

“Damned through the Church”

Amos 3:1-15

May 21, 2006

Text Comment

In the next section of the book, the indictment that Amos has drawn up against Israel in 2:6-16 is further expanded, clarified, and proved.

- v.1 The words that begin this section, “Hear this word...” is a refrain that will be repeated in 4:1, 5:1, and 8:4. It is also interesting to notice that Amos has brought the ancient nation together again in his view: Israel and Judah as a single nation. They received separate attention in chapter two, but here they are treated as one. It remains the case, however, as the following verses will make clear, that Israel, the northern kingdom, is chiefly in Amos’ view.
- v.2 The NIV’s translation is a free one, but accurate. The Hebrew says literally, “You only have *I known* of all the families of the earth...” But this is a very characteristic biblical usage of the verb *to know*. Here know means “love, choose, and form a relationship with.” We can think of the frequent use of “know” as a euphemism for sexual love, as in “Adam *knew* his wife, Eve...” but, especially, the use of the word in the context of God’s covenant. The Lord says of Abraham, for example, in Genesis 18:19, “I have known him so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord...so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.”
- v.3 Now the questions that follow are designed to make a point. The questions are all rhetorical, the answer in every case is obviously “No!”
- v.6 Everyone knew the meaning of blowing the *shophar* in city. It was the means of sounding an alarm. But in 6b the answer to the seventh question, obviously the main point of the preceding series of questions, is not so obvious. The answer is clearly “Yes!” But, just as clearly *these people* are not expecting disaster and did not see themselves in Amos’ question. The Israelites who believed that Yahweh would always bring help and never harm had forgotten that his covenant provided for curses for disobedience as well as blessings for faithfulness. [Stuart, 325]
- v.7 Now Amos departs from rhetorical questions to make his point in a straightforward way. Yahweh not only does bring disaster upon the unrighteous, but he communicates his intention to do so through his prophets. It is his way to communicate his intentions clearly through his prophets of whom Amos is one.
- v.8 Just as anyone pays attention when he hears the lion roar, so the Lord’s prophet cannot ignore or fail to deliver the Lord’s word.

Here is the entire doctrine of biblical prophecy and revelation. It is *God’s* word spoken through Amos his prophet. We have the same at the beginning of the book: “The words

of Amos...” in v. 1; “This is what the Lord says...” in v. 3. It is not a case of “this is what I think the Lord means...” or “I’m going to do my best to tell you what the Lord wants to say to you.” It is rather, “This is God’s message in God’s words!” [Motyer, 74]

- v.10 The pagan nations around Israel, those mentioned in chapter 1, are invited to observe Israel’s life to see whether the sins of Samaria deserve God’s judgment. Israel’s sins are so egregious that even the wicked nations around her will stand in judgment of her. Even nations long used to living off the labor of others would be shocked to see the level of exploitation practiced in Israel! [Stuart, 330] Israel’s people had so long ignored and defied the law of the Lord, she had grown so inured to her sins, that she couldn’t any longer tell what was right or wrong. Wrong-doing had become her second nature. [Driver, 160] She had lost the power of moral reasoning. Verse 10 is, of course, a very accurate description of our situation in the United States today. Catholic Charities in Boston has had to close down because it would not place children for adoption in homosexual partnerships. And apparently most folk in Boston think such a step is just and right and that those who oppose the normalizing of homosexuality are the moral equivalents of skinheads and neo-Nazis!
- v.11 The things Israel counts on – her strongholds and fortresses – will prove little obstacle to the Assyrians.
- v.12 Nor will her wealth save her. The wealthy in Samaria, who indulged themselves on fine and comfortable furniture, will be swept away. Only a few will survive. There is a widespread assumption in scholarship that the word rendered “Damascus” here – of course the capital city of Syria and not in Israel at all (and so hard to figure in this context) – should be rendered “damask,” that is, fine fabric. [Driver, Stuart]
- v.15 Verse 15 loses some of its impact in the NIV’s translation. “House” appears four times, not three. Bethel, in v. 14, the religious capital of Israel, is, literally, “house of God.” Of course, the fact that there are altars at Bethel says it all and sums up Israel’s rebellion. [Stuart, 331-332] And if the house of God falls, the winter house, the summer house, the houses of ivory, and the great houses all fall as well. When the house of God falls, no house remains. Israel’s great houses were monuments to her corruption and her ill-gotten wealth. They would not stand in God’s judgment. [Motyer, 80] Israel is powerless because God is against her! Hear him speak in these last two verses: “*I will punish,*” “*I will destroy,*” and “*I will tear down.*”

I confess that I stole the title for this sermon. Sermon titles have always been a problem for me, as you well know, and so if I find a good one coined by someone else, I simply steal it. But because I’m a Christian I have to confess that I stole it. So that is what I’m doing: confessing my theft. The title comes from a small volume of sermons written by the Lutheran scholar John Warwick Montgomery and published in 1970. It is an arresting title and it well serves to summarize Amos’ message in its entirety and especially here in chapter 3.

