

SUMMER 8 - Locusts, Firestorms, Plumbines and More

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Preacher: Andrew Reid

[0 : 00] Friends, why don't you stand with me and we'll pray together. Lord God, fill us with your spirit, we pray, that we might rightly understand your word, boldly proclaim it and live lives of holiness as a result.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Please sit down. Now, friends, tonight what I want to do is begin my talk from the Bible by reflecting on three great passages or more probably three great ideas.

These three great passages speak about God and his people. These great passages undergird, I think, key beliefs of God's Old Testament people.

These great passages offer great consolations, three great comforting truths. And I want to tell you that these three truths are truths that you can pin your confidence on.

So let's turn to our first passage. It's Exodus chapter 32. Now, if you've heard me preach, you'll know that this very first passage is a favourite for me. It shaped my own understanding of God very significantly and it significantly affected my understanding of how God relates to his people.

[1 : 16] It's a passage that I referred to on Wednesday night if you were here. However, it would be very good to revisit it. The passage, Exodus 32 to 34. And I want you to turn with me to it in your Bible.

So 32 to 34. And now this passage contains a critical moment in the history of the people of God. You see, what's happened is God has rescued his people from Egypt in a series of spectacular signs and wonders.

He's destroyed Pharaoh and his armies in the sea. And now the people are at Mount Sinai. And God has met with them. He's entered into covenant with them. And he has pledged covenant to them.

And they have pledged covenant obedience to him. They've entered into covenant with him as well. And the elders have then gone part of the way up the mountain actually seeing God. Then the glory of God settles on the mountain.

And it looks as though the whole mountaintop is covered with consuming fire. And God beckons Moses to come up to him in the mountain. And Moses does. And he stays there for 40 days and 40 nights.

[2 : 20] And he stays there for 40 days and 40 days and 40 days. And he stays there for 40 days and 40 days. And then in Exodus 32, the passage we've got in front of me, the people of God get fidgety.

They wonder if perhaps something's happened to Moses. I wonder if they begin to wonder what's happened to God. And so they ask Aaron to make gods for them. He gets them to pool their gold ornaments.

And he fashions the gold into an idol in the shape of a calf. And then he tells the people that this is the God that brought them up out of Egypt. He builds an altar. He announces this great celebration. Meanwhile, up on the mountain, God tells Moses what's been going on. And he tells Moses that his inclination is to just, well, totally wipe them out in his anger. And then just push ahead with Moses. And Moses is horrified. And so he intercedes with God. He says to God, please turn away your anger. He says, remember the covenant you made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

[3 : 18] And God listens to him. He relents from wiping out his people. That's the word used there. He even agrees that he will send an angel to guide and protect his people.

But he also warns that he will punish his people for their sin. And in chapter 33, Moses asked God to reveal himself to him. And God accedes.

And it happens in chapter 34. Have a look at it with me. God passes before Moses. And as he does, he proclaims these famous words. You can see them there in Exodus 34.

Verse 6. So let me read them to you. And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed.

The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation.

[4 : 15] Forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. Yet by no means clearing the guilty. But visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation.

Now, friends, I want you to look at those verses closely. You see, they are very important. I want you to notice what they say. Allow these words to imprint themselves upon your memory.

You see, these verses, in my view, capture God's nature as can be seen in the incident with the golden calf. Look closely at what they say. First of all, you will see that they use the special name for God.

The Lord or really Yahweh. Second, they say that the Lord is merciful. He's gracious. He's slow to anger. He's abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

He's someone who forgives iniquity and transgression and sin. Oh, he does punish sin. There's no doubt about that. But I want you to notice the contrast. And it's not literally there in this text, but it is there in Deuteronomy.

[5 : 11] And I think it's implied in this text. He shows love to thousands of generations. But his judgment is restricted to just a few generations. I wonder if you can hear what God is telling us about himself.

His nature, you see, is overwhelmingly on the side of love, mercy and forgiveness. That's not to say he will not punish sin. He will because he's just.

