

Self-Indulgent Stupor

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[0 : 00] This is the AM service on the 31st of August 1997. The preacher is Dr. Paul Barker.

The sermon is entitled Self-Indulgent Stupor and is from Amos 6, verses 1-14. Almighty God, we thank you that all Scripture is inspired by you, is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction and training in righteousness.

So we pray that now as we study it, that we who belong to you may be proficient and equipped for every good work. Amen. One of the most common sins that the Bible addresses is the sin of pride.

Both in the Old Testament and the New Testament parts of the Bible, pride is frequently addressed. Time and time again, God attacks or condemns those who are proud.

When Jesus was born, his mother Mary sang a song, familiar to many of us. In it she said that God, implying through his son Jesus Christ, will scatter the proud in their conceit.

[1 : 28] In the Old Testament, in the book of Proverbs, which is quoted a number of times in the New Testament, God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble. The writer of Proverbs also says that God detests all those who are proud in heart and will tear down the house of the proud person.

Early in the Bible, Moses warns the people of Israel that when they cross into the Promised Land and receive all the blessings of God, they must be careful not to end up in pride at their own wealth and security.

When St. Paul wrote a letter to the Corinthians in the New Testament, he condemned them for their pride. And in that passage that's so well known and frequently read at weddings about love, he's condemning the Corinthians for their lack of pride.

For love, he says, is not boastful or proud. There is no escape from the solemn warning of Scripture from beginning to end that pride is a serious sin in God's eyes.

And it's wrong. And those who continue to practice it stand under the judgment of God. And so Amos' words in Amos 6 aren't unusual in the context of the whole Bible.

[2 : 46] For Amos here is condemning a nation which is proud. There's nothing unusual in that in the sense that the whole Bible is consistent in its condemnation of proud people, individuals, groups, or nations.

Now for those who've been reading through Amos in recent weeks, you recognize the style. He doesn't waste time with niceties. He gets straight to the heart of the matter.

So the chapter begins, Woe. He doesn't butter them up here. But woe to you, he says. Woe for those who are at ease in Zion and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria.

Zion is another name for Jerusalem. He's talking about the group of the people of God who live in the south. Mount Samaria is the capital of the northern group of that people of God. So he's addressing all the people of God of the Old Testament.

And he's saying to them, Woe to you who are at ease or who are complacent, who are in a sense resting on your laurels amongst the people of God. In particular, he addresses himself to the leaders.

[3 : 53] He says the notables of the first of the nations. The notables are the upper echelon, the top brass, if you like. Those who draw the strings of power in the nation.

And they are the people to whom the whole nation goes. For verse 1 ends, to whom the house of Israel resorts. These are the people who are the ones to whom everybody goes for advice, for attention, for preferment, and so on in the nation.

The notables of the nation. There's a little bit of irony in this as well. Amos calls them the notables of the first of the nations.

As though Israel is the best nation, the most important nation. That's what they like to think at least. But the expression, the first of the nations, is actually one that's found elsewhere earlier in the Old Testament.

And the people who heard these words, who knew their Old Testaments, would have recognized the illusion. Because it comes from a man called Balaam, who's condemning another nation, the Amalekites, for thinking that they were the first of the nations.

[5 : 02] They soon faced God's judgment. The implication here, for those who understand the reference and illusion, is that they think Israel's the first of the nations, but they're not, and God's judgment is coming on them.

In verse 2, Amos is probably quoting these notables, these leaders of the nation. He says, quoting them, cross over to Kalna and see, and from there go to Hamath the Great, and there go down to Gath of the Philistines, three cities that Israel has recently recaptured in its glory days of the king, Jeroboam II, in recent times in Amos' day, in the 8th century BC.

So the leaders are saying, go and see those other towns. Are you better than these kingdoms? Or is your territory greater than their territory? The implication, it seems, is that they're saying, we're better off than those nations.

We are the first of the nations. We've got more territory. We should be proud in ourselves for all our achievements and our military expansion in recent years. We're better.

We're stronger. We're more prosperous than those nations that we've recaptured territory from. Now Amos, of course, is speaking very sarcastically here. He's quoting the leader's boast.

[6 : 21] But it's clear as we go through the chapter that he's actually deriding their pride. Yes, Israel had military strength. Yes, it had wealth.

The people certainly boasted and had pride in that. But in the end, Amos will say that there's nothing there. For by comparison to God, they have nothing of value.

The truth, he says, is that they have put off far away the evil day, as verse 3 says, and bring near a reign of violence.

For this so-called first of the nations is really a nation of violence. And all they're doing is pretending that the day of judgment is far, far away.

