

The time is ripe

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[0 : 00] Thank you.

Most importantly is to keep the Bible open in front of you. Let's pray. Father, I really pray that at the end of this sermon, our hearts would say how great Christ is and what a great blessing it is that we can know you.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Last week, you might remember, I started by telling you about the Challenger disaster. If you were not here, that was the NASA Space Shuttle that unfortunately just broke up 73 seconds into its flight, due to the failure of those rocket booster O-rings.

And I said last week that an investigation discovered that that disaster could be blamed, at least in part, on a culture of complacency amongst NASA's senior management.

They had known those O-rings could fail at low temperatures, but they failed to act upon that knowledge. And so disaster strikes.

[1 : 30] Perhaps what was most tragic about the whole thing was that it could have been avoided. Even on the morning of that launch, they could still have called it off. After all, just the night before, a number of engineers had strongly recommended against launching.

But the moment that space shuttle began to lift off, that was that. There was no turning back. There was no way to avoid the coming catastrophe.

It was the point of no return. Israel now stands at the point of no return. For the last few chapters, Amos has been preaching.

God has been using him to appeal to the people to return to him. He's been warning them about the coming judgment, painting pictures of imminent devastation, exposing their games of empty religion.

But now, the sermons are over. The dialogue between Amos and Israel is over. With perhaps the exception of Amaziah, whom we'll meet later, Amos has no more communication with Israel.

[2 : 49] Instead, it will be visions we get here. In chapters 7-9, we have five visions of judgment. All this while the Lord has been holding off his hand of justice for as long as he can.

He has been giving Israel plenty of advance notice of what's about to come. But now Israel stands at the point of no return.

Remember their long list of wrongdoings. The cows of Bashan, who oppress the poor and crush the needy. Turning justice into bitterness and casting righteousness to the ground.

Bringing sacrifices and offerings even as they exalted other gods. And so God finally has to say, Enough.

So that sounds like Amos 7-8 will be especially grim reading. If it's the point of no return, you'll expect it to be bad, brutal, bleak, severe.

[3 : 58] And you might sigh and prepare yourself for a grim sermon. That was what I was expecting. But in exploring Amos 7-8 this week, I've come to realize that this passage is actually none of those things.

Instead, it is actually an astonishing glimpse into the very heart of God himself. Now as Francis Bacon apparently once said, In order for the light to shine so brightly, The darkness must be present.

And so yes, darkness is clearly present in this passage. We're standing at the point of no return after all. But I think this present darkness will make God's heart shine even more brightly to us.

You see, this morning, we're going to look at the first four of those five visions. The last vision will be in two Sundays time after our church camp.

And while these visions mean that there is no more dialogue between Amos and Israel, what we'll discover is that there's plenty of dialogue between God and Amos.

[5 : 13] Notice how Amos begins each vision report. This is what the sovereign Lord showed me, He says in 7 verse 1, 7 verse 4, 7 verse 7, and 8 verse 1.

Amos is going to wrestle with God. You see, he's no dispassionate messenger. He's no indifferent preacher. Rather, he's a distressed shepherd.

He's going to bear his heart before God, imploring and petitioning and crying out to him. And in all this, he's actually reflecting God's own heart.

For we won't just find Amos wrestling with God, but God wrestling with himself, if I can put it that way. In some ways, I think Amos 7 to 8 is a bit like an unpacking of Exodus chapter 34, verse 6 and 7.

What's Exodus chapter 34, verse 6 and 7? Well, it's where God states what kind of God he is. He's the Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness.

[6 : 30] And yet, at the same time, he must be the God who does not leave the guilty unpunished. The question is, how can he be both at the same time, especially towards his people?

His heart is filled with compassion and grace, and yet he must be just. He cannot allow guilty people to get away with it. And I wonder if that's why in chapters 7 to 9, sorry, we find God described as the sovereign Lord 11 times, which is once every 4 to 5 verses.

But also Israel often described by God as my people. So we find both a stress on his absolute nature, that he has to be true to his holy self, and yet also a sense of God's tenderness towards his wayward children.

And so we wrestle. How does God's compassion and patience and justice all fit together? Well, let's explore the deep mysteries of God's heart from this passage this morning.