He may punish sin. But judgment is in many senses almost his strange work, his alien work. He must do it because he's just. But if there's a way out of judgment and he can take it, he will.

After all, his nature is to have mercy and to exercise steadfast love. God's people here in Exodus know this. Why do I know it?

Because they've just seen it in action. You see, God had every right to walk away from this covenant and even to utterly destroy them for their disobedience. But he didn't. He relented concerning judgment.

[6 : 09] Now, friends, this story, this statement about God has shaped Israel's understanding of God. You see, they found great comfort and consolation in this story and in this statement. You see, God is the God of steadfast love.

He relents concerning disaster. And so time and time again in the Old Testament, they quote this statement or they allude to it. They hang on it. They rely on it. The Old Testament saints and prophets just quote it time and time and time again.

In Psalm 106, for example, we hear of the grossest rebellion of the people of God. And in verse 45, the psalmist tells us about this God. And he tells us that God looked upon his people.

He remembered his covenant. He relented according to the abundance of his steadfast love. And in Joel chapter 2, verse 13, Joel talks about God being slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, who relents from sending disaster.

And Jonah, you might remember, tells us that the reason he ran away from Nineveh and proclaiming God's word to Nineveh is because he knew these very truths. He knew that God was a God who was slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

[7 : 20] And listen to the last part. And who relents from sending disaster. It's that incident of the golden calf where God came, where God's people came to know God's nature in a special way.

And they found out that he was a God of justice. But they found also that he was a God of mercy and that he was overwhelming in his kindness and steadfast love. And he was prone to relent when it came to sending disaster on his people.

And if you don't believe that, just read their history from beginning to end and you'll find he is prone to relent. So with this passage comes consolation one. If you're looking at my notes, God is merciful and kind.

His disposition for mercy overwhelms his desire for judgment. He's the God who so often relents. That's truth one, consolation one, if you like.

Now turn to passage two. And here it is, Deuteronomy chapter eight. So just flick in your Bibles from Exodus. Sorry, we will get to Amos eventually. So Deuteronomy chapter eight.

[8 : 27] Deuteronomy tells us that God has given us, given his law to his people. And now he urges them to keep his law. And he tells them that life is not about physical food.

It's about spiritual food. So look at Deuteronomy eight, verse three. The richest of fair, he says, is his word. God says that his people live by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

And the great consolation of God's people is that God just never stops speaking. You see, from the very first page of the Bible, he speaks. And if you read the very last page of the Bible, there he is still speaking.

And everywhere in between, he's doing the same thing. Around the center of the Bible, even isn't this beautiful in Psalm 119, you get a wonderful celebration of him speaking.

And there we're told that the richness of life is found in God's great goodness, seen in his abundant provision of his word. God is a speaking God.

[9 : 30] Friends, Deuteronomy chapter eight, verse three and Psalm 119 is the second great passage or set of passages. And they come with this incredible consolation. And that consolation is that our God is a speaking, communicating God.

You see, he knows our frailty. He knows our need of spiritual nourishment. He knows that God's people live by every word that proceeds from his mouth.

So he speaks it. And so he richly gives his word to his needy people. Now, third passage, Psalm 139. So we're making good progress.

You can see we're getting there slowly. 139. Now, the first thing I want you to notice about Psalm 139, and I know many of you will love it and know it.

I want you to notice that it is a psalm written by David or for David. That is, it is a psalm of David. In other words, it's a psalm about God's chosen person, God's chosen king.

[10 : 32] Now, look at what David has to say about his God. He says his God, Yahweh, the Lord, is the one who has searched him and known him. Verse one. He knows his sitting down and his rising up.

Verse two. He discerns his thoughts from afar. Verse two. He knows him thoroughly and completely. Verses three and four. Wherever he might be, God is with him.

In heaven. In Sheol. In the farthest limits of the sea. In the darkest places. He has been known by God from his very birth.

In fact, as verse 13 says, It was the Lord who formed his inmost parts in his mother's womb. This God knows David. And he loves David.

