,000 may have symbolic significance, but obviously then too the true believers in the nation as a whole were a small minority.

Nor do we know precisely *how* the few real believers survived the Assyrian invasion. Surely some of them would have made their way to Jerusalem. After all, it was only there that they could worship the living God as they had been taught to worship him. We know that, by and large, the ten northern tribes disappear from history in 721 B.C. when Assyria destroyed and then depopulated Israel and scattered her surviving population among and mixed them together with the conquered peoples of her empire. A Jew today is, for all intents and purposes, a descendant of the southern kingdom of Judah and Benjamin. The term "Jew" itself is a derivation of "Judah" the principal tribe of the southern kingdom and hence also its common name. But some individuals and families from those northern tribes survived. Think of saintly Anna, who saw Jesus as a baby in the temple and who is identified to us in Luke 2 as a member of the tribe of Asher. At least as late as the first century there were still remnants of the ten northern tribes to be found among the Jews.

But, however large and in whatever way, there was a remnant of believing life in Israel before the Assyrian invasion and it survived the holocaust of 721 B.C. And what makes that fact so important is that what happened then has happened many times. The survival of a faithful

remnant from Israel is a representative feature of the history of this history. When God's judgment fell upon a faithless and unbelieving Israel, we read already in Deuteronomy, that God promised that he would not totally destroy his people. He would preserve a remnant and out of that remnant would begin to build up his people again. This idea of a believing church surviving within the apostate church, of an Israel within Israel, of a small remnant being preserved when the people as a whole fall under God's wrath and suffer spiritual death is a frequent theme in the prophets, is taught again in the New Testament, and is a recurring fact of history.

After the southern kingdom was sent into exile a small remnant of believers formed the vanguard of a renewed Judah as they came back to the Promised Land from Babylon. At the time of the birth of the Lord Jesus, most of Judaism was spiritually moribund – not by the kind of pagan idolatry that had ruined Israel centuries before – but by a stultifying legalism that had produced a very similar result: a complacency about one's relationship with God, a concentration on outward things at the expense of inward, and a loss of the principle of faith and dependence upon the Lord for his grace and forgiveness. Proof of how far the rot had sunk into the heart of the religious life of the church is the fact that the Messiah was regarded as an enemy when he appeared! But there were some even in that time who welcomed the Messiah: think of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, Simeon and Anna. And it was out of this believing remnant that a new day dawned for the church.

Again, when the gospel began to be proclaimed to the world and the church mushroomed with a new influx of Gentile converts, the tendency to self-satisfaction and spiritual complacency gradually appeared again and on a still larger scale. We find a small living and faithful church within a rotten, complacent, and spiritually corrupt church again in the middle ages, and that remnant survived to form the foundation of the new beginning made at the time of the Reformation.

In the same way, the remnant that survived the onslaught of the so-called Enlightenment survived the spiritual death of the European and British churches and was taken up into the newly invigorated body of Christ at the time of the movement known as Pietism on the continent and the Great Awakening in the English speaking world. It is no surprise that the Wesleys, for example, referred to their Methodist meeting as an *ecclesiola in ecclesia*, a little church within the church. That is, the church in general was faithless and corrupt, a dead weight upon the gospel; only a small community within it had true and living faith. But, it was that remnant that survived the purging of the church by the Lord, it was that remnant that brought life to the next generation, that 19<sup>th</sup> century generation of men and women who would take the gospel to the four corners of the earth. From the remnant of European and Anglo-Saxon Christianity come the world-wide church we know today.

And on and on it goes, wherever the true faith has taken root and produced a living Christian church eventually the faith of that church withers and she slips into complacent worldliness and finally into naked unbelief. But in that church the Lord preserves a remnant of true believers and they remain until he does a new thing and builds his church again.