But it's coming soon, Amos says. And we know from history it did. You see, Israel's complacency and pride means that it will never be ready for the judgment day of God.

[7 : 19] It will keep pretending that such disaster will never happen to me. They're living under false illusions of security. They're trusting in their military might.

They're trusting in their wealth. And they've rejected Amos' earlier warnings that we've seen in recent weeks. We're safe, they're saying. Look at the army. Look how strong it is and how mighty.

Amos is just a scaremonger. Don't listen to him. We're well off. We're secure. We're wealthy. Don't listen to this troublemaker. That's what they're saying in verse 2, it seems, in rejection of Amos.

No other nation matches our strength. We're okay. Their pride, their complacency is breeding a stupor, a dull stupor.

They're dull to the reality of the situation. They're dull to their own immorality and their own pride. They're dull to the reality of God and his judgment. They're dull.

[8 : 17] They fail to see the truth. Pride and complacency, you see, breeds a stupor, a dullness. And so does wealth. And Amos turns to that in the next verses.

And what a picture he paints of wealthy, decadent lifestyle in verses 4 onwards. Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory. Ivory.

Most expensive product. Fancy lying on a bed made of ivory. That's great wealth. And they lounge on their couches. Not sitting upright, but rather sprawling back in indolence and indulgence.

That's the picture he's painting of people who are so lazy that they just sprawl on their couches and click their fingers and get their servants to come and bring them another drink or pamper their toes or something. These are people who eat lambs from the flock and calves from the stall.

Well, most of us eat lamb or beef. It's not condemning people for eating meat. But the thing is, in Amos' day, hardly anybody ever ate meat. It was far too expensive. The only times people would eat meat would be the main festivals of the year, three times a year.

[9 : 26] That's why in, say, the parable of the prodigal son, you know, the prodigal son comes back and the father says, I'm going to kill the fattened cow. That's an extraordinary thing to do. You don't eat beef.

You don't kill a cow every day. This is a statement of great wealth and great luxury. That Amos is painting here. Furthermore, they sing idle songs to the sound of the harp and like David, improvise on instruments of music.

They're living like kings and so they're mimicking the great King David by playing music on their lyres and harps and so on. But you see, unlike David, who sang songs of psalms of praise of God, many of which are in our Bible and we say or sing or read, their songs were idle songs, frivolous songs, absolute nonsense and rubbish.

They lapped it up as though they were royalty. But in the end, it's just pure frivolity. Furthermore, they drink wine from bowls, presumably because the cups and glasses aren't big enough for them.

Oh, it takes too much effort to keep filling a glass. Let's get a bowl of wine and drink from a bowl. It's much quicker. We can drink much more. What greed and decadence, you see, this picture is.

[10 : 44] And they anoint themselves with the finest oils. These are people who spend a fortune on cosmetics and shampoos and deodorants and perfumes and so on.

These are the people who buy the best but then aren't sparing in their use. They pour it all over them. What decadence. You imagine emptying a bottle of Chanel No. 5 over your head.

You don't do it, do you? Well, I presume you don't. But that's the picture of wealth and decadence that's being portrayed here about the leaders, the ruling classes of ancient Israel.

They're complacent in their own wealth. They're serving their own appetites without restraint. And in their post-feast type stupor, when they've drunk themselves silly with wine and fed their stomachs bloated with lamb and beef, their feet are up sprawling on the couch with a log fire there on a Sunday afternoon, dozing away.

They're dull to the reality of what God is on about. And Amos is trying to shock them to their senses. You see, they're dull to the reality of the fact that Joseph, their nation, is ruined.

[11 : 51] He calls the nation Israel Joseph here because Joseph was one of the early people about whom the nation was named. But he probably picks Joseph particularly because you remember what happened to Joseph.

you've seen Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical, you ought to know. Joseph was the brother who was betrayed by his brothers and sold to Egypt. And his brothers didn't care about him. That's what Amos is saying here.

You don't care about your fellow countrymen who are less well off than you. You just lap it up all the luxury and it's at the cost of the poor and the needy of your own society.

And you don't care. You're dull to their ruin and dull to their need. So Amos says the party's going to be over. Not only is Amos the scaremonger, he's also the party pooper.

But can his voice be heard above the revelry? Can he get through above the idle songs on the harp? It seems sadly that he didn't. Twenty or thirty years later, just a short time later, the nation of Assyria came from the north and destroyed the people of God, the nation of Israel.

[13 : 03] Amos's words of judgment were fulfilled. Sadly, his words of warning were not heeded. Therefore, he says in verse seven, they shall now be the first to go into exile and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.

The irony is that those who thought they were the first will actually be the first into exile. And that's what happened. When Assyria conquered a nation in the ancient world, its policy was to take the leaders, the wealthy classes, the rulers of the nation, and take them away and relocate them in their own strongholds or in other lands that they conquered.

