

The End of God's Patience

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[0:00] This is the AM service on the 7th of September 1997. The preacher is Dr. Paul Barker. The sermon is entitled The End of God's Patience and is from Amos chapter 7 verses 1 to 17. Please be seated. And you may like to have it in front of you open the passage from Amos chapter 7 on page 748 in the Pew Bibles. You may have heard the saying, Patience is a virtue, possess it if you can. Seldom in a woman, but never in a man. Well, maybe there's not much truth in that. But many of us would think, many of us would think that God is patient. The Bible tells us that God is patient.

[1:10] And yet it is easy to misunderstand the patience of God. It's easy to think that God who we're told is slow to anger is really a God who is never angry. Or a God who is long-suffering is a God who is forever suffering. But real patience is an active response to an act of provocation rather than an act of indifference. Let me give an example. Imagine you turn up to a house and there is a very old person in the house but coming from another room blares some grandchild's loud, awful, hideous music. And you might think, well, this old person is very patient to put up with this young person's music. But what if that old person were totally deaf? There's no patience there at all, is there? There isn't a sense of indifference because they can't actually hear. They're not provoked by the loud music. Well, often we think that God is stone deaf.

[2:17] That he's not at all provoked by anything that goes on in the world or in our lives, any sin or failure or whatever. You see, it's very easy to think that God's patience is really, in the end, absolute indifference. That he's blind or deaf to what's going on in the world. But you see, patience is not indifference. Patience is an active response to something that is provoking. God is not stone deaf to the blaring music of our sin but rather restrains his judgment in an act of patience but he's provoked by it. Our sin, our failure and the failure and sin of our world keep on insistently, persistently provoking God time and again. But his lack of action, both in our lives and sometimes in the world, doesn't mean our wrongdoing is inconsequential. It certainly doesn't mean that our wrongdoing is not wrongdoing but rather good. But it means that God is actively exercising patience, restraining his judgment on this world. But patience, if it is real patience, in the end expires. It runs out. Because if it were not patience, it would be cowardice or indifference and that could go on forever and ever. But in the end, there comes a limit to patience.

[3:40] And that's what we find in Amos chapter 7. God has exercised in the history of his people of the Old Testament, the people called Israel, great patience, persistent patience.

But now that patience expires. The first half of the chapter gives three visions that Amos is given, things that he sees to describe this lack of or the end of God's patience.

Firstly, in verse 1, he gets a vision. He sees that God was forming locusts at the time the latter growth began to sprout. It was the latter growth after the king's mowings.

What on earth is all that about? For us, it's a picture that perhaps doesn't quite fit our common experiences. But for an agricultural community like ancient Israel, a plague of locusts was a fearful thing.

For one day you would have the potential of great crop and the next day the locusts would have destroyed the lot. All that potential and hope is gone. But it's even more serious than that.

[4 : 44] For it seems from what this verse says, that the first crop of the year belonged to the king. It was like a tax that was made, probably illegitimately. It was probably the greed of the king and his court that had instituted that tax.

It's not an Old Testament law that the first crop must go to the king. Indeed, the first fruits should go to God. But this locust plague comes at the end of April, after the second latter reigns.

That's the crop that belonged to the people, it seems. And that's the crop that's destroyed by locusts. And that would be a fearful thing to see. For it's on that crop that the populace depended for its life.

For after those rains of April, there is no more rain for at least six months through the dry summer drought period. And so a locust plague at this point would have been a fearful thing to see.

It would have meant famine, perhaps starvation, for many, many people. Amos sees at the beginning of verse 2 this total devastation wreaked by these locusts.

[5 : 51] When they had finished eating the grass of the land implies that there's no more grass or crops to eat. It's all gone. This is total devastation. Amos' response to this vision is significant.

He speaks, O Lord God, forgive, I beg you. How can Jacob stand? He is so small. Amos' response is an urgent plea to God to forgive.

Because he recognizes where these locusts come from. You see, in the end, it's not an agricultural problem or a climactic problem, climatic problem, but rather a moral problem.

And so he urges God to forgive. He knows that the locusts come from God. It's God who is forming them. Not the winds of nature that was bringing them over. He knows that God is sending these locusts as his judgment on the people's sin.

For Amos knows his Bible. He knows that earlier in the Bible, one of the things God threatens on people who disobey him are plagues like locusts. So Amos knows what's going on in this vision.

