

At Ease in Zion

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Date: 28 November 2010

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[0 : 00] Let's turn again to the chapter we read in the prophecy of Amos, chapter 6. I'm just reading at the very beginning of this chapter.

As we know in this particular prophecy, this prophet, he was sent to give particular messages of woe.

And here we have another of them beginning in verse 6 where he says, Woe to those who are at ease in Zion and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria.

Woe to those who are at ease in Zion. Now this prophet, as we know Amos, he was a shepherd from Tekoa, which is about 10 miles south of Jerusalem.

And it would appear that he was a fairly prosperous shepherd because his shepherding, the actual language indicates that he was a breeder of sheep, a sheep breeder rather than simply a shepherd.

[1 : 05] So it would be a combined work where he would be actually shepherding. But he was no doubt a fairly prosperous man because he was into breeding sheep.

But God calls him and God calls people from all different places and from different works. And God calls people into particular duties.

And God called this man from the south, from Judah in the south. And he was to go up into the northern kingdom of Israel and he was to prophesy there.

And of course that's what we still have to do when God calls us. It doesn't matter where we are, we have to go.

If God calls us to go to a particular place, we have to go there. If God calls us to do a particular thing, we have to do it. At the end of the day, that's what it is.

[2 : 00] And sometimes people say, well, how do I know that God is calling me? Well, at the end of the day, you will know. If God puts his hand upon you for anything, he will make that clear to you.

And I would say to everybody in here tonight, and particularly to any who do not know the Lord Jesus Christ, that God is calling us in the gospel tonight. He's calling us to hear.

Every time we come under the word, we come to hear what God the Lord will speak. And we can never turn around and say, well, I never heard. I don't know what God is saying to me.

God is saying to us tonight, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. It's as clear as that. So that is the first and foremost duty that is bound upon any person who comes under the word and hears the word.

This is what God is saying. This is God's call in the gospel. Very clear. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved. And then God continues to involve us in and through his word.

[3 : 11] Now, the prophet had to declare fully what it was that God commanded him to speak. And God gave different prophets, different commissions, different roles, different messages.

And of course, there were times when the prophets, some prophets went willingly and gave their message freely. Other prophets went with great difficulty.

Some prophets were reluctant to go. Some people that God called were very hesitant to go. You look at one of the great, was there a greater prophet than Moses?

And Moses was so reluctant. And he was saying to the Lord, oh, not me. Oh, send my brother. Not me. And I'm sure that there are many people down through the history of the church who have felt the reluctance to do sometimes what God asks to do.

Because sometimes it's difficult. It goes against some of the prophets had incredibly difficult lives. You look at the life, the life of Jeremiah, the weeping prophet.

[4 : 18] It wasn't called the weeping prophet for nothing. And the particular ministry and the difficulty of the message that he had to proclaim was incredibly difficult for him.

And so some of the prophets, because of their particular message, they were hated. Some of them were imprisoned. Some of them were abused terribly.

And some of them were killed. And the Bible shows us these things. But, you know, it's, in a sense, still the same today. Because there are many people who do not want to hear the word of God.

And there are many people who choose deliberately not to hear the word of God. There are people who are selective in what they will hear. And even selective in what they may preach.

Now, we are not at liberty to do that. There are passages and portions of God's word which there might be a tendency to shy away from.

[5 : 22] Because they might be difficult. We may say to ourselves, well, these things are, they're so challenging. They go right into my own heart. And many a minister himself is challenged as he preached.

Because what we've got to remember is that while we preach to people, we're also preaching to ourselves. And sometimes we can say this is very difficult to preach because this is hitting right home into my own heart.

But the thing is, at the end of the day, we have to be faithful to what God is saying to us in his word.

And so that we find that this man, this man Amos, this shepherd, he goes, he leaves Judah.

And he goes up to the northern kingdom of Israel to deliver God's message. And he prophesied there for around about two years, around a year or two.

And it is thought that it would be around about the year 762 BC, around about that time. Because his ministry was two years before a very notable earthquake which took place during the reign of Uzziah.

[6 : 28] And we read about that in the prophecy of Zechariah. Now, the thing was that at the time when Amos preached or prophesied, it was a time of prosperity both in the north and in the south.

It was a time of material prosperity in both Judah and Israel. And both kingdoms were enjoying life and all the privileges and all the trappings and all the good things that come from a time of prosperity.

And to a certain extent, it was something, I'm sure, that we as a nation were able to identify with where up until very recently, before there was a crash, the prosperity that we were enjoying as a nation was really quite remarkable.

