

Abusing the Privilege

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Date: 03 August 1997

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- [0 : 00] I pray that you're living in England for a bit over three years. I could not but help notice a significant change in Victoria.
- Gone, it seems, was the financial and economic bankruptcy of the late 80s and early 90s. Victoria's economy, it seems, was beginning to boom.
- There was a newfound prosperity and wealth and confidence in the state. I guess being away for three years sharpened the contrast of what was happening. It seemed that ruthless economic rationalism was doing its thing.
- Now I studied economics when I was at university. And I remember trying to fathom multitudes of formulae and equations. Trying to work out the connections between inflation and money supply and GDP and balance of trade figures and unemployment.
- And I read it at university about whether Keynesian or from Friedman. Whatever different style of economics was being taught. And all the connections between various factors and indicators.
- [1 : 05] I realised that for all of those equations, one thing had been left out. There was one omission in every equation I'd ever been taught about economics at university.
- And that was God. For I came to realise in studying the Bible, that God ultimately is the one who brings economic prosperity and wealth.
- In fact, prosperity and wealth is not the sum total of various economic performance indicators. But rather comes from moral living before a holy God.
- The key lesson of the Old Testament, and it applies to this passage in Amos today, is found summed up for us at the end of the book of Deuteronomy. Listen carefully to these economic words.
- If you will only obey the Lord your God, by diligently observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, then blessed shall you be in the city and blessed shall you be in the field.
- [2 : 07] Blessed shall you be in the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground and the fruit of your livestock, both the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.
- Blessed shall you be when you come in. And blessed shall you be when you go out. That's an economic formula that should have been taught at university, it seems to me now, in retrospect.
- And the prophet Amos, whom we're studying at the moment in these sermons, in the morning services, knew that lesson. He knew his Bible well, better than Keynes or Freedmen. Amos was addressing a prosperous nation.
- The king of the time was Jeroboam II. He'd reigned for a long time and brought security, stability and expanded border to the nation of Israel. They were boom years.
- The Sumerian All-Ordinaries Index was at an all-time high. Every economic performance indicator looked good and positive and on the up. But the trouble was that Israel had forgotten its Bible, had forgotten its key economic lesson.

[3 : 15] That prosperity and wealth and blessing comes from God in response to a people which is obedient to the laws of God. Now Israel was certainly a privileged nation.

And Amos begins chapter 3 by acknowledging that in a striking way. Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt.

Using words that resonate with the great grace and love of God. Talking of the nation of Israel as a family, as God's family, because God has made them his children.

Recognizing the significant event that made Israel Israel was when God brought them up out of the land of slavery. That's out of Egypt. God has saved them in the past by his grace and love.

700 years before Amos spoke these words. He goes on in verse 2 to say, You only have I known of all the families upon earth. This is an exclusive relationship which God has made with Israel his own people.

[4 : 19] No other nation shares the privilege of that relationship apart from the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. God has known them.

Not that he doesn't know the other nations or know anything about them, but know in the sense of establish a committed relationship with these people. Israel is certainly privileged of God.

Indeed those verses that open this chapter summarize all the great grace and love of God in the Old Testament. And Amos is calling Israel back to basics.

Back to its roots. To return to where it was in the beginning when God established them as his people and they were willing to serve him. Because the Israel whom Amos is addressing is only a nation because of the grace of God in establishing it.

But the privilege that God had extended to this nation has been abused. For that privilege carries responsibility. And Israel had ignored that consequence.

[5 : 25] For the reason that God saved Israel, the reason that God chose them, the reason he established a committed relationship with them was in order that they may live for righteousness and holiness.

The responsibility. If you obey God, then these further blessings will come upon you. But Israel has abused the privilege. Its wealth, you see, is really an illusion in the end.

It is not grounded in an obedient relationship to God. Therefore, verse 2 concludes, I will punish you for all your iniquities.

You see, the relationship which God has established with his people is one that demands of them obedience, but in response to disobedience, God himself is bound, duty bound by his relationship with these people to bring punishment upon them for their disobedience.

You see, the people of God are not exempt from the judgment of God against sin. And Christians are in a similar relationship to God as ancient Israel was. We too are people of God established by God's grace.