Montgomery’s thesis in those sermons he expressed this way:

“I’ve heard people say very often, ‘It’s better to go to church than not to go; it can’t hurt you.’ Well, my friend, it can hurt you! The church can be a place of accelerated salvation; but it can also be a place of accelerated damnation.” [24]

Well that is right and often enough taught in the Bible. As the prophets often make a point of saying, Israel and later Judah completely mistook the implication of her being the church of God, the chosen people. Israel took comfort from the fact that she was Yahweh’s elect. She felt that election was a guarantee of her safety. She argued that, having been chosen by the Lord as his special people, Israel must be the recipient of the Lord’s favor. She was counting on the fact that she was the church and that she went to church. She maintained her religious life.

As this little book proceeds, we will notice not only how active Israel’s religious life was but how much remained of the form of the ancient faith of Moses. There was everywhere in Israel the evidence that she remembered that she was Yahweh’s people, delivered from bondage in Egypt on eagles’ wings. She was the same Israel of old, or so she thought. Amos replied that, so far from that being the case, her rebellion, her disobedience, and her unbelief rendered her the object of God’s wrath, not his care and protection. Israel’s privilege as the chosen people of God made her responsibilities more sacred and her failure to meet those responsibilities made her situation more inexcusable than similar sins made the situation of the Egyptians or the Philistines. Judah would make the same mistake later in Jeremiah’s time – still more inexcusable because she had watched Israel’s destruction and knew full well that the Lord would not protect his people, would in fact come against them, if they proved unfaithful to him. Jeremiah’s great “Temple Sermon” in chapter 7 was directed at precisely the same way of thinking that Amos is attacking here. The southern kingdom thought that because Yahweh had placed his temple among *them they* would be, they must be safe from conquest. Jeremiah’s argument is the same as Amos’ here: if you want the Lord’s protection, you must live in faithfulness to him. If you do not, having the temple, so far from saving you, will make your judgment worse. In other words, the uniqueness of the church includes its unique peril.

Amos’ task was to preach the unpalatable truth that [Israel was] near to losing an inheritance that they had been brought up to think of as their automatic and inalienable birthright.” [Motyer, 75] Israel forgot that God can turn and become his people’s *enemy*! As we read in Isaiah 63:10:

“Yet they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. So he turned and became their enemy and he himself fought against them.”

Since the time of Cyprian, the great North African bishop of the 3rd century, there has been an adage in Christian theology. It goes: *extra ecclesiam non sit salus* or *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. And there is no doubt that it is true that ordinarily there is no salvation outside of the church. It is in the church that God has placed the truth that sets men free. It is in and through the church that the Holy Spirit pours out his saving grace and power. His grace brings men and women into the church. There is everywhere in the Bible the explicit and implicit teaching that those who are saved will be in the church and part of the church’s life and will draw strength from the worship of God’s house and the fellowship of the saints. It is God’s will and plan: *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*.

But to say that outside of the church there is ordinarily no salvation is not the same thing as saying that being in the church guarantees salvation. Being in the church *by itself* is the guarantee of nothing; but it is not, for that reason, nothing. Being in the church either is the means of your salvation or it makes your judgment worse than it otherwise would have been. *You are better off never having been in the church* if you do not believe in Christ and follow him; if you do not embrace God's Word and remain faithful to it; if you are not in the church in the way of heart and soul and mind as well as in body and in outward profession. When Jesus says that it will be better in the day of judgment for Sodom and Gomorrah than for the Jews of his day he is surely saying that Sodom and Gomorrah *will be punished* in the judgment for their sins; but he is also very clearly saying that the church folk who rejected him and refused the salvation he brought *will be judged even more severely*.

Yet today as then there are multitudes who come to church, some from time to time and others quite regularly, who – though they probably think about this very little – suppose, at least in the deeper recesses of their mind, that being a part of the church must inoculate them against the judgments of the Lord. Being in church must put God on their side. Going to church is good for them because it pleases God. They might not put it quite that way. They would talk about how going to church makes them better people, or how they enjoy the fellowship, or that it reminds them of higher things and makes them feel connected to God. But they do not belong and are not going to church for the reasons we are given in Holy Scripture, they do not think of the church and its worship as they are taught to think of it in the Bible, and they do not belong to the church because it is the family of God, whose father is God, or because they are followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, or because outside of the church there is no salvation and because they take the matters of salvation and of living for God to be the highest concerns of their existence. The message of Amos – which is a message very often repeated in the Bible – has left no imprint whatsoever on their thinking.

