

Amos 1:1-2:16 (PM)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 25 June 2023

Preacher: Willie Shain-Ross

[0:00] The lion, the witch, and the wardrobe. In C.S. Lewis' classic, there's that famous scene where Mr. and Mrs. Beaver tell Susan and the other kids about the coming of Aslan.

And Susan, in the midst of this, learns, wait a minute, wait a minute, Aslan's not a man? He's a lion? And so then she asks that famous question, is he safe? To which Mr. Beaver responds, of course he isn't safe, but he's good.

He isn't safe, but he's good. And I think C.S. Lewis must have had the book of Amos in mind when he wrote that line. Because in our new series on Amos, God himself is described as a lion roaring from Zion and circling around his prey, ready to devour them.

And to the horror of ancient Israel, Amos declares that God's prey isn't out there somewhere. It's not the neighbor, it's not Assyria, it's not Egypt, it's not the Philistines. No.

No. His prey are his own people. And so to our modern years, it begs the question of what kind of God would do that? How can we say that God is good when here in the text before us, he promises to destroy his very people?

[1:16] So what I would like to do with you this evening then is in our opening chapters, I would like to unpack what the text reveals about God's judgment, God's people, and why at the end of the day we can come and praise God and say with Mr. Beaver, of course he isn't good.

Or of course he isn't safe. But he's good. So God's judgment, God's people, and God's goodness. But before I step into the text, would you please pray with me? Heavenly Father, you are the Lion of Judah.

And I pray that as we come here this evening, you would turn our hearts towards you. Remind us this evening of your grace and your truth. And may we taste and see just how good you truly are. In your Son's name, amen. Amen. So our text this evening opens up with the lines, the words of Amos, who is among the shepherds of Decoah. And right away we learn where Amos is preaching, where he's come from, and when he's preaching.

And so Amos has traveled to Israel at the beginning of the 8th century B.C. And at this time, Israel has enjoyed an unusual period of commercial prosperity, border expansion, and peace.

[2:32] You see, the superpowers of the day, Assyria and Egypt, are weak and ineffective. So in the absence of any major threat then, Israel, by all outward appearances, has regained its former glory.

And so you'd think this would be a time for celebrating, for rejoicing. But along comes Amos. And he has come to say this to God's people.

Your prosperity, Israel, is leading to your peril. The prosperity is leading to your peril. Because though you have prospered, you have forgotten your covenant and you have forgotten your God. You see, Amos, like all the prophets before and after him, is warning Israel so that they will repent. And so the first two chapters this evening are about judgment and destruction.

But in the middle of the book of Amos, right in the heart of it, the Lord says, Seek me and live. Seek me and live. And so as we read these judgments this evening, horrible as they sound, horrible as they are, we must remember that they are warnings that are meant to lead to repentance.

[3:47] And warnings are meant to create present faithfulness before it's too late. And that applies to Israel both in the 8th century and it applies to us in our church today.

So these warnings are meant to bring repentance. And in the first two chapters, then, we see the extent of God's wrath played out throughout the world. And he sounds both like a pouncing lion and he also sounds like a burning cyclone.

You see, in verses 4 and 5, if you'll look at the text with me, and this is just one of the oracles. God says of Damascus, and by the way, if you're following along, listen to the verbs. He says in verse 4,

So I will send a fire upon the house of Hazael, and it shall devour the strongholds of Ben-Hadad. I will break the gate bar of Damascus and cut off the inhabitants of the Valley of Abin. Friends, that's just the first oracle, and already we've got fire, devouring, burning, breaking, cutting off exile. And so, such brutality may seem cruel and unfair at first glance. After all, aren't these opening oracles about nations who don't even know God?

[4 : 59] So why then is God judging them? Well, look at a few of the reasons with me. I'm not going to cover all of them because there's a lot, but just look at three with me, for example. Starting in chapter 1, verse 3 of Damascus, he says, Because Damascus have threshed Gilead with the threshing sledges of iron.

Friends, that's slavery and oppression. Or verse 9, Because Tyre has delivered a whole people to Edom and did not remember the covenant of brotherhood. Forced exile.

Oath-breaking. Or verse 13, Because the Ammonites have ripped open pregnant women in Gilead that they might enlarge their border.

Horrific violence and greed. These nations have enslaved, exiled, and butchered one another. They pursued power, profit, and pleasure over and against the welfare of their fellow human beings.

