

# Glimmers of Hope

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[ 0 : 0 0 ] This is the AM service on the 5th of October 1997.

The preacher is Dr. Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Glimmers of Hope and is from Amos 9, verses 1-15.

We thank you, God, that you are a God of mercy. Be merciful to us, we pray, as we study your word, that we may not only understand it but heed it in our lives.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. And you may find it helpful to have open in front of you the passage from Amos 9 on page 749 in the Black Bibles in front of you.

For those who are new or visiting, this is the culmination of a series of sermons from the prophet Amos. And they all lived happily ever after.

[ 1 : 3 0 ] Well, it would be lovely if that were the case. For we all love a story in which everybody lives happily ever after. A happy ending where all the problems, the turmoil, the disasters, the fears, the doubts, the death, all gone, all resolved happily.

We all like a movie or a story that has a feel-good factor about it. We come away thinking, yes, I feel good about myself, about life, or whatever. And indeed, it's a big selling point for many movies and stories, the feel-good factor.

It's also an important thing for many people in coming to church, coming to church to feel good about life, about God, and about circumstances. Well, Amos, if you've been here the last couple of months, is hardly a feel-good book, is it?

And many of you, I guess, are fairly eager for it to finish today because today's the day and next week we can get on to something a bit more reassuring or comforting or warm and fuzzy inside. But, of course, the danger is that if we only ever pay attention to the words of comfort and reassurance, then we'll be lulled into exactly the same false sense of security that Amos has been chastising his people about.

Having said that, however, it's rather astonishing, surprising, that at the end of a book of such unrelenting doom and judgement as is Amos, we come to such striking words of hope, totally unexpected, out of the ashes of all the destruction that's been building up for eight chapters, comes an astonishing picture of a glorious hope in the future.

[ 3 : 1 5 ] But before you jump the gun too much, a little bit more patience is needed. For we've still got half a chapter yet of chapter nine of judgment and woe before we get to the judgment.

So don't jump the gun too soon. Let's see what the first half of the chapter says. Amos begins with a vision. He sees something. The fifth vision that he's had in the book.

Indeed, in the last three chapters of the book. But now something a bit more significant. No longer is it a vision of locusts or fire or a plumb line or a basket of fruit.

But now the vision is of God himself. And not a God who's like a Santa Claus figure, but a God who's towering over the altar. The passage says beside the altar, but literally the preposition is also above the altar.

And that's best what God is doing here. Amos has a vision of the shrine of Bethel, the center point of the religious community of his kingdom. And he sees God above the altar.

[ 4 : 16 ] A threatening, towering figure of judgment standing there above the altar. God is the commander-in-chief of the mighty army, if you like, who is about to bring about his judgment.

And this God whom he sees speaks. And he issues instructions to whom we're not sure, presumably to angels, if not an opposing army or a nation. And this God issues his instructions for destruction.

Beginning with the very place where God's people might expect to find safety and sanctuary, that is in their shrine, in their temple, in the very house of God, judgment begins.

Strike the capitals until the thresholds shake. The capitals are the tops of the pillars that hold up the temple. Strike them, he says, so badly that even the thresholds, that is the stones at the base which people would walk over into the temple that they themselves shake.

It's a picture of an earthquake, but not an earthquake from the bottom up, an earthquake from the top down, from God down. This is an earthquake of judgment on the people.

[ 5 : 24 ] So bad will it be, Amos says, the words go on to say, that they will shatter them on the heads of all the people. Those who are gathered inside their temple or shrine to pay their religious respects and so on, they will be destroyed as the temple comes crashing down on top of them.

A fairly horrific picture. But remember who the people are who are in there. Remember that time and again in this book, Amos has been castigating the very religious people of the nation.

For they have been parading their piety in a public facade, but have not practiced it in their lives day by day during the weeks. And so now upon them comes the judgment of God himself.

