

Amos 7-9 The Sovereignty of God: His Wrath and His Mercy

Janet Coughlin

1. Amos describes five visions given to him by God. The first two (locusts 7:1-3 and fire 7:4-6) are typically paired because of their 4-part structure. What are the four elements of the visions?

Locusts bring destruction in Egypt (Ex. 10:1-20), and Joel 1:1-2:27 also describes locusts as God's punishment. The demon locusts of Revelation 9:1-12 are part of the events leading up to the end of the world. In ancient times, people were powerless to protect their crops, and even now, with the advent of sophisticated pesticides, unexpected plagues of insects can still destroy whole species of plants and trees. (Simundson, 2005) The timing of this plague on the spring crop after the king's mowing would affect everyone except the royal household, but would be especially devastating to the poor.

It is difficult to say whether the judgement of fire in the second vision is lightning from heaven (Lev 10:2, 1Kgs 18:24, Job 1:16), fires set by invading armies (Amos 1:4,7,10, 12) or a natural disaster like a grass fire. This fire would be so significant that it would consume everyone and everything, including the "great deep," the deepest ocean, the great abyss of Psalm 36 or the primordial chaos present at Creation (Gen 1:6-8). (Simundson, 2005) With this vision, all, rich or poor, weak or powerful, would be destroyed.

Both visions end with God relenting. Amos begs "forgive!" and then "stop!" His intercession on the part of Israel halts God's wrath, at least temporarily, by pleading "How can Jacob survive? He is so small!"

Smith (2001, p. 357) asks, "If God is in charge of this world and knows everything about it, does he not carry out his perfect purposes without hesitation or human interference?" Scripture gives us examples of God's plans that are given conditionally, based on the behavior of specific groups (Deut. 27-28, Jer 18:1-12), and so can be changed through prayer. Our notion of prayer depends upon God's involvement with the world he created, and that he is a compassionate covenant partner. Yet it is difficult to conceive of how God can know the end from the beginning and still be open to the influence of prayer. Can prayer change God's mind?

2. In addition to Amos, Scripture provides numerous examples of intercessory prayer for sinners: Moses for those who created the golden calf (Ex 32), and for the rebellious (Num 14:10-25), Jesus for the soldiers who crucified him (Luke 23:34), and Paul for the Jewish people who weren't saved (Rom 9:1-5, 10:1). Smith (2005, p. 360) goes on to say:

"Clearly some believers do pray fervently, consistently, and effectively for the ungodly people of the world (the Billy Graham organization is characterized by this concern), but in the local church I hear many more prayers of intercession for the health needs of the saints than the eternal needs of sinners. It often appears as if the church is more interested in God's compassion and strength for the physical needs of church members than anything else... Why does the church not take more time and put more effort into praying for the condemned people of this world, who do not know God or Jesus as their Savior?"

3. The third and fourth visions (the plumb line 7:7-9 and the basket of summer fruit 8:1-3) share a four-part structure, though different from that of the first two visions. What are the four elements of these visions? Who are the targets of these judgements? Is God's wrath averted? Following the vision of the basket of ripe fruit, v. 4-14 describe the indictments against Israel and the coming judgement. Upon whom is this judgement directed?
4. A confrontation between Amos and Amaziah, the chief priest, is recorded between the third and fourth judgements. According to Collins (2017), "Amos says he's neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but he's clearly prophesying. I think he means he's not part of whatever official guild the court prophets ran. He's not an insider. And he gets blowback from the chief of the insiders, Amaziah, and fires back a word from the Lord which I am sure Amaziah didn't want to hear. Very interesting to hear him speaking truth to power. That's something no insider could have done safely, but Amos, being from the southern kingdom and having an independent livelihood, was freer."

Amos is the classic case of an upstart claiming divine authority challenging the established religious hierarchy. There are two sides to this argument. On one hand, sanctioned religious leaders safeguard teachings and rituals and protect the community from false prophets and heretical teachings. On the other hand, rigid ecclesiastical protocols can prohibit God's spirit from breaking through. God may choose individuals from outside a community to speak His word, renewing and reforming, and refusal to listen may weaken and impoverish a community of believers. (Simundson, 2005) Does God send prophets to us today? How can we determine whether they are true prophets?

