

## **“Roses and Lavender”**

**Amos 9:11-15**

**July 23, 2006**

I took my sermon title from a remark of the famous 19<sup>th</sup> century German Old Testament scholar, Julius Wellhausen, who in the fashion typical of German scholarship in those days concluded that this last paragraph of the book of Amos must have been added later by someone else because its tone is so different from that of the rest of the book. “Scholars are troubled,” Wellhausen said, “by the sudden switch to roses and lavender instead of blood and iron.” [Cited in Dillard and Longman, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 379] It is, indeed, a dramatic shift in perspective, but, of course, it is precisely the shift we would expect from an OT prophet, who regularly balanced warnings of divine wrath with the prospect of the eventual triumph of the kingdom of God. Only a perverse determination to find problems would find one here! As one modern commentator puts it, “The oracle is genuinely from Amos. It reflects standard covenantal eschatology.” [Stuart, 397] *Eschatology*, remember, is a term referring to the future and often to the distant future. It means, literally, “the study or teaching of the last things”. And the covenant, that relationship that God created with his people, *has a future*. God promises everywhere in the Bible that this covenant with his people is the meaning of history and the ultimate issue of history. God’s message, his salvation, and his people will be vindicated at the end of time. People in covenant with God will carry eternity with them!

In any case, as we saw last time, Amos leaves room for the preservation of a remnant of the people of Israel, even as the nation as a whole is destroyed, and, one of the great purposes of the remnant in the Bible is to provide a foundation for the rebuilding of the people of God. That we should have a grand vision of a triumphant kingdom of God in the future after an oracle or message of judgment is perfectly in keeping with the logic and pattern of biblical prophecy.

### **Text Comment**

- v.11 Amos first sees David’s kingdom as destroyed and then as renewed and rebuilt. The restoration of David’s dynasty is, of course, another way of speaking about the Messiah and his kingdom, as the Messiah is, in all biblical prophecy, the future of David’s dynasty and the hope of his kingdom.
- v.12 Edom was a particularly bitter enemy of Israel – think of the Palestinians or the Lebanese today and you’ll get the idea – and stands here for the nations of the world that, in the last days, will be subject to the kingdom of God. It is interesting to note that David was the only king of Israel who not only conquered Edom but held it. So Edom makes a particularly good representative for the nations of the world that would become subject to David’s descendant, the Messiah.
- v.14 These last two verses describe a time of unprecedented bounty. The picture is of fields so fertile and harvests so large that the reapers will still be gathering the grain as the soil is being turned over for the next planting. And the image of wine flowing downward from the hills where the grapes were grown is, again, a picture of unimaginable plenty. We have this picture very often in the prophets and as early as Jacob’s blessing of Judah in

Genesis 49:10-12. There the rule of the Messiah will bring in this time of unprecedented fruitfulness. The Messiah will restore the world to what it was in Eden before the fall. Additionally, there will be peace, enabling the people of God to pursue their life's work without fear. The full force of this picture is felt if we compare it with 5:11, where Amos says that Israel's punishment for her sins will be that she will build great homes but not be able to live in them and plant vineyards but not live to drink their wine.

- v.15 The prophecy of restoration ends with a promise that when the people of God are thus restored, and resettled in the Promised Land to enjoy the blessings and benefits of God's favor, they will never be judged again. The judgment, the exile, the destruction of the nation is upon them – that has been Amos' primary theme from the beginning of the book – but when the day of judgment is passed and Israel is restored, it will be for good. All will be finally well between God and man. On man's side his rebellion is over, and on God's side the creation has been liberated from its curse and all of its potential finally unleashed. [Motyer, 206] All that Israel lost in 721 B.C. she lost as a penalty for her sin. But in this final stage of human history the penalty of sin will have been lifted.

The judgment of Israel promised throughout the book of Amos has been due to the people's sinful behavior. You will notice that the final restoration is prophesied without regard to the people's behavior. It will be the work and the gift of God's grace; he will do it. He will bring his people to true and lasting faith, hope, and love and then will crown those gifts with unmerited and limitless prosperity. And so it is right that the book should virtually end on this note. Just as *the Lord* will bring judgment against his sinful people, so *he* will finally prosper them. “the land *I have given them*, says the Lord your God.” It is all the Lord's doing!

