

## ***"Decadent Prosperity"***

Amos 6:1-7

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Years ago I heard this advertisement on TV and I've never forgotten it. It opens with a smiling suburbanite who says, "I'm Stanley Johnson. I've got a great family." We see him standing with his wife and three children in front of their house. Then he says, "I've got a four-bedroom home in a great community." We see his rather expansive home in the background. Next he asks us, "Like my car? It's new." Stanley is driving a brand-new Jeep Grand Cherokee. The next scene is a golf course where Stanley is playing golf with his friends. He tells us, "I even belong to the local golf club." Now back home riding on his lawn tractor he asks us, "How do I do it? I'm in debt up to my eyeballs. I can hardly pay my finance charges!" With a smile on his face, the advertisement ends as Stanley asks with a half-hearted plea, "Will somebody help me?" It's a plea that somehow you get the feeling he really doesn't mean, because down deep he's not worried at all. He's living "the good life." He's living in the age of DECADENT PROSPERITY.

This advertisement perfectly expresses the attitude of the people in Israel in the days of Amos, especially those who considered themselves to be wealthy. They were living "the good life" and as far as they were concerned, "Life was like a bowl of cherries." In fact, Amos, who is continuing to serve as God's prosecuting attorney, presents evidence to support his claim that the people of Israel are guilty of casting aside all restraint in their pursuit of material prosperity. He provides us with a pretty good summary of what has been taking place in the sixth chapter of his book of prophecy. Let's take a look at it together.

He begins in verse one by addressing the leading citizens of both Jerusalem, the capital of Judea, and Samaria, the capital of Israel. These are the political and financial leaders of both nations who run their countries with little regard for their citizens. They feel secure, living in cities with great big high walls and strong armies. Thinking that all is well they have adopted an attitude of complacency, a feeling of smug satisfaction and contentment. So in verses two and three Amos reminds these heir-do-wells that the citizens of three other cities also thought of themselves as safe and secure until destruction suddenly fell upon them. Amos was warning his listeners that when you're living in the lap of luxury you can become completely oblivious to an imminent danger just around the corner.

Amos then goes on to describe the decadent lifestyles of these leading citizens in verses four through six. Like a master of ceremonies on a TV

game show, he announces, "Behind curtain number one" and immediately pieces of beautiful and expensive furniture are revealed, beds with inlaid ivory and immaculate couches for lounging with guests. Then he asks for curtain number two to be pulled back so that everyone can see the chiefs preparing choice cuts of lamb and beef for barbequing. Behind curtain number three, a group of musicians are seen, playing music on harps, just like David did when he was a shepherd lad. Behind curtain number four, a group of party goers are enjoying not small glasses but great big bowls of fine wine. Finally a fifth curtain is pulled back to reveal a group of well-off socialites bathing themselves in high priced oils and perfumes. The scene before the audience, perhaps a gathering of the everyday folk in Samaria, is almost beyond belief. Most of their homes have little or no furniture. Rarely do they ever eat meat at meals and never the finest cuts available. Music, let alone owning a musical instrument, is beyond comprehension. The wine they occasionally drank doesn't look or taste anything like those expensive brands and when did any of them have enough money to buy luxurious body lotions?

The final sad observation noted by Amos at the end of this extravagance in verse six is that those who are living this decadent way of life seem to be completely oblivious to what it is doing to their nation. Many of them could trace their heritage all the way back to a revered patriarch, but even that has not stemmed their over-the-top lifestyle. They don't care about honoring the moral mandates of their ancestors. Speaking directly to these people, Amos bemoans the fact that they are "not grieved over the ruin of Joseph" (Amos 6:7). They could care less. They want to live in the moment with no thought of tomorrow. Neither are they concerned about what might happen to those who come after them. In response Amos offers a dire prediction in verse seven, "Therefore, they shall be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away" (Amos 6:7).

Now, what does any of this have to do with us? When a person, a family, a church or even a nation begins to pursue a lifestyle of decadent prosperity, they have started down a pathway that doesn't end well. The first thing that happens is the abandonment of a disciplined and well-ordered way of life. Gluttony of mind, body and spirit take over. Will Durant, a noted historian, offers this illustration in the first volume of his *The Story of Civilization*. When the Persian Empire was established it was customary to eat only one meal a day. They lived highly disciplined lives. But as time passed and prosperity became the order of the day, things changed. They still ate only one meal a day, but it began at noon and lasted until late in the evening.

The second thing that transpires is a growing sense of complacency. People stop caring about what's going on around them. Enjoying the present becomes more important than planning for the future. When a dangerous situation arises, instead of taking precautions, an attitude of surrender and

resignation arises. The Epicurean philosophy of "eat drink and be merry; for tomorrow we die" takes over. Do you remember the Biblical account of the hand writing on the wall spelling out the end of the Babylonian Empire in the book of Daniel? What was the king doing that night on the eve of his country's capitulation? He was throwing a party, using the sacred vessels that had been stolen from the temple in Jerusalem (Daniel 5:1).

Finally, when decadent prosperity becomes the order of the day, the kingdom of God fades away. It is gradually covered up by the desire to possess more and more of the things of this world. The acquisition of stuff becomes the driving force in a person's life and sometimes even in a congregation's thinking. Let me share an observation from the history of the church where I served years ago. In 1912 the church was meeting in a little frame chapel in midtown Portsmouth. They wanted to build a bigger and better church building to serve their congregation. It was an all consuming passion. When they called their new pastor he took that passionate desire and turned it into a reality in just three short years. There was only one problem. He was an evangelist. He wanted to see people coming to a saving faith in Jesus Christ. Under his leadership, the membership had exploded. New members were being added every Sunday. He saw the new building, which at that time was the largest sanctuary in Portsmouth, as a launching pad for reaching even more people for Christ. The church family had other ideas. It was their brand new worship center where they could sit back and relax in the Lord. The church had been motivated to reach the lost so that they could build a building. That desire was now replaced by a feeling of complacent contentment. The following year, 1916, the pastor resigned because he was interested in building the kingdom of God, not an earthly edifice to self-satisfaction. The congregation had forgotten what Jesus said in His Sermon on the Mount, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33).

So let me close with this question. Has a feeling of decadent prosperity begun to make inroads into our lives as individuals, as families, as a church, and even as a nation? Is it taking hold of the kind of culture and society in which we want to live? A person doesn't have to be rich to adopt this kind of an attitude about life. Neither does that individual have to be like the smiling gentleman in the advertisement who was up to his eyeballs in debt. All anyone has to do is to sit back and enjoy whatever benefits they can glean from life, without ever bothering to look around and see the needs of others or to face up to the future challenges that may soon be confronting them. That's what the Israelites did and it destroyed them. Within forty years their nation was wiped clean from the landscape of the Middle East. To quote another Old Testament prophet who lived about the same time, "They sowed the wind and reaped the whirlwind" (Hosea 8:7).