[7 : 00] He understands the cause of the vision. It's not just locusts as a fluke of nature, but it's God's judgment on a sinful people. And that's why he says forgive.

Because he's urging God to restrain his judgment and he pleads with him to forgive the sins of his people. He appeals to God's mercy.

He doesn't say this judgment is unfair. He acknowledges that it is fair. The people have sinned and they deserve the judgment of God. But he appeals to the mercy of God and says simply, briefly, forgive.

And perhaps surprisingly God relents, we see in verse 3. It shall not be. The threat of the plague of locusts is withdrawn. God holds back. It doesn't say that he forgives, just that he relents in bringing his judgment on his people.

The next vision in the next three verses is perhaps even more terrifying. Very similar in effect, but a little bit more intense in its description.

[8 : 08] This is what the Lord God showed me. The Lord God, again God is the initiator of this, was calling for a shower of fire and it devoured the great deep, which in ancient Israel's terms was the Mediterranean Sea, and was eating up the land.

This is almost a nuclear holocaust in its extent of destruction. Not just the land, but even the seas around it are dried up by this judgment of fire.

Fire is a common symbol for the judgment of God. It's already been used several times in Amos, especially in the opening two chapters. Again, it's God's initiative.

Again, Amos understands that this is God's judgment. It's a covenant curse that's coming upon the people. Something that God in early days of Israel's history threatened would happen if his people were disobedient.

And again, Amos calls out urgently. This time, slightly different wording. This time, slightly more urgent and more desperate in its appeal. O Lord God, cease, I beg you.

[9 : 11] No call for forgiveness here. He knows that it's past that point. But just simply cease, stop. How can Jacob stand? He is so small. And again, God relents.

This also shall not be, said the Lord God. Two visions of growing depth of intensity. And two perhaps amazing things in the middle of them.

One is that Amos prays in the middle of this fearful vision of judgment. Amos takes the time to pray. Simple prayer. It's not eloquent. It's not theologically articulate in any depth.

Simply saying, forgive and cease. One man for the whole nation prays to God. Appealing for God's mercy. Recognizing that judgment is fair.

But pleading simply and urgently and desperately. God, stop. But the most amazing thing of all is not just that Amos prays in such a point, but that God hears and heeds the prayer.

[10 : 15] God changes his mind. He relents. He withdraws his judgment. The older translations say he repents. But the connotation of that for us is often that God has sinned and that we repent of sin.

But the idea is better expressed here that he turns or he relents or he changes his mind. It's extraordinary, isn't it? Prayer works. God chooses to answer prayers.

Even in the most desperate times like this. Even simple prayers that aren't well thought out in lots of detail. Simple, desperate prayers are heard by God.

One prayer by one person, but for a whole nation heard by God who relents. Some of you might object by saying, well, God really wasn't going to do it in the first place.

It's really an idle threat. And God was perhaps testing Amos. So just sort of trying to stir up the people. But he wasn't ever going to do that, surely. But no, that misses the point not only of this passage, but the whole book.

[11 : 17] The point is that God is bringing about his judgment on his people. And the point is that his patience is at its end. The point is that Israel has sinned beyond God's patience.

And that judgment is imminent and indeed inevitable. And within 30 years of Amos' words was realized. The nation was destroyed. Now these threats are real.

But they show exactly the point I began with. That the lack of judgment to this point is not because God is indifferent is not because God is indifferent, but because he is patient. But that patience has come to an end.

Israel is on the verge of receiving God's wrath. It's clear in every chapter of Amos that it is on the brink of national disaster. This is its final chance to change.

The intercession of Amos has stalled it, but not put it off forever. You see, Israel's not safe. It stands in a dangerous position.

[12:18] God has yet to act in judgment. But the fact that Israel, the nation, is relatively prosperous and militarily strong at this point does not mean it's safe, but rather ironically stands under the fearful judgment of God.

A warning for us, as we've seen in weeks past, that just because our lives might be rolling along fairly happily, thank you very much, does not mean we're safe. It doesn't necessarily mean that these are abundant blessings of God on our obedience either.

It may well be because God in his mercy is restraining himself, is exercising patience towards us. As St. Paul says, Do you not know that the kindness of God is meant to bring us to repentance?

