

“The Point of No Return”

Amos 4:1-13

May 28, 2006

Text Comment

- v.1 We are not given a new description of Israel’s sin and unbelief in the opening verses of chapter 4. Rather, the previous indictment that the prophet has given against the nation of Israel is summed up in two sharply focused pictures, the first a wealthy Israelite home (4:1-3), the second a well-attended Israelite shrine (vv. 4-5). [Motyer, 93]

As one commentator wisely puts it: “Women are the trend-setters in society. They have ever been the final guardians of morals, fashions, and standards. Consequently Amos can isolate the heart-beat of society by examining its typical women.” [Motyer, 93]

Bashan was known as we are reminded on several occasions through the Old Testament for the size and quality of its livestock (cf. Deut. 32:14; Psalm 22:12) and the women here are likened to animals fattening themselves on rich pasture. Theirs was a sensual life: lived for the flesh and for pleasure. Theirs was a life in which the poor were oppressed and they made demands of their husbands for the household service they should have been providing themselves. All because they were seeking pleasure and comfort and that only. [Stuart, 332]

- v.2 If you have ever had a fishhook stuck in your finger or cheek as sometimes happens to fishermen, you will know what an appalling image that is.
- v.3 The once proud city of Samaria will have so many gaps and breaks in its walls that one can go out of the city in virtually any direction. No one knows the location of Harmon. The sense seems to be that the dead bodies of these women will be thrown into a dump that lies in a certain direction from Samaria.
- v.4 Amos is taunting the Israelites for their punctiliousness in religion. Like Isaiah he is saying that all they are accomplishing with their worship is the multiplying of their sins and the deepening of their judgment. Amos is mocking them by exaggerating their practices as if they were going to the sanctuaries every day as if they were offering their gifts every third day (not year as in the NIV) – as if, in other words, the Israelites were doing almost nothing but making pilgrimages to Bethel and Gilgal. But what good is all of this doing?
- v.5 Leavened bread and burning the bread were violations of the Mosaic ritual and freewill offerings were supposed to be private matters between the individual and the Lord, not public demonstrations of one’s piety. Their *worship*, in other words, is the demonstration of their unbelief and their self-absorption. It makes matters worse, not better.
- v.6 This new section beginning at verse 6 and continuing through verse 11 begins with a first person verb and then the additional “I” pronoun to emphasize the pronoun. You will

notice the pronoun “I” seven more times these verses 11. There is a deliberate contrast between what Yahweh has done and what Israel is doing. Israel has been busy rebelling against the Lord; the Lord has been busy seeking to bring her to repentance.

Since the days of Moses Israel had been told that if she wandered from the Lord and if she rebelled against God’s covenant with her, he would punish her in various ways in order to draw her back to himself (Lev. 26; Deut. 28). You have a list of the punishments that God said he would use for this purpose in Lev. 26; Deut. 28). The misfortunes that have befallen Israel and that are now listed in the succeeding verses are these very punishments that God promised long before in his covenant: famine, drought, crop diseases, plague, and defeat in war. The particular instances of each curse are not indicated; but we know from the history of the Old Testament that there were many instances of all of these in Israel’s history from the death of Solomon to the middle of the 8th century B.C. where we are now.

- v.12 All of these catastrophes had been portents of God’s wrath and Israel had ignored them all. Now his wrath will befall but with all the limitations removed. What is now to befall her will not be portents of something yet to come, but it will be the wrath always indicated and anticipated in those previous judgments. It is very interesting and important that the Lord says, “Prepare to meet *your* God, O Israel.” Once again, as we saw last time in 3:2, God’s covenant relationship to Israel is made the basis for the certainty and severity of her judgment. She has sinned against the light, she has sinned against God’s grace, she has sinned against the covenant that God made with her alone with all the peoples of the earth.
- v.13 The God whose justice and judgment Israel must now face is the sovereign Lord who controls nature. Israel cannot escape such power, she cannot withstand the Lord when he comes against her in judgment, when the God of Armies becomes her enemy and the title the NIV characteristically renders “Lord God Almighty.”