In this great picture of the triumph of the kingdom of God, Amos draws together several of the primary *motifs* of the Bible's prophecy of the future and the end of history. The approach that Amos takes here is very typical of the Bible. It tends to organize its view of the future according to certain important motifs. The dictionary defines a *motif* as a “recurring thematic element” or a “dominant idea or central theme.” And there are a number of these in biblical prophecy. Any thoughtful reader of the Bible, whether or not he has thought of the Bible's teaching about the future in just this way, will recognize these various motifs or recurring themes. There are, for example, 1) the seed – a descendant of Adam and Eve, then of Noah, then of Abraham, then of Judah, then of David who would bring salvation to the world; 2) the land, that God promised his people, that they lost because of their sin and unbelief and which God will restore to them at last; and on the list goes: there are the motifs of the coming king and his kingdom; the servant of the Lord; the restoration of the people of God; the new covenant; the outpouring of the Holy Spirit; the day of the Lord; the last days; the judgment of the wicked; the salvation of the nations; and the renewal of the cosmos. These themes show up in text after text in the Old Testament prophets and then again are taken up into the New Testament's vision of the future, or its eschatology. They are the way the Bible connects the past to the future. They carry us all the way through the Bible and up to the very end of history when the seed of the woman will have crushed the head of the serpent, when God's people will enter forever the Promised Land, when the nations will be subject to the kingdom of God, when the new covenant is finally fulfilled, and so on.

And, as I said, we find them here in Amos as well. You can find at least five of these motifs in these five verses: you have the king and his kingdom in v. 11 – the booth of David being restored –; the salvation of the nations in v. 12 – David’s kingdom possessing the nations –; you have the restoration and fruitfulness of the cosmos in vv. 13-14 – a typical description of the world when the effects of the curse have been reversed –; you have the renewal of the people of God in v. 14 – “I will bring back my exiled people...” –; and you have the land in v. 15 – “I will plant Israel in their own land...”

Different prophets described the ultimate future of the kingdom of God in different ways – all beautiful in their own way – but there were many common themes and expressions. So while Ezekiel is well-known for seeing the future consummation of the kingdom of God in history in terms of the restoration of a perfect priesthood and a perfect worship (40-48) and Hosea for seeing the same future in terms of a perfect marriage (2:14-3:5), both of those prophets also employ a number of the same motifs employed by the other prophets. But all of these motifs, these various themes by which the prophets depict the future triumph of God’s people, leave us with a very well-known set of questions.

How are we to understand this prophecy? Precisely what does Amos mean with these pictures he paints? Are we to take them literally? When, for example, are the things he has described to come to pass? And there’s the rub! We know when the judgment Amos promised came to pass. We know exactly when it happened: 721 B.C. But what of this promise of restoration and renewal?

Well, in the case of Amos 9:11-15 – so like so many other Old Testament prophecies of the consummation of the kingdom of God in the world – we have been given some help. The New Testament comments on the prophecy we have read this morning and, in that way, helps us to understand it.

James, the Lord’s brother, cites vv. 11-12 to clinch his argument at the Jerusalem synod. You remember that synod of apostles and church elders. We read about it in Acts 15. It was called to give a definitive answer to the controversial question then roiling the fledgling church: on what terms were Gentiles to be admitted to the church? Did they have to be circumcised, for example? In other words, did they have to become Jews in order to become Christians? And the godly men who gathered to discuss that question were persuaded by Peter and James that the evidence both of the Bible and God’s work among them proved that Gentiles were to be admitted to the church as Gentiles. Living faith in Jesus Christ was all that could be required of them. And James looked to Amos’ prophecy in 9:11-12 to prove that. Amos had said, James argued from our text, that David’s fallen kingdom was to be rebuilt – it was at that very time being rebuilt – and was to be rebuilt not with Jews only but with people from all the nations of the world. James took that from our text. He argued that Amos’ prophecy was being fulfilled in the Gentile mission and the gospel’s advance into the nations of the world. We cannot take James to mean that Amos’ prophecy *has been* fulfilled, but its fulfillment is underway. The progress of the gospel through the nations is a step toward the final fulfillment of Amos’ prophecy. The nations streaming into the church of God *was what Amos was talking about!*

And there is something more. Amos prophesies that Israel will be restored to the Promised Land in v. 15. The promise of settlement in this land of plenty is prominent in the prophets' forecast of the future of the people of God. "The land" occupies a very important place in the biblical vision of the future. In fact, I have read though I have not bothered to check this, that *eretz*, the Hebrew word for land, is the fourth most commonly used noun in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. We know how central to the whole divine program for Israel the Promised Land was. It was promised to Abraham and his seed; the exodus from Egypt and the parting of the waters of the Jordan River were the means to bring Israel into the Promised Land.