God's delaying of judgment against us, perhaps, is not because he thinks we're doing well necessarily, but because in his mercy he's delaying that judgment. Let's recognize God's patience as patience and not indifference to how we live our lives.

But notice also the tension that's going on here as well. The same Amos who condemns the sins of Israel in such strong words as we've seen in recent weeks is the same Amos who prays desperately, urgently, even emotionally for his people.

[13:36] It's the same person who condemns the sin and prays for the nation and intercedes for them. It ought to remind us that there is no place in Christian life or ministry to denounce the sins of others if we're not prepared to love them and pray for them and intercede for them as well.

But on a bigger scale, what's going on here is a tension even within God, I guess. A tension of his exercising holy justice on a sinful people and yet also loving them and exercising mercy towards them.

Hand in hand, his love, his anger, his justice and his mercy only perfectly resolved in the end in the cross of Christ where Jesus died as God's judgment and justice on the sins of the world and yet died in mercy for that world to bring forgiveness for sin.

The third vision takes the sequence a bit further. If the second one has shown an intensity from the first, now comes the final end. No more intercession, no more prayer, no more relenting.

The time has come. The end has come. God's patience has now expired. This is what he showed me, Amos says in verse 7. The Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line and with a plumb line in his hand.

[15:01] And the Lord said to me, Amos, what do you see? And I said, a plumb line, which is an observant comment. The Lord said, See, I'm setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel.

I'll never again pass them by. A plumb line was used to make sure that the wall or the building was built straight and upright. The implication here is not it's about a wall or a building, but it's really about the nation.

It's a metaphor for God measuring the nation against his own standard. Originally, God had given his laws, which was like the equivalent of a plumb line, to establish the nation according to God's standards, which are perfectly upright.

But now, centuries after giving those laws, God has come to measure his people, to use that same plumb line, the same standards of God, which he gave to people through Moses 700 years before.

And now Israel is found wanting. Measured by God's rectitude and God's accuracy of his own plumb line, the wall of Israel's life is out of kilter.

[16:09] It's tilted. It's tottering. It's skewed. It's warped. It's bent. And it's beyond repair. A wall that's out of plumb is dangerous and needs either massive repairs or to be completely rebuilt.

God says at the end of verse 8, I will never again pass them by. The time has come. He's measured Israel. They're found wanting. They've refused to heed the warnings.

And never again, he says, will I relent. Will I keep exercising my patience on this people? My patience has expired and judgment is inevitable.

Keeping up the metaphor of buildings and plumb lines, he goes on to highlight a couple of features about why Israel is found wanting in verse 9. The high places of Isaac, another name for the nation, shall be made desolate.

The high places are where other people worshipped other gods. But in Israel's history, they'd gone there to worship other gods as well. They'd absorbed paganism into their own religion.

[17:11] So they'd gone on to the high places, the tops of mountains where the Canaanites liked to worship their gods and they'd worship there. All of that will be made desolate. The religious places, the sanctuaries of Israel, shall be laid waste, he goes on to say.

This time talking about the places that Israel had built of their own accord. Places like Bethel and Gilgal we've seen in recent weeks. Shrines and temples and so on that from the beginning were illegitimate because they broke God's law about where they could go and offer sacrifices.

All the religious centres will be destroyed. But of course, it's not just talking about judgement against religious buildings. It's judgement against the people who go and worship there. That is the nation as a whole.

But more than that, the verse ends by saying that I will rise against the house, the palace of Jeroboam, the king of the time with the sword. But again, it's not just a statement of judgement against the royal family.

It's a statement of judgement against the whole leadership of the nation as we've seen in recent weeks. The religious buildings, the royal palaces, standing for the whole nation in the end. They will be destroyed as the nation will be destroyed by the judgement of God.

[18:20] You see, Israel's had enough warnings. It's not as though God's judgement against them is unfair or unheralded. They've had a list of disasters we saw in chapter 4 but at each point Israel refused to return to God.

Amos himself had come and preached but his words have fallen on deaf ears. We'll see more of that in a minute. Amos has interceded praying for the people twice we've seen in this chapter and yet all that has done is stalled the inevitable day of the judgement of God.

God never punishes unfairly. He gives plenty of warnings and for us as well scripture is full of warnings for us that we not be like Israel of old.

For example in 1 Corinthians 10 Paul makes the exact point that in effect the Bible is a series of warnings for us that we must heed if we are to avoid the judgement of God.

