

One Last Chance

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[0:00] This is the AM service on August 17, 1997.

The preacher is Dr. Paul Barker. The sermon is entitled One Last Chance and is from Amos 5, verses 1-17.

We may like to keep that passage from Amos 5 open in front of you. We're preaching through the book of Amos in our morning sermons over the last few weeks and for the next few as well.

No doubt you know that music plays an important part in setting the mood for something. You don't need a sign in a film to tell you that somebody's a baddie.

The music tells you. You don't need a sign to tell you that somebody's the hero. The music tells you. You don't need somebody to tell you that this is meant to be romantic. The music tells you.

[1:09] You don't need somebody to tell you that this is a scene of some tension in a film. The music tells you. And the same sort of thing applies in Amos 5. If we're to get the feel of this chapter right, we need to have the right music in the background of our minds as we read it and as we study it.

For the context is lament. The first verses of the chapter and the end of the passage we're looking at today, verses 16 and 17, are in the context of wailing, a lament, even a funeral dirge.

So in the background of your minds, throughout this sermon, it's worth having Chopin's funeral march playing slowly. So keep the beat of the funeral dirge in mind as we look through this passage from Amos 5.

And imagine Amos even chanting or singing the words in tune. Hear this word that I take up over you in lamentation, O house of Israel.

And he introduces his lament. Fallen no more to rise is maiden Israel.

[2:33] Forsaken on her land with none to raise her up. Get the picture of what Amos is doing. Chanting the funeral lament, the funeral dirge, even though Chopin's hundreds of years after Amos, the funeral march is going on and on throughout this chapter.

Amos, you see, is lamenting the death of the nation of Israel. Amos is lamenting the death of God's own people, Israel. But the trouble is the nation is still alive.

It still exists in Amos' day. It's not yet destroyed by the Assyrians. That's yet 20 or 30 years in the future. But Amos is treating it as though it's already dead.

You could almost imagine the Israelites responding to Amos like Mark Twain did when he read his obituary in the paper and wrote to the editor saying that he thought he was a bit premature.

Maybe the Israelites would be doing the same thing. Amos, we are as a nation, are still alive. We're still prosperous and wealthy, relatively strong. What are you going on about? That we are dead.

[3 : 40] Amos' description in verse 2 and verse 3 is in the past tense. To make it clear that Israel's death is as if it has already happened.

So inevitable is it that it will be judged and destroyed by God through the Assyrians in just a few years' time. Fallen is made in Israel.

Fallen in battle is the context of that. And it's clear from verse 3 that it's fallen in battle in defense of the nation. It's not as though Israel's gone off to invade some other nation and then been defeated.

But rather that it itself has been invaded and fallen on its own land. Somebody has come and invaded the nation. And we know historically speaking that just 20 or 30 years after these words were issued by Amos that the Assyrians came from the north and destroyed the nation.

So Israel would send out its battalions, its platoons, and they'd be literally decimated. Verse 3 says, The city that marched out a thousand shall have just a hundred left, a tenth left.

[4 : 45] And that which marched out a hundred shall have ten left. Israel will be defeated, destroyed, and decimated by its enemy. There will be a thousand and a hundred left.

Fallen on its own land. And no one shall be there to help it, lift it up, or raise it up, or save it. There will be no Red Cross flying around, picking up the wounded bodies and taking them back to a mash unit to get better.

There will be no one there to do that. The bodies will fall, and there they will slowly die. That's the picture that Amos is portraying of Israel's imminent destruction.

And what makes it even more tragic is that he calls Israel a maiden. The idea is that Israel is seen to be a young woman. Not as though it's reached the end of a long life, and so its death is relatively expected.

But rather, it's a young girl that's dying. And I'm sure for all of us, when we see pictures of grief on the television, which we do all too often, it's the pictures of the young dying that are the most poignant and moving.