And he's for David. Friends, many Christians have found great consolation in this psalm. And rightly so. David found great consolation in the thoughts worded in it.

[11 : 32] For this psalm tells us what? It says, we are God's. We are God's chosen people. He oversees our existence. He is near to us. He's for us.

And this passage gives us consolation three. God knows those who are his. And God oversees their existence. They are his.

They are held tightly by his hand. He's known their beginning and he knows their end. This is passage three with consolation three. Now friends, I've told you these three great passages with these three great consolations for a reason.

I've told you because we're going to interact with them in our passages tonight. And I want you to remember them. Consolation one. God is the God of steadfast love who relents from sending disaster.

God of steadfast love relents from sending disaster. Consolation two. God is the God who meets the greatest needs of his people by speaking his word. Meets the greatest need of his people by speaking his word.

[12 : 32] Consolation three. God is the God who oversees the existence of his loved ones. He oversees the existence of his loved ones. With those things in mind, let's turn to our passage for tonight.

Now, our passage for tonight spans three chapters. So we are going to do some work on this hot night. So stick with me tonight. And the reason we're focusing on these chapters is because I think

these chapters belong together.

They are shaped by five visions. Five visions form their beginning, their middle and their end. But that's not all there is in these chapters. You see, there's a little narrative section as well.

There are two other prophetic sections. But these visions, five of them, shape these chapters. And for that reason, I think we need to take them together. On Wednesday night, we're going to come back and we're going to look at that really very interesting little segment in chapter 8, verses, what is it?

No, chapter 7, verses 10 on. Very interesting. It has very significant impact for Christian ministry and modern church life. So, with that said, let me show you the five visions.

[13:39] Now, you can divide the five visions that are here into three groups. The first two visions, they belong together. Followed by the second two visions. Followed by one climactic vision right in chapter 9.

So, let's have a look at them. The first two are almost identical in form. The second two are similar in form. And the third one is unlike anything that's come so far.

Okay, let's have a look at them. Visions 1 and 2. Turn with me to Amos 7, 1 to 6. Now, I wonder if you can just have a look at them. Can you see the similarity between them?

Amos, chapter 7, verses 1 to 6. You see, do you notice they both start with a statement of the vision that Amos is given by God. In verse 1, the Lord God shows him a locust plague forming.

In verse 4, the Lord God shows him judgment by fire. So, there's the beginning of the two visions. Very similar, God shows him something. Then, when the focus of the vision is at its most strong destructively, we have a middle section where Amos intercedes for them.

[14:45] In verse 2, for example, Amos says, O Lord, forgive, I beg you. How can Jacob stand? He is so small. That's paralleled in verse 5.

Look at it. It says almost the same thing, but listen for the difference. Amos says, O Lord God, cease, I beg you. How can Jacob stand?

He is so small. These words of Amos echo the words of the Pentateuch. They focus on Israel's smallness, you see, on their insignificance. But they are the elect people of God, though small.

And this appeal is followed by a third element in each vision. In verse 3, look, the Lord relents. And he says, it shall not be.

And then in verse 6, he relents again. This also shall not be. So there we have the God of Exodus 32 and 34. We've got a prophet who intercedes for God's people who are facing judgment.

[15:43] And we've got God relenting. We think, no surprises, really. We could have written it ourselves. Because we know what God's going to do. We've seen it all before in Exodus 32 and 34.

Now notice, there's no sign of repentance here, is there?

Now God's people haven't said, oh, please forgive us. No, no sign of repentance. But God relents. And mercy triumphs over judgment. So there's the first two visions. Now let's turn to the second two, because you'll notice some progress here.

Now, put your finger in, well, you can manage it actually. It's all on the one double page there for you. I want to tell you, before we start, that the vision of chapter 7 has a focus on something that our versions call a plumb line.

Can you see it there? The plumb line? It's made some wonderful sermons, the plumb line. The only trouble is no one knows what the word in Hebrew means. We know it generally probably gives the sense of a mechanism of judgment, but we really don't know, and it's really not significant in order to understand what's going on.

