

## **“The Contest for the Truth in the Church”**

**Amos 7:1-8:3**

**July 2, 2006**

We do not turn to a book like Amos for lessons in daily living, the sort of subjects now so predominate in the evangelical pulpit. We come to a book of the bible like Amos rather for the broad themes of a biblical philosophy of history. But these themes according to the teaching of God's Word are immensely important and immediately practical. It is this overarching truth that is most to shape our lives and give our lives their tone and texture and most importantly their motive. The Lord Jesus was always saying that the key to life lies deep inside the heart. Out of the heart flow the issues of life and it is down in the heart, not up in the head where the techniques are learned, but down in the heart where the motives are found that the life is born. Such truths as these we have already considered in the prophecy of Amos:

1. That God's wrath and judgment is a reality in the world and it falls first and most severely on God's house, the church;
2. That there is a progression in unbelief, beginning with indifference to God's Word;
3. That there is a point of no return which unbelievers even in the church pass with their constant refusal to heed and answer God's summons to repentance; and once having passed these people are dead even though they live;
4. That divine wrath is revealed suddenly and ferociously over and over and over again in the history of the world and yet, nevertheless, it always surprises the unbeliever;
5. That the poor are swept up in this judgment as well as the rich; and that in God's holy judgment he remains forever no respecter of persons;
6. That repentance consists not of feelings and experiences, but of the repudiation of one's sin and the putting on of obedience before God because of one's consciousness of the Lord, of his reality, of his presence, and the reality of salvation in him and him only.

The embrace of these truths has much more to do with whether you will live forever in the world where everlasting joy is upon your head than whether you are happy in your marriage or whether you have found freedom in the management of your finances important as those things no doubt are. This morning we go on with another of these fundamental perspectives on the human race, life in this world and the history of the world until the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Day of Judgment.

### **Text Comment**

We are reading from 7:1 to 8:3. The chapter division between chapters 7 and 8 is not accurately placed as can be quite easily seen. The chapter divisions are not original to the bible. The four visions and the dialogues that follow each vision in turn are all cast in the same form and belong together. So 8:1-3 belongs with 7:1-9 in a single integrated unit of material. Moreover, 8:4 begins with “Here this...” which is the formula that Amos has used repeatedly to begin new sections of his prophecy, as, for example, in 3:1, 4:1, and 5:1.

- v.1 Each of the visions opens in the same way: “This is what the Lord showed me...”  
Locusts, as you know, represented an unstoppable agricultural disaster in the ancient

world. This swarm was to fall at the worst possible time, destroying the fruit of the second planting, that part of the harvest that was reserved for the farmers themselves. Without it, neither they nor their livestock would have food to carry them over to the next harvest.

- v.3 Over and over again in the Bible, the Lord is represented as desisting from a planned course of events in response to human appeal. Think of Moses interceding for Israel when Yahweh threatened to destroy his people. Well, here Amos is the intercessor and as a result of his intercession there would be no swarm of locusts.
- v.6 The second vision is of fire sweeping over the land. Amos again appeals to the Lord and the Lord again relents. Even in wrath the Lord will be as merciful as he can be.
- v.8 In the third vision a plumb line is used to illustrate the deviation of Israel from the true. A straight line will be set beside Israel and her crookedness will be evident to all. This time Amos is given no opportunity to intercede. The Lord has determined to punish Israel as Amos has said often enough in his preaching so far.
- v.9 Two particular objects of the divine wrath will be the false worship of Israel and its royal family that had abandoned God's covenant and forsaken its responsibilities to lead God's people in the ways of righteousness.
- v.10 We may assume that Amos did not keep these visions to himself. He preached them to Israel. And the message of 7:9 was the last straw for Amaziah. Amaziah was apparently the chief priest at the sanctuary at Bethel, one of the major sanctuaries set up in the northern kingdom in opposition to Jerusalem. No doubt Amaziah, being a non-Aaronic priest, serving at a heterodox sanctuary, took personally and deeply resented Amos' condemnation of Israelite life and worship.

