

SUMMER 4 - Three Great Principles - One Gracious God

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Date: 09 January 2011

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[0 : 00] Well friends, it's great to welcome you here again. The book of Amos is such a great book. If you're a newcomer with us, particularly glad that you're with us tonight.

And please make yourself known to us using those communication cards. Now I want to begin tonight's talk by quoting to you a number of passages that come from both Old and New Testaments.

Now each passage has to do with speaking God's words. And as I read them, I want you to ask yourself, what is common about each of them? I don't want you to look them up, I just want you to listen to them. What is common about all of them?

The first one comes from Isaiah chapter 30, verses 1 to 11. They say to the seers, see no more visions. And to the prophets, give us no more visions of what is right.

Tell us pleasant things. Prophecy illusions. Leave this way, get off this path and stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel. The second comes from Jeremiah chapter 6, verse 10.

[1 : 06] To whom can I speak and give warning? Who will listen to me? Their ears are closed so that they cannot hear. The word of the Lord is offensive to them. They find no pleasure in it.

Jeremiah chapter 6. Third comes from the New Testament. It comes from 2 Timothy chapter 4, verses 1 to 3. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge.

Preach the word.

What similarities in sentiment are there in these three passages? Well, I think the passages are clear, aren't they? You see, God is often a God who has hard things to say to his world and to his people.

And people don't like hearing hard things. And so people often shut their eyes to good people saying hard things. Or they persecute and they kill the messenger.

[2 : 28] However, there's another response we can make, isn't there? And the response is outlined. Again, I won't get you to look it up, but I'll tell you what it is. In Micah chapter 2, verses 6 to 7. It is this one.

Do not prophesy, there prophets say. Do not prophesy about these things. Disgrace will not overtake us. Should it be said, O house of Jacob, is the spirit of the Lord angry?

Does he do such things? Do not my words do good to him whose ways are upright. Do not my words do good to him whose ways are upright.

God's clear, you see. God is very clear that his word at times will be very hard. You see, the words of God, because humans are sinful, will be often full of doom and judgment.

However, God's intentions for his people are always, always good. And if so, and if God has a hard word to say to his people, what will it do?

[3 : 27] It will always do good to those whose ways are upright. Godly people will respond to God's hard words with what? With thankfulness.

For God's word is good. Because it comes from a good word, from a good God, whose intentions for his people are always good.

Friends, I want to start this way, because tonight we're going to find some hard words coming from the mouth of God's prophet Amos. And Amos is going to tell us some hard things about God.

And as we listen tonight, I want you to have the response of the godly. You see, the response of the godly will lead us, the godly will think this way. God's words come from a good God.

God's word, they will be good for us. This is God's good intention for us. God always wants what is good for us. That is his overwhelming intention.

[4 : 29] So if he has some hard things to say to us, they are for our good. So let us imbibe these words. Let us take them on board. Let us let those words change us and revive us and refresh us and rebuke us.

So that's my introduction. So let's look tonight at Amos 3. Now, open your Bibles at Amos 3. If you need to find it, I could give you a page number.

I could tell you how to find it. I'm really tempted to just tell you how to find it. But I'll give you both options. 745 is the page number. But if you want to find Amos, really, it's in that last section of the Old Testament where the minor prophets are.

So once you get past Jeremiah and Ezekiel, you have all those little ones. And if you flip slowly, you'll get to Amos. Now. The chapter is divided into three.

There's verses one and two is the first section. Then verses three through to eight. And then verses nine to twelve. And each of these verses, in my view, opens up a clear biblical principle for us.

[5 : 28] And I think the principles that we find here in Amos 3 will travel down into our day. Each of the principles, I think, has clear application not only to ancient Jews, but also to contemporary Christians.

So we are going to learn great things about God from this passage tonight. Let's get started with the first principle. Amos 3, one to two. Now, verse one starts with some words that will echo through the next few chapters.