This material in the book of Amos is particularly difficult for the modern reader. We are not used to this kind of message and not accustomed to its tenor and tone. We never hear anything like this anywhere else in our experience unless we hear it in church. It is unsettling, disturbing, ominous, even depressing. And we are a people that have been taught that depression is something not to embrace but to cure. And in the Western world, it has become much harder for people to believe messages like these. Like Israel in the 8th century B.C. we are a prosperous people. It is hard for us to reckon with the prospect of a divine judgment so severe, so destructive so relentless. We are used to prosperity and no matter what we say about our knowledge of the rest of the world we have a hard time imagining catastrophe, at least for ourselves. There may be made others in the world today who do not, but we do. In our culture the twin influences of an all-pervasive advertising and popular psychology have rendered us inclined, and deeply so, to the positive, the upbeat, the encouraging, the complimentary, and the congratulatory. We find condemnation and, still more, we find threat even less welcome than previous generations of proud human beings have found them. They are not only unwelcome to us, such dour and pessimistic messages as these may strike us as strange, alien, disgusting, even immoral.

Perhaps our parents, who lived through great wars and the depression, can more easily come to terms with Amos' warnings, but they do not belong to our experience. We watch catastrophes on television as if they were put on for our entertainment. We are taken aback by the tsunami in the Indian Ocean and its sudden and devastating impact, but our world remains so comfortable we are not affected in any lasting way. The bird flu, deaths in IRAQ, even 9/11 made only momentary impressions on our society as a whole. They send a shudder, but were quickly gone. Church attendance spiked immediately after 9/11, but within a few weeks it had returned to its previous levels.

What is more, in our scientific age, we are much less likely to connect events in the world with the action of the Almighty. If there is a drought, as there had been at least for three years in Israel, we know from I Kings, we are more likely to think of global warming than the hand of God. And so with AIDS, famine, and so many other scourges in the modern world. Second causes have become the only causes. The causes of such things, we think, are natural, or political, or social but we are concerned less where the problems came from and more with how to surmount them. And in the case of tsunami, earthquake or hurricane those are just misfortunes that have no bearing on our behavior except that they call us to renew our efforts to combat global warming or detect the signs of such events beforehand so that we can give more effective warning. In all the orgy, and it was an orgy, of reporting of the tsunami, the Pakistan earthquake, and hurricane Katrina in the Western press, the one thing that was conspicuous by its absence was any thought – any thought whatsoever – that these catastrophes were either the hand of God or portents of still greater judgment to come. Indeed, to have suggested such a thing would have evoked a howl of protest from every quarter, much as Amos' preaching did. The very idea that God should have done such a thing offends people almost more than any thought about God offends them in our modern world..

Indeed, there are many religious people – as there were in Amos' day – who would have been positively offended by the notion that Yahweh *would ever have done* what Amos said he had been doing all along and was now about to do to a far greater degree. We were reminded of this recently in a series of television ads produced by the United Church of Christ. A series of ads that ran in the East, not the Northwest, the United Church of Christ has very little presence in our part of the country. But the series of ads features an intolerant church – obviously a conservative, Bible-believing church like our own – ejecting one after another an African-American mother, a gay-couple, an Arab-American, and a person using a walker. The thinly veiled sub-text of the ads is that the God of liberal Christianity of the United Church of Christ would never condemn people and would never reject people for any reason. Whereas the God of the Bible as understood by conservative Christians is a brute, as bigoted as his followers are. I am reminded of the Methodist bishop of the mid-20th century, G. Bromley Oxnam, who did not hesitate to say that the God of the Old Testament, Amos' God, was a dirty bully!

But every Bible reader, sooner or later, has to decide whether he will conform his way of thinking to the teaching of Holy Scripture. It is true that God is merciful, and that he welcomes all who come to him in Jesus name in true and living faith, but it is not only the emphatic and repeated teaching of the Bible, it is the conviction of the human conscience that the living God, the Creator of heaven and earth, the true God stands over against mankind as someone whose

holy nature, whose justice, whose law is not subject to the tastes, the predilections and the prejudices of human beings. And that much of what human beings think and do is and must be an offense to him. People know that. It is the reason why liberal Christianity survives only by feeding on the dead carcass of its once evangelical past. For man to conform God to modern human preferences and opinions – to make him fit our tastes, to be the kind of God that we think God ought to be in early twenty-first century American culture – requires an extraordinarily small God. People seem to know that. They seem to know that that is not likely a true vision, image or sight of God. That is why in Israel, in Amos' day, though there was a very active worship of God, the knowledge of God, the sense of his presence, his power, his justice rested very lightly almost imperceptibly on the Israelite mind. He had been redefined so as to be quite unimportant really too small to bother about. Israel was free to do as she pleased and live as she wanted. Such is always the case, will always be the case, when men invent their own gods, whatever names they give to those gods. As one observer has noted, in connection with the United Church of Christ television ads,