So firstly, see God's heart as compassionate and gracious. That's verses 1 to 6. Amos tells us about the first pair of visions.

[8 : 05] In verses 1 and 2, we have a locust plague. They come at the worst possible time, just after April, after the king has taken his own share, but before all the crops can be harvested.

The locusts would have gobbled up all the maturing crops from the earlier batch, as well as the later crops that were just beginning to sprout. For a society that was so dependent on agriculture, this was a disaster.

And by the way, any half-observant Israelite would know that locust coming is not a good omen. After all, it's one of the plagues unleashed on Egypt.

It's on the list of covenant curses found in Deuteronomy. It's a sign of God's judgment. And so the problem isn't climate change.

It's unchanged hearts. And so Amos cries out, verse 2, Sovereign Lord, forgive! How can Jacob survive?

- [9 : 10] He's so small. He appeals to God's mercy. He can't appeal to any form of repentance, since Israel hasn't showed any.
- He can't appeal to any form of injustice, since God is just being fair. He just cries out, Please, Lord, please, show your mercy.
- Have compassion. And God does. Verse 3, So the Lord relented. This will not happen, the Lord said.
- It shall not be. God says, Alright. He listens. He does not follow through. He gives pure grace.
- The next vision is of a fire. And this is no ordinary fire. Not when, verse 4, It dried up the great deep and devoured the land.
- [10 : 14] Some commentators suggest that the great deep is the ocean. Imagine that, a fire that dries up the ocean. But I wonder if it goes even further than that and is referring to the great deep of Genesis 1, verse 2.
- If so, then this fire is actually a picture of the undoing of creation. It points back to the chaos before God brought order into this world. Whatever it is, it's a terrifying picture.
- What fire can cause such destruction? And so Amos once more has to cry out, Stop! Please!
- Amos doesn't even bother to ask for forgiveness here. He knows he has absolutely zero grounds to do so. All he asks for is a stay of execution.
- And God, once again, doesn't drag it out. He doesn't say, Why should I? He simply grants the request.
- [11 : 21] He could have crossed the point of no return, and yet he prolongs his patience even further. So what's going on here?
- Well, I want you just to notice three things from this exchange. First of all, notice that in all these visions, Jacob, that is Israel, is so small.
- Remember how Israel have perceived themselves all this while? As big and impressive. They've got the big and impressive military, the big and impressive mansions, the big and impressive monarch, King Jeroboam, who is ruled for over quite a few decades.
- But in God's perspective, they are so small. It's a bit like Wisma Saberkas. I think it's fair to say that from the vantage point of Rock Road, Wisma Saberkas is not a small building.
- Indeed, sometimes when I'm flying in to Kuching from KL, I'll look for Saberkas if I have a window seat on the plane. But imagine looking for Saberkas from space.
- [12 : 40] From that perspective, Saberkas is so tiny, isn't it? And Amos recognizes that. In God's perspective, Israel is so tiny.
- They're so weak. They're so frail. They're so pitiful. What have they to offer God except their transgressions and indiscretions?
- No different from us today, really. What can we give? What can we bring except our rags of unrighteousness? And Israel's pitiful state is what leads Amos to cry out.
- And that's the second thing I want you to notice. Second of all, notice Amos' heartfelt plea. He doesn't say a long and eloquent prayer. It's not filled with big theological words.
- But it is urgent. It is desperate. It is heartfelt. And remember, Amos is from the southern kingdom. But he's speaking to people in the northern kingdom.
- [13 : 53] He's not local. Indeed, at that time, north and south were not good friends. And so he could easily have been rejoicing in this judgment.
- But he doesn't. He gets on his knees. He's the distressed shepherd. He's the earnest intercessor.

He's God's prophet. And he knows God's heart. He believes God is gracious and compassionate. And so he cries out to God on that basis.

Sovereign Lord, forgive. And the third thing I want you to notice is probably the most obvious detail from these visions.

God relents. God relents. God relents. He withdraws his judgment here. And actually, that's what he wants to do.

[14 : 53] Why has God shown these terrifying visions to Amos? Why has God revealed Israel's pitiful state to his prophet? Because he wants his prophet to cry out to him and plead for them.