And Amos urges the people of God to hear this word. Just flip through very quickly and you'll see that phrase here. This word occurs a number of times. What he then does is he sets the context by telling us to whom this word is directed.

It is directed to the people of Israel. That is the whole family that God brought up out of the land of Egypt. He brought those. It's a reference to Egypt is a reference to God's great act of redemption for his people.

You see, that's where God redeemed his people from Egypt. He brought them up out of bondage. He lifted them, we're told in Exodus chapter 19, on eagles' wings and brought them to himself.

[6 : 35] And after he had rescued them out of Egypt, he renewed his covenant with them. He told them in Exodus 19 that they would be his treasured possession, his kingdom of priests, his holy nation.

And verse two picks this up. Look at what God says. He says, you only have I known of all the families of the earth. Now, the word known is a word that is full of intimacy.

It's a covenant word. What God is saying is, I am acknowledging that Israel is known to me. They are known as my special people, my treasured possession, my kingdom of priests, my covenant people.

In other words, they are mine. I know this people. And because I know them, I have an obligation to them. Now, the people to whom Amos is speaking, they knew this.

They thought that God's obligation to his people meant that he would not allow evil to overtake them or come near to them, that he'd protect them, that he'd look after them, that he'd care for them, that he would be their God.

[7 : 40] Amos records in chapter nine, verse 10, that some of them at this time were actually saying this. Their catch cry was disaster shall not overtake or or meet us.

In other words, God will look after us. We are his covenant people. They were people who felt complacent, secure, confident. God was for them.

Not unlike Christians reading Romans eight might feel. But look at what Amos does in Amos three, verse two. Listen very carefully. Watch carefully. This verse. He starts off.

You only have I known of all the families over the earth. That's warm and wonderful stuff, isn't it? Therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities. You think, how does that work?

Can you see what Amos has done? He's turned things on their head. He's sure that Israel's relationship with God, you see, has two sides to it. Sure, God has obligations.

[8 : 38] But so do his people. And the people of God were to be faithful to God and obedient to his word. And they signed up for that in Exodus chapter 19.

That is God's gift to them of rescue out of Egypt demanded a shift in their behavior. Their obedience to him was to flow out of his grace toward them.

And if they were not obedient, then being related to him had consequences. Because they were related to him, any breach of relationship had a consequence. If he were truly their covenant partner, what would he do?

What must he do? He must act according to covenant. And that means he must not only bless, but curse. That's why Israel stood on two mountains shouting those things to each other.

Blessings and curses in Deuteronomy. So God must not only bless and protect his people. He must punish sin. If he were truly a covenant partner, he must act according to covenant.

[9 : 43] He must act in judgment. He must punish them for their sins, for all breaches of covenant obligation. Otherwise, he would be untrue to his covenant. Look and listen to what Amos says.

You only have I known from all the families of the earth. Therefore, because I know you, because we're in covenant, I will punish you for all your iniquities. Friends, can you hear the first great principle here?

It's an overwhelming one. The principle is that God's election implies accountability. God's election implies accountability.

On the one hand, God's people are to be accountable. They're God's elect people. That means they must act in accord with the covenant made with the relationship, which means that they are to keep his laws according to his character.

That's true. But God is also accountable. He too is to act according to relationship. And that means he must both punish covenant disobedience and reward covenant loyalty and care for his people and watch over them, guard them, keep them.

[10 : 51] Now, let me say this. This sort of principle of covenant accountability applies as much to us as it does to Israel. Friends, let me explain this.

You see, because of Jesus, we are in covenant with God. It is based on a greater rescue and a greater sacrifice. We are God's people.

He has called us to be his children and allowed us to call him father, even Abba father. We are the new people of God who have been brought out of darkness into his marvelous light.

That's what Peter says in one Peter two verses nine to 10. And being God's people means that we are called upon to act like it. We are to keep his laws and act according to his character.