[5 : 50] Whether at Port Arthur, or Thredbo, or in Tel Aviv, or in Canberra, or wherever, it's when the young die. Life is unfulfilled. The promise is unrealized.

That we see grief at its deepest. And that's the picture here. The people of God, Israel, is a young woman. Its life is in its prime.

But yet so much is unfulfilled and unrealized. What a tragedy that the people of God will die so young. This theme of the lament, the funeral dirge, continues at the end of the passage we're looking at today.

Verses 16 and 17. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the Lord. In all the squares there shall be wailing. And in all the streets they shall say, alas, alas.

That is in the cities. All the cities, the urban areas, will be mourning with grief. But not only in the urban areas, the rural areas the same. They shall call the farmers to mourning.

[6 : 54] And those skilled in lamentation to wailing. In ancient Israel there was a professional group of people who wailed at funerals. The relatives of the deceased would employ people to come to the funeral to wail and cry.

As befitting the person who was dead. They shall be brought in to wail in lamentation as well. In all the vineyards there shall be wailing. So not only the city but the country. This is national.

Wailing and mourning and lamenting the death of the nation. Not just one family here or a few people over there. But this is widespread throughout the nation. Wailing and lamenting the death of the nation.

The city, the country, it doesn't matter. They're all wailing. Why the lament? The section finishes at the end of verse 17. For I, that's God, will pass through the midst of you.

If you were an Israelite hearing those words, they would send shockwaves down your spine. Why? Because the expression comes from something very significant earlier in the Bible.

[8 : 00] If you remember back in the early part of the Bible in the book of Exodus, Israel was enslaved in Egypt. And God, through Moses, the leader of the Israelites, sent various plagues on Egypt, culminating in killing the firstborn children.

That allowed Israel to flee Egypt, go through the waters of the Red Sea, to the wilderness and into the promised land. But what God did on Egypt then was described in exactly the same expression.

God passing through the midst of Egypt. And so for God now to threaten Israel, that he would pass through the midst of them, is to acknowledge the fact that God's own people have now, like Egypt before, become the enemies of God, facing God's judgment and wrath and destruction.

So you see the lament that Amos is playing and chanting here, is really God's doing. It's God who's hammering the nails into the coffin. It's God who's bringing the flag down to half-mast.

It's God who's issuing out the black armbands for everyone to wear. It's God who's tolling the death knell on the bell. And it's God who's playing Chopin on the organ or the piano.

[9 : 15] And it's the same God who is singing the lament. It's not as though God is a God of justice and wrath, who's sitting back impassively, laughing with a smirk on his face, when he sees people suffer for their sins.

No. God is never like that. God remains steadfastly holy. But whenever someone faces the wrath or judgment of God for their sins, God laments.

God cries. God wails. For he takes no pleasure in the death of a sinner at all. And yet, according to his holiness, he remains a God who judges.

But not without feeling. God wails and laments the death of his own people. He's not just calling others to lament or letting Amos do it for him.

For the words, Fallen is Israel, no more to rise, with none to help her. They're God's words. And God is crying because of the sins of his people.

[10 : 26] Well, as if to hold out one last chance that the people of God will turn from their sins, Amos issues an invitation in verse 4.

For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel, Seek me and live. Seek me, that's God, and live.

A glimpse of hope in the midst of a funeral dirge. Seek God and live. Well, where do you find God? Surely in church.

The Israelites hearing this would have thought, Yes, we must go back to the shrine, to the church, to the place where we offer sacrifices to find God. But verse 5 makes it clear that that's exactly not what they're to do.

So seek God and live, but do not seek Bethel. Do not enter into Gilgal or cross over to Beersheba. For Gilgal shall surely go into exile, and Bethel shall come to nothing.

[11 : 24] Those three places are places of major pilgrimage for ancient Israel. Bethel we saw last week along with Gilgal. Bethel was the place that God appeared to Jacob. And Jacob recognized that God was in the midst of this place.