A case in point:

Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador from 1977-80, when death squads roamed the streets, kidnapping and murdering commoners, priests and critics of the oppressive regime, was known as "the voice of those without voice," and saw his special calling as speaking for the poor:

"The world does not say Blessed are the poor. The world says Blessed are the rich. You are worth as much as you have. But Christ says Wrong. Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, because they do not put their trust in what is transitory."

When accused of communist activities, he countered:

"When we speak of a church of the poor, we are not using Marxist dialectic, as though there were another church of the rich. What we are saying is that Christ, inspired by the Spirit of God, declared, "The Lord has sent me to preach good news to the poor (Luke 4:18)."

He called the people and rulers to repentance and faith in Christ. Finally, he appealed to police and soldiers:

"Brothers, each of you is one of us. We are the same people. The campesinos you kill are your own brothers and sisters...No soldier is obliged to obey an order contrary to the law of God ("Thou shalt not kill"). It is time that you came to your senses and obey your conscience rather than follow out a sinful command. The church, defender of the rights of God, the law of God, and the dignity of each human being, cannot remain silent in the presence of such abominations."

Two days later, he was assassinated while saying Mass, silencing the prophet. (Guenther, 1998)

5. The fifth vision (9:1-4 'no one escapes') stands alone and follows none of the previous patterns; this change signals something important. In v. 2-4, the familiar words of Psalm 139 v. 7-12, usually meant to comfort, are changed into a curse. Verses 8-10 describe the final judgement, the sieve foreshadowing Mt 19:24. According to Smith (2001), Amos emphasizes the two themes: 1) no one can escape God's judgement, and 2) the all-powerful God controls the universe, in order to destroy Israel's reliance on its special status and false beliefs that they could escape God's judgement. In today's society, people deny God's existence or reduce Him to something irrelevant or impotent, failing to grasp the significance of these two themes. Smith further urges us to uncover the subtle false beliefs of friends, relatives, and members of our congregation, and use every tool possible to persuade people of the truth: that God is all-powerful, sin separates us from Him, and that no sinner can escape his justice. Is this an effective way to evangelize? Why or why not? How can we communicate God's wrath and mercy in a compelling way to nonbelievers?
6. Finally, the book ends with the restoration of Israel, a promise of fertility, prosperity, peace and security (v. 11-15). Today we understand this restoration as having been done through the redemptive work of Christ.

Simundson (2005, p. 238-239) asks:

"When the reader finally comes to the end of the book of Amos, what picture of God seems dominant? Is God so fiercely intent on matters of justice that there is no room for mercy? ...Certainly believers trust in a God who is moral, will not tolerate evil, who will take the side of the vulnerable against the powerful oppressors, who will vindicate the innocent and punish the guilty. But all are sometimes guilty...Will there be another chance, forgiveness, hope for the future?"

What is the last word about God? Justice or mercy or, somehow, both?

J.A. Motyer (1974, p. 80) further explores this theme:

"The vengeance of the covenant is a reality, and we would do well to ponder what it is which alienates God from his people and renders them helpless before their foes. Nothing which has taken place in Christ renders this truth void. We are God's covenant people, subject to His covenant blessings or His covenant curses. A study of the Letters of Jesus to the Seven Churches (Rev. 2-3) is particularly revealing in this connection."

If God cared enough about the poor and oppressed in Amos' time, is He equally concerned now? Can we expect similar judgements, or view recent disasters or historic events as God's judgements upon us?

Very-Lame-and-Not-Quite-Fun Fact: From Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince by J.K. Rowling (2005):

"An Unbreakable vow?" said Ron, looking stunned. "Nah, he can't have...Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure," said Harry. "Why, what does it mean?"

"Well, you can't break an Unbreakable Vow..."

"I'd worked that much out for myself, funnily enough. What happens if you break it, then?"

"You die," said Ron simply.