

One Step Too Far

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] This is the AM service on July 27th, 1997. The preacher is Dr. Paul Barker. The sermon is entitled One Step Too Far and is from Amos 1.1-2.16.

Now God, your word is sometimes difficult and we pray that you'll open our eyes and ears and wills that we may not only see and understand and hear but also that we may obey it.

We pray this for Jesus' sake. Amen. There's something a bit gratifying when we hear our enemies being denounced.

It strokes our ego or it reassures our pride. So those of us who aren't Carlton supporters are probably a little bit pleased that they've done badly in the courts this week with one of their players.

And probably those of us who are Australians are quite pleased that we're doing so well in the cricket especially because the pitch got changed at the last minute. It's rather nice to see our enemies suffer, isn't it?

[1 : 1 5] It sort of reassures us in a way. No doubt those who are alive during the Second World War would have been very pleased to hear a word from God that would have said, you are on the right side, the Allies.

Well, if we were ancient Israelites, we would warmly welcome Amos' opening words. For his opening salvo that we've heard today is all about Israel's enemies and the judgment that God will bring on them.

And if you were an ancient Israelite hearing Amos speak God's words saying, God is going to judge Aram and Syria to the north, yes, you would say. God is on our side.

And then when he turns his attention to the Philistines down in the south, he'd say, yes, applause, cheer. Because the Philistines are an ancient enemy of Israel. And as Amos would have gone through each of these enemies of Israel, you could imagine the Israelites applauding, cheering, eager to learn, eager to listen, eager to approve the words of this prophet who had come to them and speaking God's word in their midst.

The Israel of 740 BC, a wealthy, affluent country, relatively secure and fairly strong in the ancient world, would nonetheless have been very pleased indeed to hear these opening words from Amos.

[2 : 3 8] Six times he repeats the formula of judgment against an enemy of Israel, the people of God. For three transgressions of Damascus and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, he says in chapter 1, verse 3.

Damascus was the capital of Syria, as it is indeed still today, sometimes called in the ancient world Aram. It was in the northeast of Israel. You may like to see that on the map that's in the notice sheet today.

And for the 150 years leading up to Amos' words, Syria or Aram was an enemy of Israel, the people of God. And if you read through the books of Kings in the Old Testament, you can see that time and again, Aram and Syria were against the people of God.

And though at times there were alliances between them, basically it was an arch enemy of the people of God. For three transgressions or for four, Amos says, it doesn't mean that they've sinned three or four times, but rather it's an idiom that means you've gone one step too far.

Your sins are more than enough. God's patience has been tried and now it's come to its end. You've done too much sinning. Now comes the word of judgment.

[3 : 57] God up until this time has restrained his anger, his wrath and his punishment from them. But now the time for this nation has run out and God will no longer revoke or restrain his punishment from this nation.

What has Aram done that has provoked God to such wrath and tried his patience just too far? We read at the end of verse 3, because they have threshed Gilead with threshing sledges of iron.

Gilead was a southern neighbour of Aram, also a neighbour of Israel. It seems that there has been a war between them. Not only has Syria won the war, but in so doing has exacted brutality upon Gilead.

They have threshed it with threshing sledges of iron. To get their grain and wheat in ancient days, they would have bits of iron tied with rope and they would sort of throw this and drag it over the grain to break it open and thresh it.

And this is a picture of what has happened to Gilead, defeated in battle by Syria. They've taken the victims and they've threshed them with rope and bits of iron and maybe rock, cutting open their bodies, tearing the flesh from their limbs.

[5 : 16] Probably this is a literal picture of what they did as a barbaric war crime. It may be metaphorical, but whether literal or not, it's horrific in what they've done to destroy this nation.

There's no need for that sort of thing in war. Yes, they may have won the battle, but that's actually not what they're being accused of. What they're being accused of is a horrific crime against humanity.