That's why he named it Bethel, literally the house of God. Gilgal was where Joshua crossed over the Jordan River, the first conquest of the promised land. Thereafter a shrine, a place of remembrance of God's promises being fulfilled.

Beersheba wasn't even in Israel, it was down south in what was then called Judah. It was the place where God had appeared to Abraham and to others of his people. And there also they recognized the fulfillment of God's promise.

But God is saying here, don't go there. Don't go to church. It may be called the house of God. It may be that in the past I revealed myself to Abraham or to Isaac or to Jacob, but I'm not there now.

You see, what had gone wrong for Israel was that they thought that seeking church or ritual or sacrifice was seeking God. But the two are not the same as we saw last week.

[12:26] God isn't located in one place, as though one shrine or one building or one area has got God boxed up and we can find him there. To seek God and live is not to go to these places, because as we've seen already in the book of Amos, they're corrupt.

They may be full of all sorts of outward parades of piety, but they're not places of sincere seeking after the living God. So seek the Lord and live, he says in verse 6, or he will break out against the house of Joseph like a fire.

Joseph is a word denoting some of the territory of Israel that incorporates Bethel and Gilgal. And it will devour Bethel with no one to quench it. Probably for the Israelites hearing Amos' words, when they hear the word of Bethel or Gilgal, they probably think of the psalms that they would sing as they would be in procession and pilgrimage to the place of worship to offer their sacrifices.

They probably have all sorts of joyful psalms and songs and hymns of praise to God in mind when they think of all their worship that they carry out there so regularly and rigorously.

But it jars with Amos' words. For the music of Amos is not the music of the psalms of praise, but rather the funeral lament. Chopin's march carries on, you see.

[13:48] Dum, dum, da-dum, dum, da-dum, dum, dum, dum, dum, dum. At funerals today, we usually hear a eulogy, some words spoken either by the minister or a friend or relation in praise of the person who is deceased.

Usually they highlight the good points, the good character, the great achievements of the person who's died. Indeed, as someone who takes funerals, it's very rare for somebody to come to me and say much that is negative about the person who's dead.

Very rare indeed. Although I remember one case where there were just a handful of people, and I think it was the son and the daughter or maybe in-laws, I can't quite remember.

And they said, we do not want anything said about this woman at all because she was a nasty person and not nice. It was very sad. I guess they were being honest.

Amos's eulogy for Israel has no place even for faint praise. He begins his so-called eulogy in verse 7. In fact, he directs his words straight to Israel.

[15:00] You that turn justice to wormwood. Wormwood is the most bitter of substances, something that can make somebody sick. Israel has changed justice into this object of bitterness.

Maybe it's suggesting that Israel's injustice makes God sick. Maybe it's also suggesting that because the ruling classes, the wealthy, the prosperous people, are those who oppress the poor, they're making life bitter for the poor by their oppression and exploitation of them.

Not only that, but they cast righteousness to the ground. They hurl it to the ground as though it was a clay pot and righteousness is slammed into the ground and smashed to smithereens.

Amos's parody of a eulogy continues in verse 10. They hate the one who reproves in the gate. That is the elder of the jury who delivers the verdict of guilty or not guilty.

They abhor the one who speaks the truth, the upright witness who gives evidence that is right. These are people who not just ignore what is right and good in the legal system, they hate it or abhor it.

[16:12] They have utter contempt for anything that is honest or right in the legal system of ancient Israel. These are people so bent on corruption and exploitation that they pay witnesses to speak falsehood.

They pay the jury to bring down a verdict that is favourable to them to protect their interests and property. This is just a system that's all completely awry, turned topsy-turvy by the greedy, wealthy and ruling classes of the nation.

The gate that's mentioned in verse 10 is the place where the court was held. In an ancient city, as in ancient Israel, you would enter the gate and as you would do so, on the left and right of you would be probably two on each side, little recesses in the gate.