We are to abstain. One Peter says this in chapter two, 11 and 12. Again, we're to abstain from sinful desires that wage war against our souls. Now that we are the people of God, we are to live good lives among the pagans.

[11 : 55] Jesus makes this principle clear in Luke chapter 12, verse 48. Listen to him spell it out for from every. Sorry. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded.

And from the one to whom has been entrusted much, much more will be asked. Can you hear it? Their words are addressed to us because it is us who have been given so much.

For from everyone to whom much has been given, much will be demanded. And from the one to whom has been entrusted much, much more will be asked.

Friends, the point that Amos makes is as true for us as it was for ancient Israel. We are God's covenant partners and recipients.

We are God's people. We have been bought with the blood of his son, Jesus Christ. And we will be held accountable. But let me tell you, God's also accountable.

[12 : 58] He's entered into relationship willingly. He too must act according to that relationship. And that means he must punish covenant disobedience with his presence as well as rewarding covenant fidelity.

So that's our first principle. Now, I think, friends, that's one that Christians often don't see and understand. And they flaunt God's grace. And don't see that God must act according to covenant, just as he did in Old Testament.

Now, Amos chapter 3, verses 3 to 8. This is a bit longer, this one, in terms of the section, but probably shorter to explain. This is our second section. Now, you'll have already noticed, if you've been coming to hear these talks, that Amos loves the number 7.

He really likes it. He uses it time and time again. And he plays with it. That's what I really like about him. He just plays with the number 7. And one of the twists he loves to make is to use the number 7 in such a way that people think he's completed what he wants to say.

You see, because if it's a perfect number, when you've said all the 7 things, that's it. You move on to your next lot of 7 or whatever else it is you're going to say. And because people know it's a full number, they sort of, their brains, perhaps not like our brains, but their brains, perhaps even think he's finished.

[14 : 12] And so when, just when they're getting, breathing a sigh of relief, phew, you know, Amos has got through that series of judgment. We've got to 7. What he does, he turns it on his head and adds a surprising 8th element.

It's a wonderful little trick. And he does so in these verses, you see. He lists 7 things that occur in the natural world. And whenever these things occur, there's a following result.

Can you see it there? Verse 3. People don't walk unless they have an agreement to meet. Now, we may not understand that, but everyone in his day understood it. Verse 4a.

Lions don't roar unless they're hunting and have captured some prey. Verse 4b. Young lions don't cry out from their dens if they haven't taken anything. Why get excited, you know, unless you've caught something?

5a. Birds don't swoop on traps unless the bait has been set. And traps, well, they don't spring shut unless a victim is present in the trap. And trumpets don't sound in alarm without causing fear.

[15 : 13] Verse 6a. Verse 6b. Disasters don't come to cities unless God has initiated it. Can you see what's going on here? Amos knows his audience has traveled with him and they agree with him.

And these causes are followed by effects and so on. And then Amos adds a final cause and effect. If God speaks, who can but prophesy?

Amos, you see, is like so many other Old Testament prophets. He appears to have been a somewhat reluctant prophet. But the Lord took him. Amos chapter 7 verse 15.

And told him to prophesy. Amos, you see, is like Jeremiah. But like Jeremiah, you see, the word of God was like a fire in him, in his bones. And what Amos says is, I cannot keep it in.

If God speaks to me, I, the prophet, must speak, no matter what the consequences are. And Jeremiah, and for Amos, it was tough. So that's our second principle, if I can put it this way.

[16 : 13] It is, if God has chosen people to speak his word, and then he speaks to them, these people must follow up and speak.

Let me say it again. If God has chosen his people to speak his word, and then he speaks, then those people must speak his word. Now, let me say again, I think the principle applies into the New Testament as well.

You see, the apostles are clear in Acts 4 and 5 that they are under the command of God. I think it comes from Acts chapter 1 verses 6 to 8. But they are under the command of God to speak about Jesus.

And in 1 Corinthians 9 verse 16, Paul says, When I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach.