The idea was that all the conquered people would be mixed up so they wouldn't be able to form groups to counter Assyria's empire. It was fairly effective because after the nation of Israel was destroyed, it never came back into existence again.

The people of God who continued through to Jesus' day were the people from the southern kingdom of Judah, not the people from the northern kingdom of Israel. So Amos' words came true, a warning to us to heed God's word, for it never fails.

He goes on in verse 8 to say something that is a solemn, terse statement of judgment. judgment. The Lord God has sworn by himself. God's taking an oath here to make it absolutely clear how certain this judgment is.

[14 : 31] I abhor the pride of Jacob and hate his strongholds. He's despising all their strength and God says I will deliver up the city and all that is in it.

Well as if to frighten Israel into action, Amos now describes the coming disaster in a terrifying picture in verses 9 and 10. If 10 people remain in one house, they shall die.

Why would 10 people be in a house? And it seems they're 10 men from the gender of the Hebrew. Well 10 men in one house seems to imply either overcrowding because the city is besieged and therefore all the people who lived out in the country have flocked into the city behind the walls and therefore there's overcrowding while the army of the invasion in invading army is circled around the city.

So it's possibly a picture of being besieged. The other thing it could be a picture of as well is that it's the aftermath of war. So that the nation Assyria has come, it's destroyed the city and all that's left might be the odd house here or there.

And a few people are left alive. Because there's only the odd house left standing, they all have to crowd in in overcrowding after the war has ended. But Amos' words are even more shocking than that.

[15 : 50] Because he says even if there are ten people in one house they shall die as well. None shall escape the judgment of God is what he's saying. They may escape the first little bit. There may be a few people left alive at the end.

But in the end God will take them all in judgment. Verse 10 is an even more desperate picture. If a relative, one who burns the dead, shall take up the body to bring it out of the house and shall say to someone in the innermost parts of the house, is anyone else with you?

The answer shall come no. Then the relative shall say, hush, we must not mention the name of the Lord. Well that all looks a little bit obscure. What it seems to be saying is that those who are left alive would go around to find the bodies of their relatives to give them a decent burial.

It was a mark of great disrespect to leave a body unburied. But here we're told it's the person who burns the dead, not who buries them. Why would they burn? Because in ancient Israel they would always bury, not cremate.

It seems to imply that there are so many bodies around that there's no time to dig graves and carve them out of rock. So they're just going to burn them. It's a fairly horrific picture of the aftermath of being destroyed by Assyria.

[17 : 07] And this relative goes to a house and he asks is there anybody here? And a timid voice cries out from the deep, sort of steward diver of ancient Israel.

But this is not somebody who's eager to get out and to escape. This is somebody who's so terrified they're hiding in the ruins of this house amongst all the corpses. And the person who's come shall say to that person, Hush, we must not mention the name of the Lord.

Why? What's this saying? Chapter 5 we saw two weeks ago at this time of judgment, Amos says, the prudent shall remain silent.

Why? Because this judgment and this destruction is God's work. And it's too late to call out to God. It's too late to mention the name of the Lord.

God. Because he's come in judgment. And he's not there to help these people anymore. It's too late to call on his name.

[18 : 14] Amos says as much in the next verse, see, he says, the Lord commands. It's not Assyria's might that will bring it victory. It's God's command that will bring this victory over Israel.

The Lord commands and the great house shall be shattered to bits and the little house to pieces, meaning every house shall be destroyed. It doesn't just mean the big and the small, but the medium ones are okay.

But rather like we say, the expression, I'm going to search near and far, means that we search everywhere. It's saying the great house, the little house and every house in between will all be destroyed at the Lord's command.

It's a terrifying picture that Amos is painting for ancient Israel. I must say that one of the things I love about Amos is his use of words.

Some of the word plays that he uses are lost in English. But the book of Amos is full of puns, riddles, rhetorical questions, little devices to try and capture attention.

[19 : 22] It's made me recognise just how dull and complacent ancient Israel was, that Amos has to go to such lengths to use words so creatively to get his point across.

I'm a person who loves interesting use of words. The sort of humour I like on television is word type humour, where words are used in all sorts of creative ways, puns and riddles and so on.

And so there's something of that that's appealing to me in Amos and something that's actually challenged me to think about what sort of words and phrases to use and how important they are to convey a message.

If we're going to get through to dull people, then we need to be creative like Amos is in the use of words. And in the next few verses he gives some illustrations of that.

In verse 12 he says, do horses run on rocks, literally rocky crags? Well no, of course they don't. Horses don't run on jagged pieces of rock. It's an absurd picture.