[16:53] However, let's put aside the niceties of meaning and see if we can discern the patterns. Look at the similarities between the two visions. The pattern goes something like this.

Can you see it there? First, God imparts a vision. In chapter 7, verse 7, it's a vision of this plumb line, some piece of metal of some sort.

In chapter 8, verse 1, that's the next vision, it's a vision of a basket of summer fruit. Second, God asks Amos, what do you see?

And Amos responds and tells him, I see this, a plumb line or a basket of fruit. And fourth, God explains the significance of the vision and tells Amos what his judgment will be.

And included in his judgment, can you see it there? He says the phrase, I will never again pass by them. In chapter 7, verse 9, the judgment will be the destruction of their high places, their places of worship, and the judgment of their king, Jeroboam.

[17 : 55] In chapter 8, verse 3, the judgment talks about the songs of the temple no longer being about joy of forgiveness and blessing, but instead wailing. So, you know, you'd expect the temple being about, you know, forgiveness and celebration, but instead it will be about wailing.

Vision 4, the one in chapter 8, also has a little advance. Can you see it there? Have a look at it.

Chapter 8, first couple of verses. Can you see verse 2? It talks about what?

The end coming upon the people of God. Do you notice the difference you see between visions 3 and 4 and visions 1 and 2? What's the striking difference between them?

Notice the difference. This time there's no intercession by Amos, is there? Amos doesn't turn up and say, oh God, you know, they're so tiny, this nation, please forgive them. And notice not only does that not happen, but God's judgment is not turned back.

There is no relenting in visions 3 and 4. You get the clear idea that God has had enough. His patience has finally run out. Israel cannot rely on him relenting anymore.

[19 : 01] No more Exodus 32 to 34. God's judgment appears to look terminal for Israel. It's an end. That's it. Consolation 1 cannot be hidden behind anymore.

Do you notice that? It's not an opportunity for chief grace. Consolation 1 is not an opportunity for just sort of fronting up to God all the time and saying, you know, please, please relent, you know, no, God's had enough.

So there's the first four visions. Now, before we go on, let's just deal briefly with the two others. I did warn you we're working hard tonight, but stick with me because it's rich. On Wednesday, we're going to look at the details of this middle section.

But just take a brief look now. Now, in chapter 7, verse 9, Amos speaks against the sanctuaries of Israel. Can you see it there? The end of his vision. And he talks about Jeroboam the king.

And then in verse 10, we come across this priest, Amaziah, the priest of the most important one of the sanctuaries in the north. And what he does is he sends a message of accusation about Amos, apparently to the king, charging him with some form of treason.

[20 : 10] Amos is then told, don't give the word to God's people. In other words, don't give the people of God what God wants them to have.

He's told by this by the very person, the priest, who should have been responsible for guaranteeing it. And in verse 12, Amaziah, the priest, tells Amos, look, you know, go and speak God's word somewhere else, will you?

What we're dealing with here in verses 10 to 17 is just what Amos has been saying from the very beginning. The temple, the priesthood, they are all corrupt.

God's priest is degenerate. He'll be judged. Now look at the other passage in chapter 8. Look at verses 4 to 10 in chapter 8. Very much like what we've seen earlier in Amos.

God's people are corrupt. God will judge them. Verse 11 contains the ultimate judgment. God has already withdrawn his first consolation. What was the first consolation? He'll relent concerning disaster.

[21 : 13] That's gone. He's clearly indicated there's no hope of him relenting anymore. But he's still been sending his priests, his prophets to speak his word. And now he promises the most disastrous thing.

Can you see at the end of chapter 8? Look at verses 11 and 12. God promises now that he will withdraw his second consolation. He will send a famine on the land.

It is from God. Not a famine of bread and a thirst for water. Here is God saying, I am going to stop speaking. It's almost unheard of for God to stop speaking.

But he says so here. He'll send a famine for something far more than a lack of water and of bread. Something far more disastrous. A famine of hearing the words of God.

And God's people will be bereft. They will wander the length and breadth of the land seeking the word of God. And they won't find it. They will faint of thirst.