And I suppose it's a feature of the West that there was a great level of prosperity, certainly, when we compare it to so many other parts of the world.

And we've grown up now. I know that some of the elderly people here will remember a very different day. They will remember times of struggle. Some of the very old people you speak to, and they often didn't know.

[7 : 46] Sometimes where their next meal was coming. And they were dependent upon just really on the natural things and sometimes even dependent on what others would provide for them.

So what some of the very, very old people still alive that you speak to, what they have seen in their lifetime has really been quite remarkable.

For many of us, we've never known what it is like to go without a meal, what it's like to struggle, to have this awesome sense of need and wondering day by day, how is there going to be provision? But it was like that if we go back in time. So in a sense, while there are wonderful privileges and blessings in growing up and in living during a time of prosperity, it also can be quite a dangerous time because it can give people a false sense of security.

And that's exactly what happened at the time when Amos is prophesying. And the funny thing was that even although people were enjoying a very luxurious lifestyle, and also it's very interesting that at that particular time, history will tell us, that there was a growing gap between the wealthy and the poor.

[9 : 19] And again, this sometimes happens is where those who are poorer begin to be exploited by those who are wealthier.

And again, that always causes resentment within a nation. And we've always got to remember that when we look at God's judgments in the Old Testament, we tend to think that God, that he only came in judgment against what we might say against idolatry and against immorality.

But you know, if you go through the prophets and the prophecies, you will discover that probably, yes, idolatry, but so many of God's judgments came about because of oppression, because of injustice, because of social injustices and oppressions, and where there is bribery and corruption,

and where the poor are being exploited, and where we see all these social evils.

See, God is righteous, and he hates injustice. And we've always got to remember that if those in authority deal in a way of injustice, and in a way of oppression, where there is a putting down and exploiting, we are moving history, biblical history will show us that it is moving us towards judgment. And I think if you study through the word of God, you will find that over and over and over again, God is coming in judgment because of oppression, because of exploitation, because of the neglect of the poor, and all these kind of things.

[11 : 12] But funnily enough, also at this time, even although this was beginning to happen, there was still a religious flavor to the land. The sacrifices were still being offered.

People still went through all the rituals. But you see, the religion of the day was a religion that was out to impress others.

It wasn't the religion of the heart. It wasn't the religion that was seeking fellowship with the Lord. And there's a huge, huge difference. And if we ever find ourselves that our religion is such that we're out to impress other people, or our religion is for other people, then we've got it seriously wrong.

Our religion is first and foremost, is in and through our Lord. And if our heart is right with the Lord, then our heart will become right with others.

That's the way it works. We cannot be right with others if we're not right with the Lord. And so this was again part of the problem of the land, is that while there was a religious veneer over things, the heart was haywire, the heart was going wrong.

[12 : 23] And so God is going to come in judgment. And while Amos is giving his judgments against other nations, we also see that it's against God's own people.

And it's very interesting, right, at the very beginning of the chapter, at the beginning of the prophecy, in Amos chapter 1 at verse 2, it tells us here, the Lord roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem.

And with this idea of the Lord roaring, it's got the idea of the lion roaring. Now the lion roars, and so I am told, I don't know if this is true, but that part of the reason why the lion roars is that its roar paralyzes its victim, that there is a sense of fear in what the lion is going to attack.

And that often the lion will roar before it attacks. And right at the very beginning then of this prophecy, the prophecy of Amos, there is this idea that the Lord is coming in judgment.

He is declaring his voice. It's as if the roar from heaven, the roar from the royal seat has come, and God is coming in judgment.

[13 : 45] And so, while, as we say here, that he's speaking about all the different nations, we also see very clearly here that woe to those who are at ease in Zion.

Now that is speaking of the church. Now, of course, God's judgments fall upon all the different nations of this world. We know that. But God's judgment will also, and does come, upon his own church.

And we have it here. Woe to those who dwell at ease in Zion. Those who are, just as it were, taking their ease. Those who are apathetic.

Those who have grown used to everything and are just going through the motions. And we've got to say, when we talk about the church and when God is speaking, often as we find it in Scripture, to the likes of Jerusalem or the likes of Judah and Israel, it includes all those who are, what we would say, affiliated.

Those who belong to Judah and Israel. That will include those who are true believers, but those who are what we would term nominal believers.

[15 : 03] Those who know the truth, follow the truth to a certain extent, but have never come to know and appreciate and become part of that truth within their own lives.

