

# Not a Tame Lion: *If God is Against Us*

Amos 3:1-15

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on 2/10/2013

## Introduction

- ❖ After last Sunday's Superbowl, a player on the Baltimore Ravens was asked how it felt to be a Superbowl Champion. He replied, "***It's simple: when God is for you, who can be against you?***" He was quoting Romans 8:31. Apparently this player believed the Apostle had the game of football in mind, the Superbowl in particular, when he penned that sweet, assuring verse.
  - ▶ Thanking God for giving you the strength to play the game hard and for the integrity to play the game well – that is commendable. But misapplying a Bible verse to validate your win is just plain silly. You're deluding yourself to think that God being "for you" somehow ensures victory or success in all your pursuits.
  
- ❖ Psalm 118:6, "***The Lord is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?***" That is another sweet and assuring verse written for God's people. But such verses can be misapplied or outright twisted to reinforce a false sense of entitlement or to excuse a lack of godly fear. Consider these statements:
  - ▶ "It's okay if I still mess up, if I still fall into sin on occasion. God still loves me. He won't punish me. He's forgiven me."
  - ▶ "The Lord knows I'm not perfect. But that's okay since he doesn't expect me to be perfect – just to be forgiven."
  - ▶ "If God is for us, then there is no reason to fear him. There is no reason to fear his judgments."
  
- ❖ Friends, each of those statements contain sweet, assuring gospel truth. **But each of those statements can also be misapplied by Christians to justify a cavalier, dismissive attitude towards our indwelling sin.**
  - ▶ A more balanced and careful perspective would be put like this: **God can be totally for you and yet still act against you for all your sins.** Knowing he's on your side, should take from you the fear of man but put in you the fear of God.
  
- ❖ This reality was missing from the theology of those to whom Amos was sent. Last week we began a new series in the book of Amos, and there we explained that a shepherd of Judah sent to Israel with a word from the Lord. At this point, the twelve tribes of Israel were divided – ten formed the northern kingdom Israel, two formed the southern kingdom Judah.
  - ▶ For the kingdom of Israel, this was a time of economic boom and military expansion, which led to an inflated view of their own status as God's chosen people. They were convinced that their prosperity was a sure indicator of God's favor. They believed their status as his people exempted them from God's judgment and entitled them to live by a different standard than all other nations.
    - ***Will God always and absolutely bless his chosen people, regardless of their behavior?*** That was, and still is, the big question.
  
- ❖ It's a question to which I believe Amos addresses in chapter 3 with a clear answer. God can be totally for you and yet still act against you. That is not a contradiction. That is a theological truth that all God's people need to know and rightly fear.

- ❖ So I want to draw out three related points from Amos 3. They go like this: **1) If the Lord chooses you, it comes with responsibility (3:1-2).** **2) If the Lord punishes you, it is not without reason (3:3-6; 9-15).** **3) If the Lord roars at you, there is a right response (3:7-8).**

### **The Lord's choosing comes with responsibility**

- ❖ Let's consider the first point: **1) If the Lord chooses you, it comes with responsibility.** We are not chosen by God for privilege. Being elect is no excuse for exemption or entitlement.
  - ▶ Jesus himself taught us, *“Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom much was entrusted much, of him much more will be demanded.”* (Lk. 12:48)
    - **Being chosen is not a shelter from accountability, it is an endowment of responsibility of which we shall one day give an account.**
  
- ❖ We're familiar with this principle. We choose political leaders from among us and give them great influence over our lives. We choose pastors and elders and teachers and place them above us as a congregation. And it's by virtue of being set apart that we assign them a greater responsibility and moral accountability than the average citizen or church member.
  - ▶ If a politician or pastor were to do something unethical and break trust with his constituents or congregation, who among us would say, *“That's okay. He's special. He's chosen. He has a lot of responsibility, so let's give him a pass on this one.”*
    - That's ridiculous. It's because of the fact they are chosen that we hold them to a higher standard. It's because of the fact they have so much responsibility that we cannot exempt them from judgement.
  