“The biblical God covered in blood, is plausible; the liberal God is not. What we have in the liberals' tireless pronouncements against conservative religion is protest against the fearsome and not-to-be-trifled-with God who haunts them not only here, but in general human consciousness, and will not go away.” [S.M. Hutchens, “The God Who's Still There,” *Touchstone* (June 2006), 3]

The God of Amos was the God of Armies, the God of hosts, the Lord God Almighty – that is not a god who bends his nature to fit our tastes. The true God is unlikely to be the god of the religious liberals and most people – religious and irreligious seem to know this. That is why, after all, that the United Church of Christ is half the size it was just one generation ago and is shrinking still more with every passing year. Indeed, it is as unlikely that the United Church of Christ can teach us about the nature of the true god as it was that Israel had somehow connected with Yahweh himself when she rejected his law, broke his covenant, began to worship in the way popular in the Canaanite culture of her time and began living for her own pleasure. That is why religious liberalism is dying. Their God is unworthy of bothering about. Religion in such churches today, as in Samaria in the 8th century B.C., is a pleasant hobby, nothing more. God had become in Israel, “a United Church of Christ kind of God, who hasn't the strength of character to kick anybody out of anywhere, including one of his own churches.” [*Ibid*, 4] Amos had a different understanding of God.

Still, even if we are unwilling to re-define God so as to make him a mirror image of our own opinions, likes, and practices. Even if we refuse to imagine God is as small as that, as subject to our likes and predilections as that, it takes faith to see the heavy hand of God as Amos sees it and to know him at work as a judge in the world. Troubles can seem so haphazard and so unrelated to anything happening in the world. The Lord admits as much this. We read in v. 7 that it rained in one place and remained dry in another. One field was soaked, in another the crops withered away to nothing. It was not as though Amos is saying one group of farmers were godly and so got rain and the other group was ungodly and did not. God's judgments are rendered piecemeal so long as they are a portent and anticipations of a judgment to come. So long as they are intended as warnings, not as the execution of his wrath. So it is easy for those who have a low view of God or no view of God to doubt that God had anything to do with this famine, or that blight, or this

hurricane, or that earthquake. Did God really cause them? If he did, why didn't he make that more clear?

But Amos has already said any view of God that remotely resembles the truth that man has received about God both in nature and in his Word, any view of God like that will answer this question with no difficulty. "When disaster comes to a city, (Amos has already asked rhetorically) has not the Lord caused it?" Of course he has! God causes everything, he is in control of everything. He rules over everything in this world he has made. Everything comes from him and disaster especially! The Lord would say through Isaiah years later:

"I form light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I am the Lord, who does all these things," [Isaiah 45:7]

Anyone with any remotely accurate understanding of God knows that. It was this moral and theological sense of the world that Israel had lost and Amos was now proclaiming to her again. And it is all the more important that it be proclaimed to us again, our world being so like the world Amos encountered in the 8th century B.C.

Amos, of course, was right and events would prove him right. God was angry with the wickedness of his people, still more angry that they had not repented after so many punishments had been imposed as warnings. And his wrath was about to be unleashed upon Israel. In a few decades time, the proud and prosperous nation would exist no longer: her shrines broken, smoking ruins left of her proud cities, her people dead or enslaved the population never to be gathered together again.

But, of course, few could imagine this twenty years before when Amos was preaching his sermons. The nation seemed indestructible, riding a tide of prosperity into a rosy future. But, in fact, God was against her, the God of Armies had exhausted his patience. Israel couldn't see that, but it was the supreme *fact* of her existence. What rendered Israel blind to all of this was her lack of faith. She had lost touch with the true knowledge of God that she had been given and when she lost that knowledge, she lost touch with reality as well. She was living in a dream, in a mirage, but didn't know it.