You know, if we were to put this in today's parlance, we would say that they've committed crimes against humanity. But in their day, in Israel's day, they would say that they've committed crimes against God's moral order.

[6 : 08] God's created goodness. And so when God judges, he does so because crimes are committed against his moral order. There is a right and a wrong, and we long for those right and wrong things.

We long for those right things. And we long for those wrong things to be made right. And here's the thing. This text is a warning because God is watching.

God is watching. You see, God sees the injustices, the pains, and the atrocities of the world, and he will come to judge those who commit them. His judgment isn't capricious, it isn't cruel, and it's not unfair.

He judges because he's just. So God's judgment is for the sake of repentance. It's just, and it's always coupled with mercy. You see, in God, mercy and wrath go hand in hand.

And judgment and salvation can never, ever be separated. And now we, in our modern day, may see those two things as different, but in God, they come together. And we see it in the repetition of that phrase, for three transgressions and for four I will not revoke the punishment.

[7 : 17] That's how every oracle starts. You see, God doesn't bring his wrath on simply the first transgression or the second or the third. It takes four. It takes an excessive number of transgressions before God brings his judgment.

So here's my point. God only judges when his mercy has waited for repentance a long time. But that mercy has waited in vain.

And so the upshot of this for us today is put really well by one commentator who says, God never punishes the sinner except after prolonged observation and ample opportunity for repentance.

You see, God's patience is meant to lead to repentance. Don't miss that. And please don't waste that opportunity. So God's judgment, it's meant to lead to repentance, it's just, and it's always coupled with mercy.

That's point one. Now into point two, God's people. So the first two chapters, they consist of eight oracles. And the first seven, it's quite interesting how they're structured.

[8 : 30] The first seven are a roll call of Israel's surrounding neighbors. And you can imagine Amos coming into Israel, the people first hearing his words and going, Yeah! Down with Damascus.

Yeah, down with Gaza. Yeah, those Philistines, they deserve it. But Amos keeps going. And if you were to look at a map of the way he does it, it's almost like he crisscrosses.

He'll start up with the northeast, southwest, like that. And it's almost like he's drawing an X right over Israel. And so when the final oracle lands, it lands on its bullseye, Israel.

And we're left wondering, what did Israel do to deserve God's punishment? But look with me at chapter 2, verse 4. It says, quote, For three transgressions of Judah, and I know this says Judah, but it applies to Israel as well.

And for four, I will not revoke the punishment. Because, listen, they have rejected the law of the Lord and have not kept his statutes. But their lies have led them astray.

[9 : 35] You know, and it's interesting, too, when God judges the other nations, he never mentions anything about their worship or about their gods. But here, starting with Judah and Israel, God changes the charge. God's people have rejected his truth, and this gets at the heart of Israel's sin.

It's the principle behind God's accusation, we could say. And God's truth is his revealed word to his people. And so when anything other than the word of God is given priority, we end up basing our lives on something else.

And that foundation, whether it's prosperity, power, or pleasure, becomes a lie and becomes a source of lies. Let me illustrate. If you believe that happiness is truly found in financial security, that will shape your priorities, your values, how you view yourself, whether you're good or not enough, and especially it will change how you view other people.

And so if the bottom line is the most important priority, then people become objects for economic gain, and that's a recipe for use and abuse. And I use that illustration because you don't have to watch the news very long today to see that play out in our world time and time again.

That's what's happened to Israel. They've built their lives on prosperity and power and pleasure, and others have suffered for it. Now, return to the text with me.

[11 : 05] Starting in verse 6, God now brings his judgment on Israel. Now, if Judah was the principle behind the accusation, now we get the practice of the accusation. We see the natural outflowing of rejecting God's truth.

And follow along with me from verses 6 to 8 in chapter 2, and look quickly at what God judges and count them with me. Did you catch all that?

A lot. Seven crimes to show Israel's complete rejection of God's instruction and truth. And Israel is without excuse.

They have the law. They know that God cares about the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. They know that God cares about the needy and the innocent. But instead of obeying God and building their lives on his truth, they take advantage, they use, and they abuse because they prioritize wealth, comfort, and pleasure.

That's a perilous place to be. We should take heed because we too are living in a time surrounded by wealth, comfort, and pleasure. Now, in contrast to this, starting in verse 9 and going through verse 12, God reminds Israel what he's done for them.

[12 : 42] You see, when Israel was helpless and needy, God alone delivered them out of slavery. God alone brought them into the promised land of milk and honey. And God alone has raised up prophets and Nazarites to guide them.