- ❖ This is Amos' point in vv1-2. Here he proclaims a word of the Lord against the people of Israel – against all twelve tribes, *“the whole family”* that he rescued out of Egypt. Notice what the Lord says in v2, *“You only have I known of all the families of the earth”*.
  - ▶ That word for *“known”* is derived from the Hebrew word *yada*, which in the Bible implies more than just an intellectual knowledge of someone. It carries more of an intimate, relational tone involving not just your mind but also your heart and will. In fact, in Hebrew it was used as a euphemism for sexual intercourse (Gen. 4:1). So clearly *yada* is intended to convey something deeper than just mental assent.
  
- ❖ It's related to the Greek word *ginosko*, which means "to know". It's found in Romans 8:29-30, where we're told, *“for those whom [God] foreknew (proginosko), he also predestined.”* That means God *“foreknew”* his people even before he created us. He was relationally committed to us before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4).
  - ▶ **By the free exercise of his will (his choice), God set his love upon us and predestined us unto salvation.** This is why the NIV translates v2 as *“You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth”*. Israel was a chosen people.

- ❖ That phrase “*of all the families of the earth*” is a reference to Genesis 12 – to a particular instance of God choosing a particular man and his family. Genesis 12:3 speaks of God setting apart Abraham and his family and blessing them so that “*in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*”.
  - ▶ **In other words, the Israelites were chosen for mission. They were the one family on earth set apart and blessed to be a blessing to all families.** This is what Amos’ listeners had forgotten. They consistently failed their mission to bless the nations. They took God's blessing for granted and turned it inward to serve themselves.
    - But instead of fearing divine consequences for their blatant disobedience, they took the sweet, assuring truth that “*God is for Israel. God is on Israel’s side.*” and assumed that would exempt them from judgment and guarantee God's continual protection.
  
- ❖ Amos is not denying Israel's special status as a chosen people. He is just trying to help them see that this status does *not* carry with it a special exemption but a special responsibility.
  - ▶ When God chose him, he told Abraham that I now expect you to “*walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.*” (Gen. 17:1-2) That same expectation of walking blamelessly before God is expected of Abraham's chosen descendants.
    - In Deuteronomy 28, the Lord explains that the covenant agreement he is making with Israel stipulates obedience (covenant faithfulness) in order for God's blessings to be enjoyed, and it also warns of curses if the people forget all that God has done for them and break covenant by their disobedience.
  
- ❖ This is why the “*therefore*” is there in Amos 3:2. Read it again, “*You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.*”
  - ▶ **So God's justification for punishing Israel hinges directly on their status as a chosen people.** Because they alone were elect. They alone were set apart. Therefore, they will be punished. **With a unique election comes a unique responsibility.**
  
- ❖ That means for the people of God today – those who have been adopted into the family of God through the Lord Jesus Christ and our faith in him – we are a chosen, elect people. We have every right to take comfort and sweet assurance from verses like Romans 8:31. “*If God is for us, who can be against us?*”
  - ▶ But let us not forget that we have no promise in Scripture that God will always and absolutely bless his chosen people regardless of our behavior. God can be totally for you and yet still act against you if you persist in your sin.

### **The Lord’s punishment is not without reason**

- ❖ This lead to our second point: **2) If the Lord punishes you, it is not without reason.** This is an important point because the message of vv1-2 would come as a shock to most Israelites, as it would to many Christians today.