The accusation that Amaziah brought against Amos was suited to provoke the maximum response from the king. Jeroboam had reigned for a long time and almost certainly there was opposition to him abroad in the land. Upon Jeroboam's death a few years later, his son was assassinated, further suggesting that there had been political intrigue already during the later years of Jeroboam's reign. So he would have been alert to any threat to his throne. Amos was certainly no political conspirator. He had not spoken treasonously against the king; he had taken no action against the king himself, and he had not conspired with anyone else to do so. But the Lord's public condemnations of the king and of the nation through his prophet could easily be taken in that way. They provided Amaziah with a pretext for his charge. So Amaziah gave Amos' prophecies against Israel a more personal character in hopes of raising Jeroboam's ire. What is more, Amos had condemned Israelite religion and the Israelite sanctuaries. Amaziah, no doubt and rightly, took that as a personal attack on himself and his work. He would not only want to punish Amos, he would want to discredit him and get rid of him. Getting him in trouble with the government would serve both purposes.

To say that the land cannot bear Amos' words is simply to say that they ought not to be tolerated.

- v.11 Amaziah exaggerates, as do most people who wish to place someone else in a bad light. Amos had never predicted that Jeroboam would die by the sword – in fact he died of natural causes – but Amos had said enough about the nation's sins and God's impending judgment by military conquest that it was a small step to saying that Amos was predicting Jeroboam's death by the sword. Amos *had* predicted Israel's exile. Amaziah didn't exaggerate that.
- v.13 Israelites, being wealthier and somewhat more cosmopolitan than the citizens of the southern kingdom, probably had come to think of Judah as the sticks and so dismissed out of hand the more conservative religion of the southern kingdom. "Get back to where you belong," Amaziah said to Amos. "Earn your bread there..." The insinuation is that Amos was preaching in Israel because the money was better in the wealthy north. As we often say, "it takes one to know one." Amaziah was judging Amos by his own standards. He thought of his work as simply a job, a living; he imagined it was the same for Amos.
- v.15 Amos' response was to the effect that he was not in it for the money; in fact, he had never had designs on the office of prophet; he had been gainfully employed in another occupation. But the Lord called him, gave him orders, and that was that.
- v.16 Amaziah, of course, had no knowledge of the Lord or the true calling of a man of God. Amaziah was a bureaucrat, doing the king's bidding. Amos was Yahweh's prophet under orders to deliver the Word of God to Israel. The two men had fundamentally different conceptions of their calling.
- v.17 Seeking to prevent God's people from receiving God's Word is a great sin and so it is no surprise that he should receive stern punishment. The last line of the curse is the explanation of the previous four: Israel will be conquered and its people sent into exile. The other punishments all are the regular, inevitable effects of military conquest and exile. *In any case, events would prove which of the two men has been speaking the truth and which a servant of the living God is.* That is something important about the Christian mind: it is always calmly ready to let history judge. Christianity is, at last, a prediction of the future and Christians have no doubt about their eventual vindication.
- 3:1 The fruit would be the summer fruit of figs, olives, or grapes.
- v.3 Amos has already referred to music in Israel's temple worship (5:23), but when the Lord's judgment falls the only music to be heard at Israel's sanctuaries will be wailing. And dead bodies will lie everywhere. All that remains is silence. After the deafening thunder of battle, many soldiers have commented on the impressiveness of the silence that followed. Silence is the sound of death.

Anyone who reads church history knows that the history of the church is, to some very significant measure, the history of her great men. And of those great men, the lion's share are

ministers of the Word – the descendants and the heirs of the OT priests and prophets. The apostle Paul calls himself a priest, for example, in Romans 15 because he is a preacher of the gospel. Priests and Levites were preachers in the Old Testament, many more of them preachers than superintendents of temple worship. Moses said that one of the principal duties of priests was to teach the Law of the Lord to Israel. [Deut. 33:10] We hear of priests and Levites preaching from time to time in the Bible, confirming clearly enough that this was their regular work. Prophets were preachers too. Many more of them ordinary preachers, not predictors of the future. We hear of schools of prophets in the Old Testament – what we would nowadays call a theological seminary – and of the many graduates of those seminaries we are told very little. But they would have been what we would call today preachers and teachers of the Word. It comes close to the biblical picture to say that priests were like our modern pastors and prophets were more like our modern itinerant preachers. I'm a priest, R.C. Sproul is a prophet. Francis Schaeffer and John Stott started as priests – they were both first church pastors – and finished as prophets. You get the point.