So the Lord is saying, woe to those who are at ease. And you know, we've got to take these things to heart. And can I say to anybody in here tonight, who maybe you know everything that the Bible says, and yet somehow you're, there's no urgency within your heart to deal with these things. You're aware of what it says, but you're saying to Israel, look, I'll see to these things some other time. There are too many other things that are occupying my days, too many other things that occupy my time.

I have too many plans for other days and other years. Later on, I'll maybe see to these things. Oh, I'm still going to keep coming to church. I'm still going to read my Bible now and again.

I believe, I believe in all these things at a level. But I'm not ready to commit myself to the Lord yet. [16:17] I'm not ready for that commitment. But the Lord is saying, in this woe, woe to those who are at ease in Zion. And it's a very, very, very serious thing, this, where we can, where we can feel at ease.

You know, again, we can think of it and you go to the book of Revelation and you see the church in Laodicea. There was a church that was taking its ease.

A church, in fact, a church that thought it was doing very well. A church that was saying, you know, we're not really in need of anything. It's a time of prosperity and everything is going well.

Everything is flourishing. We're doing very well and I'm sure God is very pleased with us. And the Lord's judgment was the very opposite. The Lord's verdict was the very opposite. And the Lord is saying to them, you have nothing.

In fact, the Lord is saying to them, I am ready to spit you out of my mouth. I wonder sometimes what the Lord would be saying of you and me. What would he be saying of us here?

[17:23] What would the Lord's verdict be? It's a very solemn, a searching thing. We don't, we don't know. But we've got to look into our own hearts and see there, are we filled with pride and selfish ambition?

Are we, do we puff ourselves up? Do we think we are somebody? And the Lord is saying, actually, you're not. Do we have our priorities right? Do we have our priorities wrong?

It's very important that we search into our own hearts because it's so easy to be critical and judgmental and look this way and that way and condemn and see what is wrong there and there and there.

And, you know, whenever we do that, it's very, if we're busy condemning at one level, it usually means we're puffing ourselves up at another. And we've always got to look in, first and foremost. It's like, you know, the disciples, I like the way they reacted when Jesus said, you know, one of you is going to betray me. And straight away they say, is it I?

[18:29] And I often find that that's the way that the Lord's people, if there's life in their heart, if there's a vibrance there, we tend to take things to our shelves and look in personally and examine ourselves.

Judas didn't say, is it I? But it was Judas. And so there is this, this, how essential it is to look in and to examine ourselves.

But another reason why those were taking their ease in Zion was that they were putting away the day of disaster from them. Verse 3, O you who put away, far away the day of disaster and bring near the seat of violence.

again, many people, and in a sense we've touched on that, many people push away an evil day.

I suppose we, if you go back into your own life, certainly if I do, and I think, if we can be personal for a moment, and I think back to many a time when I was challenged by the gospel, and I knew what the gospel was saying, and I knew where I stood as a lost soul, and yet I would sit under the gospel and I would say, oh, I'll deal with that.

[19:45] I have time. I always told myself, I have time. My friends, we don't know. Because that's the very thing God is saying to the people there, woe, woe to those who are at ease in Zion, you who put far away the day of disaster.

You're putting it away from yourself. You don't know. It might be just round the corner. Well, Israel dismissed any thought of coming calamity.

But you'll notice that while they were putting away their own personal disaster, they were bringing near the seat of violence. What does that mean?

It means, I think, very simply, that violence was becoming more and more part of national life. And again, when you study through the prophecies, you find that God's judgment will come upon a nation of violence.

Those who are always shedding blood. Those where violence is part and partial of society. And that's exactly what was happening in Israel and again in Judah.

[20:58] And so, Israel, Judah, or Israel, I should say, were dismissing any thought of this coming. Well, actually, prior to God's judgment coming, a reign of terror went through throughout the land.

And there is an apt description, that's really, I would say, an apt description of Israel's years prior to had been taken into captivity. In the 30 or so years after the reign of Jeroboam II, there were six different kings and three of them came to power through coups and through assassinations.

And fear and violence became the diet of the land. And it was, in fact, whole townships were being killed. And you can read about that in 2 Kings how there were atrocities carried out and whole towns, these are people, these weren't invading armies.

These were one town in Israel fighting against another and destroying, annihilating, wiping out. God couldn't just bypass that and ignore it.

And he was saying, you're putting the day of disaster from you. And yet you're bringing near to you this way of violence. And what did God do? Well, he handed them over to the Assyrians who were the most cruel, barbaric nation that was going.

[22 : 31] You see, God can't be mocked. What a man sows, that shall he also reap. And again, this ease is highlighted by great self-indulgence.