[22 : 12] For their false deities of Samaria and Beersheba cannot offer sustenance in this area. And their priests prohibit prophets from speaking in Bethel. So you've got the three major sanctuaries gone.

They're of no use for hearing God's word. Consolations of God's word will be gone. And God's people will be at the worst risk. Friends, just in passing. God's priests in our day.

That is, the ministers of the gospel. Are at great risk of doing this very thing. And casting God's people into famine. You see, because our churches are often no longer speaking the word of God.

And when people speak it, they tell them to go elsewhere and do it. It is a terrible thing to be without the word of God. Now we have it written in so many ways. But we need it explained as well.

So, let's turn to chapter 9, verses 1 to 6. This is our final vision. And it's very different. We're not given the traditional introduction of the Lord sort of showing Amos something.

[23 : 15] Saying, have a look at this, will you? No, this time Amos just points to the Lord. Standing beside the altar. And God orders its destruction. He orders it to fall on the people and to decimate them.

But look at the language he uses and see if you can remember it. Verses 2 to 4. Listen to it. See if you recognize it. We've read words like it tonight. See if you can hear them.

Though they dig into Sheol. Sheol. From there my hand shall take them. Though they climb up to heaven. From there I will bring them down. Though they hide themselves in the top of Carmel.

From there I will search out and take them. And though they hide from my side at the bottom of the sea. There I will command the sea serpent and it shall bite them. And though they go into captivity in front of their enemies.

There I will command the sword and it shall kill them. And I will fix my eyes on them for harm and not for good. Friends can you hear the play of words on the sort of language used in Psalm 139.

[24 : 16] Where can I go from your presence? You can't go anywhere. But you can't go anywhere from God's love. And nor can you go from his judgment anywhere. He will search you out and find you.

The great consolation of God's people is that they were known by God. He was their God. They were his people. They were known to him. He would never let them out of his hand. But now he will not let them out of his hand.

But his actions towards them have changed dramatically and turned on their heads. God's sovereign choice and knowledge and ability is not just a course of consolation and comfort. It's a course of great fear as well.

It means that if God is not favorably disposed towards you. Then there is nowhere to hide from him. And in verses 5 and 6 push it home.

For God is the true creator. And as Psalm 145 says, it's echoed here, this cuts in two directions. Those who call upon him being the creator means that he's near.

[25 : 16] He can hear the cry of his people and save them. But it also means he can destroy the wicked. Now friends, in the background, I can hear God's people almost in this passage taking refuge in their election.

I can hear them saying, oh come on Amos. We are God's people. God rescued us from Egypt. He sent great plagues.

He destroyed Pharaoh's armies. We are God's special people. And in verse 7, God retorts. And he squashes their specialness.

He says, oh so you think you're special. Just because I brought you up out of Egypt. Well you know, I brought the Philistines up from Kaphtor as well. And the Arameans from Kor. Israel needs to be very careful.

Can you hear what God's saying? He's saying be very careful about claiming special privileges. For I hate evil. And my eyes are on sinful people and sinful kingdoms no matter who they are and where they are.

[26 : 15] That was clear, wasn't it? Remember chapter 1 and chapter 2 where you went through all the nations and they were all named? It's clear here. God hates sin wherever it sits.

And no matter who commits it. And he will judge sin. Now verses 9 and 10 are a little complicated. I think what's being said is that God's destruction of the nation will be overwhelming.

And evil people will die by the sword. And even the godly will be scattered among the nations. This is overwhelming judgment. And it's about the last tough word.

Friends, the picture here is incredible. It is awesome and awful. For here are God's favoured people. His elect people.

The objects of his saving love. The recipients of his grace. His word. His forgiveness. His mercy. And here they have been removed from everything that is good.

[27 : 17] The consolations they have clung to stripped away. All comfort. All shelter. All hope.

God has finally had enough. This is a terrifying book, Amos. His judgment is totally deserved by his people. No amount of good that they do can now turn things around.