[6 : 30] We too are the recipients of his love. We too are those who have been saved and redeemed. Not from Egypt, but from our sins. Not through the parting of the Red Sea, but through the death of Jesus on the cross.

And we too are not exempt from God's judgment against sin. The privilege of being God's children carries with it great responsibility. Well, not many Israelites would have welcomed Amos' message.

Everything in their nation looked good. The economic indicators were pointing up. Everyone was very upbeat about the economy, about the nation, about its fortunes. And along comes the ancient Eeyore called Amos.

It won't last. It's all doom and gloom. To a people who are unwilling to hear, Amos again, in a sense, plays a trick with them in order to get them to hear and agree to his words.

If you were here last week, you'll remember his eight statements against different nations. And for the first seven, the people of Israel would have agreed heartily. Being softened up by these agreeable words, they would have then heard the statement against themselves and been shocked.

[7 : 48] And the same sort of thing is happening in the next verses of chapter three. Again, we have a sequence of eight. Again, the first seven are accessible and comfortable, fairly innocuous questions.

It's a bit like a game of Simon Says that Amos now plays with ancient Israel. He asks them questions for which the answer is clearly no. Such and such no, such and such no.

And they get into the habit of answering no to all these questions so that when they get to the last question and answer it the way Amos wants, they must suddenly realise, hey, what have we just said? It's a bit like a game of Simon Says where Simon says put your hands on your head.

Simon says stand up. Simon says sit down. Simon says turn around. Turn around again. And we suddenly do it because we forget because we're in the habit of doing what we've been told because Simon says. So it's a sort of word game that Amos now is playing with ancient Israel.

See how it goes from verse three. Do two walk together unless they've made an appointment? No, they don't. In the ancient world, if you're going to walk between towns and you walked with somebody, you would have made an agreement to walk with them.

[8 : 50] So do two walk together unless they've made an appointment? No. Does a lion roar in the forest when it has no prey? No, it doesn't. Because it would scare off any prospects of prey.

Does a young lion cry out from its den if it's caught nothing? No, it doesn't. Does a bird fall into a snare on the earth when there is no trap for it? No, it doesn't.

Does a snare spring up from the ground when it's taken nothing? No, a snare only springs up when there's a bird in it to catch or some other little animal. Is a trumpet blown in a city and the people are not afraid?

No. Because the trumpet was the sound of alarm. Does disaster befall a city unless the Lord has done it? No, ancient Israelites would have looked around the world and when they saw a disaster on another nation, they'd have said, God is behind that.

The answer you see is no. The question's fairly innocuous, although they're all about capture and alarm and threat. Amos is building up to his climax, you see.

[9 : 52] Verse 7 is the transition leading into the punchline. Surely the Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants, the prophets. Again, Israel would probably have agreed with such a statement.

You see, the logic is this. If God is bringing disaster, he tells his prophets what he's doing. And if he tells a prophet what he's doing, then the prophet raises the alarm.

And the true prophet cannot ignore the word of God told to him. And that's the crunchline of verse 8. The lion has roared, who will not fear?

Well, everyone will fear if a lion roars. The Lord God has spoken. Who can but prophesy? You see, Amos is defending his own words here.

Amos is compelled to speak because God has told him to speak. God's word has taken grip on Amos. And he's saying to the Israelites, they're not my words.

[10 : 55] It's not me, the prophet, who's chosen to say some uncomfortable and rude things to you people. But rather, these are God's words. Reject my words and you reject God's words.

It's just like St. Paul later on in the New Testament. He says, Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel. The prophet of the Old Testament, the preacher of the New, compelled by God's word to speak God's word.

And that's what Amos is saying to Israel. These are not my words. They are God's. And I am a prophet of God. So listen.

Or ignore them at your peril. You see, for ancient Israel, Amos was the trumpet sounding the alarm before the army attacked the nation. The danger is imminent. And Amos's words are urgent.

Yes, God is the lion, but Amos is the roar. And Israel is the prey. Amos then conjures up a setting or a picture of a legal court.

[12 : 04] The scene is the capital city, Mount Samaria. And God is putting his own people on trial. God is the one who is bringing an accusation against his own people.

And the setting, metaphorically speaking, is a public court. And in ancient Israelite law, two witnesses were needed before anybody could be found guilty of something. And so God here, through the prophet Amos, calls two witnesses in verse 9.