But how often have we seen this? How often has the future taken men by surprise and how often has it unmasked and revealed their foolishness and their wickedness? Imagine knowing ahead of time what the consequences of certain decisions would be. Would Napoleon have attacked Russia had he known what would befall his grand army upon the onset of the cruel Russian winter? Would Germany have gone to war either in 1914 or 1939 had she known beforehand what devastation and humiliation would be the consequence? Would America have gone to war in Vietnam if she had known how that conflict would end? For that matter, would she have gone to war in Iraq this last time had we known then what we know now? Would the sexual revolution have gathered the same head of steam in the 1960s if people could have seen then the consequences of that fundamental shift in the behavior of our culture, had people known that the divorce rate would sky-rocket, that it would now be typical of American children to live in broken homes? Would we have embraced that revolution had we known that huge proportions of American children would now be born to unwed mothers, millions of abortions performed every

year, we would become a pornography culture even to the extent that, sated on an unending stream of sexual images, men in ever larger numbers would come to require sexual stimulation that was increasingly violent and increasingly perverse, and that on television sitcoms it would become standard fare even for children in these television shows to make dirty jokes, and homosexual sex would be normalized, and that AIDS would become a fact of American life? Would anyone of them embrace the sexual revolution in the 1960's could they have seen the 1990's and the early years of the twenty-first century?

No one advocating those wars or revolutions accepted or expected that such curses would be their inevitable consequence. Quite the contrary. They were confident that the pursuit of power and pleasure would lead to more power and more pleasure, not to shame, not to disgrace, not to devastation, not to the degradation of human life, and not to death. But, had they true faith in the true and living God, Amos is telling us, they would have known that from the outset. For this is a moral world and God is its judge and, patient as he is and merciful as he is and as often as he will warn people of judgments to come, he has filled this world with portents of his wrath so that both men and women might respond before it is too late, and so that no one will be without excuse when he executes his vengeance upon a sinful world. Offenses against God's holiness have never been, are not, and will never be, without his punishments and punishments that are sufficiently serious to cause every human conscience at least in its depths to realize that these are portents of something still to come. God does not leave his justice without a witness in this world.

Everybody understands that the future will stand in judgment over the present and that a person's present confidence or societies present confidence can be made to look ridiculous, and foolish, and evil by the course of events as those events unfold. So it would prove in Israel's case.

But, of course, in an ultimate moral sense, man already knows this in the present. Everyone knows this. Everyone knows that judgment is coming. Suppress the truth as he will, as Paul says in Romans 1:32:

“Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do those very things but also approve of those who practice them.”

The knowledge of divine judgment is in here in every life. He or she gives away that knowledge in the way in which we judge others so regularly and so cruelly. This fact that men suppress, the fact that they know but will not permit themselves to consider, is the very fact with which the Lord so solemnly begins this oracle of judgment in verse 2 of chapter 4: God is holy, in his very nature he is holy, and his holiness is offended by the disobedience and rebellion of his people. In this great oath the Lord, 'the sovereign Yahweh', commits the whole unique resource of his nature to the complete reversal and destruction of the order of things as it then existed in Israel. [Motyer, 94] God will not be mocked. Israel was mocking the Lord. But now she would reap what she had sown and the time of reaping was drawing near.

When Katrina hit it was not a surprise to any of us to hear Daniel Schorr opine on *National Public Radio* that if there were an Intelligent Designer of nature, “he had a lot to answer for.”

According to Daniel Schorr, no God would pound a people with a terrible storm as Katrina had done. But of course such a sentiment utterly ignores God's holiness and the sinfulness and rebellion of this world against its God and maker. Such a sentiment also ignores God's mercy. As we read in these verses "famines, droughts, plagues, earthquakes" they are all divinely imposed disciplines meant to recall mankind to God. That they are so severe is the index of both the intractability of man's rebellion and the far graver and more deadly nature of God's final wrath. No parent who has ever punished a child for playing with matches can deny the principle by which the living God seeks to restore the whole earth to a sound mind and a sound heart.