And that's if they were capable of good. However, their history and their heritage demonstrates that they are not. You see, the history of Israel from its beginning is illustrated they cannot do it.

They can do nothing. Friends, on their own, these people have nowhere to go. Please grasp their desperate plight. For you see, deep within them lies Adam and Eve's nature.

The true enemy is one within themselves. It's their inclination away from God and toward unfaithfulness and rebellion. Friends, this nation and these people have only one hope in the world.

[28 : 19] Only one hope. And it can only come from outside themselves. They can never bring anything from themselves into this situation in one sense.

And God gives them a tantalizing hint in verse 8 that this will be forthcoming. And verses 11 to 15, as we'll see, next Sunday night reinforces it. But friends, please hear what I'm saying tonight.

Whatever happens from here on with this nation will not be due to anything within them themselves. It will be due to God. And I wonder if you've ever pondered why the Bible begins with Genesis 1 to 3.

It begins with Genesis 1 to 3 in order to explain everything that will follow thereafter. It tells us about a God who's loving and kind. It tells us about rebels who hate to live under his rule.

And then it proceeds to tell us that everyone who follows these rebels, bar one, is tainted with the same brush. Abraham, Moses, David, Israel, Judah, they're the good ones.

[29 : 29] God's people before the exile, God's people after the exile. You, me. Friends, the uniform and overwhelming testimony of Scripture is that of page 2 and 3.

We are sinful. And that means we deserve nothing from God but judgment. Friends, there is nothing in you and me that can bring us to God.

Now, you may not be characterized by the sorts of sins that mark this ancient nation that Amos speaks to, but you are surely marked by their nature, no matter how it shows itself.

Friends, if you are from human stock. Friends, if you are from human stock, and I can't see. Oh, no, there's a dog up the back, but that's it. If you are from human stock, then you are tainted with the same brush.

And you are therefore by nature a child of wrath, like every human being. But you see, Amos is right. God is rich in mercy.

[30 : 34] And out of the great love that he has for his world, he holds out his hand to us. He expresses that love by sending his son into the world. And in grace, he acts to save.

And he promises that all those who are dead in sin can be made alive together with Christ. We can be set right with God because of the death of Jesus in our place.

We can be raised with Christ and seated in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. We can be forgiven in Christ. Now, friends, I know that some of you here know this, if not most of you.

You have embraced God's love in Jesus. And by grace, you have been saved through faith in Christ. That is not your own doing. It is the gift of God because without the gift of God, you could not be in this position.

But my guess is that there are some of you here tonight who do not yet know this. That is, who have not yet trusted in Jesus. Well, friends, if this is you, then you're in the same position, unfortunately, as ancient Israel.

[31 : 41] There can be no long-term consolation and comfort for you without Jesus. So I urge you tonight to flee to Jesus. For only in Jesus can shelter be found.

He alone is the means of reconciliation with God. So please, please turn to him and trust in him. And tonight I want to give you an opportunity to do this.

I'm going to pray a prayer that enables this. And if you want to flee to the comfort and consolation of God's love in Christ, then I want to urge you to pray along with me. So let's pray together.

Father, we read of this ancient nation. And we see their character just as you saw it.

We see that you have mercy on them, but they have flaunted your mercy, scorned your word, run from you.

[32 : 47] And Father, we see in this ancient nation our own character and our own nature. And tonight, Father, we want to come running to you through your son, through whom relationship with you is possible because of his death.

Please forgive us for sins past. Please do as you have promised and relent from sending disaster because of Jesus.

Please embrace us with your love and reconcile us to yourself. We put our trust and faith in the Lord Jesus, knowing that it's only because of him that we can come to you and live with you. And Father, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Friends, if you're not a Christian and you've prayed along those lines tonight, it would be good to tell someone, perhaps Chris or myself, or perhaps even drop a little card in that, what did you call it, Chris? Big white box out there. Okay, so just put a card in there. You can tear it off, the green card's in front of you or behind you, or tear it off from that newsletter. That would be helpful. [34 : 04] Then we can help you talk about what that means for you.