Let us heed them then. Let us not be like ancient Israel. After those three visions the chapter goes on to another episode between a chap called Amaziah a priest and Amos.

[19:38] It's a confrontation between the establishment and the rebel if you like. And we know from world history that the establishment never sits easily with someone within it who is a rebel.

Think back to people like Thomas Obeck the Archbishop of Canterbury 700 years ago who so exasperated Henry II the King that he is reputed to have said who will rid me of this turbulent priest and Obeck was murdered in Canterbury Cathedral.

Martin Luther and the establishment of German church. Martin Luther King and the establishment of the United States of America. Even Princess Diana and the royal family establishment of England in recent years.

And Amos here the rebel according to the establishment of his nation. What we find in these verses is the establishment trying to squash or silence the rebel.

Trying to box up the rebel and restrict it so that the words of the rebel don't come out. It's interesting to reflect how these verses that we're about to look at show just how provocative Amos' words were.

[20 : 45] What a great reaction that they had brought about in the nation. Amaziah, the priest of Bethel sent to King Jeroboam of Israel saying, Amos has conspired against you in the very centre of the house of Israel.

The land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said, Jeroboam shall die by the sword and Israel must go into exile away from its land. Bethel was the chief shrine, the king's sanctuary it's called a little bit later on.

And Amaziah was the establishment priest. He was perhaps the spiritual leader of the nation of Israel in Amos' day. And yet, as is clear in this passage, his authority came solely from the king, not from God.

When he goes to the king to make a complaint about Amos, he misrepresents Amos. He's selective in what he says. He makes no mention of Israel's sin.

He makes no mention that Amos keeps appealing time and time again that his words are God's words. In fact, he just describes Amos as a political conspirator, as though Amos personally is about plotting to kill the king.

[21 : 58] And so he misconstrues what Amos has said about Jeroboam. At the end of verse 9, Amos has said that God will rise against the house of Jeroboam, but Amaziah twists that just a little to say that Amos is plotting to kill Jeroboam himself.

A slightly different thing. Amos has not actually quite said what Amaziah has quoted him as saying. And so Amaziah says to the king that the land is not able to bear his words.

That is, that the land will be destroyed if Amos' words come true. We'd better silence this person. Well, there's no mention of what the king says in response to his chief priest, to his Archbishop of Canterbury equivalent, if you like.

But rather, what we get now is Amaziah coming back to Amos and speaking to Amos. And he says to him in a fairly derogatory way, O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there, but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.

To say to him to go to Judah is to say, go back to your homeland. Judah was the southern nation. Amos had come from there to the north. But there was huge disdain in Israel for the people of Judah.

[23 : 20] They were regarded as a bit backward, traditional, and conservative. Amaziah is saying, go back home. We don't want you here. It's like saying somebody has come over from Tasmania to Victoria and said the words of Amos.

And now the Archbishop of Victoria or Melbourne has said to him, you go back to your little bush parish back in Tasmania. We don't want you here. That's the effect of what's going on here. Words of great disdain or rejection for somebody who's come from the outback of Judah.

He says to him, go and eat bread there. Literally, go and make your living there. Which shows just how corrupt the prophetic system was in the day. All the prophets that were in ancient Israel were paid by the king, were employed by the king.

They were civil servants, if you like, in the king's sanctuary. Therefore, under the authority of the king, inevitably, they would say words that were soothing and pleasing to the king. There was no recognition of the authority of God here.

There's none expressed by Amaziah, the chief priest here. In the employ of the king, they say words that please the king. And anybody who rebels against that is ostracized and expelled.

[24 : 32] The Old Testament gives many examples of where there are false prophets around, invariably employed by the court or the king, saying words that please the king and bolster the king's confidence and esteem.

And very often, God's prophets, the ones we know from the books of the Old Testament, like Jeremiah and so on, are cut off, ostracized, even persecuted by those false prophets.

It's Amos' turn here in chapter 7. Notice that the authority that Amaziah pleads is the authority of the king, not an authority of God at all.

So bereft is the institution of real spirituality. Amaziah's full of his own importance. In effect, he's parading around saying, I'm the archbishop of the king's sanctuary or cathedral here and we don't want you, you little outback priest here, get out and leave us alone.