[20 : 18] Do oxen plough the sea? He goes on to say. Well no, oxen don't plough the sea, they plough on dry land. Horses run on flat paths and so on generally or gentle hills and oxen plough the land.

He's painting two absurd pictures with these questions. The implication is that what Israel has done is just as absurd. Because the end of the verse says, but you have turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood.

Something that's very bitter, like poison. He's saying that Israel has done something absolutely unnatural and absurd. It's despised justice and righteousness.

It's put it totally to one side. It's become the opposite of what it ought to be. Something that's sweet and beautiful and nourishing has in fact become for Israel something of poison.

There's another example of Amos' use of words in verse 13. He chides the people for boasting in their military victories. You who rejoice in Lodabar, a city that they'd recently recaptured east of the Jordan River, who say have we not by our own strength taken Kanaïm for ourselves?

[21 : 29] Another city they'd recaptured in recent times, this time to the northeast in Syria. Israel, you see, is boasting in its military strength, taking of these two cities.

But you see, what Amos does is just change one little vowel in the word Lodabar. And what it then means in Hebrew is nothing. You see the irony? They are boasting in nothing.

He's just changed a little word. But in effect, their victory is hollow. All they've defeated is some second rate little town out on the outskirts of the nation. There's nothing to boast about.

It doesn't mean that you've got military strength. But you see, ancient Israel sort of had this boast of Lodabar and Kanaïm as cities that they'd captured, sort of a Falklands factor, if you like.

That they've defeated the mighty Falkland Islands. Wow. It's nothing. Sort of like Australia taking pride in beating the Solomon Islands in soccer or England in cricket or something.

[22 : 28] But you see, Amos goes on with the sting in the tail. You wait for the real opposition to come, he says.

Because it's coming. Verse 14, I am raising up against you a nation, O house of Israel, says the Lord, the God of hosts. And they shall oppress you from Lebo Hamath to the Wadi Arabah, places which literally mean from Cape York to the bottom of Tasmania, or Shark Bay to Byron Bay.

The length and breadth of the nation. They will be oppressed by this nation which God's raising up. You wait for the real opposition, Israel, and you will see that you are nothing.

Your strength is nothing in the face of an almighty God. You boast in these little victories, but they are insignificant and trivial.

Because ancient Israel of Amos' day was relatively strong. It was relatively prosperous as well. But the thing is, there was a power vacuum at the time. The earlier empires had crumbled and the world was still awaiting the rise of the Assyrian Empire, which happened just years after Amos' words.

[23 : 35] So Israel's strength was an illusion. It was a weak year. There was no superpower around. It thought it was the first of all the nations, but it was rubbish.

And God was going to come and judge it and defeat it. Amos 6 is a warning for all of us who are proud.

And all of us are sometimes. Where does our pride, our confidence lie? Amos is addressed to a nation. Where do we as a nation place our confidence and pride?

In trivial sporting victories? In being the lucky country, the place of hard work, the place of self-made people who can do well and make a fortune by hard work?

Where's our pride in justice, righteousness, our pride in God? Or is a state, a Victoria, a growing pride that's built in the end on immorality and greed?

[24 : 42] But where is our care and compassion for the poor and the needy? What about as a church? There's little for the modern church to take pride in.

The latest census figures show how declining the church is in our society. The Melbourne diocese figures are perhaps even worse than that. There seems to be little pride in the diocese and in local churches for what's going on.

And yet, heard this week that Holy Trinity over the last three years has been one of the top few churches in the diocese in growth. Many people comment about how good it is to see the pews relatively full on Sundays.

How things are going well, we naturally want to take some pride in what's going on. And I know I do. And in preparing this sermon, it's made me check that. For there's no place for complacency.

There's no place to think we've made it. There's no place to place our pride in our achievements or our status or our position as a church. While the rest of Doncaster remains without faith in Jesus Christ.

[25 : 49] What about us as individuals? For Amos addresses individuals as well. Where do we place our pride? In our possessions, our house, our family, our status, our achievements, having met goals in our life?

But what does it profit to gain the whole world and yet forfeit our soul, says Amos, says Jesus? At any level, we're tempted to place our pride in our perceived strengths.

But in the face of an almighty God, nothing that is our perceived strength matches up to his might. The writer of Proverbs got it right.

Pride comes before a fall. And Amos is making that clear. Israel is proud. If you remember back two weeks, we saw his mockery of their forthcoming funeral.

Fallen, fallen is Israel. Maiden Israel, no more to rise. Pride comes before a fall. Unless our confidence is placed solely and squarely in God and in the death of his son Jesus Christ on the cross for our sins.

[27 : 07] Amen.