What I mean to say is that for all intents and purposes, Amos was what we would today call a preacher of the Word of God. He got his message more directly from the Lord than the ordinary Christian preacher does – indeed than the ordinary priest and preacher did in Amos' own day – but his calling was to proclaim God's truth to God's church and to the world. He is unique as a biblical prophet, to be sure – he was given visions of things to come, his messages were more directly the deliverances of God himself – but in other respects he is entirely typical as a preacher of the Word.

Such preachers have carried the gospel forward and been the vanguard of the kingdom of God ever since. You will have noticed long ago that the story of apostolic Christianity in the New Testament is primarily the story of the ministries of two men: Peter and Paul. That is certainly a remarkable fact: that the Lord chose to tell the story of his kingdom's advance in the world as the story of two men and their preaching ministries. In that we are being given a representative fact about the kingdom of God and its progress in the world.

After reading the New Testament, it does not surprise us that the story of early Christianity cannot be told apart from the biographies of men such as Ignatius, Justin, Irenaeus, Origen, Cyprian, Ambrose, Chrysostom, and Augustine. And the same continues to be the case in every era of church history. The story of medieval Christianity cannot be told apart from the personal histories of the church's great ministers: from Gregory the great in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century, to Bernard and Francis in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup>, to Wyclif, Huss, and Savonarola in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. The story of the Reformation cannot be told apart from the preaching and teaching ministries of such men as Luther, Calvin, and Knox. The story of the Great Awakening is the story of God's work done through preachers, such men as the Wesleys and George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards and others. The modern world-wide sway of the gospel cannot be accounted for apart from the life and work of the 19<sup>th</sup> century men who convinced the church to reach the unreached world – men like Thomas Chalmers and Charles Simeon – and the men who went: William Carey, Robert Morrison, William Burns, David Livingston, Adoniram Judson, and so many more. And in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the resilience of the Christian faith and its influence in the modern world cannot be explained apart from thinkers such as C.S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer and preachers such as Martyn Lloyd-Jones, John Stott, and Billy Graham. And these greater

men, of course, represent thousands upon thousands of lesser but also faithful ministers of the Word who preach the Word Sunday after Sunday to untold congregations around the world.

But all along the way of that grand story of the march of divine truth and grace through this dark and dying world there has been the story of another ministry, another company of men. These too are preachers, but not like Amos who received his message from the Lord and faithfully relayed it to men. These men are false prophets, corrupt priests, usurpers of the office of the ministry. Their message, as Amaziah's, they made up themselves. They put their finger to the air, determined which way the wind was blowing, and spoke accordingly. They delivered the message the king wanted them to preach, or the people, or the message they thought would make them popular and successful.

For every Elijah in Ahab's day there were countless priests quite happy to make common cause with the prophets of Baal. For every Jeremiah, there were a number of Pashurs and Hananiahs. For every Amos, Israel had a host of Amaziahs. For every Jesus there was a Caiaphas. For every Peter and Paul there were Jewish rabbis by the score who rejected the gospel root and branch and did everything in their power to frustrate its progress and to pluck it out of the hearts of men once it had been preached to them. For every Augustine there was a Pelagius; for every Chrysostom there were envious Arian bishops quite willing to sell their souls to get rid of the influential preacher of Constantinople. For every Luther there was a Pope Leo and a Johan Tetzel, for every Calvin there were a host of ignorant and immoral priests and rationalist ministers like Faustus Socinius. For every Wesley and Whitefield and Edwards there were many comfortable, self-satisfied, unbelieving ministers and bishops who went to great lengths to keep those men and the sound of their voices far away from their parishioners. For every Charles Spurgeon, there were many Victorian pastors of every stripe ready to pour scorn on the famous Baptist preacher's out-dated message. For every J. Gresham Machen in 1920s and 30s American Presbyterianism there was a Harry Emerson Fosdick or Henry Sloane Coffin. And still today, for every J.I. Packer or John Stott, or for every faithful African Anglican bishop, there is a John Shelby Spong, the now retired Episcopal bishop of Newark, who never met a biblical teaching he wasn't ready to jettison in a headlong rush to be modern and up-to-date. Spong and those like him are simply Amaziah redivivus, Amaziah alive again! All along there has been a shadow ministry and a shadow church.