It's the same reason he sent Jonah to the Ninevites. It's the same reason he gave Moses a hearing after the building of the golden calf. It's the same reason he persisted with Israel after their grumblings in the wilderness.

His heart is gracious and compassionate. He does not want his people to wither and die, cut off from the ultimate source of love and justice and righteousness himself, and so he skillfully leads Amos to pray.

He wants Amos to make the right prayer request. As Martin Luther once said, prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance but laying hold of his willingness.

Amos is taking hold of God's willing heart. heart. So that gives us real motivation to pray.

[16 : 13] How can we be motivated to pray? When we know God's heart. If we see God as uncaring or heartless or harsh, we won't go to him no matter how many times your pastor encourages you to pray.

after all, you won't approach your boss if you think he's hard-hearted and narrow-minded. You won't approach your teacher if you think she's cold and ignorant.

But you will approach them if you think that he's kind and wise and empathetic. And so when we see God's heart filled with grace and compassion, when we see that exemplified in Jesus, who honored Mary when others despised her as she poured all that perfume on Jesus, who cast out the demon legion from that tortured man who was isolated from society, who told Peter, after he had denied him three times, feed my sheep.

When we see all that, we will pray. When you know God listens, and he doesn't drag his feet, you will pray, even when they are not well thought out, or your prayers are full of um and errs.

And when we know our own hearts, we will pray. When we know we are small and frail and weak, when we know we are sinful and dirty and in the dark, we will plead with God.

[18 : 01] And when we know that others are in that place as well, as Amos did, we will pray for others. We will be like Paul in Romans 9 and 10, praying with tears for his fellow countrymen, and even daring to say that he will give up his own spiritual privileges if that means that they will be restored to God.

So the first thing that Amos helps us see more vividly is God's heart as gracious and compassionate. But that doesn't mean that God is a wimp who can be easily manipulated.

It doesn't mean that he's forgotten Exodus chapter 34 verse 7 and that he cannot leave the guilty unpunished. The rest of Amos 7 to 8 makes that clear.

So don't just see God's heart as gracious and compassionate, but secondly, hear God's word as true and authoritative. And here's the truth about us.

In vision number 3, in verses 7 to 9, God shows Amos a plumb line and a wall. Now, I don't know about you, but I had no idea what a plumb line is.

[19 : 25] So here's a picture. Basically, it's a tool to measure whether something is perfectly vertical or upright. And in this vision, the war is Israel and the plumb line is God's covenant standards.

So God is measuring Israel against his standards. And what does Amos find out? What we already know. Israel is not upright.

They have not lived by God's word. And a war that is not upright is actually dangerous. It needs repairing or rebuilding.

when we become crooked, something needs to be done. And so God takes action.

Verse 9, the high places of Isaac will be destroyed and the sanctuaries of Israel will be ruined. With my sword I will rise against the house of Jeroboam.

[20 : 36] This time, the point of no return is crossed. the religious centers with their altars to other gods, the royal powers with their pride in their military might, all will be destroyed.

And this time, Amos has no answer. There is no prayer. What lies at the very heart of this calamity?

Well, the answer is found in the next section. Before we get to Vision 4, we hear of an encounter between this guy, Amaziah, and our prophet, Amos.

As the priest of battle, Amaziah is a bit like the dean of St. Thomas' cathedral, in charge of the most prominent religious place in the nation. He's the king's pastor.

But although he has the office, he is not God's spokesman. Instead, he misrepresents God's spokesman. Verse 10, Then Amaziah, the priest of battle, sent a message to Jeroboam, king of Israel.

[21 : 51] Amos is raising a conspiracy against you in the very heart of Israel. The land cannot bear all his words. For this is what Amos is saying.

Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will surely go into exile away from their native land. Sedition, Amaziah says to the king.

This is what Amos is up to. Treason. So you better use the national security act against him. But of course, Amaziah is twisting Amos' words.

He makes Jeroboam's doom sound like the result of an assassination plot, not the result of God's judgment against him. Amos comes off like he's looking for personal gain rather than just delivering God's message.

And so Amaziah is really twisting God's word. The land cannot bear all of Amos' words, he says. But it's actually him who cannot bear the word of God.

[23 : 05] And not only does he twist God's word, he actually silences it. Nowhere does Amaziah talk about Israel's injustice.

Nowhere does Amaziah talk about their wrong worship. Nowhere does Amaziah back up what Amos says. He silences God's word.

That becomes perfectly clear in verses 12 and 13 that Amaziah said to Amos, get out you seer, go back to the land of Judah, earn your bread there and do your prophesying there.

Don't prophesy anymore at battle because this is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom. Amos go earn some money there.

Amaziah doesn't recognize Amos as God's spokesman. He thinks Amos is just trying to earn some extra cash. After all, that's what a lot of people around them were doing.

[24 : 15] They became professional prophets and went around saying nice things for people to hear so that their love gifts would be bigger. And to give force to his words, Amaziah falls back on the authority of the human king.

This is the king's sanctuary, he says. This is the cathedral. So don't think you have any standing to preach here. Verse 16, do not prophesy against Israel and stop preaching against the descendants of Isaac.

He is plainly silencing God's word. Now put yourself in Amos' shoes and remember you've just been told to shut up and leave by someone who is powerful, influential, someone who could make life a little bit difficult for you.

That would be a little scary. But Amos knows whose authority he's standing on. Amaziah might speak on behalf of the king, but Amos speaks on behalf of God.

Verse 14, Amos answered Amaziah, I was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I was a shepherd and I also took care of sycamore fig trees.

[25 : 43] But the Lord took me from tending the flock and said to me, go, prophesy to my people Israel. I'm not in it for the money, Amos says.

I was never a professional prophet, but I came because God asked me to speak his word to you guys. And God's word is true and authoritative, even above kings.

God's word is and because you twisted and silenced God's word Amaziah, you have condemned yourself. Verse 17, therefore this is what the Lord says, your wife will become a prostitute in the city and your sons and daughters will fall by the sword, your land will be measured and divided up and you yourself will die in a pagan country and Israel will surely go into exile away from their native land.

You see, Amaziah is really representative of the nation as a whole. It's not just that he practiced injustice and told lies, things that we know Israel is guilty of from the previous weeks, but he twisted God's word.

He silenced God's word. Well, that's a warning to us, isn't it, not to do the same? We might not always enjoy what God says, but his word remains true and authoritative.

[27 : 23] We need to hear God's word. And it's also a reminder to us not to give space to false teachers and false teaching. As Paul puts it in Romans 16, verse 17, I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned.

Keep away from them. And notice that the dividing line there is doctrine. The divisive people are not those taking a stand for sound doctrine, like Amos, but those who actually went around blocking sound teaching, like Amaziah.

Stay away from them. You see, this is not just a conflict between Amaziah and God's messenger.

It's actually a conflict between Amaziah and God's word. And that means conflict between him and God himself. It is Amaziah and Israel who are guilty of treason, not Amos.

And God cannot leave the guilty unpunished. He cannot be compassionate yet unjust. And so we get the fourth vision.

[28 : 48] God shows Amos a basket of ripe fruit. And he says, chapter 8, verse 2, the time is ripe for my people Israel. I will spare them no longer.

We have reached the point of no return. And that's a good thing. Imagine if the 1MDB corruption scandal went on for another 10 years unchecked.

How would you feel? You would be crying out, enough! How long more, Lord? And that's exactly what God is doing here.

Enough. Again, we have a list in verses 4 to 6 that detail how they have gone wrong. I hardly need to repeat it to you again.

Although, just notice verse 5, the true heart behind their pious religion. When will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended, that we may market wheat?

[29 : 55] They may be at church all the time, but they actually hate worshipping God. When will the sermon be over? When is all this God stuff and God talk going to end?

So the time is ripe. For the rest of chapter 8, we have pictures of judgment. In verse 3, we have wailing, death, and silence.

In verse 8, there is mourning and trembling in the land. In verse 9, there is darkness at noon. In verse 10, the time is like mourning for an only son, just like Passover.

And perhaps most strikingly, in verses 11 to 13, there is a famine of the word. If you silence God's word, you will get what you want, God declares.

You will go searching for it, but you cannot find it. One commentary puts it very well, the neglected word becomes the absent word.

[31 : 07] And that's perhaps the most scary part. For God to withdraw his word is to withdraw himself. But now we are back to the question we had at the very beginning.

God's heart is gracious and compassionate, compassionate, and yet he is also just. This is clear from what we've seen so far. He is love, and yet his love demands that he hates evil.

As the scholar Charles Cranfield puts it, a man who sees apartheid and is not angry at such wickedness cannot be a good man, because his lack of wrath means he doesn't really care or love his fellow human being.

Unless God hates sin, he cannot be a God of love. His wrath proves his love rather than disproves it. But the question remains, how can he be both gracious and compassionate, and still just, especially towards his people?

And that brings us to our final point today. Trust the word made flesh, where compassion and justice meet.

[32 : 28] The answer is found in the gospel. And today's passage is filled with pointers to the gospel. I know you might not see it immediately, but let me show you.

Like Israel, we're small, we're weak, we're pitiful, and we need to acknowledge that. We need to have the right perspective, God's perspective.

For we too are guilty of religious routines empty of God, of not loving our neighbour as we should, of ignoring and even silencing God's word.

And we desperately need someone from God to speak to us, to end the famine of God's revelation. We desperately need someone from God to plead for us, to ask him to free us from his judgment.

question. For after the time of Malachi, there were no more spokesmen from God. For 400 years, there was no prophet. There was only exile from the land.

[33 : 39] And even when Israel returned from the land, it wasn't the same because they were under Roman rule. Until one day, someone dressed just like the prophet Elijah appears on the scene.

And he, John the Baptist, says, prepare the way for the Lord. And then Jesus appears. Like Amos, he's not afraid to speak against Israel's sin.

Woe to you, Pharisees, because you give God a tan of your mint, rue, and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God.

You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone. Woe to you, Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and respectful greetings in the market places.

Does that not sound like Amos? And Jesus grieves over the unrepentance of the nation. As Jesus approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, if you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace, but now it is hidden from your eyes.

[34 : 59] The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls.

They will not leave one stone on another because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you. Does that not sound like Amos?

And then we see Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane, Amos. Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me, yet not my will but yours be done.

An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.

Does that not sound like Amos? But now we get a difference. For Jesus is the better Amos. His pleading is greater than Amos.

[36 : 04] Amos could only cry to God, Sovereign Lord, forgive and hope for the best. But Jesus can do better. From his pleading at Gethsemane, he now goes to Calvary.

And at Calvary, Luke 23 verse 44 tells us this, it was now about noon and darkness came over the whole land. just as Amos said will happen on the day of judgment.

Except Jesus is bearing that day for us. And as Jesus hung on the cross, he didn't just say, Sovereign Lord, forgive.

He said, Father, forgive them. And then he cried out with a loud voice, Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit.

And then there was death, then silence, and then mourning for an only son. If Amos is a distressed shepherd, Jesus is the distressed shepherd who endured the greatest distress of all.

[37 : 19] Because from the very beginning of time, he has already chosen to go to the cross for you and me. God the son reveals himself as the word made flesh, the truthful and authoritative one.

And yet he dies on the cross to bear all the wrong words we ever said and all the wrong actions we have ever done. That was the point of no return.

It is done. Love has won. And so the words of Hebrews chapter 2 verse 17 ring true. For this reason, he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.

Jesus is the merciful and faithful high priest. Or if you want to put it another way, he is the high priest who is gracious and compassionate, abounding in love and faithfulness.

Unlike Amaziah, he pleads for you and me. He stands in the gap. And he did all this without once compromising his justice.

[38 : 45] Evil must be dealt with. Our sin must be atoned for. But God has done it for his own son chose not to be spared.

And so you can believe he is graciously for you. Nothing can separate you from the love of God. Now in Amos chapter 8 verse 14, those who swear by the sin of Samaria will fall, never to rise again.

And if we keep swearing by our sin, not seeking Jesus, that remains our fate. But those who trust in Jesus will rise again.

Is that you? That's the Christian's future. Because every day, in the meantime, those who trust in Jesus will have to die to their old selves and live like their new resurrected selves.

Every day, those who trust in Jesus commit themselves anew to hearing God's word and praying for others. But every day, they have this joy.

[40 : 03] Every day, they know the Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, and abounding in love and faithfulness.

Thank you.