My son has made some Christian friends at the University of Tübingen in Germany. They are part of a remnant, the very small believing community that is left in the German nation; a small

minority within the once great German church. And theirs is the life of the remnant, of exiles in their own culture. We can be worried as Americans, and rightly, about the declining influence of the Bible and the gospel in our day. We can be disgusted with large segments of the so-called Christian church that do nothing but parrot the world and have no living faith at all in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We can and should grow concerned over signs that even the evangelical part of the American Christian church seems to be ready to cast off the Bible's teaching at points where it conflicts with the orthodoxies of American 21<sup>st</sup> century culture. But our situation is nothing like that faced by these young men and women in Germany. Believing churches are tiny. The existing church structure is often such that often the few believers in a congregation must put up with unbelieving pastors. The sort of ministries that we demand and take for granted in our American Christian world – Sunday schools, youth groups, Christian radio, Christian publishing houses and bookstores – either don't exist or exist in a skeleton fashion only. No Ligonier conferences, no mega-churches or R.C. Sproul or Billy Graham. Indeed, those foreign names are as well known to German evangelicals as any German Christian preacher or leader. During his first semester, Rob attended a small evangelical house church in the village where his language institute was located. They listened to and read R.C. Sproul. One of his friends is preparing for the ministry, but he must do so in an unbelieving divinity school. Imagine having to put up your entire life with spiritless worship and ineffective preaching. Imagine going to church every Sunday and getting almost nothing from the pulpit and feeling almost no real spiritual life in the congregation. Such is the lot of many real Christians in Europe. And for them to remain faithful through it all may be one of the most astonishing works of Christian holiness that the world ever sees! It could happen only because God is preserving his remnant as he promised to do.

Imagine raising your children in an environment in which the Christian faith appears to most people little more than a by-gone superstition. Talk to the missionaries in France and let them tell you how difficult it is to raise children to be enthusiastic and confident Christians when the believing church of which they are a part is so unimpressive, so small, so lacking influence and often so dispirited.

Now, to be sure, there is an opposite problem. Sometimes Christians can wrap the mantle of the remnant around themselves too quickly. There are Christians who think that everyone who doesn't agree with them is apostate and they, therefore, are God's true remnant. I know a number of Christians and Christian churches in the United States today who think of themselves as the remnant. From that assumption it is a short step to assuming that the fact that your church is tiny and no one likes you is proof of your faithfulness. Lots of people worshipped at Bethel; only a few refused to do so. That fact is then translated into the modern situation. Lots of people worship in that mega-church but only a few come to ours. This proves that we are the remnant, the few faithful that remain. There are a lot of churches that think of themselves as the remnant who in fact are small and isolated simply because they are cross-grained people and the message of their pulpit is too harsh or too narrow or too lacking in the grace and love of God in Christ. The believing church is not yet a remnant in the United States – it is far too large, successful, and influential – but if history teaches us anything, it is that it is likely to become a remnant at some point. And that is no fun. However we bless God for his faithfulness to his covenant, it is a hard thing to be among the few that remain when the whole church has gone over to unbelief.

Nevertheless, let us accept from our text that there is such a thing as the remnant and that this remnant is an important feature of any authentically biblical philosophy of history. It is another way in which God remains faithful to his covenant. He never allows his covenant people to be extinguished altogether. He never permits the line of faith to be entirely broken.

This fact, this spiritual, historical fact, this feature of the life of the kingdom of God – that it has been preserved in many times and places by a mere remnant of the church – is something for each one of us to reckon with.

And so we ask ourselves this morning: what is the application of this truth to your life and mine? And is the answer not that we are always to live *as the remnant lives*? Is it not that our lives are to be distinguished in precisely that way that distinguished the remnant from the rest in Israel before and after the judgment of God fell upon his unfaithful people? We want to know, do we not, that we would be among the true and faithful remnant, were it to be our lot to live through the spiritual judgment and death of the church of our time. And what is that distinctive quality? What is the defining characteristic? What distinguishes the pebble from the grain? What makes the difference between the person who *thinks* he is right with God and the person who *actually is*? What defines the remnant?