- ▶ This is why Amos continues in vv3-6 to explain the reasonableness of God's actions through a series of illustrations that stress the principle of cause and effect. Now in vv3-5 each verse begins with an effect and then give the cause, but they're all framed as rhetorical questions where the expected answer is No.
- ❖ Look at v3, "*Do two walk together, unless they have agreed to meet?*" The word "to meet" is actually a gloss included by the translators. The question is not asking if they've made an appointment to go on a walk. It's asking if two people would walk together if they were not in agreement with each other. And the obvious is No. Enemies do not walk together.
  - ▶ I wonder if Amos' audience caught the connection. Remember, Israel had an agreement with the Lord – a covenant agreement. And upon that agreement they walked together. They had fellowship with God. But now they've broken that agreement, so it's no surprise God is not walking with them. That he's against them.
- ❖ Look at vv4-5. **Here we have a series of cause-and-effect scenarios, all intended to suggest that danger is near and did not come uninvited.** Everyone knows a lion does not make a sound when he has no prey (v4a). He quietly stalks. But once he has found prey and is committed to the attack, he lets out a pouncing roar. Likewise everyone knows a lion does not "*cry out*" (or growl contently) if he has no prey to eat (v4b).
  - ▶ Everyone knows a bird does not get caught in a snare unless someone set a trap (v5a). And a snare does not go off unless something has triggered it (v5b).
- ❖ Again I wonder if the Israelites are making the connection. Back in chapter 1, the Lord was already described as a roaring lion ready to pounce on the nations. And his roar (his voice) was manifested in Amos' prophecy (also in 3:8).
  - ▶ **So if the Israelites are in earshot of this prophetic roar, then it should be obvious that the lion has his prey in sight and there are it.** And they can't blame anyone else. A bird is trapped in a snare through no fault but its own. The people of Israel were to examine themselves – their behavior and their attitude towards the poor and needy in their midst. To see their fault. And to do it quickly because a lion is coming!
- ❖ Now you might be wondering what was their fault. ***Why is God against them and so ready to pounce?*** The answer is in vv9-15. Chapter 2 already called out Israel, particularly those who oppressed the weak and those who did nothing to protect them.
  - ▶ The guilt of Samaria (capital of Israel) was so great that in v9 Amos is instructed to call the nations of Philistia (Ashdod) and Egypt – two of Israel's ancient enemies – to be witnesses to verify the oppression taking place within the walls of Samaria.
- ❖ According to v10, the rich and powerful had developed such a culture of oppressing and marginalizing others that such behavior had become the norm. No longer could they discern right from wrong. They shamelessly stockpiled the possessions they plundered from the poor and powerless, using it to furnish their great houses.

- ❖ V11 tells us the consequences. Destruction will come by an unnamed adversary who will oppress them by violently, tearing down their walls and plundering their possessions and toppling their idolatrous altars. V12 conveys just how definitive the destruction will be.
  - ▶ According to Israelite law, if a sheep was killed by a wild animal, the shepherd was to recover what remained and bring it to the owner to prove he didn't steal the sheep (Ex. 22:10-13). So the two small parts leftover of the sheep are like the two small pieces of furniture that will be leftover from the plunder. It's communicating the extent of the destruction that is coming for Samaria. It's going to be bad.
  
- ❖ Now look with me at v6. "*Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid?*" In this question, the cause is mentioned before the effect. When a watchman blows the trumpet to warn of an approaching enemy, will not the inhabitants of the city be afraid? The expected answer this time is Yes.
  
- ❖ Now it is the second question in v6 that trips us up. "*Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has done it?*" The intended answer is No. If a city falls, it's because the Lord did it. Now Amos' audience would probably agree with that. They knew the stories of Jericho and the conquest of Canaan. They knew who really won those battles. It wasn't them. It was God.
  - ▶ Yet if that is true, then by implication the destruction of their own city would be from God. It was an inescapable logic. **If the Lord brought down those other cities, then if Samaria goes down, it can't be a coincidence.** It's not because of the superior might of their invaders. It's because the Lord has done it. It's because they have broken covenant and now the Lord will visit covenant curses upon their heads.
  