Proclaim to the strongholds in Ashdod and to the strongholds in the land of Egypt and say, assemble yourselves on Mount Samaria and see what great tumults are within it and what oppressions are in its midst.

First, Ashdod was one of the major cities of the Philistines. Like the Philistines, Egypt also was a major enemy of the people of God.

The Philistines and the Egyptians, you see, are being called as the witnesses at the trial of Israel by God. And it's horrific because the Philistines and the Egyptians were the arch enemies of the people of Israel.

[13 : 12] They are also the people who are immoral, brutal, unjust. They're people who've traded others as slaves. So how on earth can they be witnesses against the very people of God?

How can God call such abhorrent people to be witnesses against his own people? That surely must have been something quite shocking for the Israelites to consider that God is using such abominable people as the Egyptians and the Philistines to be witnesses against his own people.

But you see, even in the light of their pagan crimes and sins, Israel's own sins are disgusting, obscene, and indecent.

Bad as the Philistines and Egyptians were, the implication is that Israel is worse. Indeed, so bad is Israel that Amos goes on to say in verse 10, they do not know how to do right.

The idea, it seems, is that they've begun a course of sin and evil. And so far down the track have they gone in such a course that they've actually lost all perception of what is right and wrong.

[14 : 25] You begin a course of doing evil or sin and you know what's right and you know what's wrong. But keep on down the path and not only do you keep on doing the sin and evil, but you even lose the perception of what is right.

That's how far Israel, the people of God, have travelled down the path of crime and iniquity. They're spiritually blind. They think they're storing up treasures, but all they're storing up, Amos says at the end of verse 10, is they're storing up violence and robbery in their strongholds.

That's how their treasure has been accumulated, through violence, through robbery, through the oppression of the poor. Therefore, thus says the Lord God, an adversary shall surround the land and strip you of your defence and your strongholds shall be plundered.

Amos remembers the words of Deuteronomy, the obverse of what I said before about blessings coming from God, because that passage that I quoted goes on to say that if you disobey the Lord, then these curses will come upon you.

And one of them is that you'll be surrounded by your enemies and defeated. Amos, you see, is preaching the Bible to them. He's warning them from the very Bible that they ought to know and should have read that what they're doing wrong incurs the curses and judgment of God.

[15 : 50] The nation will be defeated. They may pride themselves in their strength and their strongholds, but God is stronger. And through some enemy, probably Assyria, which conquered Israel about 30 years after Amos' words, God brings about his judgment even on his own people.

And so bad will this judgment be that there will be nothing of significance of Israel left. So verse 12 says, Thus says the Lord, As the shepherd rescues from the mouth of the lion two legs or a piece of an ear, so shall the people of Israel who live in Samaria be rescued with the corner of a couch and part of a bed.

As I read that verse, you probably think, what is this talking about? An ancient shepherd would have to give proof to the owner of the flock that a lion or some other animal has attacked and killed a sheep.

The idea is that if a lion attacks the sheep, the shepherd must find something of evidence to show that it's not the shepherd who's stolen the sheep for his own benefit. So he finds an ear or just a bit of a leg.

That's the evidence that the lion has attacked. It's hardly a rescue of the sheep. The sheep is dead. But just this little snippet that's kept, the ear or a bit of a leg, shows that destruction has happened.

[17 : 02] It's the evidence for destruction. But the really biting, sarcastic thing about Amos' words about Israel's destruction is what will be left. The verse ends by saying the corner of a couch or part of a bed.

It's a picture of some luxury, in fact. Most people would have slept on a mat that they'd roll out at night. But all that will be left as evidence of Israel are statements of obscene luxury.

Couches and fine beds, it seems. The words actually suggest something that's quite grand and expensive. That's the evidence of Israel's life.

That's all that will be left. And indeed, the archaeologists who've excavated the capital city called Samaria, a place I visited a couple of years ago, have found exactly that. evidence of great luxury and opulence, grandeur and riches.

It's a scathing indictment of the people of God that all that will be left will be a statement of their sin of luxury, indulgence and indolence.

[18 : 14] Nothing of faith and nothing of godliness, but rather statements of oppression. Israel, the people of God are on trial. The witnesses are called for to see the evidence and to testify.

