

REAPING THE WHIRLWIND

Amos 7: 7-9

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March 2, 2025

Last Sunday the sermon ended with a quote from the book of Hosea, "They sowed the wind and reaped the whirlwind" (Hosea 8:7). It was a profound harbinger of what was about to happen to Israel. The seeds of worthless worship, oppressive behavior and decadent prosperity had been richly sown in the land of Israel and they produced a crop of unrelenting despair and hopelessness.

Hosea, another of God's prophetic voices, began his ministry about ten to fifteen years after Amos had visited Israel. Unlike Amos he was no stranger to this northern kingdom. He lived there. But he was treated no better than Amos. Furthermore he lived during a time of increasing political and military instability. After the death of King Jeroboam II in 748 B.C., the country fell apart politically and militarily. Six kings ruled in quick succession, often being assassinated while they reigned. Furthermore, the Assyrian Empire began to assert its dominance, conquering the neighboring countries and demanding financial tribute from the northern kingdom of Israel. When they refused to pay, the Assyrians invaded the country. After a lengthy siege, the capital city of Samaria fell in 722 B.C. The country of Israel ceased to exist. Those who were not slain during the invasion were deported to foreign lands never to be seen again. They have become known as the "Ten Lost Tribes." Only little Judah, comprised of the remaining two tribes that Moses had led out of Egypt, maintained their freedom and that was only by the miraculous intervention of God. Approximately forty years after Amos had issued his dire prophetic warning of divine judgment, everything that he had said came to pass. Just as Hosea had warned, "They had sown the wind and were about to reap a horribly destructive whirlwind."

So with this rather brief description of what happened to Israel in mind, let us imagine for just a moment that we are once again in a heavenly courtroom. The defendant, the ten northern tribes of Israel, have been found guilty of all of the charges presented by Amos. The time has now come for them to be sentenced for their crimes. The judge, the Lord God Almighty, is now ready to pronounce judgement. Let us reflect upon what He said in the ninth chapter of Amos, verses 1-15.

- In verse one the Lord decrees that the temple at Bethel is to be destroyed. Bethel was the place that God had made a covenant with

Jacob, the ancestor of the Israelites, centuries earlier during a dream. He had promised to bless Jacob and his heirs, to give them the country in which they now dwelled and to make them a blessing to all of humanity (Genesis 28:13-15). Striking the pillars of the temple meant that the covenantal relationship between the ten tribes of Jacob's ancestry and their God was now officially severed. Instead of being their protector, the Lord would now become their adversary.

- In verses two through four, the Lord tells the people of Israel that they cannot flee from the judgement that has been rendered against them. Even if they hide as high as the heavens or as deep as the bottom of the sea, He will find them and punish them.
- In verses five through six, God reminds the accused of who He is. He is not some minor deity with limited strength and power. He is the ruler of the universe.
- In verses seven through ten, the Lord says that He has maintained a watchful eye over Israel and found them to be a sinful people who will now be sifted like grain. Like harvested seed, almost none will be planted in the land of their ancestors. Most will be bagged up and banished to far off lands from which they will never return.
- In verses eleven through fifteen, however, a merciful reprieve is issued for those who can trace their heritage back to the family of David. In the future peace and prosperity will be restored to a remnant of Israel living in the land of their forefathers.

Now what does this say to us, God's people living in the twenty-first century? There are a number of things which deserve our attention.

1. First, God loves us. However, that love is a relational love. It is a love which is established when we enter into a personal relationship with the Lord. However, when we turn our backs on God and declare that we want to live as if He has no further claim upon our lives, then we have placed ourselves in serious jeopardy. That's what happened to Israel. They had cast God out of their lives through their idolatrous worship, their oppressive behavior towards one another and their decadent lifestyle. They were neither repentant nor interested in really loving God or one another.
2. Second, God loves us. But that does not mean that He will not punish us. God's love always contains a measure of discipline. What happens when a parent does not discipline their children? More often than not they turn into monsters. Loving parents cannot allow that kind of behavior to take hold of their children's lives and neither can God. Quoting the book of Proverbs, the writer of the New Testament book of Hebrews declares, "My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, or lose heart when you are punished by Him; for the Lord disciplines those whom He loves and chastises every child He accepts"

(Hebrews 12:5-6). God punished Israel and punished them severely because His love for them compelled Him to do so.

3. Lastly, God loves us. Even when He is punishing us, He is looking for a way to redeem us and restore our relationship with Him and one another. It is for that reason that the book of Amos ends on a more hopeful note. Not all of the Jewish people in northern Israel were lost. A precious few found safety among their brethren in the south. Centuries later one of them, Paul, could trace his heritage all the way back to the tribe of Benjamin, one of those tribes who were carried away into exile by the Assyrians. (Philippians 3:5). More than one lost soul, someone who has violated all of God's laws and lived a life in absolute rejection of everything that the Lord stands for, has found his way back to God. I remember quite clearly the testimony of a Sunday school teacher in the Presbyterian church where I served as a youth minister during my years in seminary. He was an incorrigible sinner until the Lord Jesus Christ saved him, delivered him from his past, and transformed his life into a beautiful example of what it means to be a Christian.

Having spent six Sundays in the book of Amos, you may now be eager to wish a "fond farewell" to this prophetic book in the Old Testament. However, don't be too anxious to say goodbye. Here's why. In the days of the early church there were some who said that a person could not become a Christian unless they first became a Jew. It was such a contentious issue that a church council was held. People from all of the churches in the Middle East came to Jerusalem to debate this controversy. Both Paul and Peter were invited and they argued that people are saved by God's grace in Christ Jesus, not by keeping the rules and regulations of the Jewish way of life. James, the half brother of Christ, was the chief elder of the church in Jerusalem. He was highly respected. After hearing everything that had been said, he recommended that Gentiles, people like you and me, be welcomed into the household of the Lord without adopting Judaism. Turning to the Old Testament for Scriptural support, he quoted, "After this I, (referring to God) will return and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles over whom My name has been called." From which book of the Old Testament was he quoting? He was quoting Amos 9:11-12. Had it not been for Amos, that rough shod prophet from Tekoa, the doorway to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ may never have been opened to folks like you and me. As we prepare to celebrate the Lord's Supper this morning, that, my friends, is something for all of us to think about and something for all of us to be eternally grateful for.