Well, as we said in an earlier sermon in this series, the Bible often uses a form of shorthand to describe the true character of a Christian. It mentions one thing that is characteristic of the genuine Christian life and lets that one thing stand for the whole Christian mind, heart, and life. Sometimes it speaks of believing in God or Christ; sometimes it describes the true believer as someone who truly repents; sometimes it identifies the true believer by his or her obedience to God's laws and commandments. Here, in Amos' final oracle of judgment, very interestingly and very importantly, the remnant is described as those men and women who did not and would never have said, "Disaster will not overtake or meet *us*." They are people, in other words, who take the reality of sin seriously. They believe in the judgment of God and they know that sinners deserve that judgment. They know the difference between a pretend faith and the real thing and are concerned that they practice a genuine faith in the Lord. They know their moral failure all too well; it concerns them. They know they need forgiveness because they know God will judge the unrighteous. They know they need God's grace because he is holy and they are not, at least not in themselves. They are people who understand their need for salvation, know that God alone can give it to them, and will if they trust in him. They take sin and righteousness seriously. In other words, *they are not complacent*. They don't take their salvation, their peace with God for granted.

We had a lovely hymn in the first edition of *Trinity Hymnal* that we lost in the second edition. It was a text by the evangelical English hymn writer with the wonderful name, Thomas Hornblower Gill. Its first line, if you remember, was "Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in every generation..." The hymn had an interesting origin. Gill, on one of his travels, had visited a Waldensian community in the Piedmont, in one of the remote mountain valleys of northern Italy. If you remember your church history, the Waldensians were the followers of the 12<sup>th</sup> century reformer Peter Waldo, a merchant from Lyon, who sought to call the worldly and superstitious church of that day back to apostolic Christianity. The Waldensians denied the power of the mass, the existence of purgatory, they preached the gospel in the vernacular, the language of the

people, and they took seriously living a holy life. In some respects we might think of them as the first Protestant church – long before the Reformation. They were, in truth, a remnant of faith in a sea of unbelief and were often bitterly persecuted by the church establishment. It was Amaziah against Amos (as in chapter 7) all over again! They found some peace, such as it was, by staying out of the church's way, and this they did by locating in remote places, such as the mountain valleys of northern Italy. Gill visited them in 1864 and was tremendously impressed by the fact that they had preserved a pure and sound faith in Christ through centuries though surrounded and often set upon by a powerful and largely unbelieving church establishment. His hymn reflected God's faithfulness to the remnant of his inheritance, his preserving the true faith among a few when the many had gone over to unbelief.

The verses of that hymn express precisely the same spiritual characteristic among God's true people that is expressed here in Amos 9:10. That is, the true believer is always the one who would never say or think to say, "Disaster will not overtake or meet us!"

Our cleaving sins we oft have wept, and oft thy patience proved;  
 But still thy faith we fast have kept, Thy Name we still have  
     loved;  
 And thou has kept and loved us well, Hast granted us in thee  
     to dwell,  
 Unshaken, unremoved.

No, nothing from those arms of love shall thine own people  
     sever;  
 Our helper never will remove, Our God will fail us never.  
 Thy people, Lord, have dwelt in Thee, our dwelling place thou  
     still will be,  
 For ever and forever.

Israelites as a rule neither thought that way nor spoke that way. Such were not the ruling convictions and sentiments of their hearts. But some in Israel thought that way, prayed that way, spoke that way, and lived that way. And of those people, *and those only*, the Almighty said, they would be saved, not destroyed. If only you could see what the sanctuaries, the cities, and the people of Israel looked like after Assyria was finished with them. If only you could know and feel the terror of that divine judgment! If only you could know then what a remarkable thing it was, what a surpassingly wonderful thing it was to be among the few who were spared that judgment; who lived through it to love and serve the Lord on the other side! Then you would have some small idea – a true but still very inadequate idea – of what it will seem to those who open their eyes and find themselves in heaven.