- ❖ **Like I mentioned last week, a lot of us stumble over this idea of God bringing disaster upon a city, much less an entire nation.** When that devastating earthquake hit Haiti a few years ago, many were appalled when a prominent televangelist suggested it was a form of divine punishment against the Haitians for their practice of voodoo. I was disturbed by his audacity to make such a claim with such certainty!
  - ▶ *But isn't this what Amos is implying?* If you look back chapter 1:1 it said these prophecies were made two years before *the* earthquake. It must have been a significant event, and there is little doubt Amos' readers were to make a connection with the various warnings he issues about an earth-shaking event (cf. 6:11; 8:8; 9:1-2, 5). So the earthquake not only confirmed the authenticity of Amos' prophecy, it was understood to be a form of divine punishment.
  
- ❖ *So am I wrong for being disgusted at that televangelist? Could it be that he's right?* I say all this because I want you to know that *I know* how difficult all of this is to accept. But I must submit myself to the teaching of Scripture.
  - ▶ *Does every disaster that comes to pass have to first pass through the sovereign hands of God?* Scripture seems to imply so. **But is every disaster that befalls man a form of divine punishment?** You just have to read the book of Job to see the answer is No.

- ❖ So in the end I have no problem saying the Lord destroyed ancient Samaria or that God's hand was in that devastating earthquake in Haiti. I can't escape Scripture's teaching regarding the absolute sovereignty of God. **But I won't be so brash as to assume I can read the mind of God and suggest he brought an earthquake for this or that reason.** That's where the televangelist erred.
- ❖ But, friends, the whole point is this: **If the Lord is going to punish you or a nation, it's never done on a whim.** It's never out of a knee-jerk reaction. The Lord patiently waits and withholds punishment until a nation's (or an individual's) iniquity is complete (Gen. 15:16). There is always a justifiable reason.
  - ▶ ***Would you expect anything less from a holy God who rules over all nations in righteousness?*** Imagine a God who turns a blind eye when the strong oppress the weak. A God who could care less if the rich fleece the poor. A God who ignores when the powerful marginalize and exploit the defenseless. Would such a God be worthy of your worship?
    - Imagine another group of people whose hands are clean of these things, yet they know it's going on and have it in their power to at least bring some justice, some rescue, some relief. And yet they do nothing since it's not really their problem. If God agreed with that assessment and gave them a pass, would that be a God you would want to know and follow?
- ❖ Amos' listeners found themselves in a difficult position. They knew they were guilty of either sins of commission or omission, and they hoped for a way out. But they could not deny the justness and reasonableness of Amos' prophecy – of God's judgment against them. And now the watchman's trumpet is blowing and the lion is roaring. It's time for them to respond.

### **The Lord's roar demands a right response**

- ❖ This leads to our final point 3) **If the Lord roars at you, there is a right response.** Let's not take for granted the fact that he even leaves an opportunity to respond. That the Lord would even roar first before pouncing is pure mercy. If he just took us out, no one could accuse him of wrong. But that's not how he operates. Look at vv7-8.
  - ▶ *"For the Lord GOD does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets. The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord GOD has spoken; who can but prophesy?"*
- ❖ The emphasis in v7 is on the fact that God does not destroy a city without adequate warning. V6 establishes the fact that if disaster comes to a city, it's the Lord that has done it. But he does nothing without first revealing his plans to prophets to warn the inhabitants.
  - ▶ This explains why Amos has shown up in Samaria preaching doom and gloom. He didn't come up with this on his own. He's compelled by God. The Lord has spoken, he can't not prophesy and warn everyone that God intends to act soon. That his judgment is near.