And it was there that various legal transactions would occur. We know that in the book of Ruth, when Boaz went to stake his claim for Ruth as his kinsperson so that he could marry her, he went to the gate to meet the other person who could have done the same and there conducted the transaction.

So Amos is attacking here the legal system of ancient Israel. He goes on in verse 11 to say that they trample the poor, probably not literally walking over their heads, but rather just disdaining them, having contempt or disgust for them, walking over the poor metaphorically, fleecing them of all they have to feather their own nests.

[17:38] They take from them levies of grain. That is, it seems they've built up an economic and legal system that makes the rich wealthier at the expense of the poor.

Who even when they obtain some grain from their meagre crops, have to pay exorbitant taxes to the wealthy and therefore struggle to eke out an existence in this unfair and cruel society.

To those people, to that Israel, God brings his judgment. Therefore, Amos says in verse 11, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them.

You have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. What an act of great frustration for the wealthy to have, but to be unable to enjoy the fruits of this illicit labour.

It's better never to have had than to have actually gained the houses, the vineyards or whatever, but then be frustrated in God's judgment by being unable to enjoy those houses or vineyards.

[18:46] The spoilers will be despoiled by God. The tables will be turned by God. The wealthy will be brought low by God. And the accusation continues in verse 12, for I know how many are your transgressions and how great are your sins.

It's not as though the rulers and the wealthy have just once or twice forgotten to do the right thing, but rather that their practice is habitual, not occasional. Their sins are entrenched in their lifestyle.

And it is to those people that Amos is bringing this accusation in this parody of a eulogy. Remember that Chopin continues in the background. Remember that it's a funeral march, marking the death of the nation.

And this is why it's being brought to death, because of its great and gross injustice and lack of righteousness. Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time, for it is an evil time, verse 13 says.

Probably not so much that the prudent will keep silent at injustice, but rather when God's judgment comes, the wise person will remain silent, struck with the horror of God's judgment against those who habitually practice such sin.

[20 : 08] The problem for ancient Israel was that it's got its worship and justice completely awry. Proper worship reveals the character of God.

Proper worship leads us to know God well. Proper worship leads us not only to know God well, but to imitate God. And essential to the character of God is his character of justice and righteousness.

So proper worship of God leads not only to the discovery of that character of justice and righteousness, but to its imitation as well. But for ancient Israel that had not happened.

Their worship had not led to the imitation of justice or righteousness. Rather they were unjust and lacking in righteousness altogether. That's why God condemns their worship and their places of worship.

That's why when he says, seek me, he's saying something the reverse of going to worship at their equivalent of church. It also explains why in the book of Amos there is so much about practicing justice.

[21 : 19] For it's fundamental to God's own character. If we are to be people who imitate God's character, if we are to be people who know God well, then justice and righteousness ought to be essential parts of our life as well.

It may be that none of us serve very often on juries or in the legal system in a formal way. But yet for each one of us, justice and issues of justice are around us every day.

How we bring up our children, exercising justice one between another. How we deal in the workplace with our boss, our colleagues, our employees, our clients.

ensuring that justice prevails. Not only in our own transactions, but also in those transactions of others which we observe or are involved with in some way.

Are we people by imitating God seek justice and speak for it? Or in our scaredness do we turn a blind eye?

[22 : 19] When we come to funerals, we like to sing hymns of comfort and hope.

Psalm 23, amazing grace, abide with me, and so on. Often hymns that speak of the sovereign power of God, a power that extends from creation through life beyond death.

Those sorts of hymns are reassuring and encouraging to us, giving us glimpses of hope. And in the middle of this eulogy about ancient Israel is a hymn.

I suspect a hymn that Israel knew well. Begins in verse 8. A hymn praising God as the one who made the Pleiades and Orion. Warwick tells me there's stars in the sky.

He turns deep darkness into the morning and darkens the day into night. Who calls for the waters of the sea and pours them out on the surface of the earth. The Lord is his name. A great hymn of praise of a creator, sovereign God, who has power over times and seasons and the earth.