Verse 13 repeats the summons. Hear and testify against the house of Jacob, says the Lord God, the God of hosts. And then in the last two verses, two things are held up as key bits of evidence against the people of God.

Their religion and their wealth. Their religion in verse 14, on the day I punish Israel for its transgressions, I will punish the altars of Bethel and the horns of the altar shall be cut off and fall to the ground.

Bethel was the place, the major place for Israel's religious centre. It was their St. Paul's Cathedral or their St. Peter's Rome. But it was an illegitimate place to worship God.

For God had decreed a couple of hundred years before that Jerusalem would be the place, the only place, where legitimate worship of God could be carried out. But what had happened after Solomon died two hundred years before Amos was that the kingdom divided into two.

[19 : 26] And Amos is speaking to the part of the kingdom that does not have Jerusalem as its capital. What did they do for worship? They could hardly go to their enemies now to worship in Jerusalem. So they set up an illegitimate shrine at Bethel, another one also in the north at a place called Dan.

But wrong in God's eyes from the beginning. They were places of idolatry rather than of true worship. It's hinted at in these words. It says, I'll punch the altars plural of Bethel.

How many altars? Why many it seems because they've got many gods to worship rather than the one true living God. It's a statement of implying the idolatry and apostasy of the people.

And the horns of the altar which were meant to be a place of sanctuary and refuge from people who were threatened by others. They've been broken off. There's no sanctuary, no refuge now in this place. And it's full of sarcasm and irony as well because Bethel, literally the word means the house of God.

Bethel was the place where Jacob had a dream and met with God. But here comes this damning statement against the house of Jacob, the descendants of Jacob, that no longer do they meet with God there for God is actually going to destroy this place because it's full of idolatry and apostasy.

[20 : 44] But not only is their religion part of the accusation God makes against his people but so too their wealth. Verse 15 says I will tear down the winter house as well as the summer house.

What luxury and opulence in the ancient world to have two houses, one for winter and one for summer. Whereas many people would not have had a house at all for themselves but maybe shared some big communal area.

And the houses of ivory shall perish. That seems again a statement of enormous opulence and affluence that people could have their houses inlaid with ivory and expensive material then as now.

And the great houses, the mansions, the many houses shall come to an end says the Lord. Israel's laws were meant to protect the poor, were meant to see equitable distribution of the wealth of the nation.

Rather what's happened is that the wealthy have got rich at the expense of the poor, oppressing and trampling upon the heads of the poor so that they can accumulate their own wealth.

[21 : 52] God will punish his own people for their false religion and for their wrongly accumulated wealth. For the economic rationalist, Victoria's economy may now be something to rejoice in.

Its fortunes are on the rise and many indeed do rejoice in our state at this time. But it also should be something of great concern for us.

Certainly some coffers are filling but who's coughing up to pay? The collection plates at South Bank Cathedral are overflowing but whose plates are empty for the evening meal?

The end of the Doncaster Freeway invites us to the boardroom brothel for pleasure. But who's without a bed tonight and on the streets of our city?

The Premier's friends may wear crowns with pride but who can't even afford a hat to keep them warm in winter? You see, our economic recovery is really an illusion and mirage built on the profits of gambling and brothels and the veneer of prosperity will not stand the scrutiny of God.

[23 : 25] You see, our state's economic managers were taught at the university where I went it seems and they've got their economics wrong. They've left out God. For them it seems morality has no place at all.

uneasy ought to lie the head that wears the crown. What we need is economic irrationalism not economic rationalism.

But before we condemn others too quickly we ought to remember that this is a word against us as well. For the Lamos speaks to a nation and a society.

He speaks fundamentally to the people of God the church. Ours are the privileges of ancient Israel and even more as people who live saved by Christ.

And we on the whole are wealthy. Is our wealth accumulated at the expense of others? What is our attitude to the poor? How generous are we with our wealth?

[24 : 36] And we are religious. Yet is our religiosity something of complacency pride or ease? Let us not presume upon the grace of God which we have received.

Let us accept the responsibility that that grace brings to strive for righteousness and holiness and compassion for others. The lion is roaring says Amos who can but fear.

Amen. Amen.