What I mean to remind you from our text is that the fact that the one individual whom we are given to see opposing Amos' preaching in Israel was a minister himself – no doubt he would have called himself a priest of Yahweh – is predictable, typical, completely unsurprising. And given the fact that human psychology has not changed from the 9<sup>th</sup> century B.C. to our own day, and given the fact that unbelief has always been expressed in the same ways, it is not hard for us to imagine what Amaziah would have said about Amos' preaching. It was out-moded, impossibly narrow, not at all in keeping with the large vision of Moses, if only Moses were rightly understood. He would have taught his people – with amused condescension – to scorn the hell and brimstone preacher from the south. Amaziah prided himself on his respectability; Amos was a hick and those who took him seriously were hicks as well, uneducated and easily led as the *Washington Post* reporter famously said sometime back. Amaziah was even willing, as we read here, to seek the government's help in deporting the preacher forthwith and was not above exaggerating, if not downright lying, to secure Amos' ouster from the kingdom. And Amaziah

would have said and in some respect I believe that he would have thought that he was doing Israel a great service in ridding it of Amos' negative and judgmental message. As Jesus said to his disciples before he ascended to heaven, "a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God." [John 16:2]

The existence of this parallel ministry, this corrupt and unbelieving succession of false teachers and enemies of the truth, is so prominent a fact of church history, the number and influence of the long line of Amaziahs has so profoundly shaped the course of events in the kingdom of God and the world, that Henry Scougal, the 17<sup>th</sup> century Scot and author of the celebrated and influential little book, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* – this was the book instrumental in the conversion of George Whitefield – was willing to say in his day, quoting Chrysostom in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, that of the large number of men through the ages who have served as ministers of the Christian church he did not think that, comparatively speaking, many were saved. That is surely a remarkable thing for two very wise and godly men to say: most Christian ministers have been unsaved men! But, thinking about it, I have difficulty believing that it is not true. Think of how many time-serving men have occupied Christian pulpits through the ages; how much false teaching has squeezed the life out of congregations for generations on end. Think of the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox and the Protestant ministry, whether in our own day or in some earlier day. For example, in 1801 John Newton could write, "I am told there are about ten thousand parishes in England; I believe more than nine thousand of these are destitute of the gospel." That is a lot of parish ministers who were not preaching the Word of God faithfully! [Cited in I. Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided*, 103] "To whom much is given much is required, our Savior said." What does he think about unfaithful ministers and how will he judge them?

Well we are told something about that here in v. 17. It is a ferocious judgment that is pronounced against Amaziah for his false ministry. His wife will become a prostitute to survive, his children killed, his property despoiled, and the nation that he purported to provide spiritual leadership to will be destroyed. A judgment that severe, that relentless, is reserved for sinners whose sins are of great consequence. And there is no more consequential sin than that of faithless Christian ministers. Kings and politicians can ruin a nation for a time; bad ministers are much more lethal. Preachers of falsehood inject a poison at the well-head that generations will drink to their death.

The Bible says times without number that the reason for the people's ruin is bad ministers. Ask Jeremiah how Israel and Judah could have fallen so far and he will tell you that it was the result of the infidelity of the priests and the prophets. In Ezek. 34, the Lord says that the false and faithless shepherds of Israel had scattered his sheep and they had been plundered as a result.

"This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock."

You remember the Lord's remark to the effect that in his day the Jews were sheep without a shepherd. They had many ministers – many religious functionaries – but they had no true shepherds. And you remember the stern language often used in the rest of the New Testament to condemn those preachers and teachers who sought to subvert the faith of the church in the truth as it was revealed once for all through Christ and his apostles. Richard Baxter, who was well

familiar with unfaithful, grace-less and faith-less ministers of his own day, was only being faithful to the repeated warnings of Holy Scripture, when he wrote,

“I am afraid, nay, I have no doubt, that the day is near when unfaithful ministers will wish that they had never known the charge of souls; but that they had rather been colliers, or sweeps, or tinkers, than the pastors of Christ’s flock; when, besides all the rest of their sins, they shall have the blood of so many souls to answer for.” [*The Reformed Pastor*, 199]