And this contrast not only highlights the difference between God's grace and Israel's abuse, it also reveals how we're to react today. For when God saves us, he saves us so that we can become more like him.

He saves us so that we can become more like him. And friends, this is more than just behavior modification. Do you all get highlights for Children magazine up here?

Is that something that comes? Okay, see, I'm seeing a few nods. Great, great. So I don't know if any of you remember that, but there's a comic in there between Goofus and Gallant. One acted cruelly, that was Goofus, and one was supposed to act morally and good.

And it kind of left the reader wondering, which were you going to be? Friends, that's behavior modification. And that's a pathway to self-righteousness and legalism. And God doesn't simply want behavior modification.

[13 : 51] He wants life transformation. And we meditate on God's grace then because his grace transforms us into becoming more like him. Again, allow me an illustration.

My uncle is a very successful businessman. But the thing about it is he wasn't always successful. In fact, several of his early ventures failed and creditors started hounding him.

They started hounding his parents. The debt got so bad. And so one day his father, my grandfather, took my uncle aside and said, Son, these creditors are killing your mother.

How much do you owe? And so my grandfather took out his checkbook and wrote check after check after check right in front of my uncle. That transformed his life.

It didn't magically make him a good businessman, but it made him generous. And that's how grace works. That's an illustration of how grace works. We receive and grace transforms.

[14 : 55] So return with me to the text. Israel has rejected God. That much is made clear. And so now at the end, God says he will reject and forsake Israel.

Now we're told in the end that he will press down upon them and none of them will be able to flee God's destruction. Not one. Friends, that's a warning to us here in our church today. Grace is a beautiful thing. It's a transforming thing. But we, like Israel, can turn divine grace into divine entitlement. We can think that our special standing means that we're not accountable or responsible.

But Amos reminds us that the opposite is true. With grace comes responsibility. How we treat those closest to us, our friends, our parents, our spouses, our children, how we treat the poor, the stranger, the outcast among us, that will reveal how much we love God and his grace in our lives. Love of God and love of neighbor are always fused in scripture. You can never worship God and hate your neighbor. That is impossible. So Amos reminds us that when we love God, that love should then radiate outward into our community.

[16:21] And that is the mark of God's people. An abiding love for God's truth that manifests in love for righteousness, justice, generosity, and welfare for one's neighbor.

And that should sharply contrast with the world's desire for profit, power, and pleasure. Okay. So I've been talking a lot about God's judgments and his people. And now let me just briefly conclude with my third point. And this is a word about God's goodness in all of this, a point three God's goodness. Friends, if you remember that scene in Lewis's classic, then return with me there now.

You see, before Susan raises that famous question, is he safe? Mrs. Beaver says there's a rhyme in the woods and it goes like this. Wrong will be right when Aslan comes in sight.

At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more. When he bears his teeth, winter meets its death. And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.

[17:21] Susan may be afraid of meeting the lion, but that lion is the source of their hope. And the same is true of our God. Friends, we worship a God who's not indifferent to the atrocities of the world.

He watches them, he cares, and he is going to come to set them right. We worship a God who has not left us helpless or groping in the dark. He gives us truth.

He reveals himself in his holy word. And when that word becomes our priority, we will see God's grace and it will transform us when we build our lives upon it. We worship a God who will one day bring judgment.

There is no escaping that. But that judgment is always combined with salvation. Wrath and mercy go hand in hand. And that paradoxical combination of wrath and mercy is fully revealed when God himself became needy, helpless, innocent, when God himself, when his righteous life is sold for pieces of silver and lots are cast for his garments.

The lion who roars becomes the lamb who is given. You see, God's wrath and mercy meet perfectly on the cross. Jesus Christ takes on the wrath of God so that we could walk in his mercy.

[18:43] Jesus experiences the judgment of God so that we could experience his salvation. And that's the goodness of God. And when you realize that, when you remember and meditate and build your life on that truth and that grace, then righteousness, justice, and generosity become something that we enjoy, not just a dry duty, but we long to live that out in community.

That's what happens when you build your life on God's truth. Would you please pray with me? Heavenly Father, we thank you for the text before us. We thank you for what you have revealed. And we pray, Father, that as we would go out from this place, we would be emboldened by your truth, emboldened by your grace. May it strengthen us and turn us into righteous, just, and generous people longing for faith.

We pray this in your son's name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.