That's what we see in verse 4. Woe to those who lie in beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches and so on and eat lamb. Now, obviously, we all stretch out on a couch.

Unless you're a vegetarian, we all eat lamb. We all eat beef. We all eat these things unless, as I say, we're vegetarian. And these are good things.

These are blessings. These aren't things that we're saying are wrong and are condemned. But the picture that we have here is one of a self-indulgent life.

This is really what the picture that is shown. Those who stretch themselves out on couches. It's got the idea almost of being in a drunken stupor, just stretched out and not able to do anything.

[23 : 31] And this is the kind of way that people are living their life is gone. And they're not grieved. They're not upset by what is happening.

in any particular shape or form. You know, it's a solemn thing as God looks down upon a nation.

And as God looks down upon us, and remember, this, I believe, is the key to our future as a nation is how do we react nationally to how things are happening.

because remember, the future of our country, while at one level, yes, it is with our leaders and with those in authority over us, it is also very much with the church.

And the Lord keeps saying that to us in the Bible. We have an incredible responsibility. And we aren't to adopt a them-and-us attitude and say, oh, well, isn't it terrible the way our nation is?

[24 : 36] We're part of that nation. You look at the life of Daniel, and we've looked at that before, and we find that when Daniel looked at the state of the things, we find Daniel's great prayer of confession.

And Daniel is saying, we have sinned. Daniel's not saying, our nation has sinned. They have sinned. No, he said, we. Daniel put himself amongst them all.

And so must we. We have to go to the Lord and confess. And the Lord says that if his people who are called by his name, if they repent, and the Lord is looking to his people for repentance, and he's looking to his church to be on their knees confessing their sin, the Lord is saying he will hear from heaven.

And he says, I will heal their land. Isn't that wonderful? It's not the policies that are made.

And I believe that if the church acts responsibly before the Lord, then our politicians will be given, God will give the wisdom and the clarity and the understanding to deal righteously and to do things in a right way.

[25 : 56] We have a responsibility before God and for the good of our nation. And as I say, there's no point in us just saying, oh, it's awful.

Look at that. And so often when we do look at many of the ways and things and laws that have passed, and sometimes we say, you know, society's going mad. And to a certain extent there are aspects of it that you say, well, it seems to be, that seems to be the case.

are we praying? Are we praying? Are we confessing? Are we serious before God? Or do we just pick up a paper and say, oh, you know, this is going crazy.

The responsibility, my friends, lies with ourselves. We've got to look at ourselves and we've got to look at how God dealt in the past. When nations go further and further and further and further away from it and kid themselves on and where the church is slumbering and taking its ease in Zion and not accepting its responsibilities.

My friend, it's important. It's urgent. But you know, while we see here that there are woes, we cannot help but finish with a realization that the great, the great woe took place on Calvary.

[27 : 22] You know, this word woe has the idea of a funeral in it. It's a death word. It's an awful word. And yet, when we see what God thinks of sin, some people say, what does God think of sin?

Well, you look at Calvary. That's what God thinks of sin. Where you see his own son, Jesus Christ upon the cross. That's what God thinks of sin. That's how God has to deal with sin. God cannot ignore it. God would cease to be God if he just ignored sin. He has to deal with it. And the great thing about the gospel of Jesus Christ is that while the Bible declares the woes, the gospel tells us that Christ has come to deal with the woes by taking the woe upon himself. And that is the good news. that's what gospel is, is good news. And that is why it is so important that we hear what God will speak. And that we will believe what God will speak. And that we will rejoice in what God will speak. And that what God speaks becomes part of our life. And I hope that everybody in here tonight will know this God as is revealed in Jesus Christ as his Lord and her Lord.

[28 : 43] And if you do, then there will be no eternal woe for you, because Jesus has taken it. For you there will be eternal delight and rejoicing and gladness.

But may we also accept our responsibilities as a nation before the Lord. Let us pray. O Lord our God, we pray that we may indeed reflect upon what the word says.

And there are times when we may say, well, I don't want to hear the woes. I don't want to dwell upon these things. Help us, Lord, to realize that this is God's word.

And that we have to be faithful to what God puts upon our heart. And we have to be faithful to what God's word says. And we pray then to help us tonight. And to believe.

And to hear. and to do. O Lord, watch over us all, we pray. Take us all to our homes safely. We pray in these slippery conditions on their foot to watch each one.

[29 : 53] And that we might be kept in safety, protected in every way. O Lord, do us good, we pray. Cleanse us from our sin. In Jesus' name we ask all. Amen.