But ignoring or denying the reality of damnation through the church, of the fact that such large numbers of people through the ages have perished *in the church* and have left this world *from the church* only to encounter the Lord as an enemy and not a friend, I say to ignore or deny that reality or to treat it lightly is to show open contempt for the Bible, its message, and its history.

As Amos will remind us later, the great company that was delivered from bondage in Egypt, the company that Stephen calls in Acts 7 “the church in the wilderness,” died there under God's hand of judgment on account of their unbelief and disobedience. They did not and would not enter the rest of God; God was their enemy not their friend, their election notwithstanding. They were *in* the church but not *of* the church. No sooner had Israel settled in the Promised Land than she made her peace with the Canaanite culture round about her and through the long years of the judges she went through the motions of an Israelite faith while repudiating the Lord with her life. Her election was, over and over again, the cause of the Lord's severe judgment and his repudiation of generations of those Israelites. After her faith had been revived during the reigns of David and Solomon, the ten northern tribes openly rebelled against the Mosaic religion, built altars, golden calves, at both Dan and Bethel to persuade Israelites against taking the time and trouble to travel to the temple in Jerusalem to worship as the law of Moses required. From that point she lived her life – with only few exceptions – as the pagans did by and large, with a thin

vener of the ancient faith laid over the top. She thought of herself as the church, but she lived like the world.

After the destruction of the northern kingdom in 721 B.C. Judah followed her sister in the same course of apostasy and suffered God's vengeance herself in 586 B.C. After being brought back into the Promised Land following the exile, it was not long before her faith and her commitment to live according to God's law began to wane. By the time of the first century and the appearance of the Messiah, the church had moved so far from the ancient faith of Moses and the prophets that when the Son of God, the Messiah came among her, she crucified the Lord of Glory.

And lest we imagine that the same problem and the same danger do not exist in the new epoch, we have the same warnings addressed to Christian churches in the New Testament that we find in Amos or the other ancient prophets. Take, for example, the Lord's address to the church in Laodicea in Rev. 3:14-22, another church, by the way, that was wealthy and self-satisfied.

“You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. ...So, I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”

Amos could have written that. Amos *did* write that! Laodicea was a Christian church, but she was in danger of finding the Lord her enemy not her friend.

And what we find in the biblical history, we find times without number in the history of the church ever since. Not long after the church was solidly established and the gospel set out on its course of conquest in the world, the church began to fill up with people who denied what the Bible teaches and did what the Bible forbids. That problem became exponentially worse when Christianity was formally recognized in the 4th century and worse still when it became the established religion of the Roman empire and vast numbers of people were added to the church who had no living faith in Christ and no intention of living for him. It will curl your hair to read what so-called Christian bishops did in the 4th century to faithful Christian ministers and their people – just like the so-called priests of Israel. It was the church against the church, as it had been so often in Israel's history: the unbelieving church persecuting the believing church. Later on, in Dante's *Divine Comedy* we get some sense of the corruption of the medieval church, the venality of its ministers and the ignorance and spiritual indifference of its people.

Amos, you remember, spoke in chapter two of the sexual sin that was prevalent in Israel in his day, even in connection with worship. Well, Israel in the 8th century B.C. had nothing on the Christian church in medieval Europe. Good grief, even Pope Leo, who presided over a Vatican populated with bastards, complained that “the immodest life of the monks [has] come to such a pitch that neither kings, princes, nor the faithful have any respect for them.” Most German priests – sworn to celibacy every one – kept women. In Norfolk, Ripon, and Lambeth, in England, 23% of the men indicted for sex crimes were clerics, though they accounted for only 2% of the population. The nuns were scarcely better. One monk noted that “many convents...differ little from public brothels.” It sounds like a sanctuary in Israel in Amos' day.

Abbot Johannes Trithemius of Sponheim condemned his own monks.

“The whole day is spent in filthy talk; their whole time is given to play and gluttony.... They neither fear nor love God; they have no thought of the life to come, preferring their fleshly lusts to the needs of the soul...” [The above from William Manchester, *A World Lit By Fire*, 128-130]

No wonder then that Savonarola in the 15th century – outraged as Amos was by the corruption of the church – should have been burned for his troubles. When, for example, the supposedly celibate archbishop of Scotland had fourteen children, eleven sons and three daughters – and he was all too typical of Roman churchmen – it was unlikely that criticism of the church’s sexual immorality was likely to find a willing ear. It didn’t in Amos’ day and didn’t in Savonarola’s. To be sure, there was something very impressive about the medieval church. Anyone who has stood in its great cathedrals has felt the spiritual power of them. But, at the time, so far as biblical faith and life are concerned, it was more often the power of Dan and Bethel rather than that of Jerusalem. The glorious outside of the church – as in Amos’ day – hid the rotten inside.

It was no doubt true of the church in Israel as it was of the later medieval church, that the ordinary priest neither knew the gospel nor the Word of God nor cared to teach it carefully to the people. When one of the few godly ministers in early 16th century Scotland was rebuked for preaching the Gospel or Epistle to his parishioners every Sunday, the bishop said, “I thank God that I never knew what the Old and New Testament was...” Plenty of Israelite priests in Amos’ day could have said the same thing about Exodus and Deuteronomy!

But then the situation was often scarcely better in the 18th century churches gutted by rationalism and deism, in the 19th century churches that practiced a polite but dead orthodoxy, and in our 20th and 21st century churches in which the pulpit was as likely to be an enemy of the gospel as its champion and in which, in many places of the world, there has been a thorough mixture of the Christian faith with whatever forms of unbelief were popular in that time and place. And what of sexual immorality in our day? We’ve had more than enough of *that* in what is still called the Christian church! We have adulterous ministers; we have priests guilty of sexual abuse by the thousands; and we have homosexual bishops. And we know very well that what is true of the clergy is all too true of the laity.

People nowadays dispense with a biblical book like Amos as belonging to a far away place and a far off time. It sounds so unlike what we read and hear today. It does not belong to our world, or so it is thought by many. But the fact is, Amos is describing the church as it has often been, as it has always been in part, throughout its history and right up to this very day. A church full of unbelievers who think God must be their friend when in fact he is their enemy: that is what Amos is describing and he could and would describe the same today. There is a believing church, to be sure; a faithful church. There was in Amos’ day, but too much of the church is rotten. It looks like the church in some ways; it talks like the church in some ways, it certainly claims to be the church, but it has rejected the Word of God and thrown off the law of God and is, for that reason, subject to severer judgment than other peoples who have never made any pretence of being Christians.

From the beginning it has been fundamental to the Bible's philosophy of history that, as Jesus put it, "many are called, but few are chosen." There are many *in* the church who are not *of* the church. Large tracts of Holy Scripture are devoted to this theme and this fact. This is why there is so much warning, and such solemn warning addressed *to the church* in the Bible. This is why the church's witness in the world is so often ineffective and utterly unimpressive if it is not plainly false: because the church must carry the enormous weight of her own unbelief and her own rebellion as she walks through this world. No one was going to think high thoughts of Yahweh and his holy love who observed Israel, his church and people in Amos' day.

Now we must remember this and take this truth to heart. We must not doubt that our election – in the sense of being in the church of God – can deepen our punishment as well as ensure our eternal life. Given the teaching of the Bible and the history of the church, it is a brave man or woman who finds no reason to be concerned, no reason to be serious about being sure that he or she is not taking friendship with God for granted; less a brave man or woman and more a foolish one.

Amos 3:2 not only explains so much of the present world and the history of the world and the church in the world, but it summons us to make our calling and election sure, to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, knowing that it is God, the holy God, whose church we belong to and whose summons we must answer.

You will notice that Amos' message – the same as that of the other prophets of the Bible – was that divine judgment was coming. He addressed the present in the light of the future. [Motyer, 72] What would it matter, after all, how Israel lived, what she thought of Yahweh, how seriously she took the matter of her salvation and her peace with God, if there was no reckoning, no coming day when she would have to give an account of her life to God and receive what was due her? If there is no coming judgment, what does it matter if Massachusetts despises Catholic charities and would rather see it closed than allow them publicly to demonstrate their opposition to homosexuality? It is just one person's opinion against another and the most powerful will win. So Israel thought and so she lived. That is, *until the Assyrians arrived bearing God's wrath with them.*

John the Baptist's message was not "repent so that the kingdom of God might come." It was rather "repent *for the kingdom of God is coming!*" Tertullian said in his day, "We get ourselves laughed at for proclaiming that God will one day judge the world." Amos said the same thing in his day and we can say the same thing today. But the world's laughter has a hollow ring to it, when the lion's roar can – at any time of the day or night – be heard off in the distance and growing closer day by day. Israel snickered until she wailed in fear and despair. Israel is gone, swept away; she can't tell us now what she thinks of Amos' message and whether she wishes she had never been part of the church of God. It is too late.