Over the next long period of Israel's history, most of the time the land functions as the sphere of God's judgment. Enemies enter it, droughts and famines plague it, and, finally, the people of God are driven from it because of their infidelity. As Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden, so unbelieving Israel was cast out of the Promised Land. So, in a way, "the land acts as a barometer of the nation's relationship with God, bearing blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience." [DBI, 487]

Then, as you well know from your reading of the OT prophets, the place that the land held in the imagination of Israel is given its full rights in the prophetic forecast of the restoration of God's people and the inauguration of the end of history. In the restoration, the Lord "will set them in their own land" (Isa. 14:1). He "will bring them back to their own land" (Jer. 16:15). He will cause Israel "to dwell in their own land" (Ezek. 28:25) and "will plant Israel in their own land never again to be uprooted from the land I have given them" as we read here in Amos 9:15. There are many statements like those. And the vision is not only of the people of God restored to the land but of their enjoying unprecedented prosperity there. Amos paints that picture here as well.

Now, what is remarkable is that this preoccupation with *the land* virtually disappears when we enter the New Testament. In fact in the only three instances in which the OT sense of the land appears in the New Testament, the idea is "re-signified." That is, it is understood in a different way. Let me show you what I mean.

1. In Matt. 5:5, in the midst of the "beatitudes" that begin the Lord's *Sermon on the Mount*, we have "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." That language is taken over from Psalm 37:11 where we read: "...the meek will inherit *the land*." Now the Greek word used in Matt. 5 is the same word as used in the LXX of Psalm 37:11 to translate "land." So it could be argued that the Lord Jesus means that the meek will inherit *the land*, that is, the Promised Land. But in the context of the beatitudes and the New Testament in general it seems clear that there has been a shift. "The Land" has become "the earth." The idea has been generalized and no longer is the geographical area of Canaan especially in view. Rather we are now interested in and talking about what the Promised Land always stood for, the new heavens and the new earth.
2. In Romans 4:13 this becomes even clearer. There Paul says that Abraham and his seed received the promise that he and they would be the heir "of the world." Abraham, you remember, was promised the land of Canaan. But, land now definitely has been generalized to the entire world. *Eretz*, land, has become *kosmos*, world. The entire inheritance of man, lost on account of sin, will be returned to Abraham and his seed.

3. You have something similar at work in Ephesians 6:2-3 where Paul tells the children of a church composed largely of Gentiles that they should honor and obey their parents as the fifth commandment requires, for, he says, this is the first commandment with a promise. And that promise is “that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy a long life on the earth.” In the fifth commandment originally, as you remember, the promise was that those who honor their parents will live a long life *in the land the Lord your God is giving you*. But here in Eph. 6 the promise of the land now is made to Gentiles who do not live in Canaan. The whole earth has become the land.

This prepares the way, of course, for the teaching, already anticipated in the Old Testament, but made specific and emphatic in the New, that Canaan, the Promised Land, was a foreshadowing of heaven, of the heavenly country. That point is made explicitly in Hebrews 11 where we are taught that the OT saints themselves perfectly well understood that the promise of Canaan’s real estate stood for the much more significant promise of the heavenly country. They knew that it was not any part of this world that God had ultimately promised them. Even if that were gained, it would still be lost at death. And, as that author already made a point of saying in Hebrews 4, the rest that God’s faithful people were seeking was not really physical peace and prosperity in Canaan; it was the eternal peace of heaven. Israel entered the Promised Land under Joshua, he reminds us, but much later we find David in Psalm 95 still warning the Israelites of his time about the danger of not entering the rest of God. You can be in Canaan and not have title to God’s rest. That rest is found in the world to come and right to it is obtained here only by living faith in Jesus Christ.

Well, taking all of this together, where do we find ourselves? Well, *first*, Amos’ prophecy does not concern ethnic Jews only but all the people of God, Jews and Gentiles alike. The living, faithful church – whether Jewish or Gentile – as we are often told in the New Testament is the true Israel of God and both believing Jews and Gentiles are promised the same grand future. *Second*, the promise here is primarily a promise of eternal salvation, of the life of heaven, and of the complete fulfillment of human life as it will be experienced at the consummation of all things. The images used here were those most powerful to Amos’ audience and the ones usually used in the Bible to describe an authentically human future – the continuation of human life as we know it in the world to come – but without sin or sin’s consequences in a world much more wonderful than words are able to express.

In other words, Amos’ description of the future here is simply another version of that description of heaven that John gives us at the end of the book of Revelation: the entrance of the believing nations into the heavenly Jerusalem and into a life that is in every way all that a human life ought to be because it will be lived in communion with and under the blessing of the Triune God.