And so in response to that, we read in verses 4 and 5, God will send a fire on the house of Hazael, that was one of their kings a few years before Amos. It shall devour the strongholds of Ben-Hadad, that was his son, the next king.

I will break the gate bars of Damascus, the capital, cut off the inhabitants from the valley of Arban and the one who holds the scepter from Beth Eden. And the people of Aram shall go into exile to Kiah. The nation will be destroyed by God's fire of judgment.

The nation shall be no more, says the Lord. Amos doesn't stop there. For three transgressions of Gaza and for four, I will not revoke the punishment.

[6 : 22] Gaza's a name we know today, the Gaza Strip on the Mediterranean coast south of the modern nation of Israel. But the Gaza of Amos' day is the same place, but it was the chief city of the nation of the Philistines.

Amos has turned his attention from the northeast down to the southwest, the opposite point of the compass. And the key enemy of Israel for many, many years were the Philistines.

Samson, you may know, the man with long hair whose wife deceived him and chopped it off, his enemy was the Philistines. And when he died, he died in killing Philistines. And in Saul's reign, the first king of Israel, in David's reign, the great king of Israel, the chief enemy was the Philistines.

And Gaza was its main chief city. But what had the Philistines done that had provoked God to such wrath that he was no longer prepared to exercise patience and tolerance with them?

The end of verse 6 says, they carried into exile entire communities to hand them over to Edom. Not only have the Philistines defeated somebody in battle, and it may well be Judah and Israel that are being talked about, the people of God, but they've carted off and sold as slaves the entire community.

- [7 : 38] Not just the military figures, the soldiers and the generals, but the civilians. And not just the men, but the women and children as well. They've been engaging in slave trade of those who've been defeated, the helpless victims of war.

And again, like Aram, a different war crime, but just as serious, just as barbaric, just as inhuman. And for that, God's punishment will come.

So God will send a fire on the wall of Gaza, we read in verse 7. Fire that shall devour its strongholds. God will cut off the inhabitants from Ashdod, another of the major cities of the Philistines, and the one who holds the scepter from Ashkelon, another of its cities, presumably talking about defeating the king.

I will turn my hand against Ekron, yet another of its cities, and the remnant, whoever's left of the Philistines, shall be destroyed. There'll be none left. The nation shall be gone. God's judgment will come upon it, and it will be final.

Amos doesn't stop there. He's done two compass points, the northeast, the southwest. Now he goes to the northwest, and he turns his attention to Tyre in modern-day Lebanon.

- [8 : 49] For three transgressions of Tyre, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment. Tyre was a major Phoenician centre, a port, a trading place.

We know that for much of Israel's history, especially leading up to Amos, it was an enemy. But earlier on it had been an ally. When the Israelites built the temple in Jerusalem, Tyre was the ally who provided the cedar wood to build the temple.

Hiram was its king. He was a friend of David and a friend of Solomon. But what has Tyre done that is so bad and so wrong? They delivered entire communities over to Edom, just like the Philistines engaging in slave trade with the victims of their war and their victories.

But even worse than the Philistines, they did not remember the covenant of kinship at the end of verse 9. Tyre's sin is not just what the Philistines did in being an enemy of the people of God and trading the victors of war for slaves, but they forgot the covenant or the alliance that they had made with the people of God.

They'd gone back on the alliance with David and with his son Solomon. They'd transgressed that. They'd not kept their word. And in God's eyes, that was worthy of judgment as well.

- [10 : 10] So then, what will God do? Same as he does for Aram and Philistia. He will send a fire on the wall of Tyre, fire that shall devour its strongholds.

God's judgment will come upon that nation also for its inhuman treatment of others in war and its breaking of its word of kinship.

The fourth compass point is to the southeast. And here there were three nations dwelling. Edom, Ammon and Moab. And Amos turns his attention to each in turn.

For three transgressions of Edom and for four, I will not revoke the punishment. What was Edom's sin? What was it's sin that had tested God's patience too far that would bring about God's inevitable judgment and wrath?