Amos doesn't take this lying down. If you've been listening to the last few weeks of Amos, you wouldn't expect him to do otherwise, would you? He responds to Amaziah in words that are very biting and very blunt.

[25 : 45] I am no prophet nor a prophet's son. What a strange way to respond at first. Of course he's a prophet. His words are full of prophecy. But what he's saying is I'm not a professional prophet.

I'm not born into this. It's not as though my father and grandfather before him were a prophet and that's why I'm a prophet in the pay of the court. In fact, he goes on to say, I'm a herdsman, one who dresses sycamore trees, which is possibly one that were fig sycamores and he would go around slitting the early fruit to make them sweet.

He was probably an expert in this, it seems, from the expression that's used. That's where his income came from. That's what he says he used to do. So why is he a prophet? Because verse 15 says, And the Lord took me from following the flock.

And the Lord said to me, Go prophesy to my people Israel. It's God who's made him a prophet. And if God speaks, as Amos has already said in chapter 3, who can but prophesy?

Amos is under the authority of God. He's challenging Amaziah at the very heart of what Amaziah should be on about. He's saying, I am under the authority of God. The implication is, you have nothing to do with God.

[26 : 55] So far are you from him. Indeed, there's more that's blunt here. He quotes God as saying to him, Go to Israel. Amaziah's just said, Go to Judah.

But God says, Go to Israel. It's clear that the king's authority and God's authority are in direct opposition. More than that, God said, Go to Israel and prophesy.

And Amaziah says in verse 16, Do not prophesy against Israel. Whose authority? Amos says, It's God's authority that counts and I will follow that.

And Amaziah says, It's the king's authority and I will follow that. Amaziah is ordering Amos to disobey God. And Amos goes on to say in verses 16 and 17, Therefore, in judgment of what you're selling me, hear the word of the Lord.

You say, Do not prophesy against Israel and do not preach against the house of Isaac. Therefore, thus says the Lord, these things are going to happen to you. Four curses coming upon Amaziah for his resistance to the will of God.

[28 : 02] Firstly, your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, maybe having to earn her keep when Amaziah himself disappears and is killed. Your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword.

Not himself, maybe, but his line is wiped out. For a priest, it was quite prestigious to have a line that would continue on the priestly family. It will be wiped out by the sword.

Your land shall be parceled out by line. Amaziah will lose his own property. Indeed, in that day, priests weren't meant to have property. It shows how corrupt the system had got. And you yourself, Amaziah, shall die in an unclean land.

Bad enough for an Israelite to die in a pagan land, it's even worse for a priest who is meant to be especially ritually clean in ancient Israel's day. And then, to put the sword in even further, Amos repeats the threat of exile for the nation.

And Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land. Amaziah, you appeal to the authority of the king, but it's God's authority that counts.

[29 : 06] And all your rejection of me will come to naught, for God's word will be fulfilled. The Bible, and indeed subsequent church history, are full of examples of attempts to silence the word of God.

The Bible and church history are full of examples of where the establishment has tried to control God's word, to keep it locked up, to keep it safe, and to resist the rebel.

And Amos is, in the end, just one of a long line of the spokespeople of God who suffer that threat of silence. But silence the prophet and you cannot silence God.

God's word will still be fulfilled and still come to its realization. But you see, for us, I think we recognize that at least in Amos, if not other parts of the Bible, there are parts of God's word which are unpleasant, challenging, disturbing to us.

And I know that over recent weeks, many of us have felt rather troubled. Oh, if only we could have a sermon that's a bit nicer and a bit more encouraging and a bit more comforting and a bit more bolstering and joyful, rather than all these words of doom and gloom from Amos.

[30 : 23] I know many of you have felt that. I know I have on a Saturday night, believe me. But the point is that we ignore God's word at its peril. We ignore the challenge and the warnings at our peril.

We cannot and must not resist the will and word of God like Amaziah and the establishment of ancient Israel. We cannot expurgate the version.

We can't rip out the pages we don't like, narrow it down to just those nice little psalms and some comforting words of Jesus and 1 Corinthians 13 and nothing else. You see, we need courage not only to listen but to heed God's word, to heed the warnings that are there for us about how we live our life.

For those who resist God's will and God's word will end up with a fate like Amaziah. So let us take heed. Let us always recognize that we live under the authority of God, not a nation, not a king, not a religious institution in the end, but under God.

Amen.