

The Time is Ripe

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0:00] This is the AM service on the 28th of September 1997. The preacher is Dr. Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled, The Time is Ripe, and is taken from Amos 8, verses 1 to 14. Please be seated.

And if there are any children who haven't got their activity sheet, maybe they'd like to wave their arm around and Sue will bring them an activity sheet. And for the adults, you may like to have open page 748 in the Bibles.

We're continuing a sermon series on this Old Testament prophet Amos. And I shall pray as we begin. Our God, we thank you that you speak and that your word is available to us.

We pray that we may hear it, heed it, and follow it for Jesus' sake. Amen. It's a rare person who thinks that our world is not in moral decline.

[1:12] It's a rare person who thinks that the moral standards of today are better than in past generations. It seems that we're on the way down.

There is a less obvious honesty, fidelity, loyalty, less obvious propriety in our world's morality. And if, as we saw this week, politicians are at fault, so too, it seems, are many business tycoons.

And sadly, of course, the church is not always above reproach either. What's gone wrong? Why is it that morality seems to be in a decline in our world?

Well, despite all the severity of the book of Amos, as we've seen in recent weeks, Amos points his finger to the answer, to God. For when the true living God is marginalized, then in the end, morality and ethics fail.

And certainly in the Western world, over the last 200 years, God has been marginalized and sidelined. Morality has been taught, yes, but in our increasingly humanistic and secular society, there is no undergirding faith to support that.

[2:29] So in the end, the structure of morality that gets taught has no foundation and crumbles and breaks up. And the result, in the end, is a world in which morality is in decline and where immorality is on the up.

After all, why in our world, when there is no faith in God to undergird our moral standards, why should anyone be honest? Why should anyone be upstanding or selfless?

Why not just look after oneself? To give an example from the child's playground at school, give me that ball. No, why should I? Because I said so.

So what? I'm bigger than you. Okay. Here's the ball. You see what happens? There's no undergirding morality and so the strongest wins out.

Might is right. A crude example, but in the end, where there is no faith, that's where we're heading. Might is right. Might. Where faith in a holy and judging God is jettisoned, might is right.

[3 : 42] And that applies in the church as well as society. The first thing the serpent denied in the Garden of Eden, way back at the beginning of the Bible, was the fact that a holy God will judge. And the first thing that these days modern liberal Christians and others deny is that a holy God will judge.

And so in the end, whatever we do is up to us. The book of Amos draws our attention to the error of the modern world. It draws our attention to the fact that God is holy and will judge.

It's God who determines what is right or wrong. It is God who's revealed his standards and will judge not only his own people but the world accordingly. So what the world needs, what the church needs, what we need as well is to return to the one true living God, the holy God and the God who will judge.

That is to Amos' God who is also, of course, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. As we've seen, however, in recent weeks, ancient Israel failed to do that.

It failed to return to the living God. It ignored God's word as spoken through the prophet Amos. And as we've seen in recent weeks, God's patience with his people has expired.

[5 : 04] The end has come. Amos has given a vision, the fourth vision that he's actually received in this book. And at first sight, it looks to be a very pleasant vision. A vision of a basket of summer fruit.

God asks him, Amos, what do you see in verse 2? And he says, a basket of summer fruit. Probably for him, that was olives and figs and pomegranates. For us, we might conjure up pictures of berries and cantaloupes and melons and so on.

Something that would be sweet and appealing. And yet it's not what it seems. The significance is not so much in the fruit, but in the word summer fruit.

I'll give you a little Hebrew lesson. The word for summer fruit is a word kayets. And the word for the end, which is God's next words in verse 2, the end has come upon my people.

The word for the end is kates. Kates and kayets sound almost the same. It's a pun, a word play. Amos has had several in his book. God's making a little joke almost here.

[6 : 10] What do you see? I see kates. Yes, kates has come. The end of the world has come, or the end has come for my people. The NIV translation, not that we've got it in front of us, puts it this way.

I see a basket of ripe fruit. The time is ripe for God's judgment to come. And just like the previous vision in the previous chapter, the force of this is to say that God will never again pass by the sins of his people.

Yes, judgment's coming. And a fearful judgment it is too. As Amos goes on to describe it in verse 3, the songs of the temple, which are normally songs of joy and praise and festivity, those songs of the temple shall become wailings in that city, in that day, says the Lord God.

But even worse than that, perhaps, the dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place. The pictures we saw of Rwanda a couple of years ago are the pictures of what ancient Israel's judgment will be like.

Corpses piled, stacked, one on top of the other. Too many to bury, too many to deal with. Just left to rot and molder along the side of the road or in houses.

[7 : 21] What a dreadful picture of the judgment of God that would come upon God's own people. And just like at Princess Diana's funeral, that extraordinary silence of the millions of people as they watched her coffin passing, so too on that day of judgment, silence.

After all, what can anyone say in the face of such a macabre scene and in the face of God's judgment? One of the most frequent accusations levelled against the church is that it's full of hypocrites.

Perhaps even your friends or family, people who don't come to church and aren't Christians, have said that to you. Oh, the church is just full of hypocrites. Why should I go there? Well, usually that sort of accusation betrays an ignorance of God and of his ways with his people.

And yet, sadly, there are times when there is religious hypocrisy around. It does exist. There are those whose religiosity is a public parade, a public veneer or sham.

Their internal life has no link to the public piety and religiosity that's practiced. It's easy to do, after all. It's easy to attend church, come every week, look respectable and so on.

[8 : 38] And yet, secretly, or away from the religious facade, lives that are lived far from God. And ancient Israel was a classic example of religious hypocrisy.

Because the people that Amos is accusing in this book, they're not the people out there, they're the people who are in here. They're the religious enthusiasts, those who'd be in church every week, taking up the front pew, or if they're Anglicans, the back pew, probably.

They are people who strictly observe the Sabbath. They wouldn't go out on their equivalent of Sunday and do their shopping. They'd be very strict in their observance of the Sabbath day and all their festivals to do the right thing and to be seen to do the right thing.

So verse 5 says, quoting these people, when will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain? And the Sabbath, when will that be over so that we may offer wheat for sale?

These are like kids waiting for Christmas who count down the minutes and the hours until getting up on Christmas morning. But these are people who come to church on their Sunday or their Sabbath day and they're counting down the minutes until their business reopens on their equivalent of Monday morning.

[9 : 46] And what happens on Monday morning? Why, they fleece the poor for every cent they've got. So Amos accuses them at the end of verse 5, quoting them again. We will make the ephah small.

The ephah was a measurement by which you would measure grain, a sort of bag or container would be an ephah measurement of 22 litres for grain. We make the ephah small.

That is, they use containers that are a bit smaller. So when somebody buys their ephah or 22 litres of grain, they actually only get about a bit less, you know, 21 or 20 maybe. They use small containers.

People think they're buying the right measurement, but they're actually getting less than they buy. And then they go on to say, and we'll make the shekel great. The shekel was the weight by which people would pay for their goods.

So you can imagine a set of scales and the proprietor of the shop puts on his shekel weight. And so people are meant to put in their gold or silver or whatever to balance the scales and that would buy their ephah of grain, which of course is a bit smaller than it should be.

[10 : 47] But what does the proprietor do? He makes his shekel great. He's got a bigger measurement. You know in your kitchen scales in the olden days, you'd have one ounce and two ounce and so on. He'd have slightly bigger things, which meant that the buyer would have to put more money in to balance the scales.

So in effect, the buyer was spending more than he ought to get less than he ought. And the wealthy proprietor was giving less than he ought and gaining more than he ought.

The false balances, the deceit of what was going on in their business. And remember, these are religious enthusiasts who are doing this on their Mondays to Saturdays or equivalent.

Indeed, some excavations have shown in ancient Israel two sets of weights in some trading places which show exactly this point, that there were false weights in order to make the buyer, the wealthy, more wealthy, the seller rather, more wealthy at the expense of the poor buyer.

No wonder Amos says in verse 4, you that trample on the needy and bring to ruin the poor of the land. That's what they're doing. The wealthy are bringing the poor to ruin.

[11:57] One of my favourite books is Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, a moving account of people in the Depression in the United States of America. The farmers of Oklahoma selling up their land in order to try and eke out a living, indeed even perhaps make a fortune in California.

So they head west. But what do they find? The elusive dream has evaporated. There's nothing there for their wealth. Indeed, it's worse than that. Because what's happening there are the wealthy landowners who are controlling the labour prices and forcing them down and controlling the food prices and forcing them up.

So one day people are able to earn enough, the next they have to work longer to earn enough. Then they have to work longer again to earn enough and then in the end they just cannot work long enough and hard enough to earn a subsistence wage.

At the end of that book, poignantly and very sadly, a man is starving through this system where the wealth have become wealthier at the expense of the poor and the only food he can get is the milk from a woman's breast.

It's a dreadful picture of a two-tiered economy like ancient Israel's that Amos is accusing here. For ancient Israel, it was the same thing. The wealthy would force the little farm owner or landowner into bankruptcy, would buy their land probably at a low price, then allow the former landowners to work their own land for wages that would gradually become less and the food prices increased as the wealthy controlled the market.

[13:31] And in the end, in effect, what they've done is force the poor to become virtual slaves on what used to be their own land. That's what Amos is attacking throughout his book, this two-tiered economy of ancient Israel.

The wealthy, made wealthy at the exploitation of the poor. All of which, of course, is an infringement against the laws of ancient Israel. The laws which we have in the early part of the Old Testament.

You see, this is religious hypocrisy par excellence. These are people who come to church and worship their God seemingly with the rest of their society and the people they sit next to in the pews they go out and then exploit further the next day.

They don't have a love of God that is greatest in their life. Their love of money and wealth and accumulation is far greater than their love for God. Well, there surely is a challenge to us here who are workers that our ethics of work must be godly, must accord with the standards of God, that we must practice honesty and uprightness in all our dealings.

Indeed, whether we're workers or not, in all our business dealings, in all our transactions with other people, to maintain a Christian integrity, that we don't just exercise a public parade of piety on a Sunday morning, that we practice it deeply and it flows from our heart Monday to Saturday as well.

[14:51] There is surely a great challenge to us here about our Christian integrity, that in every relationship and in everything we do, we exercise the godliness of God's standards and don't put them aside when we walk out of this building and off this property.

No wonder God is coming to judge ancient Israel when they exercise such a sham of their life as is described here. No wonder God swears an oath in verse 7 to say, yes, I mean business when I'm coming to judge you.

The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob, that's the pride of the land, their boast in their wealth, what a sarcastic way of saying God is taking an oath to judge you. The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob, surely I will never forget any of their deeds, he will hold it against them forever.

Yes, this day of judgment will be a terrible day. Shall not the land tremble on this account, he says in verse 8, and everyone mourn who lives in it, and all of it rise like the Nile and be tossed about and sink again like the Nile of Egypt.

What a terrible day that will be. It looks a bit like an earthquake, the land trembling. It looks a bit like a flood, as the river Nile would periodically rise and therefore flood and devastate huge tracts of land.

[16:06] Amos is saying that destruction by God on judgment day will be massive, like the destruction that the rise and the fall of the Nile brings in North Egypt. But indeed, even worse than that, it will be a day of cosmic upheaval.

So he describes it in verse 9, on that day, says the Lord God, I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight. This is more than a solar eclipse, more than something to get the astronomers excited about.

This is something that is devastating, that the sun at its very peak at noon, at its zenith, at its height, just like the nation Israel, will suddenly come to an end and it will be black.

Just when it looks as though it's all bright and rosy, it will go. And so will the nation as well. There will be great reversal that is happening in this land on judgment day.

I will turn your feasts into mourning, all your songs into lamentation. I will bring sackcloth on all loins, the ancient equivalent of a funeral mourning suit.

[17:14] Sackcloth would be hard and coarse against the skin, a mark of self-denial in grief and mourning and repentance. I will bring baldness on every head, not because people will lose their hair or grow old and bald, but rather they will shave their heads because that was an ancient mourning rite at the time of grief.

I'll make it like the mourning for an only son, the bitterest of all grief, surely in a patriarchal society. And at the end of it, like a bitter day, a day without hope, that will be God's judgment on his people Israel.

But perhaps even more stinging and certainly more ironic than all of that comes the words of verse 11. Israel has consistently and persistently shunned God's word, ignored the parts that were handed down to them from centuries before and turned deaf ears to God's word through the prophet Amos.

And now, appropriately, to a people who shunned God's word, God will withdraw it. He'll take it away. There'll be a famine of it in the land. At first, maybe Israel won't even notice the difference and won't worry.

But on that devastating final day of judgment, when all is thrown into upheaval, and suddenly at that last they turn desperate, searching for God's word, in a last desperate act to get right with him, it will be too late.

[18:57] God's word has been taken away and God has shut up his mouth and shut up the mouth of his prophets. He is silent. And it will be too late to find his word. What an appropriate punishment for a people who'd been shunning it.

But what a terrifying picture at the end when it's too late. Why even the strong will suffer. Even if people search through the whole world, they will not find God's word.

So verse 12 says they wander from sea to sea and east to north and so on. The whole world is encompassed there. They won't find God's word. They shall run to or fro. The idea is of wandering aimlessly, that sort of desperation when everything's falling down around you.

They won't find God's word. In that day, verse 13, the beautiful young women and the young men, those who are strong, those for whom there is future, surely, they will faint for thirst.

Not just lack of water, but lack of God's word. Because in the end, of course, real life is sustained not by bread or by water, but by the word of God. And it will be gone.

[20:05] And there won't be any life, therefore. Maybe there were some who'd respond to Amos by saying this, but we didn't go into the synagogue or the temple to worship God.

We worshipped other idols. Surely our gods then are right, and their God is wrong. But no Amos says there is no escape there either. So those who swear in verse 14 by Ashma of Samaria, probably the name of their god or their idol set up in the capital city, no future for them.

And those who go up to the very north of the kingdom to Dan and swear by their god up there, their idol, no future for them. And those who go to the very south, even make a pilgrimage is the sense of the way of Beersheba.

Those who make a pilgrimage to Beersheba, no future for them as they go to worship their idol as well. For as the last words of the chapter say, they shall fall, all of them, and never rise again.

The day of judgment will be a ferocious and terrifying day. And we as Christian people ought to live fearfully in anticipation and expectation of it.

[21:14] this chapter ought to make us worried, fearful, nervous even about that day. And yet, in balance to that, there is a sense in which this day is already past.

For it's described in verse 9 by these words, I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight. And when has that already happened?

When was it that at noon the sky went black? for three hours on that afternoon, 2,000 years ago on a Friday, the first good Friday, the time when Jesus was hanging on the cross, is the time when this judgment of God has already been executed.

For on that day, 2,000 years ago, our sins and God's judgment on our sins was executed. on that day 2,000 years ago, the judgment for our sins was born by our Savior on the cross.

Yes, it's true that one day we'll all face the judgment seat of God and before him on our own account we cannot stand. We will not be able to stand and say I've made it, I've done it, I've achieved it.

[22:28] For all of us fall short of God's standards in our life. But nonetheless on that day there will be acquittal, there will be innocence declared for those with faith in the death of Jesus Christ.

For those who've placed their trust and confidence in his death and the fact that God's judgment has been borne by him for our sins, we will stand acquitted on that day knowing that our sins are forgiven at the final judgment.

Then and only then when our faith and confidence is placed, in him our saviour, will we stand before the throne of God on that great and terrible day.

Amos's words ought to send us to Christ. They ought to send us to the cross of Christ. His words of unrelenting judgment through these eight chapters which I'm sure have tired and tried many of us in these recent weeks ought to in the end send us to the cross to the mercy seat of God to know that there God's judgment against our sins has already been executed and carried away by the one who cried my God my God why have you forsaken me?

Why did he cry that? Why not? When he carries the judgment for us. For there in Jesus' death we find our sins judged, there we find indeed by the same holy God our sins forgiven.

[23 : 57] so then for us today now is the time to heed God's word. Now is the time to pay attention to it.

Now is the time if you've not already done it to place your faith and trust and confidence in the death of Jesus Christ for you. Taking the judgment from you, giving you forgiveness of your own sins.

Now is the time. Now before it's too late. Now before God's patience expires with you. Now before God withdraws his word. Now before God is silent.

Our God■m.

Thank you.