[23 : 30] And I suspect that Israel knew that song well and sung it with gusto and received comfort from it. But Amos goes on in verse 9. The same God who makes destruction flash out against the strong so that destruction comes upon the fortress.

Maybe they were words that Israel would sing thinking of their own enemies and receiving joy and comfort from thinking that God would punish their enemies as in the puppet play we saw earlier on. But maybe Amos is doing something a bit more subtle here.

Maybe what Amos is doing is actually changing a few words of a well-known hymn so that it stings not only towards the enemies but actually back on Israel itself.

You imagine coming to a funeral and singing these words. My table thou hast furnished for the revelry of my foes. My head thou dost with fire anoint and my blood overflows.

You see, a hymn that we sing to our comfort about God preparing a table for us in the sight of our enemies, we could, with just a few words being changed, turn against ourselves.

[24 : 37] I think that's what Amos is doing here. For the word is not a hymn of praise but again it takes up the funeral lament. He wouldn't be singing it to the tune we know but rather to Chopin's funeral march.

But certainly like any good funeral, Amos does return to the note of hope. It's just a glimpse but there is some hope nonetheless. Verse 14 and 15.

Seek good and not evil that you may live and so the Lord, the God of hosts will be with you just as you have said. Hate evil and love good and establish justice in the gate.

Seek good, Amos says. That's the same as seeking God which he's exhorted them to do earlier on in verses 4 and 6. But it has a counterpart. To seek good is to shun evil.

You can't have your cake and eat it too. You can't find God and keep on practicing your evil ways he's saying. So turn from the evil and turn to God and seek him and you will find him because the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you.

[25 : 49] He says in verse 14. He goes on to say that seeking good will mean establishing justice in the gate. That's because faith in God is not something that's private but public.

If we are Christians we have a personal faith but not a private faith. We have a public faith. We are to be Christians on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday through to Saturday as well as on Sundays.

In all that we do we are to practice our relationship with God in public and not keep it private. That's what Amos is saying here. And he's reassuring the Israelites that even in the midst of judgment and even in the midst of sin they can turn to God personally and find life.

And the result he says at the end of verse 15 it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. It may be another translation puts perhaps God will be gracious.

It doesn't mean that God's character is fickle so you can never tell what he's going to do but rather he says perhaps because we cannot presume upon God's grace.

[27 : 03] We cannot take it for granted. He says perhaps because God's greatest grace is not our just dessert. He says perhaps because turning to God means throwing ourselves to God for his mercy without a claim of our own without anything in our hands without coming to God and saying God this is why you must accept me but rather seeking God is to throw ourselves at his mercy.

He says perhaps because we have no right to that mercy. where then do we find God? Where do we go when we hear the words seek God and live?

For ancient Israel they would have gone to their shrines to Bethel and Gilgal and Beersheba but we know from Israel's history that it doesn't have a happy ending. When they turned to Bethel or Gilgal or Beersheba they didn't find life they didn't live.

Their history was one of destruction but their history also led to one person and one place. When Amos says seek God and live there is one person to whom we must turn.

The one who said I am the resurrection and the life. The one who said I am the way the truth and the life. When Amos says seek God and live it's to that person that we must turn.

[28:23] And when Amos says seek God and live there is one place to which we must turn. not Bethel not Gilgal not Beersheba or church or a cathedral but rather the place of the cross.

For the hope of mercy is found in the midst of judgment on a cross at Calvary two thousand years ago. For there did God bring judgment on the world and there did God offer mercy to us as well and only there.

So then in the midst of this world's injustice seek Jesus Christ. in the midst of God's judgment on this world seek Jesus Christ.

For in Jesus Christ and in him alone is found mercy and life. But remember the tune that's in the background.

Remember that Chopin is still being played for this world even today. and that music cannot last forever. forever. Dam dam dam da ram da ram da ram dam da ram da ram da ram da ram da ram dam da ram da ram da ram