Edom was a long-term perpetual enemy of the people of God in the Old Testament. But it's not its enmity of the people of God that is its sin.

- [11 : 17] Its problem is its implacable hostility, its lack of compassion and mercy and pity. Edom, we're told, pursued his brother with the sword and cast off all pity.

He maintained his anger perpetually and kept his wrath forever. Edom exercised merciless inhumanity in its relations with its neighbours.

Edom was a warmonger, implacably hostile to anybody else. But even worse, in the midst of this denunciation against the nation of Edom, comes the fact that he pursued his brother with the sword.

For Edom, the nation, was descended from a man called Esau. And those of you who know your Old Testaments will remember in the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis, who Esau was, at least who his brother was.

Esau's twin brother was Jacob. Jacob became the father of the nation of Israel, the people of God. Esau, the twin brother, became the father of the nation of Edom.

[12 : 20] And though they were brothers, in a sense, they were Edom's hostility, never gave up, through Israel's history, and even beyond the time of Amos as well, when the nation was restored later.

Edom not only committed atrocities of war, but it was implacably hostile against its brother nation. So God will send a fire on Teman, and it shall devour the strongholds of Bosra, in verse 12, the major cities of Edom.

The second nation that dwelt in the southeast of Israel was the nation of Ammon. For three transgressions of the Ammonites, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment.

The nation of Ammon was around what is modern-day Jordan. Indeed, the capital of Jordan today, Amman, takes its name from the Ammonites, though the capital in the time of the Old Testament was a place called Rabbah.

And again, Ammon, like the other nations, is guilty of obscene crimes of warfare. They have ripped open pregnant women in Gilead in order to enlarge their territory.

[13 : 32] Gilead was Ammon's northern neighbour. Gilead lay, therefore, between Syria and Ammon. And at some point in history, Ammon has defeated Gilead in war. Not a war of defence, but a war of aggression.

Ammon is wanting to extend its boundaries and its borders. But what they've done to the pregnant women of Gilead goes far beyond anything they would need to do, even to extend its borders, if that were right.

I mean, what nation needs to rip open pregnant women in order to extend its borders? What another? Obscene crime against humanity in warfare. And for that, Ammon incurs the wrath and judgment of God.

Again, this may not be literal, it may be hyperbolic language or metaphoric, but it doesn't really matter because it's an obscene crime against humanity, an obscene crime of brutality in warfare that is totally unnecessary.

God, as he would do for the other nations, sends the fire of his judgment, this time against the wall of Rabbah, the capital city. Fire that shall devour its strongholds, with shouting on the day of battle, with a storm on the day of the whirlwind.

[14 : 43] Then their king shall go into exile, he and his officials together, the nation shall be destroyed by the judgment of God. The third nation to the southeast was Moab.

For three transgressions of Moab and for four, I will not revoke the punishment. Moab was a brother nation to Ammon. And their sin that's gone too far, their sin that's tested God's patience beyond its limit, is that they burned the king of Edom to lime, the bones of the king of Edom.

In the ancient world, it seems that cremation was regarded as something that would prevent any possibility of life after death. Cremation would prevent the resurrection of a person beyond death in the ancient world.

And it seems here that Moab has defeated Edom in battle. It was, after all, one of its neighboring nations at some point in history. But not only did they just defeat it, but in an act of petty humiliation, and in decency and dishonor, they burned the bones of the defeated king to lime, something that was hardly necessary to give it victory.

And yet was, and again, a war crime of gross inhumanity and petty vengeance. So, like the five nations listed before it, God would send a fire on Moab, and it shall devour the strongholds of Kerioth, its major town.

[16 : 09] And Moab shall die amid uproar, amid shouting and the sound of the trumpet. I'll cut off the ruler from its midst, and we'll kill all its officials with him, says the Lord.

For these six nations, Amos's words came to fairly quick fulfillment. For the major world power of the 8th century was Assyria further to the north, and Assyria came down and conquered these nations.

Many of them never again became nations in their own right, though some did. There are two lessons at least to learn from these words thus far against these nations.

To remind us that God is a God of all nations. The Christian God, the God of the Bible, is not just the God of Christian people, not just the God of Western civilization, but the God of every nation, whether or not it is a nation that honors the name of God, or not.

And God is involved in international affairs. This is his world, and he cares for it. And he will judge it. Sometimes when we look at our world and see its horrors and atrocities, which are, after all, little worse than, or little better than, what we find in these verses in Amos 1 and 2, we wonder, what is God doing in this world?

[17 : 23] Why doesn't he act? I think in some, in part, the answer to that is that God is biding his time and being patient with nations.

But as with these nations of the Old Testament, so today, surely, that the patience of God will one day expire, and God will bring his judgment against such horrific crimes.

But the second lesson, at least, to learn from these words thus far, is that God judges even pagans. It's one thing to think that people who are Christians who know God and are therefore accountable before God may be somehow held accountable by him and receive his judgment or should be accountable for what they know of God.

But these are nations that don't know the God of the Bible. They don't know the words of the Bible. They're not descended from Abraham. They haven't received his covenant. They haven't been saved by him. The equivalent today is these are nations who aren't Christian.

Who've never heard of Jesus Christ or the things of God. And for many of us we would want to say, well, how can they be judged by God if they don't know of the things of God? And yet God, you see, will judge all.

[18 : 35] He may not judge them according to the knowledge of Jesus Christ, but ignorance is no excuse. These nations are judged for basic reasons of morality, for crimes against humanity in warfare.

and they are held accountable by a sovereign God. You see, there is a basic moral standard that God expects of all people, whether Christian or not. And this passage reminds us that God will judge all.

Amos doesn't stop here. Indeed, his next words are perhaps even more surprising than the first. He continues his series of judgments against nations in chapter 2, verse 4.

For three transgressions of Judah and for four, I will not revoke the punishment. Judah, like Israel, were the people of God.

Judah and Israel together had been one nation with David as its king, with Solomon as its king after David's death. The story of the first half of the Old Testament is the story of the people of God which comprises both Judah and Israel together.

[19 : 43] It's only when Solomon died 150 years before Amos that the one nation split into two. The northern nation, later called Israel, seceded from the successor of King Solomon, his son.

So the southern nation became what was called Judah and the northern called Israel. But they are the people of God who are being mentioned here. By the time of Amos, even though they were really brother nations, they were at enmity with each other.

Indeed, a few years before Amos, in living memory, the king of Israel in the north had gone and defeated and fought against Jerusalem and indeed taken some of the treasury out of the temple, it seems. So Israel and Judah were enemies, even though originally they'd been the one people of God.

And so when the Israelites hear these words of Amos having gone through six long-term enemies and now tackling Judah, they probably think, yes, Judah may have been with us in the past but they are now our enemies and God is obviously on our side.

Yes, we agree, we applaud, we cheer the words of Amos as he now tackles yet the closest enemy of his day. What has Judah done wrong that warrants God's judgment?

[20 : 57] Verse 4, the second half says, they've rejected the law of the Lord and have not kept his statutes. They've been led astray by the same lies after which their ancestors walked. Hardly a crime against humanity.

Hardly the serious, gross, brutal, indecent crimes of warfare that those other six nations are guilty of. Is it really fair that Judah should be judged on such trivial or what we might call polite sins of disobeying the law of the Lord, all those laws in the early part of the Old Testament?

Is it really fair that God should send a fire on Judah to devour its strongholds in Jerusalem? The same sort of punishment that he sends on the six nations that are listed before this?

They've hardly done the same sort of serious sins, have they? Maybe God's being a little bit unjust here. But you see, in God's scale of values, to break his law is just as bad as the basic, indecent crimes against humanity that those six other nations committed.

No doubt these were hard words for Amos to say. Hard, because he himself came from Judah. And he'd come from Judah called of God to the northern kingdom of Israel.

[22 : 06] It's as though Amos had been born in Hobart and raised in Tasmania. And then God had called him across to Melbourne. And in Melbourne he'd stood up and said, God sends his judgment on the nations around about, Indonesia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, etc.

And then he turns his attention to Tasmania. Now we as Victorians might still agree and applaud. But you see, imagine Amos as a Tasmanian saying words against his home place.

Well that's what's going on here. Amos is from Judah and the seventh in the series is his own place, Judah. In the ancient Israelite world, the number seven often meant that something was complete.

If the Israelites had been hearing Amos' words and counting them up, they would have realised that they'd now got to the seventh. And most of them I expect would have thought this is the climax of the series. Many, many times in the Old Testament are there groups of seven things to denote completion of something, that something is now perfect and complete.

But you see, Amos has something more to say. He doesn't stop with Judah. It's not, you see, a complete series of seven, but rather like a musical octave of eight.

[23 : 18] And if you sing up the scale in music and you get to the seventh note, it begs the eighth. You listen to a scale or play it on a piano, go up the scale, da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da.

And you're all waiting for the last one, aren't you? And that's what's happening in Amos' words. He goes up the scale, he gets to the seventh, but the seventh must go on to the eighth. It's incomplete without the last.

And so he turns his attention in verse six for three transgressions of Israel and for four. I will not revoke the punishment. Step by step, Amos has been circling around the nation of Israel, denouncing its traditional enemies, denouncing then Tyre, which had once had an alliance with it, denouncing Edom and Moab and Ammon for whom there was some kinship relation, going way back into the book of Genesis, then denouncing Judah, its fellow nation as the people of God.

But it's not just Turk tackling its neighbours. In the end, it's driving to the centre, to Israel. You see, Amos has been softening them up. He's been winning their applause, their attention, their ear.

And as they heard him denounce their neighbours, they'd be saying, yes, give us more. Yes, give us more. And then, of course, he turns the screw and punches them in the stomach because he's caught them unawares.

[24 : 43] For three transgressions of you and for four, I will not revoke the punishment. They've been ready and eager to hear his word, but his word has got a very sharp sting in the tail.

What's Israel done that warrants the punishment of God? Second half of verse 6 is they sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals. That is, they're trading their own people into slavery for a mere pittance.

The pair of sandals didn't cost all that much. They trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and push the afflicted out of the way. This is addressing an affluent nation, remember, a nation that is prosperous, has had its glory years in a king who's not long died.

Yes, but that glory, that prosperity, that affluence has come at the expense of the poor. They've been oppressed by the rich and the powerful. But even worse, the end of verse 7 says that father and son go into the same girl so that my holy name is profane.

Clearly an act of sexual immorality. But even worse than that, it seems that it's not just general sexual immorality, but it's actually in the name of worship of God. For verse 8 says they lay themselves down beside every altar.

[25 : 59] The idea, it seems, is that father says to his son, hey, come on son, let's go up to the temple for a bit of worship. Okay, dad, let's go. He knows what's going to happen at the temple because the Canaanite worship that's going on there that seems the Israelites have indulged in is to have a prostitute.

Male or female, it didn't seem to matter in those days. But the idea was for the Canaanite gods, you go up to the temple, you come to your church and you find a prostitute and you lie down and have sexual relations with her and the idea was by having sexual relations with a prostitute in the temple or the shrine, then it would induce the gods to provide you with children or crops or rain or animals.

It was a fertility religion and it was grossly sexually immoral and that seems to be what's going on. But even worse than that, when they actually lie down with the prostitute, father and son with the same woman in the temple, they lie down on garments taken in pledge.

These are rich people and the money they've got to engage in what they're doing has come at the expense of the poor because they've taken a loan or the poor person's taken a loan and as a pledge for that loan, the poor person has given their garment to the one who's offered the money.

The Old Testament forbade keeping that garment overnight. Why? Because the poor must be able to have the garment that was basically the outer coat which was also the blanket and the bed.

[27 : 15] It seems here you see that they're exploiting the poor for their own gross indulgence and that's clear at the end of verse 8. In the house of their god they drink wine bought with fines they imposed. Illegally it seems from the gains of corruption they're getting themselves drunk and oversexed.

that's what Israel's done wrong. Crimes of social injustice all infringements of the Old Testament law these sins are just as bad in God's eyes as all those sins of warfare for the first six nations.

But even worse it's an act of great ingratitude to God. For verses 9 to 11 remind Israel what God has done for them. This is not just any old God they've offended this is the God who's cleared out the Amorites from before them in verse 9 that is prepared the land for them to live in.

The Amorites or the Canaanites were the people who lived in the land before Joshua took them in early in the Old Testament. And then verse 10 says this is God who saved them from Egypt when Moses led them out of Egypt through the Red Sea.

This is the God who provided for them for 40 years in the wilderness with bread and quail and water and so on for 40 years in a desert. This is the God who's raised up for them some prophets who would speak God's word and yet as verse 12 says they've silenced the prophets.

[28 : 33] This is the God who's raised up specially holy people called Nazarites people like Samson and Samuel who are specially set apart by God to speak his word and to act for him and yet the people have continually rejected such people from God.

You see their sins are not just social injustice but an act of great rejection and ingratitude to a gracious God and it has been happening all through their history. Israel has taken God one step too far and so God's judgment described in verses 13 to 16 is that the people will be frozen with fear on the day when God's judgment comes.

They'll be stuck in the mud so to speak unable to flee even their strong people will be rendered helpless when God's judgment comes upon them. There'll be no escape for any of them.

This is indeed a chilling message for the people of God. The shock for Israel was that they considered themselves to be God's people.

They thought themselves therefore safe from God's judgment. They thought well God has chosen us he's made us his special people his special nation we are safe.

[29 : 49] God's on our side. It's okay for God to judge these other nations we approve of that because in judging our enemies it seems that God is saying yes to us. And very often as Christians we think similarly.

God's on our side God's with us God's pledged to be with me forevermore therefore I'll never face that wrath or judgment of God no matter what I do. We like to think that God's mercy endures forever that is that his patience will never ever run out.

He is an endlessly patient God with me a sinner who keeps failing. But you see if patience is inexhaustible it's not patience is it? If somebody is always patient in the face of abuse then they're not actually patient.

They're either a coward because they're not prepared to stand up for what is right or they're actually indifferent to what is going on. But God is neither a coward nor indifferent.

He is patient and patience is not inexhaustible. God's patience will one day run out and that is Amos' chilling message for Israel the people of God.

[31 : 02] We cannot presume upon the endless patience of God one day that will come to an end. God's voice is a smooth comforting mellow peaceful type of voice.

If we were to pick up a tape in a shop that said this is the voice of God if you're like me you'd probably think it's like Richard Burton those mellow tones that are sort of so soothing to listen to that make us feel nice and peaceful and calm.

In England year after year when they take a poll of favourite hymns the one that tops the poll is Dear Lord and Father of Mankind no doubt because it talks about the still small voice of calm that breathes coolness and balm.

That's what we like to think of as the voice of God something that comforts us and helps us to rest and relax in the midst of a busy world.

But Amos says that's not God's voice all the time. Chapter 1 verse 2 in introducing all these words of prophecy says that the lion has roared.

[32 : 14] God has roared. His voice is not still and calm and smooth to send us to sleep but rather it's the roar of an angry lion. The roar of a lion that is about to judge and to pounce on his victims because their sins have taken him once too far.

His patience has run out. God is about to judge not only his enemies but also his own people for their sins. The lion has roared.

Let us heed the war. The roar lest we sin once too often. Bennet justice sin once to berategy wid risk and for the women die who were going last week or Iain Screw Thank you.