You will have noticed the five-fold refrain in vv. 6-11: "yet you have not returned to me," declares the Lord." The Lord had punished Israel again and again with scourges of various kinds to warn her from her way, but she had ignored them. She had ignored both God's prophets and his heavy hand. Nothing had shaken her self-confidence; nothing interfered with her headlong pursuit of her own pleasures in indifference to God. And the result was that Israel had finally reached the point of no return. God will send no more warnings. The next stroke to fall would be the last and final stroke. "Prepare to meet your God, O Israel." You would not return to me as your Savior; now prepare to meet me as your Judge, your implacable enemy.

And that point of return comes on both sides. As with tobacco or alcohol or other vices, there comes a point at which the damage done to the liver or the lungs cannot be undone. A person may live for some time yet, but he or she has passed the point of no return. The damage is too great to be cured. And in the spiritual realm there is a like law. Persistent refusal to believe what God says, persistent refusal to obey his commandments when summoned to do so finally so hardens the heart that it becomes impervious to penetration and so poisons the mind that it can no longer function correctly. The heart has become sermon proof and sickness proof. The Jews in Jesus' day were so habituated to unbelief that when the Messiah came among them and performed grand miracles of divine power before their eyes, they could not see him for what he was so obviously the Son of God. In Revelation 9 John tells us that it will be so at the end of the age. He tells of plagues being visited upon the earth and then says that "the rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of their sins..." How like life, how like human history. So it was in medieval Europe in the time of the black death, the terrible plague that took perhaps one-third of the population of Christian Europe in the mid-14th century. Did those superstitious people repent and trust in God, as you might expect when a religious people like that felt God's hand so remarkably heavy upon them? No, they did not! Europe became more wicked and more sinful in the months and years that followed. They became so completely inured to their sin and to God's judgment that all they could think of was eating and drinking and being merry, for tomorrow they were sure to die. They were past learning lessons as was Israel in Amos' day.

But there is a point of no return also because the Lord's patience can be exhausted on his side and so it was in this case. He was turning away from his people, he was done seeking their repentance. When the Assyrians arrived at the gates of Samaria, Israel cried out to the Lord, but he paid no attention to her cries, it was too late, way too late. This solemn fact is often enough taught and illustrated in the Bible. You remember that Israel's act of rebellion at Kadesh Barnea in the wilderness was the last straw. She had exhausted Yahweh's patience and, though the next day she tried to do what she should have done the day before, she was mauled by Canaanite

armies because God had left her and would no longer go with her. And for the rest of those 40 years he held his people at arm's length until they had all perished in the wilderness.

We have no divine prophet to tell us where precisely the church of God is today, at this present moment in the history of western civilization. We cannot know whether the point of no return has been passed in the church or in the society. There were, after all, believers in Israel in Amos' day there just weren't nearly enough of them, and the unbelievers were too defiant in their unbelief and in their rebellion. We can only confess that God is holy and that everything we have ever seen happen in this world reminds us that the people that ignore or defy that divine holiness must perish. We can also say that even in our day as in all previous days this world rings with the warnings of coming judgment; that everywhere we look we find anticipations of it. Therefore, the reality of divine judgment must be part of our understanding of life or we have lost touch with reality as Israel did in the day of Amos. The Assyrians were Israel's final judgment in the world. But they were themselves still only anticipations of the still worse, and still more final judgment of the world to come.

That such things happen so often in God's world, and on such a scale, is a reminder to us all that the Sovereign Lord has sworn by his holiness, that a time will surely come when [the unbelieving and the disobedient] will be swept away. The only way to deny that is to deny God altogether. The God of battles, the God revealed to us in holy scripture. The God who spoke through his prophets. But denying God will not make the judgment go away; it will, in fact, hasten it and make it still more severe.

It is the most honest, right, and true thing to say to large sections of the church as well as to our society as a whole: "Prepare to meet the God of Armies." For nothing is more certain than that the people, the societies, the generations of the church that rebel against God and ignore his holiness must, in due time, face his vengeance. And everywhere we look and whatever direction are portents of doom. This world stands under the wrath of God. Its doom waits. Why? Because God is calling the world to himself, meantime, and because he will have no one with an excuse when his judgment finally falls. What does that make of your faith, your living faith in a living God? What does that make of the forgiveness of your sins? What does that make of the hope of everlasting life that dwells in your heart by the Holy Spirit? Well, if you have that, it makes it the most important thing in the world -- by far! Amen.