And woe to me if I don't preach the gospel. 1 Peter chapter 2 verses 9 and 10 tells us that we are the new people of God.

[17 : 17] And do you know why God has called us? Well, 1 Peter says, In order that we might declare the great deeds of him who has brought us out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Can you see what is being said? God has spoken in Jesus Christ. And we must speak of him and what he has done. We are, this is part of what it means to be Christian.

To declare the great deeds of him who has brought us out of darkness into his marvelous light. Now, let's turn now to Amos 3 verses 9 to 15 and our third principle.

In verse 9, Amos tells us that God gathers two witnesses to assemble on the mountains of Samaria. In other words, here are these two tribes that are sort of meant to sit there sort of watching on.

See what God is doing. He's about to make an accusation. And according to the Old Testament law, if you're accusing someone of wrong, you need to have two or three witnesses. So what God does is he gathers these pagans to sit there and hear the accusation read out.

[18 : 21] The witnesses are Ashdod, representing Philistia and Egypt. And both nations can be considered, well, independent, expert, experienced, competent witnesses.

So there you've got them. They're sort of sitting there watching what God is going to do. And God's accusation before these witnesses is strong and powerful. It's spelled out there in verse 10. God's people are a people who do not know how to do right.

It's a tragic thing, isn't it? Here are God's people who do not know how to do right. They are incapable of acting in an upright and godly fashion.

And then Amos hones in on the particular culprits he has in mind. He appears that they appear to be the members of the upper class of Samaria who hoard, he says, and who hoard plunder and loot.

The terms Amos uses here are known terms. They've got connotations of violence and lawlessness. That is, you know, you plunder, you loot, and you abuse while you're doing it. That's why our version says in verse 11 that they store up violence and robbery in their strongholds.

[19 : 32] And then in verse 11, Amos announces judgment. His language is very clear. In verses 9 to 10, he's talked about fortresses. The representative of these foreign fortresses are invited to witness the current crimes going on in Samaria.

They're to bear witness concerning the crimes committed against people and property. And they're to see how the results of these crimes are stored up in Israelite storehouses and fortresses.

And God announces that an unknown enemy will come and in turn plunder these fortresses, will do to them what they have done to others. And the punishment will fit the crime.

Do you notice it there?

You know, a shepherd might grab a piece of a lamb's carcass in order to prove that a lion took the lamb. He might just grab a little bit so he can say, it wasn't, you know, I didn't do anything else with it.

[20 : 34] Someone else didn't take it. No, no. A lion took it and here's the carcass to prove it. Here's the last bit I could grab just to indicate what's gone on. But do you know what God says? He says, the devastation of Israel will be so severe that there won't be a carcass.

There won't be bits of a carcass to grab. There won't be any remaining bits you can sort of hold on to. And then verse 13 spells it out even further. Bethel, the place named here, was a religious, significant religious sanctuary for Israel.

The altars were places of asylum. By going to an altar and hanging on the horns of the altar, people could seek refuge from God. There's an account of Joab doing this in the books of Samuel.

So he goes into the temple and on the corners of the temple there were these horns. And if you held on to them, you could supposedly be protected. And you could find asylum there.

You see, so can you see what this verse is saying? Altars are places of sacrifice. Horns on the altar are places of asylum. Here God says, you know what I'm going to do?

[21 : 41] I'm going to destroy those altars. And there will be no horns on the altars to hang on and find refuge in and asylum in. Can you see what's being said?

God will destroy the places where Israel can go and hide. And then in verse 15, he's going to strike the symbols of their opulence. You see, this was the day when people were doing so well that they had pleasure estates and holiday resorts.

And they would go to them. They'd go to summer places, winter places and so on. And what God says is, These houses festooned with symbols of wealth and ill-gotten gains will be just torn up and destroyed.

So what's the principle? Well, the principle is, God's generosity toward his people is to be met with generosity from his people.

And Samaria, Israel has not done this. They have not, God has been generous to his people. They have not responded with generosity.