- ❖ And in v8 we see the intended effect of this prophecy – this roar of the divine lion. *“The lion has roared; who will not fear?”* **Fear is the intended response.** Now this is not a cowering fear. It’s not intended to paralyze you into inaction. **It’s meant to motivate you to repent – to turn from your sins and turn towards God pleading his mercy.** This is the right response when you hear the Lord’s roar, when you hear his warning of punishment.
- ❖ **There is a great illustration of God roaring at a sinful, immoral city through a prophet and of that city responding rightly with godly fear and repentance.** It’s the Jonah story.
  - ▶ The Lord revealed to his plan to destroy the great city of Nineveh to Jonah his prophet. It took a bit of convincing but eventually Jonah realized if the Lord has spoken, who can but prophesy?
    - So he enters Nineveh and lets out God’s roar, warning everyone of destruction. And lo and behold, the people of Nineveh believed God, feared God, and repented of their evil ways. And much to Jonah’s disgust, the Lord shows mercy and relents of the threatened disaster (Jonah 3).
- ❖ The ironic thing is that Nineveh is none other than the capital of Assyria, the very nation God will end up using to punish and destroy Samaria and the northern kingdom. Israel’s guilt is thus multiplied; for the nation that will come and throw down their walls was more receptive to God’s prophet and prophesy than they are.
  - ▶ That’s tragically ironic. **But the point I want you to see is that God was merciful enough to even give them a chance to respond rightly.**

## Conclusion

- ❖ This is the takeaway for us. **If you don’t consider yourself a Christian, I hope as you’re reading this chapter that a sense of godly fear is starting to creep in.** *If this is how the Lord will deal with his own people when they persist in sin, then what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?* (1 Pet. 4:17)
- ❖ Now this whole time you’ve been hearing me talk about Christians being God’s chosen people, and I can understand if doesn’t sit well with you. I understand if it sounds pretty elitist. That it is discriminatory to say you’re chosen by God and everyone else is not.
  - ▶ And you would be right if what distinguished us as chosen was the color of our skin OR the language we spoke OR the culture we come from OR a particular physical trait OR a certain degree of morality. If God’s chosen people were only identifiable by one or more of those things, then, yes, we would be elitist and prejudiced.
- ❖ But according to Scripture, **God’s chosen people are distinguished by one thing – one thing that marks us as different from everyone else – that’s our faith and public profession of Jesus Christ as Lord.** We believe Jesus is the Son of God who died on the cross for our sins and rose again from the dead to give us a new life and new hope. We profess him to be our Lord who rules as King over our lives, and we make our identity public through the waters of baptism.

- ▶ That is what distinguishes a chosen one of God. And I hope you see how available that status is for you if only you share our faith and profession of Jesus as Lord. **God can be *for you* just as much as he is *for us* if you cry out to Jesus now in faith.**
  
- ❖ **For my chosen brothers and sisters in Christ, I urge you to listen intently to the Lion's roar.** Some of you need to wake up from spiritual slumber and heed the warning found in this morning's passage.
  - ▶ It would be wise to compare our lives, especially our lifestyles, to that of the Israelites in Amos' day. Perhaps you've been telling yourself "*God is for me*" and twisting that truth to justify your affluent lifestyle (or the one you're chasing). I mean a lifestyle, like the Israelites, that shows little regard to the poor and needy among you.
  
- ❖ You keep telling yourself, "*God is for me, who can be against me?*" "*The Lord is on my side, whom shall I fear?*" But you forget that you are still to fear the Lord. You forget that God can be totally for you, and yet still act against you because of sin.
  - ▶ **He will never abandoned his children, but he will discipline us when we sin.** "*For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son (or daughter) whom he receives.*" (Heb. 12:6)
  
- ❖ Christian, don't ever lose sight of how precious it is to be chosen of God. You are loved by him more than you know – more than you can even comprehend. **And though that love will never change just as he never changes, God is still very much grieved when you sin, just as any loving father would be.**
  - ▶ Every time it's my turn to put my 2-year-old down at night, I sing her a song. The same song. I've been singing it to her since she was born – *Jesus Loves Me*. And there is one verse I especially like, and I hope, one day, she'll get it. It communicates a truth simple enough for a child to grasp and yet deep enough for a whole sermon.
    - "*Jesus loves me when I'm good / When I do the things I should. / Jesus loves me when I'm bad / Even though it makes him sad. / Yes, Jesus loves me. / Yes, Jesus loves me. / Yes, Jesus loves me. / The Bible tells me so.*"