And as if an earthquake is not enough, then will follow a sword, presumably an opposing army from another nation. As indeed we know that 20 or 30 years after these words were spoken by Amos, the Assyrian Empire conquered the people of God of Israel.

And those who are left I will kill with the sword. Not one of them shall flee away. Not one of them shall escape.

[ 6 : 35 ] That's the emphasis in these verses. There is no escape from the judgment of God. So verses 2 to 4 give various possibilities about where people might flee to to escape the judgment of God, but none is effective.

For God is there in all those places. Though they dig into Sheol, that is to the place of the dead, the grave underground. Hyperbolic of course because you cannot do it.

But imagine that somebody digs so far underground that they actually come to the place of the dead. From there shall my hand take them, says God. No escape there. And though they may climb up to heaven, which of course is impossible, but even if they were to climb all the way up to heaven, from there shall my hand bring them down.

Though they climb up to the top of Mount Carmel, a major mountain in the middle of Israel, a place where other gods tended to be worshipped. You may know the story of Elijah the prophet a hundred years before Amos in his major confrontation with the prophets of Baal.

That was at Mount Carmel, the place where Baal gods were worshipped very keenly. Possibly people thought that it was outside the jurisdiction of the God of the Old Testament.

[ 7 : 50 ] Amos says, if you flee there, there's no escape either. From there I will search out and take them. And though they hide from my sight at the bottom of the sea, again, impossible in a sense literally, but speaking hyperbolically again, if that were possible, from even there God can act.

There's no escape from God's judgment for he'll command the sea serpent and it shall bite them. What happened 20 or 30 years after Amos' words where the Assyrians came and they took away the leaders of the people into exile, repopulated them in other parts of the Assyrian empire.

But even that is not escape from the judgment of God as he says in verse 4. And though they go into captivity in front of their enemies, there I'll command the sword and it shall kill them.

And I'll fix my eyes on them for harm and not for good. There is no place outside the jurisdiction of God. There is no escape and no place which is safe from the judgment of God.

Many of us like to remember words from the end of Romans that were actually read for us earlier in this service. Words of comfort and assurance that I'm sure many of you know well.

[ 9 : 10 ] Words that are used often in funeral services. That neither height nor depth or principality or power or things present or things future or anything else in all of creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ.

Words of great assurance rightly so that there is nowhere where we can go and nothing that can come between us and God for God is there wherever we may be.

And we ought to take great comfort from those words. Often we sing hymns of great comfort as well that make a similar point that wherever we may be in whatever circumstances we may face God will not abandon us or forsake us he is with us.

Words of comfort and assurance. Indeed the first hymn we sang today expressed that view as well. Ancient Israel would have sung hymns similarly but God was with them their strength their refuge the psalms are full of hymns of praise like that where God's presence is with his people regardless of the situation and circumstance.

The flip side of all of that the flip side of Romans 8 the flip side of those hymns that we in ancient Israel would sing to encourage them and give them assurance that wherever they may be God is there as well the flip side of all of that is that there is nowhere we can escape God's judgment for if God is wherever we may be in comfort the same applies to God because he is wherever he may be in judgment as well and we cannot escape the judgment of God.

[ 10 : 45 ] Amos in fact quotes one of the hymns of ancient Israel and it seems that it was probably a hymn that was used to express the sovereign power of God caring for and being with his people so that God was powerful over everything else in all of creation but Amos takes their hymn maybe he changes a little bit of it and he throws it back in their face you sing a hymn like this to give you reassurance and comfort that wherever you may be God's there with you but the flip side of it is that you cannot flee from God's judgment for wherever you may be God's judgment will catch up with you there there's no escape so he says and quotes this hymn in verses 5 and 6 the Lord God of hosts he who touches the earth and it melts and all who live in it mourn and all of it rises like the Nile and sinks again like the Nile of Egypt picture of devastation as we saw last week who builds his upper chambers in the heaven and founds his vault upon the earth who calls for the waters of the sea and pours them out on the surface of the earth the Lord is his name but the point of quoting that hymn is not to reassure that God is sovereign over all things but is to reassure

Israel that there is no escape from the judgment of God in heaven on earth the sea anywhere God is present you cannot flee his judgment so how can you sing a song like this Amos is in effect saying and think that you're immune from God's judgment how can you sing a song of the sovereign power of God and think that you can escape from him and from his judgment you cannot or to make us take heed of what we sing in church and some of the implications of that as well now I imagine that for many of us today and in weeks past have been thinking Amos is not speaking to me I'm not like this ancient Israel that he's addressing why these words are 2700 years old they're not for me they're irrelevant past he's speaking to other people but not to me there's a great danger if we too readily dismiss the words of Amos because ancient Israel was like that as well they thought he's not speaking to me his words apply to somebody else out there not in here indeed Amos quotes what people were responding to him at the end of verse 10 he describes the people as sinners because they say evil shall not overtake or meet us we're safe we're immune

Amos isn't speaking to me and I know that for many of us here we at least wish that Amos were not speaking to us either why every Saturday night I've felt that for the last couple of months one of the main bases on which Israel staked its claim as special people of God was the fact that hundreds of years before when Moses was alive God had rescued his people from Egypt brought them through the 40 year period of the wilderness into the promised land now if God had done that for his people and if he'd called them as he did his chosen people his special possession a royal priesthood his people amongst all other nations as special why surely we must be immune from his judgment surely we must be safe is the thinking of the ancient Israelites but it's a dangerous way to think Amos says his words in verse 7 are astonishing are you not like the Ethiopians to me O people of Israel says the

Lord well no the Israelites would have said we're not like the Ethiopians we're different we're God's chosen people they're not did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt well of course you did that's what makes us so special but then what does Amos say and the Philistines from Kaphdor an ancient name for Crete and the Arameans from Kira a place in Mesopotamia the Arameans were the Syrians whose capital was Damascus Amos is saying here that what God has done for you Israel is what he's done for the Philistines and the Arameans and you're just like the Ethiopians you're not that special that you're immune from God's judgment just because he brought you out of Egypt into a promised land under Moses leadership and just because he called you a chosen people and a special possession and so on that doesn't mean you're immune and safe from God's judgment when you say that evil will not overtake us you're wrong Israel we too need to be careful that we don't have a false security in God that we're not like

God thinking Jesus died therefore I'm okay or I was baptized some time ago before I could remember but I'm okay or that I've been confirmed therefore I'm okay because that's the wrong thinking of Israel that's being being criticized here and corrected here the danger for us is if we like ancient Israel think that just because somehow I was born a Christian or baptized a Christian or something in the past or just Jesus died on the cross or was born on Christmas Day that somehow that makes me right with God it didn't for ancient Israel and nor does it for us either Israel abused its privilege as God's special people by thinking it was immune from judgment and therefore did not need to live a holy life and so God says through Amos in verse 8 the eyes of the Lord God are upon the sinful kingdom and I will destroy it from the face of the earth and it may well be that here endeth the book and what a book of doom it would be for eight and a half chapters unrelenting doom and judgment threatened on a guilty rebellious people but verse 8 doesn't stop there the second half of verse 8 is a great surprise for those who've been reading from the beginning the eyes of the Lord are upon the sinful kingdom and I'll destroy it from the face of the earth except that I will not utterly destroy the house of

[ 16 : 53 ] Jacob says the Lord that's an astonishing surprise if we've been reading from the beginning because at every point we've been thinking God is judging his people totally and utterly but now comes a ray of hope absolutely surprising I heard the other day of a person who'd been rung up at work and said you have to get home immediately there's a problem he raced home saw police cars outside his house walked up to his house there was a policeman at the door his heart was trembling was his family killed the house obviously wasn't burned down had all his possessions been stolen policeman said come in sir he opened the door and all his friends said happy birthday now what a surprise that's an extraordinary surprise for a birthday isn't it but in a sense that same surprise is what's happening here we're expecting the worst by the time you get to the middle of Amos 9 you think this is it there is absolutely no hope for these people end kaput except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob says the

Lord what an astonishing verse 8 the second half is so astonishing that many writers and scholars think Amos couldn't have said this somebody later on hundreds of years later perhaps has written it back in that's a fairly small minded view because every prophet has a word of hope along with a word of judgment and Amos would be unique if he stopped in the middle of verse 8 and that was the end of the book consistently the prophets recognize that there is hope beyond judgment and consistently it's with God's character as well for God's final word is never the end kaput judgment but God's final word is there is hope and Amos goes on to describe that hope why can he do that because he sees a vision of God as the cook God as the cook who's sieving his flour if you like in verse 9 sieving out the lumps and the impurities and the good flour passing through the sieve for lo verse 9 says I will command and shake the house of Israel among all the nations as one shakes with a sieve but no pebble shall fall to the ground the good material passes through and is kept and preserved but the impurities the pebbles the lumps the dirt whatever else is caught up in the sieve of judgment and destroyed and so

God says sinners will not escape verse 10 all the sinners of my people shall die by the sword who say evil shall not overtake or meet us so it's for those who pass through the sieve if you like for whom the picture of hope stands valid in the last verses of the chapter on that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old the booth of David is a reference to the former king who'd lived 200 years or more before the great king under whom the whole of God's people were united in Amos's day that's not the case it's a divided kingdom so the booth of David is perhaps a derogatory way of saying the dynasty or house of David like we say the house of Windsor it's only a booth because it's divided into two but Amos is looking forward promising a day when the whole of God's people will be reunited under a king descended from David the great king probably a promise that there will be a king who will come in the future to reign over God's people but even more than that it promises God's people world dominion so verse 12 says in order that they may possess the remnant of

Edom one of their enemies on the southeastern border and all the nations who are called by my name says the Lord who does this this will be a great kingdom that is rebuilt but even more than that it will be a great kingdom full of prosperity the time is surely coming verse 13 says the Lord when the one who plows shall overtake the one who reaps and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed the mountains shall drip sweet wine and all the hills shall flow with it so abundant will be the crops that they will spend so long harvesting that the plower is ready to plow up the field for the next crop and so quickly will it grow that the one who's harvesting will almost overtake the one who's sowing the seed it's a picture of superlative agricultural fertility abundant blessing crops beyond belief quickly and largely growing so great will it be that the mountains will drip sweet wine perhaps an idiom for saying you'll be up to your ears or eyes in crops and wine and grapes so great will be the blessing that will come to this nation not even abundance but also enjoyment so verse 14 says I'll restore the fortunes of my people

Israel and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine they shall make their gardens and eat their fruit it's a reversal of judgment from back in chapter 5 now those who plant will enjoy the benefits of their labors there will be fruitfulness rather than futility in the labors of these people in their land and it will be permanent I will plant them upon their land and they shall never again be plucked up out of the land that I have given them says the Lord your God what a glorious picture of hope to finish the book of a kingdom reunited rebuilt restored returned from exile a kingdom that is powerful and prosperous abundant and full of joy but let's get straight why this picture comes at the end of the book it's not just a and they all lived happily ever after type book it's not just Amos trying to give a feel good factor to boost his sales in the local bookshop it's not an every cloud has a silver lining or always look on the bright side of life it's not just wishful thinking but Amos's words of hope have got a solid foundation and that foundation is God because the reason for the optimism at the end of this book is that

[ 23 : 05 ] God is a faithful God keeping his promises so all those things that are promised in those last few verses of the book are derived from promises that God has made earlier in history a couple of hundred years before in 2 Samuel 7 God has made promises to King David that there will be a Davidic king on the throne of God's people forever and here is the outcome of that promise God will restore the fallen booth of David he will keep his promise then before that even back in the books of Exodus Leviticus Numbers and Deuteronomy God had made promises to his people through Moses in particular in Deuteronomy 30 that after a period of exile and judgment God will restore the fortunes of his people the exact same expression that's used here in verse 14 of Amos 9 God will bring prosperity and abundance to his people Amos' statement of hope derives from what God had promised hundreds of years before and finally and even earlier on in the Old Testament again

God had made promises to Abraham amongst which he promised a land and that's the basis of this promise at the end of this chapter and also that God's people would be the means of blessing for the world the basis of the promise in verse 12 of Amos 9 you see what Amos is doing is saying God is faithful he keeps his promises the promises he made to David to Moses and to Abraham the three great places of the Old Testament where God makes promises to his people Amos says God's faithful he keeps his promises even beyond judgment it's a very important lesson there that even despite all the sin of God's people Israel God's promises cannot be and will not be thwarted or foiled the same applies to us as well St. Paul says in the New Testament in Romans 3 can the faithlessness of God's people nullify the faithfulness of God by no means God's promises are bigger than our failure something that ought to give us great confidence and hope when we fail

God it's only left to ask the question when does all this happen has it already been fulfilled or is it yet to be fulfilled in the future some people think it may have been fulfilled when God's people returned to their land the problem is the people to whom Amos addressed these words never came back to their land after they were destroyed and the people of the southern kingdom Judah 200 years later when they came back to their land 200 years later sorry when they came back to their land it wasn't prosperous they didn't have a Davidic king and so on unfulfilled some people think maybe it's in the modern state of Israel since 1948 that this is being fulfilled but no again that doesn't match there's no Davidic king there's no world dominion there's no prosperity and abundance and coming back to God of the Bible at all the New Testament tells us when it's fulfilled in the words that were quoted in the second Bible reading today the Apostle

James at the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 he understood what was happening because he saw the gospel of Jesus Christ now going not only to Jews but to Gentiles non-Jews and he saw in that the fulfillment of these words of Amos that through the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ and the giving of his spirit the gospel is for all people of all nations and all places and that was happening the gospel was spreading and going through Asia Minor to Jew and to Gentile and James saw there the fulfillment of this that the time has come the booth of fallen David is lifted up because Jesus is the Davidic descendant the son of David Jesus is the one who brings perfect peace and prosperity so these are being fulfilled not yet totally but we are part of it and its culmination of course will be the day when Christ returns to this world but remember how this picture of hope began it began with God the cook the one sieving sifting the lumps the impurities and the pebbles out from the good preserving the good but destroying the pebbles the bad the lumps the impurities and the dirt this glorious hope only lies beyond judgment there's no entrance to hope by circumventing that judgment only by going through the sieve do we come through to the glorious hope of the future maybe you think

I've got it wrong and maybe you think the new testament's a bit easier than that I'm sure there are many of you who possibly think that that the new testament's easier more comforting more assuring than this statement of the old testament but hear Jesus own words on this matter from Matthew 25 Jesus says when the son of man comes in his glory and all the angels with him then he will sit on the throne of his glory all the nations will be gathered before him and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats and he'll put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left then the king will say to those at his right hand come you that are blessed by my father inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world then he'll say to those at his left hand you that are accursed depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels Jesus you see is the sieve he's the one who separates the pebbles from the good the sheep from the goats he's the one who is the judge he's the one who in the end fulfills what Amos is promising and if you have a problem with seeing judgment as a necessity before hope then you have a problem with Jesus not with the old testament if you don't like the picture and the picture of Jesus the son of man separating sheep and goats is Amos's picture as well then you have a problem with Jesus and you need to argue it with him but if it's true that Jesus is sifting out the hearts of men before his judgment seat then there is only one response that we can make be swift my soul to answer him be jubilant my feet our God is marching on followed followed by there is a hesitate to

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