[22 : 45] So did you hear that? God's generosity toward his people is to be met with generosity from his people. And we saw this last week, didn't we? And we spent a lot of time on it last week.

We saw that God had been generous and kind, but that God's people had been stingy and mean. God's generosity should have been learnt and copied and mimicked, but it wasn't.

Now, as I said last week, this is a principle that travels down to us as well. It's reiterated in the New Testament. See, who are we? We are people who have received grace.

God has forgiven us. You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich.

God has been generous toward us. He has forgiven us. God has accepted us. Though we were spiritually poor, God poured out his grace upon us so that we might become rich.

[23 : 40] And throughout the New Testament, we're urged to be gracious to each other in response. As God has forgiven us, forgive each other. As God has accepted us, accept each other.

As God has been generous with us spiritually, we ought to be generous with each other materially and financially. Friends, there's nothing more tragic as a pastor, let me tell you, than to find someone in a congregation who has been bitter for 20, 30, 40, 50, 60 years.

Because someone did something to them somewhere in their past, some Christian brother or sister, and they have not forgiven for 60 years. There are some of these in nearly every Christian congregation I have been to.

Where people have been forgiven by God, but are not willing to forgive each other. It's a terrible thing. We who are rich because of all that Christ has done for us, are to be generous and rich.

Even as God has forgiven us, we are to forgive each other. So, there are the three great principles from Amos. First principle, election implies accountability.

[24 : 57] Second, if God chooses people to speak His word, and then He speaks to them, then those people must speak His word. Three, God's generosity toward His people is to be met by generosity from His people.

So, how do we treat these three principles? First thing to say is, these principles are the way we will be judged. And that's terrifying.

We are God's people. And God will judge us for our actions. So, God will judge us for how we, how I, how we, the elect people of God, have lived in response to our election.

If you don't believe me, read Romans 11. It says this, it makes clear that if God judged Israel in the past because it failed rightly to respond to God's covenant love, then He's got every right to do it in the future as well, with Christians.

In verse 21, He makes clear that God can act in the same way to Gentile Christians if they are ungodly. Covenant election means covenant responsibility.

[26 : 02] And the same goes for principle number two, about speaking God's word. So, Paul knows this in relation to his own ministry, doesn't he? He knows. He says, woe to me if I don't preach.

God will judge me. He'll judge His people as to whether or not God's word has been faithfully spoken. So, 1 Corinthians 9, he says, woe to me if I don't preach.

But that's not why he preaches. And we'll find out a bit about that later. In 1 Timothy 2, 1 Timothy 4, he says to Timothy, preach the word, knowing that God will judge the living and the dead.

In relation to the third principle, James makes clear in a variety of places that the measure that we have received will provide the measure by which we'll be judged on the last day.

If you want some references, you've got to pen Matthew 7, verse 2, Luke 6, verse 38. So we know that these principles are principles by which God will judge us.

[27 : 11] I don't know about you, but that's scary, isn't it? I find that scary. God will want to know how we have acted as His covenant partners. Because He's been faithful to covenant.

He expects us to be faithful. He'll want to know, have we spoken His word? Have we responded to His generosity with generosity toward others? See, we're accountable to God.

These principles are principles by which God will judge us. But I need to add a second element. Otherwise, I won't have given you the balance. Let me tell you the other side of the story.

See, my reading of the New Testament and of the Old is that although these principles exist, they're not our primary motivation for action. Can you hear me?

It's not our primary motivation for action, not the threat hanging over our heads. God is not waving a stick at us as a way of motivating our obedience. No, God's way of motivation is, I think, not law, but grace.

[28 : 18] Let me look at these principles and notice something from the New Testament about them. First of all, the New Testament people think of God's election and when they do, it's a motivation for what?

When you think of God electing you, what does it cause you to want to do? It causes you to want to thank God, doesn't it, and rejoice. In 1 Thessalonians 5, verse 24, we're told that if God has chosen us, if God's chosen me, He will be faithful and keep us to the end.