Now, brothers and sisters, we began our studies in Amos by saying that however uncongenial the message of divine wrath and judgment is to the human heart and, all the more, to the modern Western mind, we need to hear it. We need to live our lives fully alive to the fact that this world is doomed and everyone in it who has not a living faith in Jesus Christ. We need to be all the more conscious of the fact that the church – the ostensible people of God – will be the first to suffer God’s wrath (all those who merely pretend to be Christians but who do not live a Christian life) and will suffer that wrath in a conspicuously severe form. Amos is nothing if he is not a

preacher of *that* message, stern, unrelenting, gloomy, disturbing, unwelcome as it is. Anyone who does not believe that what happened to Israel in 721 B.C. – that horrible catastrophe that engulfed and destroyed that people – is a picture, an anticipation of what will happen to the whole world of unbelievers is living in a dream world. They are banking on Amos being wrong, utterly wrong about them and about the world. And Amos is not wrong. Not only does he have all of human history on his side – a history that rings every day with anticipations of this final judgment – but he is a prophet of the living God, whose prophecies were accredited by the Lord Jesus Christ and by his apostles. It is as certain that Amos' vision of the future – both of judgment for the wicked and vindication for the righteous – is true as it is certain that Jesus rose from the dead.

This reality of divine judgment, so solemnly promised and starkly depicted beforehand by Amos and so catastrophically demonstrated in the Assyrian destruction of Israel, ought to make us serious people. Serious about our own salvation, about the salvation of our children, and about the salvation of others. We ought to be people who fear God in a world full of people who have no fear of God. It ought to make us less worldly and more spiritually-minded. It ought to make us cry more and laugh less. It ought to break our hearts.

But Amos does not end with this message of impending doom for those who do not know the Lord. He ends with a promise – call it roses and lavender if you will – a promise of a wonderful day, a day of fulfillment, joy, and perfect satisfaction for every human being who is numbered among the true people of God when history comes to its close. There is a future out there – Amos helps us almost to see it in our mind's eye – a future so happy, so wonderful, so full of everything worthy we have ever known as human beings –and *that* is *our* future if we are truly followers of Jesus Christ.

Billy Sunday, the ex-baseball player turned evangelist, used to say that if there is no heaven or hell then there are a lot of ministers who have raised money under false pretences. That is absolutely fair. Paul himself was willing to say that if Jesus didn't rise from the dead and if the Bible's doctrine of the future – both good and bad – were not true, that Christians are to be pitied. They would be the classic examples of people who bet on the wrong horse!

But is it not much easier to see that the world is full of people who are betting that Amos was not speaking the truth when he preached that there was judgment awaiting those who rejected God and a world of immeasurable love and joy for those who were God's people by a living faith and an obedient life? It makes all the difference in the world – Amos' message – if it is true!

And it *is* true. Jesus said it was true. He preached the same message that Amos preached, the same judgment and the same eternal life. And in one conversation he had with his disciples about these very things he looked his disciples in the eye and said, "If it were not so, I would have told you." Amos was proved right about 721 B.C. even though when he preached that message it seemed utterly unlikely, and he was right about the bumper harvests and the mountains dripping wine and the people of God happily and forever settled in their own land. He was right because David's great descendant, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, has broken the back of that sin that alienated men from God – has broken the back of it for all who trust in him.

And that fact turns human life into something completely different than most people imagine it to be. It is the question to put to oneself and about everything, absolutely everything in your life: am I thinking, am I feeling, am I speaking, am I living as someone should who knows of God's wrath and of God's eternal salvation? And if you are a Christian it is the same question: am I thinking, feeling, speaking and living as someone who knows that though I deserve God's wrath, by God's grace in Jesus Christ, I am soon to be in that world where everlasting joy rests on everyone's head?

If you could see the king there in his glory; if you could see the beauty of the place, if you could see the smile on everyone's face, if you could feel the gladness and the goodness in every heart, if you could see such fullness of life stretching out before you for ever and ever, you would not think of anything in your life today in the same way: not the sorrows and not the joys. And that is the future of every Christian, as much the literal future as today was your future yesterday and tomorrow your future today. "Roses and Lavender" indeed!

That fact should shape our lives every day. That it does not is cause for earnest repentance. That it become so should be the longing of our hearts. To make it so should be our daily effort.

Samuel Rutherford, in one of his beautiful letters, lists thirteen reasons why his correspondent, one John Gordon, should take his life and the issue of his life seriously. Thirteen reasons. Everyone one of them is interesting and important. But he begins where the Bible begins and ends. Reason number one: "Weeping and gnashing of teeth in utter darkness, or heaven's joy."

We must never, ever forget!