I avidly read ministerial biography because I am a minister. I love to read about faithful and gifted ministers because I find both instruction and inspiration for my own work as a minister. You should read these biographies as well because you can’t really know the story of the church unless you do. What is more, these faithful Christian preachers together are a significant number of the greatest men of the world. But what that reading will show you is that shadowing these men and opposing them at every turn was another minister, or several, or many who, like Amaziah, did what they could to persuade people to pay no attention to the old-fashioned message of Amos and instead to live comfortably with their new message – enough like the old to attract the loyalty of the church, different enough to make it deadly error and modern enough to make it easy to believe. There should have been no sanctuary in Bethel, of course. Jerusalem and its temple was the only authorized center of Israel’s worship. But to keep Israelites loyal to the northern kingdom and to prevent them from advertising Israel’s illegitimacy by traveling to Jerusalem three times a year for worship, sanctuaries were set up at Bethel and elsewhere. Nevertheless, most of the old Mosaic ritual was still visible in Bethel; but the deletions and the additions were enough to have turned Bethel into a pagan sanctuary instead. Yahweh’s name was invoked in praise and prayer, but his lordship was denied in every practical way. The Yahweh worshipped at Bethel was a god of Amaziah’s devising, not the living God who revealed himself to Israel at the Red Sea and who gave his law to her at Sinai.

And so it has continued ever since. There is nothing more predictable than that the Episcopal church should have among its ministers John Shelby Spong, who wishes to remain and to be known as a Christian minister but who denies the existence of a personal God and does not believe that Jesus rose from the dead in any ordinary sense of that statement. He calls Jesus “Lord” for some reason, but it is not because he is God the Son, the Second Person of the Triune God, the Creator of heaven and earth, who became also a man to save his people from their sins. He preaches not to summon men and women to Christ that they might live and not die, but for other reasons, less momentous, less controversial, less, in his view, outdated and outmoded. Spong is a thoroughly modern minister, as was Amaziah before him. And he had plenty of folk in the church cheering him on as Amaziah did in his day. In Amaziah’s time, what he taught and the way he led Israel in worship amounted to virtually the same thing as Spong’s message today or that of so many other so-called Christian ministers. Amaziah too denied the one living and true God. He was happy to suggest that there were other ways to God than that which Yahweh himself had revealed. Other gods were worshiped at Bethel. He too denied the one atonement for sin. In the language of the New Testament, if he *had* believed in Jesus Christ, he would have gone to Jerusalem and refused to worship at Bethel. For the sacrifices at Jerusalem, the lambs that then took away the sin of the world did so only as prophecies of and anticipations of *the* Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world.

J.I. Packer has defined biblical preaching as “The event of God bringing to an audience a Bible-based, Christ-related, life-impacting message of instruction and direction from Himself through the words of a spokesperson.” [In McGrath, 256] Well, no one got that from Amaziah! He gave his congregation what G.K. Chesterton said many in the church will always prefer: “one solid and polished cataract of platitudes flowing for ever and ever.” [Cited in J.S. Stewart, *Heralds of God*, 29-30.]

Some sermons are designed to summon you to believe in Christ, others to embrace some truth of his word, others still to exhort you to live in a certain way. Some sermons are preached to cast you down, others to lift you up. But some are to settle you in a Christian confidence that the world is precisely as the Bible describes it to be. The Bible, first and foremost, after all, is a book that describes the world as it is. This is such a sermon. Why for goodness sake, has there been and is there today such an immense amount of naked unbelief *within the Christian church*? It is because there have been so-called Christian ministers in large number always found denying the very truth about Christ and salvation that brought the church into being in the first place, and teaching that soul-killing error effectively and winsomely to souls that, after-all, are all too ready to find the truth hard to believe. We can say this for sure: as the Lord Christ is abroad in the world by his Holy Spirit, so the Devil is at work seeking to block him at every turn. And as the living God, in gracious condescension, uses men as his spokesmen, so does the Devil. My confidence, my sure hope is founded on this fact – and yours should be too – the Lord will vindicate his truth as he did in Amaziah’s case. The punishment that false priest, that poor benighted fool suffered, I would wish on no one, even though he deserved it absolutely. Here is the profound difference between Amos and Amaziah – a difference that will be found between all faithful and unfaithful ministers – the Lord vindicated Amos for speaking his truth and he swept Amaziah away with his congregation, to remain forever a poster-boy of the unfaithful minister and the unfaithful congregation who listens to him.