Now, what does that do to me? It says to me, well, thank God for that because if it was reliant on me, I would not be there because I am so often a covenant breaker.

And so we as God's people eagerly wait for the appearing of Jesus and His appearance will be what the New Testament calls a blessed hope, Titus chapter 2 that we read earlier on. And it motivates us not to fear, but to joy.

What about the principle of speaking? Well, Paul and the apostles are crystal clear. They say, we're under command. You read through Acts, it's clear that the apostles think that they're under command.

[29 : 31] Paul clearly thinks he's under command. But let me tell you, they don't speak about Jesus because they're under command. That's not what motivates them. They don't think, oh no, God's given me this great, I must go out and do it.

Well, they do, but they don't need a command in one sense. So the apostles say in Acts chapter 4, verse 20, we cannot but help speaking about what we have seen and heard.

See, what is their motivation? They say, we just can't help but do it. And Paul preaches voluntarily rather than under compulsion.

He says, woe of me if I don't preach, but he's not worried about that because he wants to preach. What about the principle of generosity? It's interesting that in relation to money, Paul tells the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 9, verse 7, that they should give not under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

In other words, generosity is something that flows from the heart because of God's generosity to us. So he motivates Christians this way, you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich.

[30 : 51] And we hear that and we say, if God sends his own son into the world for me that I might become rich, I'm going to go to the ends of the world so that others might become rich.

I'm going to give so that others might receive. Can you see what I'm saying? Our motivation as God's people is not the stick of God's judgment.

It is the grace of God shown to us in Jesus. We trust in God to keep us to the end. We speak because we cannot help but speak and we love because we have been loved and cannot help but love us.

We have been loved. And friends, that leaves us with one question. What happens if we hear what Amos says and what Jesus says and what the New Testament authors have to say and we realise oh no.

I fall short of God's requirements. I've been caught out. What happens when we realise our sinfulness? Christians traditionally beat themselves up out of it.

[32 : 08] Don't they? They say no, I've got to do better. Friends, I want to urge you that while there's something to that, the New Testament is actually quite clear on this, I think. When we realise our shortcomings, when we realise we stand under God's judgment and fall far short, where should we go?

Back to works? Back to drumming ourselves up to do better? No. We should flee to God's grace and forgiveness and as he forgives us yet again, for that perhaps oft-repeated sin, as he forgives us yet again, we should turn to our neighbour and our world and act as God has acted toward us.

See, friends, we are people of grace. Let us act as those who have received grace. Friends, I want to urge us tonight to be God's people. And if I can say it fairly starkly, please don't run to obedience out of fear.

Don't run to obedience even out of duty. Run to obedience out of the enjoyment of having received God's mercy and of loving to be related to God.

Don't speak about Jesus because you're under command so much. You are under command, but speak about Jesus because God and don't speak so much because God says you must do it. No, speak loudly and clearly about Jesus because you cannot help it.

[33 : 42] Many of you know my wife Heather is an evangelist. I've never heard her asking, oh, must I go and do this today? She loves people becoming Christians.

Why? Because she loved becoming a Christian herself. that's what must motivate us. The fact that there is no better place to be but in the presence of God in Christ and through Christ.

And if you've received that, you know that you want everyone else to have it as well. The message of Jesus saved you and transformed you and you love him and you cannot but help speak of what you've seen and heard in Jesus.

Friends, don't be generous out of stingy rules. No, be like God. Be generous and kind and forgiving and accepting because you've seen this in Jesus.

And you can imagine nothing better than being like him. Let's pray. Father God, we thank you that you have made us your covenant partners through the Lord Jesus Christ.

[34 : 57] thank you Father that you love us with an extraordinary great love. Father, please fill us with this love through remembering again what you have done in Jesus.

And Father, please drive us out from here to live lives that match, that truly reflect that we have been loved with a great love. We pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen.